Security Governance and the Necessity for Community-led Approaches in Nigeria

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To Cite this Article

Manuscript History

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Abstract

A number of community-led initiatives have emerged in response to Nigeria's deepening security crisis. Using broken windows theory as its conceptual frame, this paper examines several examples of community policing in the country, to explore the factors which shape the effectiveness of local security actors. It finds that community-led policing succeeds where legal recognition, oversight, and intergroup trust are present and fails where fragmentation and impunity persist. The study proposes the refinement of community-led security mechanisms by better integrating them into Nigeria's national architecture, while also contributing to broader debates on hybrid security governance in fragile states.

Keywords: Broken Window, Community-led Policing, Insecurity, Governance, Vigilantes.

Introduction

Over the past decade, Nigeria's security landscape has deteriorated into a complex patchwork of insurgencies, banditry, gangsterism, state-sponsored violence, and secessionist movements. From Boko Haram's evolving tactics in the north-east to the resurgent Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in the south-east, each region now faces a diverse array of security threats. The country is currently ranked sixth on the Global Terrorism Index, rising from eighth in 2022-24, after experiencing a 34 percent year on year increase in terrorism-related deaths (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025). This is despite Nigeria having a significant security budget.

Concurrently, citizens' trust in formal security institutions has plummeted. Extrajudicial killings, misinformation, and suppression of legitimate protests have fueled widespread resentment (Peoples Gazette, 2023; Premium Times, 2024). Moreover, the "commodification of security" has created stark inequities in security, where the wealthy are able to buy private protection, while ordinary citizens are left vulnerable (Amao, 2020; Sanda, 2020). For example, even as state security forces remain under-resourced, over 150,000 police officers are re-directed to the protection of elites (Daily Trust, 2018).

In such a context, community-led approaches can complement overstretched formal security services. Groups like the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) in Borno State and Amotekun in the south-west have demonstrated that, when properly coordinated, local initiatives can provide early threat detection, mobilize local intelligence, and even repel militants (Agbabiaka, 2025; Bala & Dizolele, 2025; Bamidele, 2025; Lenshie, et al., 2024; Momodu, 2020; Omenma & Hendricks, 2018; 2026 [forthcoming]). Yet such initiatives can also function as "pathways to predation" (Moncada, 2023, p. 176). Without legal oversight or standardized training, well-meaning vigilante groups may devolve into ethnic militias and become a new source of insecurity. As this paper will show, while community-led policing efforts such as the CJTF and Amotekun have shown promise, others have devolved into ethnic militias or engaged in acts of "jungle justice". A stark example is the 2025 Uromi incident, where local vigilantes executed sixteen hunters believed to be members of another region's security group (Bello et al., 2025). Such tragedies underscore the risks of the community security model.

This paper addresses two interrelated questions. First, what underlying factors make community-led security initiatives a plausible model for addressing Nigeria's multifaceted security challenges? Second, what are the components of effective community-led security in Nigeria? To respond to these questions, it compares several communities led security initatives in Nigeria – the CJTF, Hisbah, Benue State Community Volunteer Guards (BSCVG), Anambra Vigilante Group (AVG), Amotekun, and the Onelga Security Planning and Advisory Committee (OSPAC) in Rivers State, and tests broken windows theory (BWT) on each one.

This paper is structured into six parts. Section 2 reviews the evolution of community policing, both globally and within Nigeria, highlighting the successes and pitfalls of the model. Section 3 develops the paper's theoretical framework drawing from BWT, but adapting it to Nigeria's socio-political realities. Section 4 outlines the qualitative multi-sited methodology of the paper and the case studies explored. Sections 5 presents an assessment of existing formal security provision in Nigeria, followed by three case studies of community policing. Section 6 concludes by arguing that, if properly regulated, community-led security can become a sustainable pillar of Nigeria's security architecture.

The Emergence of Community Policing: A Review

The term "community policing" emerged in the late 20th century in the context of rising urban crime and growing distrust between citizens and law enforcement. In the United States (US), Sir Robert Peel's nineteenth-century principles had already laid much of the groundwork for the concept by emphasizing that the police are an extension of the public, and the public, in turn, plays a role in policing (Kelling & Wilson, 1982). However, it was not until the 1970s and 1980s that American cities, such as New York, Boston, and Los Angeles, formally adopted community policing models, which emphasized decentralized decision making, foot patrols, and partnerships with neighborhood organizations (Skogan, 2006; Innes, 2016).

In the United Kingdom (UK), the Brixton riots of 1981 also prompted a shift toward neighborhood policing, as the police sought to build trust in predominantly Black urban communities by assigning dedicated officers to small beats and involving residents in local problem-solving (Genç Yılmaz, 2023; Seagrave, 1996). By the 1990s, the London Metropolitan Police had institutionalized Safer Neighbourhood Teams, which blended policing with social services to address underlying causes of

disorder (O'Reilly, 2023). Similar philosophies emerged in Australia, where community engagement units aimed to integrate police into the community (Young et al., 2014).

