

**VIGILANTE GROUPS AND CRIME MANAGEMENT IN THE
CALABAR METROPOLIS, CROSS RIVER STATE, NIGERIA,
1999-2020**

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Abstract

The increasing rate of crimes across cities and communities in Nigeria has prompted an all-hands-on-deck approach since security from the government and statutory security agencies has become inadequate. Today, the protection of lives and properties has become all-inclusive and participatory as citizens have taken up the responsibility for their common good to protect themselves from anything that may threaten their existence. Hence, the use of vigilante groups as alternative security body has become very popular that their presence is seen in almost cities across Nigeria. This study is qualitative, employing both primary (interviews) and secondary sources and it aims at investigating vigilante groups and crime management in Nigeria with Calabar Metropolis as case study. While community participatory theory serves as theoretical framework, findings of the study reveal that community vigilante groups in Nigeria have contributed immensely to crime prevention and management. However, they also face

certain challenges which disrupt their effectiveness and efficiency. The paper thus recommends among other things that Nigerian leadership should give them more recognition as part of the security sector as well as provide adequate funding to support vigilante groups in the dispensation of their duties.

Keywords: Vigilante group, Crime, Crime management, Calabar metropolis

Introduction

Since the commencement of democratic rule in 1999 (Amalu, Jack-Rabin, Abdullahi and Adetu, 2022) Nigeria has been plagued with all sorts of crime that “no community has remained unaffected, by the negative consequences of crime although the level of intensity of the problem might vary from one community to community” (Achu, Owan and Abul, 2013). In recent times, the increasing rate of crimes and the manner in which they are conducted now has become more worrisome. Adejoh (2013) stated that crime is getting more sophisticated and deadlier with every passing day. There are reports of kidnapping, burglary, theft, rape, and murder, snatching of handbags and cars, shootings, drug abuse, evading taxes, fighting by area boys, etc., on a daily basis. Accordingly, Nigeria’s crime and security problem is multifaceted and it has the capacity to destroy the peace, unity and development it has taken her to build since independence.

While it the duty of the state to ensure that citizens are protected and crimes prevented (Ariche and Awurimbe, 2017), traditionally it is the responsibility of the police to prevent and control crimes, but the capacity of the police to maintain law and order has continued to be undermined by the rapidly growing increase of violent crimes (Ambali and Araba, 2020). Regrettably, the capability of the police force to perceive, thwart and control crime solely has been totally probed. In this regard, Ikoh(2013) noted that the continuous increase in criminal activities with its attendant burden and the ability of the police to stern it to a tolerable level has resulted in community members resorting to establishing informal policing structures (IPS) to control crime. In every human society, security of lives and property is an essential prerequisite for the attainment of growth and development. In the same vein, its absence stifles the human capacity to develop and heavily compromises the dignity and quality of life of both individuals and society (Adejoh, 2013). Thus as a response to the incessant crimes occurring across the nation and in order for people to live good and

quality life, many communities have resorted to community-based or informal policing structures in a bid to improve their safety and security. These self-help measures include neighborhood watch groups, vigilante groups, citizen patrol among others.

Vigilante groups are very common in the Nigerian society and they are dedicated to their duty because they are primarily residents of that area in which they operate, and to ensure their lives and that of their families are protected. They are answerable to the community where they operate and so far, they have proven to even be far more effective in combating crime than the state law enforcement agencies. For instance, in the Northwest, according to the International Crises Group (2022), in Adamawa state, hunters played a major role in blocking Boko Haram's advance in 2013 and taking back the cities of Gombi and Mubi that had fallen to the militants. To recall in the South east, Ajeli (2020) had stated that there is the famous Bakassi Boys; "a vigilante group which had the objective of fighting crime in Aba, Onitsha and other cities in the region. More recently, in the South west, Governors and citizens have hailed the two-year old *Amotekun* as having reduced crime especially kidnapping for ransom by gangs based in the vast forests (ICG, 2022). In the South-south, today, security and safety is everyone's concern and evidence has shown that most successful interventions against crime were those made by vigilante groups and neighbourhood watch groups, and also in collaboration with the police. Hence, there is need to urgently recognize their increasing efforts in curbing crimes and put in place a comprehensive strategy that will further employ their local resources collaboratively with security agencies in combating crimes in their communities. On the other hand, they are growing concerns as to records in some places where vigilantes have rather become threats to security of life and property in their communities as they take the law into their hands, extort community members of their resources, committing human rights abuses and even partaking in crimes. Nevertheless, B. Owumi and I. Ajayi (2013) however maintained that neighbourhood watch organizations and vigilante groups are operating optimally and get consulted on security issues probably because of the perceived ineffectiveness and inefficiency of the official law enforcement organisations. Thus, it is within this backdrop this paper examines vigilante groups and crime management in Nigeria, with Calabar Metropolis as a case study.

