
INFORMAL POLICING STRUCTURES IN CRIME PREVENTION AND CONTROL: AN ADVOCACY

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Abstract

In contemporary Nigeria, insecurity has virtually become a norm because The Nigerian police seems incapable of effectively delivering on their mandate of securing citizen's lives and property. Several communities have been completely ravaged, and many others fully displaced leading to the unprecedented number of internally displaced people. Government has introduced complementary measures like joint taskforce approach, yet not much has been achieved. Further evaluation of this situation reveals the desire for a workable complementary strategy, hence, this paper advocates for community vigilante and other informal policing structures as suitable strategy in crime prevention and control in Nigeria, especially in remote areas. The paper is anchored on broken window theory and situational crime prevention theory, which are deemed suitable in understanding the emergence of informal institutions as a better strategy to curb violence and crime in the society. The author therefore recommends that the members of vigilante groups should be trained properly to enable them acquire adequate skills and knowledge in crime control, and be properly equipped to deliver on the mandate. Also, the police should co-operate with the vigilante groups and possibly act as higher tier crime control/ supervisory agency.

Keywords: Crime, Crime Control, Formal Policing, Informal Policing Structures, Vigilante Groups

Introduction

Historically, policing in Nigeria can be traced to three epochs that is the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial eras. In the pre-colonial era, crime prevention was the duty of indigenous institutions responsible for crime control. The absence of codified laws and social structure provided the necessary basis for the regulation of behaviour which was largely enforced by various institutions responsible for crime prevention in different parts of the country such as secret societies, messengers and palace guards (Marenin, 1985 cited in Ikuteyiyo & Rotimi, 2010). In the pre-colonial era, traditional African policing methods were rooted in the community and closely interlinked with social and religious structures. Reiner (2000) opined that formal policing structures, a body of men recruited and paid by the state to enforce law and maintain order is a recent development in human history. He went further to state that traditionally and historically, policing was the responsibility of every adult in the community. In medieval society, all adults were obliged to contribute towards the prevention and control of crime and disorder. "This was achieved through the system of "hue cry and pursuit" and the "watch and ward" that preceded the emergence of the state" (Martin, 1990:6). In his own contribution, Achebe (1974) identified institutions like council of elders and masquerade cult as very indispensable in ensuring the prevalence of community peace, safety and security prior to colonial rule in Nigeria.

Modern Policing in Nigeria can be traced to the colonial era; during which time policing was based on the provisions of the British law. There was a paradigm shift from the traditional pattern of policing where a lot of emphasis was placed on traditions, customs and unwritten laws (Inyang & Abraham, 2013). However, in the colonial era, the primary purpose of the police was to advance the economic and political agenda of the colonialists. Hence the police engaged in the brutal subjugation of communities and the suppression of resistance to colonial rule (Idowu, 2013). Rotimi (2001) described this pattern of policing as that in which strangers policed strangers.

The emergence of the state as an entity with the claim to the monopoly over the means of legitimate violence in society resulted to the creation of specialized agencies such as the police and the armed forces for controlling the use of violence by other groups (Weber, 1968 cited in Ritzer, 2012). It is worthy to note that policing and police work did not start as a paid profession rather it started as a noble, incorruptible profession with considerable responsibility and distinction (Newburn, 2004). Nevertheless, the police went through three distinct stages before it became profession. At the first instance, the populace though small was responsible for maintaining law and order, then justice of the peace emerged on the scene to provide both law and justice at the bar and in the present era, paid professional police were established to maintain law and order (Idowu, 2013).

The post colonial era of policing which incorporates the present Nigeria Police Force reflects a cultural transfer with reference to style of policing from the colonial law enforcement officers. Scholars have observed that the NPF also serves the interests of their financiers and nothing better can be expected from them since it is obvious that he who pays the piper dictates the tune (Ikuteyiyo & Rotimi, 2010).

Insecurity has been a major problem facing Nigeria as a developing country. Many policies have been developed in a bid to reform the Police Force for better performance. The inefficiency and lackadaisical attitude of the Force in tackling security challenges have prompted the masses to demand for a change in the current police methods of operations, with options including devolution of police powers from the Central Government to accommodate regional and state levels, community policing and incorporation of informal police institutions into mainstream policing for effective police system in the country (Inyang& Abraham, 2013).