Community policing initiatives across these contexts shared a number of features most notably proactive problem solving, decentralization and partnerships. In terms of proactive problem solving, officers were encouraged to identify underlying causes of disorder and address them through code enforcement, rather than simply responding after serious crimes had already occurred than waiting for serious crimes to occur (Goldstein, 1990). Decentralization empowered local precincts to tailor policing strategies to community needs, whether addressing gang activity in Los Angeles or anti-social behavior in London's housing estates (Skogan & Hartnett, 1999). Lastly, partnerships formalized collaboration between police, social services, schools, and faith-based groups, through conducting joint trainings and establishing protocols for data sharing (Maguire & Uchida, 2000).

Critics highlight that community policing programs have often lacked sustainable funding and devolved into tokenistic outreach activities, ultimately failing to offset structural issues, such as underfunding and racial bias (Brown III, 2023; Harcourt, 2001). Nonetheless, the global body of evidence demonstrates that, when adequately resourced and contextually adapted, community policing can reduce fear of crime, improve clearance rates, and enhance citizen satisfaction with law enforcement (Weisburd & Braga, 2019).

In Nigeria, the emergence of community policing must be placed in the wider context of Nigeria's pre-colonial, colonial, and post-independence history. Long before formal police forces existed in Nigeria, pre-colonial societies maintained their own security arrangements in ways that parallel the wider concept of community-led policing. In Northern Nigeria security was managed by groups like yan banga (community police) and dogarai (royal guards), while the south-west had Oro (masquerades) who oversaw law and order in societies (Okoli, 2024). In the Benin Kingdom, the Odionwere (eldest man/head of the village) played a significant role in community policing and maintaining security within their villages. These groups were responsible for overseeing village order in the kingdom, mediating disputes, and enforcing community norms, often working in tandem with age-grade systems (Okpevra, & Ovuede, 2024). In the Igbo society in Nigeria, community policing was integral to society, as the entire community was involved in crime prevention and control (Okafor & Aniche, 2015; Aniche, 2018).

After Nigeria's independence in 1960, regional police commands replaced colonial structures, but the colonial legacy of centralization persisted. As the First Republic (1963–66) gave way to military rule, state security forces expanded their remit—often at the expense of engagement with the community. Despite this shift, in remote areas throughout the Niger Delta and Middle Belt, ethnic militias and self defense groups formed de facto policing bodies in contexts where presence was minimal. As a result, pre-colonial and indigenous security practices never entirely disappeared, but were reconfigured as shifts occurred in political economies. In Nigeria, the effectiveness of community-led policing is further undermined by a highly fragmented, diverse, and frequently conflict-prone social environment. As a result, it becomes essential to clearly define who legitimately represents the community and to navigate the internal power dynamics within communities. Addressing these issues is crucial for creating the enabling conditions necessary for community policing to thrive.

Since the early 2000s, Nigeria has witnessed a proliferation of community-led security formations due to rising insecurity, community distrust of formal policing, and the need for localized responses to complex security challenges. Three illustrative examples are the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) – north-east Nigeria, the Hisbah – north-central and north-west and Other Vigilante Collectives.

The Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) – north-east Nigeria

The inception of the Civilian Joint Task Force in 2013 followed Boko Haram's mass kidnapping of schoolgirls in Chibok. It was initially composed of volunteers whose primary mission was to gather and relay human intelligence to Nigerian military units in Maiduguri (Momodu, 2020; Nwokeoma et al., 2020). Over time, the Borno State government and the Nigerian Army began coordinating training sessions for CJTF members, providing basic training in military drills and weapons handling (Agbiboa, 2019). By 2018, the CJTF had demarcated a number of sectors across Borno State, each overseen by a Field Marshall who liaised with senior army officers to coordinate patrol schedules and joint operations (Bamidele, 2017). The group appeared to be effective at supporting local security, with Momodu (2020) and Nwokeoma et al. (2020) reporting that 90.9 percent of their attempts to repel Boko Haram incursions were successful. However, human rights organizations documented instances where the CJTF was involved in extrajudicial killings and ethnic profiling (Center for Civilians in Conflict, 2018).

Hisbah – north-central and north-west

The term Hisbah was originally used to refer to the religious policing units operating in Zamfara, Kano, and Kaduna States from the late 1990s onwards. These groups enforced public compliance with Sharia injunctions (Ibrahim, 2022). Hisbah councils have formal structures within each state, with emirs and state governors appointing commanders who report to an overarching Sharia Implementation Committee (SIC). However, Hisbah's role has evolved over time. Its focus on moral policing has increasingly come alongside a responsibility for community security, leading to occasional friction with state police. These tensions led to the eventual proscription of the group by the Federal Government (Hassan, 2021). There are also allegations that the group has committed brutal human rights abuses (Makama, 2025).

Other Vigilante Collectives

There are also smaller vigilante groups across the south-east, sometimes informally known as neighborhood watch, which continue to fill security vacuums. For instance, in Anambra State, the state Homeland Security Law 2025 saw the creation of Operation Udo Ga-Achi, also known as Agu ne chemba. The aim of this group is to support operations carried out by the formal security sector (Mefor, 2025). In Nasarawa State, the Ombatse vigilante militia was established as a community effort in response to the rising tide of banditry, drawing from similar groups in the pre-colonial period (Lenshie et al., 2024). In the North, Okoli (2017) identified various autochthonous community-led policing arrangements that have been instrumental in counterinsurgency operations, such as yan banga (community police) and maharba (local hunters). In the south, Rivers State has OSPAC, which operates as a community-led initiative.