Definition of Concepts

Vigilante groups

The concept of vigilante or vigilantism cannot be defined in a straight-jacketed manner. Unya remarked that to be sure, vigilante groups are in numerous shapes and sizes: some belong to organized nationwide structures while others are made up of dozens or so unemployed locals (2022). However, Alemika and Chukwuma (2004) identified four types of vigilante groups that operate in Nigeria. They are: religious vigilante, ethnic vigilante, state-sponsored vigilante, neighbourhood or community vigilante. In this paper we are concerned with the community vigilante. According to Erhurhu (2017), vigilante groups refer to groups formed and funded by members of a particular community to fight against crimes and protect lives and property of individuals. They can be found in both rural and urban areas and are not armed with guns or ammunitions but rather armed with whistles, big sticks and machetes; they often carry out foot patrols at night to reassure the community of their security.

Crime and Crime Management

Crime is an offense which violates the laws of the state and is disapproved by the society. It is an act of offense which violates the laws of the state and is strongly disapproved by the society and can be punished by imprisonment or fine. (Sowmmnya, 2014). On the other hand, Crime management is the efforts made to decrease and prevent crime and criminals. In this paper it is specifically the efforts made by vigilante groups to prevent, reduce and maintain peace and security in their respective communities.

Theoretical Framework

This work is hinged on the community-participation theory by Dennis P. Rosenbaum who postulates that the criminal justice system by itself is incapable of solving the intricate problems of crime and anarchy including violence and terrorism that affect the society. He posited that these problems can be achieved through the creation of partnerships that can bring distinctive but complementary skills and resources to the table and that can produce coordinated and targeted responses to public safety problems (Rosenbaum, 2003)

Participation gives way for individuals of a community to control their environment and set priorities as they integrate local knowledge, values and attitudes. It is clear that the government cannot singlehandedly

manage the numerous problems confronting the people and in the case of security, integrating locals as stakeholders in their communities will enhance security as they understand their neighbourhoods better and share the mutual objective of promoting and protecting it.

With regards to this paper, the residents of various communities in Calabar Metropolis get involved in security and safety by organising vigilante groups to secure lives and properties. Hence, a community participatory approach to crime management because they are most affected by these crimes and only self-defence measures will bring lasting solutions and benefits to them.

History and Development of Vigilante Groups in Nigeria

Vigilante groups can be traced to the pre-colonial era. They have been a feature of the Nigerian society and have existed along communal lines, ethno-religious lines, and indigenous systems; drawing their membership, support and operations within their ethnic regions. They were often charged with warding off invaders, preventing crimes, maintaining order enforcing compliance with communal tradition and promoting ethical conduct (ICG, 2022). With the introduction of colonialism, the British monopolized the use of force and created the Nigeria Police Force in 1930 and lessened the powers and influences of local policing structures and even went ahead to restrain those considered treacherous. The International Crises Group (2022) remarked thus:

In the mid-1980, however following a surge of crime the military governors of some state notably Colonel Adetunji Olurin of Oyo State and Colonel David Mark of Niger State, began encouraging residents to band together to help the police fight crime. In April 1987, colonel Olurin issued an edict launching the Oyo state vigilante group. Since then and particularly since state governments have given their blessings to various groups ranging from joint military taskforce to neighborhood watches that operate without a legal framework or proper oversight to support the police patrolling the streets.

The origin of the vigilante groups has been traced to the South-east of Nigeria (Erhurhu, 2017). In this region, the level of insecurity which was at its peak in the 1990s bred a growing agitation among the people.

The security challenges in economic and industrial cities like Onitsha, Aba and Nnewi among others became worrisome as armed robbery endangered the personal safety and livelihoods of market traders, manufacturers and industrialists. In order to solve this problem, the Bakassi Boys which was formed by an association of shoe makers in Aba, Abia state, sprang up. They were unique in their competence in preventing, combating and reducing crime rates. From Aba, “the activities of the Bakassi Boys Vigilante were extended to Anambra and Imo States on July 12, 2000 and 22 December 2000 respectively” (Ajeli, 2020).