Despite notable successes, the extant literature highlights several persistent issues that hinder community-led security in Nigeria. These include issues pertaining to legitimacy and legality; oversight and accountability; coordination with state security forces and resource constraints.

Legitimacy Deficits

Despite often claiming "local legitimacy" (Aina, 2023, p. 1), many vigilante outfits lack formal legal mandates, creating doubt around their authority to detain suspects or carry weapons (Olaniyi, 2023; Tar & Bala, 2021). Ethnic and religious biases in these groups can also erode their legitimacy in parts

of the community. In the north-west, the Yan Sakai vigilante group engaged in ethnic profiling and extrajudicial killing of alleged Fulani marauders, escalating cycles of violence and impacting their legitimacy (Okoli, C.R., 2024). This lack of legitimacy also leads community policing groups to rely on the black market for weapons and ammunition (Yusuf, 2025).

Oversight & Accountability Gaps

Few community initiatives have transparent oversight mechanisms. Concurrently there are many reports of extrajudicial killings and extortion by these groups (ICG, 2022). There is often little recourse to judicial redress for such actions. Victims of mistaken identity or unlawful detention rarely receive compensation or an apology.

Coordination challenges

There is no harmonized national policy for community policing. State-level laws conflict with the Nigeria Police Act (2020), the National Counter terrorism Strategy (NACTEST) (ONSA, 2014), and the Nigerian Army's civil-military cooperation manuals (Tar & Bala, 2021). Moreover, coordination among security agencies – the Army, Police, Department of State Services (DSS), and Civil Protection Units – is sporadic, leading to overlaps in jurisdiction and communication breakdowns.

Resource Constraints

Funding for community-led policing – training, equipment, and stipends – is often ad hoc. In many states, local government allocations to vigilante groups are delayed or diverted (ICG, 2022). Moreover, there is no standardized training curricula for these groups, which means that some volunteers have limited understanding of basic human rights, first aid, or data collection methods (Agbiboa, 2019).

Despite the aforementioned challenges of community-led policing in Nigeria and elsewhere, the practice continues to be deployed in a number of contexts. Countries as diverse as South Africa, the UK, the US, China, Turkey, Belgium, and the Netherlands, as well as Nigeria, consider active community involvement and collaboration with security agencies to be at the core of successful security provisioning (Akarsu, 2020; Bullock et al. 2006; Dlamini, 2020; Eijk et al. 2018; Lin 2021; Momodu, 2020; Skogan et al. 2004). By strengthening public-police interactions and enhancing

legitimacy, these initiatives, support the consolidation of state authority and mobilise support for democracy (Skogan, 2006). Citizens participate for a number of reasons, including: altruism (Agbiboa, 2019); job opportunities (Britton & Knight, 2021); safety concerns (Eijk et al., 2018); and grievances with insurgents (Nwokeoma et al., 2020). Community policing allows civilians to perform combat duties and intelligence-gathering in cooperation with security forces (Akarsu, 2020). This occurs in organizations such as the CJTF in north-east Nigeria and Amotekun in south-west Nigeria. In this way, several scholars argue that community policing democratizes the police and makes participation in choices about security more inclusive (Ruteere & Pommerolle, 2003). This community policing approach even allows communities to play a role in defining their security needs and monitoring the performance of the police (Cross & Benjamine, 2022).

Despite the fact that public-security cooperation has been instrumental to counterterrorism operations and addressing insecurity in Nigeria, and elsewhere, there is a continued ambiguity around the concept of community policing, and little consensus on how it should be implemented in practice. This has driven a number of cases of clashes between recognised state security outfits and community-led groups. Adegboyega and Gbolagade (2016), Krause et al. (2024), and Nwokeoma et al. (2020) all agree on the importance of community participation in security, but highlight that a comprehensive nationwide community-based approach remains absent, hindering effective security provisioning.

This study addresses this gap by exploring how security is delivered nationwide between the Nigerian Military, Nigerian Police, and community-led groups. Most studies focus on a single case of community policing in Nigeria without systematically comparing multiple regions (Momodu, 2020; Bamidele, 2021). At the same time, little attention has been given to how pre-colonial norms of indigenous authority shape contemporary legitimacy discourses. Concurrently, there is limited research on the long-term sustainability of community-led security models once insurgent or criminal threats abate. While individual community policing models in Nigeria demonstrate promise, there is no comprehensive framework that systematically evaluates cross-regional variations, remains sensitive to indigenous security practices and proposes standardized oversight mechanisms. This paper seeks to fill that gap by applying a comparative, theory-driven approach across six states, thereby generating insights into which institutional configurations yield durable improvements in citizen safety and trust.

Broken Windows Theory (BWT) and Community Agency in Security Governance

This study adopts broken windows theory to systematise its comparative study of community policing in Nigeria (Kelling & Wilson, 1982). The theory proposes that minor transgressions, if left unchecked, result in a general disavowal of safety, leading to more severe crimes. According to Michener (2013), residents' proactive engagement in community security converts them from passive onlookers of their safety to citizens with a role in security maintenance. Other scholars highlight that communities that invest in collective security promote better coordination with official security services (Pitner et al., 2012; Sampson, 2004) and evidence greater social resilience (Lyon & Parkins, 2013; Osaghae, 2023). This is exemplified in Newark, where "communal barriers" or unofficial community restrictions helped maintain law and order by building closer relationships with locals and providing security forces with better intelligence (Kelling & Wilson, 1982, p. 31; Kelling & Coles, 1996; Innes, 2016).

Such community-led strategies operating at the hyper-local level can be especially helpful in a country like Nigeria, which has limited resources to address local security concerns. Drawing on BWT, informal local community policing can be effective when it addresses minor concerns, preventing them from escalating further (Thompson, 2015). Community involvement enables early threat detection and resolution, due to proximity to and familiarity with local issues. There are some critics of this approach, however, who argue that a focus on minor violations leads to over-policing in a way that can burden the underprivileged, while ignoring structural issues, such as poverty (Brown III, 2023; Harcourt, 2001). Despite these criticisms, BWT was deployed in Newark and New York with some success, facilitating the alteration of policing practices, greater collaboration between neighbourhoods and the police, and a reduction in crime (Kelling & Wilson, 1982, p. 31; Kelling & Coles, 1996; Innes, 2016).

The framework can be applied to Nigeria to highlight the potential contribution of community policing. In Nigeria, "minor disorder" takes forms that differ from urban graffiti and similar crimes in the Global North. These include: the abuse of power at checkpoints (Lenshie et al., 2024); sit at home orders[4] in the south-east (Jatau, 2025); and minor bandit activities. Each of these, left unchecked

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[4] refers to directives issued—often by non-state actors—for residents to stay indoors and avoid public activities on specific days in south-eastern Nigeria.

can trigger wider insecurity. For example, in north-west Nigeria, small-scale cattle rustling or roadblocks, when unaddressed, has led to the growth of larger kidnapping rings (Idris et al., 2024). In the context of Nigeria, BWT is not deployed to justify zero-tolerance policing but to theorize how community-led initiatives can pre-empt violent escalation. This approach is therefore sceptical of the neo-conservative underpinnings of the theory that often obscure the structural and political roots of crime. In Nigeria, applying BWT without this critical lens could risk legitimizing overreach by community actors or ignoring the socioeconomic and ethno-political dimensions of insecurity. Therefore, this study adopts BWT not as a normative blueprint but as a heuristic tool for interpreting how communities read and respond to signals of abandonment, disorder, or institutional failure in fragile security environments.

Adapting BWT to Nigeria, localized 'disorders', such as checkpoint abuses, can be understood as "broken windows", which cause citizens to observe that neither the state police nor the military are effectively responding to insecurity. Over time, "broken windows" can become normalized in a community, allowing insurgent cells to grow, recruit, and even smuggle arms. By contrast, according to BWT, a community-driven "watch" – local vigilantes or neighbourhood patrols – can more quickly identify and "repair" these windows, restoring a sense of order and deterring the growth of more serious threats (Michener, 2013; Pitner et al., 2012). To test BWT's relevance to Nigeria, we track three dimensions in each field site (Table 1).

Table 1. Operationalizing BWT across cases

BWT Dimension	Indicators/Examples	Data Source/Method
1. Visible Signs of Disorder	- Illegal checkpoints - Open alcohol consumption - Marketplace extortion - Reports of "everyday fear"	Key informant interviews, field observations
2. Community Response Capacity	- Presence of local patrols or vigilante groups - Level of community coordination - Dependence on state forces	Interview data
3. Escalation to Violent Crime	- Progression from minor infractions to widespread violence	Incident timelines, community narrative accounts

Source: Authors' compilation 2024

By tracing these three dimensions across six states, we assess whether community interventions "with fixed windows" correlate with a reduction in serious incidents. Conversely, this study explores whether community initiatives that lack coordination or legal oversight coincide with the "pathways to predation" predicted by BWT. (Moncada, 2023).

Methodology and Case Studies

We conducted fieldwork in Borno; Zamfara; Benue; Rivers; Anambra; and Ondo states. These states were selected for their distinct set of security threats most notably terrorism; banditry; cultism; violent secessionist agitations; and farmer-herder clashes. To gather data on the indicators of each dimension outlined above we interviewed four key informants in each state, for a total of 24 interviewees (see Table 2). Interviews took place between January and May 2024 and participants were selected through snowball sampling. This involved making initial contact with local security agencies and community associations, and then recruiting other research participants based on their recommendations.