In the West, the Oodua People’s Congress (OPC) has been a major vigilante group in the region. According to Unya, recruitment into OPC in Lagos is done in every ward (the smallest political unit). After recruitment, the boys are trained through seminars and workshops during which time the dangers of selling out or collaborating with criminals are stressed. However, he further claims that the OPC was initially formed by the Yoruba intellectuals to promote historical and cultural research, but they later became involved in vigilantism. Their activities became more or less ethnic militia, consequently the reason for continuous conflict with the law enforcement agents (Unya, 2022). In recent times, the security situation in the south west is nothing to write home about. Today, the famous South-West Security Network (SWSN) code-named *Amotekun* is a formalized regional vigilante group provides security for the south western states in Nigeria. Though the Federal government of Nigeria declared the outfit illegal as it is not backed by any known law of the land (Yahaya and Bello, 2020).

In the Northern half of the country, the *Hambada* and *Hisbah* who enforce *sharia* in the North also play *vigilante* roles. Though the *Hisbah* more of a religious outfit than a vigilante group. It was setup by the governments of Zamfara and Kano who amongst other things claimed that the federal police failed to effect sharia (Unya 2022). The Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) operating in the North East and working with the military to combat the *Boko Haram* menace is also an example of *vigilante* (Zumve, 2012). It was comprised of local hunters with the purpose of protecting their communities against Boko Haram insurgents, they were quickly integrated into the government’s official counter-insurgency operations (Agheyisi, E. and Aghedo, 2021). The success of the CJTF together with support from the government as well as that of other vigilante across the nation led to the passing of a Bill establishing the Vigilante Group of Nigeria in 2016. The group is mandated to work

in partnership with the Nigerian police and military in fighting banditry and insurgency.

Today, while there is no comprehensive database of vigilante organisations in Nigeria and no reliable way to offer a precise figure for their numbers country wide, credible anecdotal evidence suggests that thousands of groups exist at the state, local government, community and neighbourhood levels (ICG, 2022). This is true as there is no street or area where you do not find an active vigilante group. Irrespective of the increase in the statutory security outfits since 1999 as well as their perceived ineffectiveness and inefficiency over time, people prefer to employ vigilante groups and other similar groups on security issues as they perform very effectively.

Vigilante and Crime Management in Calabar Metropolis

Calabar is the capital of Cross River State, Nigeria, and it is located at the southern part of the State. Calabar Metropolis encompasses of Calabar Municipality and Calabar South Local Government (Attah, Agba and Festus, 2018). Just like in every city, Calabar metropolis has had its own very share of crimes and criminal activities. There is no day that passes by where theft, burglary, fighting, and other crimes are not recorded. Due to widespread insecurity, Calabar metropolis has had a long history of security mechanisms which could be traced to the pre-colonial era. For example, there existed several agencies that played significant roles in maintaining social order, preventing and managing crime and ensuring traditions and customs are obeyed in their domains. Some of this indigenous systems include; Ekpri Akata, Ekpo society, Nka (age grade), Iban Isong and the Ekpe cult. They assisted in no small measure in ensuring security and safety of both the people and the environment.

Nevertheless, as earlier mentioned from colonial to postcolonial era, government increasingly focused on the Nigeria police force for fighting crimes and suppressed some of these indigenous security agents. As crime rates increased, community-based security group began cropping out in order to safeguard their communities since the Police became overwhelmed and their operations became inadequate. Today, vigilante group have gained prominence in the metropolis as these criminal activities could not be handled effectively by the state security agencies alone. Within the metropolis, several vigilante groups exist named and unnamed. Some of the named groups include the IkpaEyop vigilantes of ward 9, the Double

Smash of Anantigha, the MkparawaEfak of Jebes and the MkparawaEfak of Afokang among others (Ikoh, 2013).

Some of these vigilante groups are either paid vigilante staff or vigilante volunteers. In this regard, Ikoh (2013) remarked that sources of funding include compulsory and stipulated levy on landlords, well-to-do tenants and residents in the area. The pooled funds are used for the payment of monthly wages as well as the acquisition of torch lights, batteries, whistles, raincoats and rain booths.