Table 2: Breakdown of the study's interviewees

Participant Category	Number of Interviews (n)
Community residents	5
Formal security personnel	5
Vigilante or volunteer group members	7
Displaced persons and civil society actors	7

We sought to engage research participants with different genders, ages, and roles in the community. Interviews were transcribed and then coded using a deductive codebook based on BWT's three dimensions. Three researchers conducted separate coding in NVivo 12, achieving a Cohen's Kappa of 0.78, indicating substantial inter coder reliability. We then triangulated qualitative themes with incident timelines, open-source data on violent events and other secondary sources, such as media archives and NGO reports. Standard research ethics procedures were followed. All participants were asked for their informed consent before participating, and data was subsequently anonymized and stored securely. The study's qualitative design provides depth but is limited in its capacity to support statistical generalizability. Future research should incorporate longitudinal household surveys to quantify the impact of community-led policing and assess their sustainability.

Community-led Security in Nigeria

The limitations of state-led security in Nigeria

In a country where security is a privilege for very-important-persons (VIPs), vigilante citizens have become the frontline line of defence. Despite the severe shortage of security personnel in Nigeria, those available are disproportionately allocated to the political and economic elite. For example, elite battalions of the army are deployed along three major highways leading to Abuja to provide reconnaissance and protection for the presidential villa. This is on top of the work already done by the Presidential Guards Brigade and other security agencies to support presidential security. Over 150,000 police officers are attached to VIPs, providing convoy escorts and private details for politicians and wealthy individuals, while ordinary citizens endure understaffed checkpoints and delayed responses (Daily Trust, 2018). One Assistant Inspector General (AIG) of Police lamented, "Every big man wants personal security; they want several policemen to come and secure them and their family members, instead of supporting the police to work and ensure a safer environment" (Sahara Reporters, 2018). Access to political power and patronage is often required to access security and protection (Ojo et al., 2019, p. 4). The intersection of financial interests and security provision also undermines the rule of law. This is clear in the case of high-profile figures indicted for corruption, such as former DSS Director Ita Ekpenyong and National Intelligence Agency (NIA) boss Ayo Oke, who retained security details to shield them from arrest (Vanguard, 2017). This "commodification" of security not only erodes public trust but also creates stark inequities: elites secure personalized protection, whereas rural and peri-urban areas remain exposed to insurgents and bandits.

Compounding these governance failures is Nigeria's demographic boom. In 2024 the population was around 224 million and it is projected to grow to 370 million by 2050. The current force of 230,000 military and paramilitary personnel is inadequate to secure such a large population (World Bank, 2024; Statista, 2023). Even if this number increases, as projected, to 620,000 personnel by mid-century it would still leave security personnel-citizen ratios far below global norms, exacerbating vulnerabilities in conflict-affected regions.

In this context, not merely an issue of "broken windows" but of an irregular security dilemma (Gray, 2007), community-led policing emerges as an essential complement to the work of the formal security sector. Local initiatives can mobilize grassroots intelligence, bridge trust deficits, and

"repair" visible signs of disorder in areas beyond the reach of state security services (Ogbonnaya, 2020). Figure 1 illustrates the convergence of these political and structural pressures.
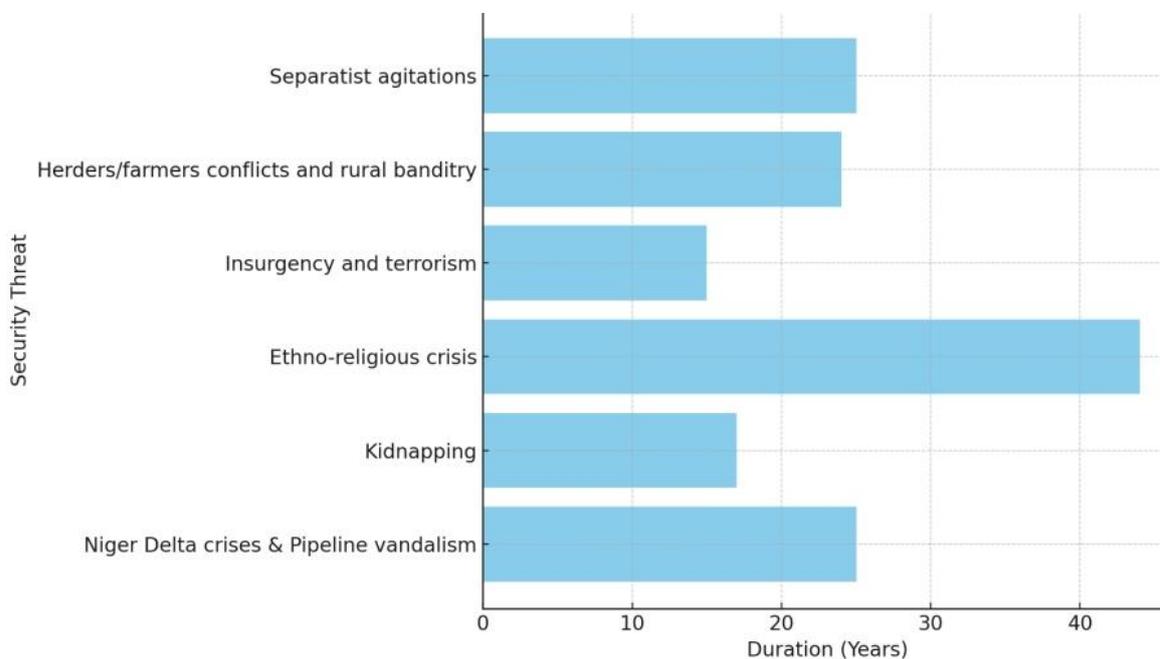

Figure 1. Security threats confronting Nigeria, 1980-2024. Source: Adapted from Ochime & Nebiefe (2024).