There are several ways the vigilante groups have played vital roles in crime prevention and management in the metropolis. Uchechukwu (2022) reported of a middle aged man, Christian Edem Eyo, who confessed to slaughtering his neighbour and aunty who was in her sixties. The tragic incident occurred in the early hours of Wednesday in their compound at 39, Inyang Street by Afokang in Calabar South local government area, Cross River State. Findings showed that shortly after the suspect slaughtered the woman, Uduak Effiong, he buried her body in a shallow grave he dug in front of the compound. Someone in a nearby building saw the young man when he was trying to bury the body in the shallow grave he dug the person then rushed to the vigilante to report. The vigilante in turn reported to the Police and he was apprehended (Uchechukwu, 2022). In such a situation, if the vigilante group had not taken immediate charge of the situation, maybe some angry mobs would have taken the law into their hands and even commit more crime.

Again, in 2020, there was the breakout of the COVID-19 virus. In order to curb the spread of the virus, restrictions were placed by the governments. People were directed to shut down their businesses and stay indoors. They could no longer provide their basic daily needs and many families now found it difficult to feed (Ariche, Ikegbu and Amalu, 2021). The vigilante groups in various ways assisted in restricting incessant movements and searching and arresting suspected criminals at late and wee hours of the day both in the Metropolis as ordered by the state Government. According to a respondent, *vigilante groups mounted road blocks in different streets and areas within the Calabar Metropolis to curtail any criminal act and compel people to use face masks (Personal Interview).*

In Anantigha, Calabar, bounded by waterways, the waterways enhances bunkering activities, kidnapping, drugs peddling and proliferation of arms have been heavily arraigned by military forces assisted by local Vigilante groups who know some of their drugs hideouts (Edem, 2019). According to one of the Vigilante members in Anantigha area:

Vigilante groups have volunteered to join the government to reduce the crime rates and instead of being a flashpoint for crime, it should be the flashpoint of peace. He lamented that kidnapping and armed robberies have been a great challenge to the people in Calabar South for sometimes now. He said a few months ago, a community member was kidnapped and huge ransom was paid before she was released, adding that due to the spate of kidnapping in the area, the vigilante members have been doing all they could to ensure that the people are safe (Personal Interview).

On their performance so far, the respondent further stated that:

We keep vigil from 10pm to 5am every day. We hardly have time to sleep. What we do is patrol round the area all through the night. So, by and large, we are doing our best and I can tell you that the area is now calm and peaceful,” he said. He appealed to the government to keep on supporting them with security personnel and weapons to keep the culprits away (Personal Interview).

With regards to support from government, it will be recalled according to Uchechukwu (2022) that the executive chairman of Calabar South Local Government Area, Hon. Esther Basse kept vigil with security personnel and vigilante groups across the LGA in a bid to boost morale while on duty. She further noted that the three-day tour which took her round the nooks and crannies of the LGA at midnight also served as an avenue to boost morale and get first-hand information about the challenges they are facing in the field while carrying out their duty.

However it must be noted that irrespective of the efforts made by vigilante groups to manage crime, they have been cases where vigilante groups have taken laws into their hands as they mete out immediate punishment to suspected criminals. Amnesty International Worldwide, observed that armed vigilante groups routinely carry out killings and unlawful detentions and inflict torture, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatments to citizens due to ignorance towards human rights law (Onwuegbusi, 2017). According to the Asanga (2022) “two of the suspected criminals who are said to rob a residential building that was set ablaze at Mayne Avenue by Azikiwe Street opposite Hart Street in Calabar South L.G.A. The lone incident occurred at the Ikot Ansa community in

Calabar Municipality where the suspect was set ablaze by a vigilante group.” There are also several unreported cases of vigilante punishing suspected criminals, killing or setting them ablaze, beating and torturing suspected criminals. Usually they carry out these actions to serve as deterrence to others because sometimes even when these suspected criminals are handed over to the police, they are often released. However, vigilante groups should always do the right thing and not take laws into their hands, hence the need for proper training in security and crime management as they often lack the professionalism to handle these issues as well as other challenges they face in the conduct of their activities.