Yet community-led policing efforts have also led to major challenges. The tragic incident in Benue state in June 2025, known as the Yelwata massacre, where over 200 civilians, including women and displaced persons, were killed without resistance, highlights the potential consequences of under-regulated community protection structures. Following the enactment of the state's Anti-Open Grazing Law, the government established the Livestock Guards to enforce compliance. These units were poorly armed and ill-prepared to confront heavily armed herders, prompting the creation by the Benue State Government of the Benue State Community Volunteer Guards (BSCVG) (Kukwa-Yanor, 2022). However, the Federal Government refused to approve assault rifles for the BSCVG, despite granting similar permissions to Katsina State's vigilante outfit (Nnamdi, 2022), exemplifying Nigeria's uneven and politicized security architecture. Today, many BSCVG members are relegated to perfunctory roles, guarding hotels and local offices, far removed from more important intelligence gathering or deterrence roles. The incapacity of these groups to resist attackers like those in Yelwata lays bare the failure of community-led policing to guarantee local survival. Incidents such as this

foreground the need for self-defense as both a moral right and a strategic necessity in contexts of persistent state absence, weakness, or indifference. When survival is at stake and bodies are charred to smithereens, community resilience and self-organization are not acts of defiance; they are acts of existence, highlighting the way that civilians in conflicts do everything but stand idly by until they are hewn down (Barter, 2014; Buba, 2025; Kalyvas, 2023; Welsh, 2023).

From the standpoint of BWT, the federal government's selective arming of vigilante groups sends a dangerous signal: that some communities are valued and protected while others are not. In this context, visible inaction in the face of mass violence functions as a "broken window," undermining public faith among vulnerable communities in both federal and state government responses, and inviting further attacks.

More importantly, the tragedy in Benue also raises a fundamental normative question: At what point does self-defense become not just a right but a necessity for survival? In situations where the state cannot or will not protect its citizens, community-led security becomes a moral imperative grounded in the right to life itself. The imperative, then, is not to criminalize or suppress such local efforts but to regulate and support them within a legal and ethical framework that recognizes their life-preserving function.

The emergence of community-led policing

The CJTF emerged in 2013 as an ad hoc vigilante network in Borno State. Initially composed of civilian volunteers, many of whom were relatives of victims kidnapped by Boko Haram, it began by gathering local intelligence on insurgent movements and providing tip-offs to military units (Momodu, 2020; Nwokeoma et al., 2020). Over time, the CJTF formalized into a semi-structured organization with sectoral leadership and basic vetting for volunteers (Bamidele, 2017).

Unlike informal vigilante groups elsewhere in the country, the CJTF in Borno receives periodic training from Nigerian military and police units. Weapons issued during operations are retrieved afterward – a measure intended to prevent illicit arms proliferation (Agbiboa, 2019; Ibrahim & Bala, 2018). Local council officials also provide ad hoc funding for fuel and communication costs. However, there is no formal legislative framework establishing and regulating the CJTF, though they operate loosely under the army's civil-military cooperation (CMIC) protocols (Tar & Bala, 2021).

According to Momodu (2020), the CJTF's collaboration with security forces has achieved significant success in repelling Boko Haram attacks and gathering actionable intelligence on the group's activities. One interviewee suggested that CJTF foot patrols scanning for "unusual activity" supported the early detection of improvised explosive device (IED) caches, often hidden beneath shrubbery near market roads (Interview, military officer, Borno State, May 2024). In the terminology of BWT terms, the CJTF effectively "fixed broken windows" by eliminating minor indicators of disorder, such as a suspicious individuals loitering near a village perimeter, thereby reducing the chances of large-scale bombings.

Despite these successes, the CJTF has faced accusations of extrajudicial killings. In early 2023, Human Rights Watch documented at least five incidents where alleged Boko Haram suspects were summarily executed after being handed over by the CJTF to the Nigerian Army (Center for Civilians in Conflict, 2018). This "jungle justice" can be understood as an example of Moncada's (2023, p. 176) "endogenous pathway to predation". Without sufficient oversight, community volunteers can morph into de facto executioners. Moreover, these groups can also fuel ethnic tensions: some Kanuri-dominated CJTF patrols have been accused of disproportionately targeting non-Kanuri Fulani herders (Interview, military officer, Borno State, May 2024).

The CJTF case underscores that a BWT-inspired, community-driven model can work in a resource-scarce environment. Success depends on there being sufficient institutional coordination, such as regular drills with military and police, clear "command-handover" procedures for weapons, and periodic debriefs. The example of the CJTF also shows the value of basic vetting & training of recruits, to ensure a minimum level of literacy and understanding of human rights norms (Bala & Dizolele, 2025). It also points to the importance of clarifying the legal basis of community security models – CJTF leaders have advocated for a formal amendment to the Police Act to create a legal "umbrella" for vetted community watchers (Interview, CJTF sector commander, Maiduguri, March 2024). When these elements are in place, "minor disorder" signals can be addressed swiftly, closing "broken windows" before they become openings for more serious attacks.