Challenges of Vigilante Groups in Crime Management

Vigilante groups are faced with several challenges that need utmost attention for them to carry out their duties effectively. They include;

Lack or inadequate funding

Lack or inadequate funding has been the biggest challenge facing vigilante groups across the country. Most of them volunteer with little or no money or incentives to encourage them. Erhurhu (2017) noted that as a result of these, it lures vigilante group members into paying their loyalty to politicians and other state authorities, helping in actualizing the nefarious motives and objectives that has often played along with their preferences because of monetary benefits (Erhurhu, 2017). Lack of funding has affected the ability of the *vigilante* to prevent crime effectively as they lack the necessary equipment, and this is directly tied to inadequate funding. On the issue of lack of crime management resources, Vigilante Respondent One decried thus: “*Vigilante groups are not well-equipped and we blame the government for not being sensitive enough towards the plight of these community vigilante groups. For example, they often encounter threats from hoodlums who use sophisticated weapons in their robbery operations*” (Personal Interview, 2022). In many of the streets in the metropolis, there are no there’s CCTV cameras to monitor activities. The vigilantes do not have modern day protection body amours, communication gadgets, patrol vans and other crime fighting equipment.

Bribery and political interference in criminal justice system

Bribery and political interference have eaten deep into the criminal justice system in Nigeria. The people have lost hope in the system as it often allows criminals to escape punishment under the law. One of the

respondents stated that sometimes when criminals are held and handed over to the police for further prosecution, the alleged criminals would either be granted bail or released.

Political interference in the criminal justice system is also a factor hindering the work of vigilante groups. Some of the perpetrators of crimes have political fathers or godfathers who usually work for their release or may even go as far as influencing the judge to deliver favourable judgments. These criminals return back to the same community and continue from where they stopped with impunity. When such situations keep occurring, the vigilantes' efforts in crime management become fruitless and ineffective.

Inadequate manpower/human resource

Inadequate manpower is also a challenge to vigilante groups. This problem is also tied to the fact that there are little or no financial incentives. Hence, people are rarely motivated to take up roles that will not make them earn a living. Most vigilante groups lack the adequate manpower to cope with the daily challenges of policing their communities.

Lack of professional training

Many vigilante groups lack training and professionalism in their work. On the issue, a respondent who is a vigilante commented thus:

Many vigilantes are uneducated and unaware of the legal framework; they do not always report crimes and some take the people they arrest to their traditional rulers, effectively taking justice into their own hands. They entirely resort to jungle justice as a means to impose punishment on culprits...Vigilante group members are only job seekers in the community (Personal interview, 2022)

The international Crises Group stated that for vigilantes, training is also spotty. Some groups especially those established by state government, have fairly elaborate programmes involving instructors from the police and other security agencies (ICG, 2022). Amnesty International Worldwide, observed that armed vigilante groups routinely carry out killings and unlawful detentions and inflict torture, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatments to citizen due to ignorance towards human rights law

(Onwuegbuisi,2013) Some vigilante groups however, get standardized training in issues as respect for human rights, compliance with the rule of law, conflict management and resolution as well as other sensitive areas. In the northwest, Yan Sakai members learn to handle guns on their own, from old hunters or former soldier men (ICG, 2022).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The paper examined the role of vigilante groups and crime management in Nigeria in Calabar Metropolis. It is established that vigilantes are becoming more popular and preferable in crime management. This growing choice has been traced to the fact that the Police have become overwhelmed by the increasing rate of crimes and only a joint collaboration with vigilantes and neighbourhood watch groups can ensure crime management become successful. However, the vigilante groups are faced with several challenges in the course of carrying out their duties which included inadequate funding and crime management equipment amongst others. Hence given these challenges, the paper therefore recommends the following;

All state government should adopt and implement the community-based approach to policing. They should institutionalize the vigilante group and follow all the necessary steps from recruitment to training and to deploying them to every community within the state. This will also mean that proper funding would be provided for the new institution (i.e placing them on statutory salary and allowances, providing equipment and working tools and even offices spaces). There should be synergy between the vigilante groups and government security officers in order to enhance confidence building, cooperation and communication between the *vigilante* and state security agencies.

The vigilante groups need to undergo some form of professional training to enhance their capacity for managing crime. They should not take the law into their hand and should ensure the follow the right channel to give out every criminal to the appropriate authorities.

Communities should encourage the work of their vigilantes by reporting any information or issues concerning security to them on time. Also, community members should appreciate their efforts from time to time through praises, food items or money gift, to boost their morale to perform better in protecting the community.

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Respondents

Vigilante respondent one, Calabar, 30+, face to face interview, July 24, 2022.

Vigilante respondent two, Calabar, 40+, face to face interview, July 25, 2022.

Vigilante respondent three, Calabar, 45+, face to face interview, July 25, 2022.