In January 2020, the governors of Nigeria's six south-western states established the Western Nigeria Security Network (WNSN), commonly known as Amotekun, in response to growing insecurity, including kidnapping, banditry, and armed robbery (Dogi et al., 2024). This decision was driven by a perceived failure of federal security institutions to provide adequate protection to rural communities and commuters along major highways. The corps was established under a clear legal framework –

the state-level Amotekun Establishment Laws – making it a clear attempt to combine community-led policing with formal structures and training protocols.

Amotekun recruits are vetted by state security advisers and undertake a 23-day training regimen facilitated by the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC), DSS, and state police commands (International Crisis Group, 2022). Amotekun's command structures are also integrated with formal security structures. This includes holding daily intelligence-sharing briefings with police commissioners, participating in weekly security council meetings chaired by state governors, and running a dedicated secretariat to handle logistics, personnel, and procurement.

Amotekun's model can be read as a proactive application of BWT in the Nigerian context. According to Kelling and Wilson (1982), visible signs of disorder, such as open-bandit checkpoints[5] or the impunity of kidnappers along transit corridors, invite more serious crimes by signaling state weakness. Governors in Nigeria's south-west interpreted the surge in highway kidnappings as an early indicator of growing disorder, or in our terms a "broken window," prompting the launch of Amotekun to restore visible order and community confidence. Foot patrols by uniformed Amotekun operatives, seizure of unlicensed firearms, and the clearance of illegal roadblocks function as literal and symbolic "repairs" to the social fabric. Field reports indicate that Amotekun's presence in areas like Oke-Ogun and Akure reduced kidnapping rates by up to 47% between 2021 and 2023 (Agbabiaka, 2025). This suggests that localized and visible enforcement of norms, in line with BWT, can help deter more serious crimes.

However, the BWT model also helps reveal deeper vulnerabilities in the Amotekun framework. Despite its initial success in "repairing" disorder, Amotekun has faced a growing challenge to its legitimacy, stemming from friction with the federal police, poor judicial oversight, and variation of public trust between groups, with ethnic minorities and non-Yoruba settlers being especially wary (ICG, 2022). For instance, some communities reported that Amotekun operatives set up unauthorized roadblocks, detained citizens arbitrarily, or acted on unverified intelligence (ICG, 2022). These actions can become new "broken windows," reintroducing disorder and alienating certain communities. Without robust legal safeguards and accountability structures, even well-intentioned community-led actors risk sliding into behaviors that reproduce the very insecurity they were created to mitigate.

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[5] Unauthorized or illegal roadblocks or checkpoints set up by armed criminals or bandits

Amotekun illustrates how community-led security can thrive when formally structured, regionally coordinated, and visibly responsive to citizen concerns. However, the example also demonstrates that reactive disorder suppression alone is insufficient. For community policing to maintain legitimacy under the logic of BWT, it must be embedded in a system that balances enforcement with rights protection, prevention with restraint, and visibility with verifiability. Amotekun's experience suggests that community-led groups must not only "fix broken windows" but also avoid becoming new sources of social fracture themselves.

A particularly tragic example underscores the potential dangers that arise from unregulated community-led policing: in 2025, local vigilantes in Uromi, Edo state, reportedly intercepted and extrajudicially executed sixteen hunters armed with Dane guns (Bello et al., 2025). Initial investigations suggest that the slain individuals were members of a northern chapter of a recognized vigilante association. However, due to the absence of a national registry or inter-group identification protocol, those killed were perceived as external threats rather than partners in security. This case of mistaken identity, fuelled by inter-regional mistrust and a lack of interoperability, is a stark example of the fatal consequences of the breakdown of community security norms.

This case reflects what Moncada (2023) describes as a "pathway to predation", wherein vigilante groups, lacking oversight or verification systems, assume the role of judge, jury and executioner all at the same time. In BWT (Wilson & Kelling, 1982), the unchecked use of extrajudicial violence ceases to merely be a symptom of disorder but a new driver of insecurity in of itself, by signaling to communities that no legitimate authority governs the use of force.

BWT provides a clear analytical framework to explain this tragic incident. First, it highlights the role played by the absence of visible signals of order – the lack of standardized identification badges, a national database, or liaison protocols to denote legitimacy. The hunters' unfamiliar presence, armed but unverified, triggered a disorder-sensitive response from the local vigilantes, who themselves were operating without oversight or procedural justice norms.

The extrajudicial response, in turn, created a new "broken window": a public signal that force can be used outside legal norms. This may invite retaliation, escalate mistrust across regional lines and more widely undermine the rule of law. Thus, the incident illustrates a systemic failure of governance in community-led security arrangements, as well as a breakdown in symbolic and institutional control that BWT would argue signals deep social disorder.

By contrast, as seen in the examples of the CJTF or Amotekun, even minimal state coordination helps establish a level of legitimacy that can reduce the likelihood of fatal cases of mistaken identity occuring. The Uromi case reinforces the argument that community-led security only contributes to order when embedded in a formal structure that enables recognition, restraint, and accountability.

Other Models: OSPAC in View

OSPAC emerged in the Local Government Area (LGA) of Ogba-Egbema-Ndoni in Rivers State in 2017 as a community-led initiative to address rampant kidnapping, armed robbery, and cult violence (Onwuzor et al., 2020). Its operational model, which was later replicated in five neighbouring LGAs, is another example of the localized adaptations of security provision in governance vacuums. Poroma and Ekine (2025) characterize OSPAC as Rivers State's CJTF, noting its reliance on grassroots intelligence and familiarity with the terrain. Despite lacking a statutory mandate, OSPAC has operated with tacit acceptance from the community. The group has also episodically collaborated with state security forces, notably conducting joint raids with the Nigerian Army and police to dismantle major cult networks in 2017 (Onwuzor et al., 2020).

Viewed through a BWT lens, OSPAC functions as a community-level response to perceived "disorder" that signalled state incapacity, in this case unchecked violent crime and pipeline vandalism. By conducting visible patrols, raiding criminal hideouts and providing actionable intelligence, OSPAC functioned as a local "window-repair" mechanism. This correlated with documented reductions in rape, theft and armed robbery (Onwuzor et al., 2020), illustrating BWT's premise that targeted interventions against minor disorders can deter escalation in crime.

However, the case of OSPAC also highlights the risks of unregulated community-policing, echoing findings from our analysis of CJTF and Amotekun. The group has been accused of extrajudicial violence, including clashes with police in the attack on Omoku Division police station in 2024. There have also been allegations of unlawful killings and detentions by OSPAC, leading to a government crackdown on the group and the arrest of some of its commanders (Dada, 2024). Moreover, the absence of legal frameworks around the group has enabled the proliferation of locally manufactured and black-market firearms. The lack of consistent resourcing for the group has also impacted OSPAC's effectiveness, as the group's volunteers depend on an irregular stipend of 10,000 naira per month and other voluntary funding.

These challenges associated with community-policing underline this study's core argument: community-led security requires regulated integration into national security architectures. For OSPAC-like initiatives, this includes establishing a harmonised legal framework, accountability mechanisms, and sustainable funding.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the viability of community-led security approaches in Nigeria's fractured security environment and identify the institutional mechanisms required to ensure these efforts are effective and accountable. Drawing on a comparison of several case studies, it demonstrates that community-led security can play a vital role in restoring order and deterring violence, but only when coordinated, regulated, and ethically grounded.

The massacre of a vigilante group in Uromi in 2025 and OSPAC's attack on a police station in 2024, illustrate the tragic consequences of unregulated and fragmented security arrangements. In contrast, the CJTF in Borno and the Amotekun Corps in south-west Nigeria demonstrate that when community actors operate within structured, state-backed frameworks, with oversight, coordination, and recognition, they can effectively "repair broken windows" and restore a measure of trust and order at the community level.

Although Using BWT as an analytical lens, this study found that disorder, whether in the form of unchecked abuses, lack of identification systems, or intergroup misrecognition, signals to communities that no legitimate authority governs public safety. In such contexts, fear, suspicion and retaliatory violence thrive. However, when communities feel that small threats are addressed swiftly and transparently, they are more likely to collaborate with both state and non-state actors in maintaining peace. Moreover, unlike BWT-inspired policing in the Global North, Nigeria's community-led models succeed not through coercive enforcement of social order but through building legitimacy through formal recognition, intergroup trust, and oversight. This underscores that effective "window-repair" in fragile states requires cooperation between institutions.

To build on the promise of community-led security whilst mitigating the risks of the model, it is important to create a central registry of vetted vigilante and community security actors linked to the police and civil-military coordination offices. This can support intergroup verification, along with the implementation of recognition protocols, including identification badges, mission briefing

documentation, and cross-state jurisdictional permissions. The establishment of community security liaison committees at the state and LGA levels can also help coordinate responses, build inter-ethnic trust, and prevent incidents like Uromi. Another important step will be to harmonize legal frameworks between state-based security initiatives and national legislation. It is also essential to institutionalize capacity-building for community security actors, providing them with standardized training in human rights, conflict de-escalation, and intelligence-handling.

This paper contributes to the literature on security governance by offering one of the few comparatives, cross-regional analyses of community-led policing in Nigeria. It demonstrates the value of BWT beyond its original western urban policing context, and relevance for interpreting grassroots security dynamics in weak-state environments.

Security in Nigeria must develop through a bottom-up approach. In a country where the police-to-citizen ratio remains abysmally low and VIP protection outpaces public safety, community-led security is more than an option, it is a necessity. However, this necessity must be harnessed in line with clear legal, ethical, and institutional frameworks. When local actors are trained, recognized, and held accountable, they can serve as a critical pillar in Nigeria's overstretched security ecosystem. Getting this balance right between state oversight and community initiative is perhaps the most urgent governance challenge Nigeria faces today.

Acknowledgements

Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors have reported no potential conflict of interest.

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