Factors influencing the Emergence of Informal Policing Structures as Alternative Strategy to Formal Policing

Peace safety and security are both necessary and indispensable requirements for development and the attainment of good quality of life for any human society. They provide the enabling and conducive environment for citizens to live and work towards social, economic and political development of the society (Groenewald & Pake, 2004). However, insecurity impacts negatively on all citizens through losses of property, life and limb, or through loss of confidence from fear of violence. The delivery of safety and security is considered a justifiable public good and the very essence of the state (Lubuva, 2004). Odinkalu (2005) asserted that human safety and security are indeed

human rights having a value of their own and serving an instrumental function in the construction of human contentment and prosperity.

The task of providing security to lives and property in most societies is the exclusive function of the conventional police institution. This forms the major tenet of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) social contract theory which stated that security and order could only be achieved by a contract in which all citizens would give up all their individual powers to a central power, the sovereign in return for the protection of life and property (Marshall, 1998). The police are important officials of the state charged with the responsibilities of preventing crime, apprehending offenders and preserving public order. Police work involves a variety of tasks and responsibilities. Officers are expected to prevent crime, protect life and property, enforce laws, maintain peace and public order and provide a wide range of services to citizens (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2005). However, as the Nigerian society progresses especially with the advent of the current democratic system of government, new forms of violent crimes have also emerged and the society has become insecure with many people getting involved in diverse sophisticated criminal activities (Otto & Ukpere, 2012). This phenomenon has affected the NPF in a sense that it has actually exposed its inability to accomplish the bulk of its constitutional responsibility. In response, government has established other law enforcement agencies as Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC) in addition to existing military police to assist in the process of law enforcement and maintenance of order in the country. Also, other private security companies such as Bemil Nigeria Limited, Cardinal Security Limited and lots more have been given constitutional approval through the Private Security Act to assist in the security business and their activities are supervised by the NSCDC (Inyang & Ubong, 2013). These establishments do not have any impact on the current security demands by Nigerian masses. In spite of the fact that many security agencies have been established, the rate of crime keeps on increasing.

Nevertheless, it is unfortunate that social life in Nigeria has remained largely characterized by fear and insecurity in a manner that suggests that the country lacks the capacity to discharge its security functions especially that of policing (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2005; Bach, 2004; Odinkalu, 2005; Odekunle, 2005). The inability of the NPF and other related security agencies to control the rising spate of crime and the fact that these institutions are seen as oppressive tools in the hands of people in government, especially the rich few has given room for public distrust and subsequent debates on how to improve safety and security for Nigerians and foreigners residing and doing business in the country. Hence, increasing attention has been given to informal policing and it is seen as a rational response of poor communities to the weak criminal justice system with regards to low policing and high levels of criminality (Wisler & Onwudiwe, 2005). Olusegun (2014) noted that some crimes are committed with the connivance or participation of the police. He observed that there were cases of alleged destruction of crime evidences and reports by the police, release of arrested persons, dropping of criminal charges in exchange for bribes or other benefits. Also, false charges were reportedly made against innocent and ignorant citizens, criminal investigations suspended and other abuse of rights with impunity were rampant among the police. He also noted that poor educational attainment, lack of the requisite

professional qualification, recruitment of low skilled persons and low salary scale are allegedly at the root of the misdeeds of the police and high attrition rates. The public see the police as ineffective, corrupt, brutal and uncivil. This is a throwback to the colonial epoch where the police was more or less an occupation force terrorizing and extorting tributes from the natives in somewhat dehumanizing circumstances (James, 2013). He opined that due to the obvious ineffectiveness and inefficiency of the formal police, supplementary security networks like the vigilante groups have emerged to assist or complement the police in their duties (James, 2013).

Some state governments in Nigeria are also known to have tacitly or openly endorsed armed vigilante groups as part of their campaign against crime (Amnesty International, 2012, Akinyele, 2008). Debates about how to improve safety and security for urban communities and rural dwellers in Nigeria are beginning to pay increasing attention to Informal Policing Structures (IPS) which were set up by people living in poverty in response to the apparent inability of the formal police to adequately protect them from crime (Etanibi, Alemika & Chukwuma, 2004). In Nigeria, the ratio of police to the population is low – about 1 police officer for every 500 Nigerians. In a study conducted in Plateau, Kaduna and Kano States, findings of the study indicated that police are not enough and vigilante groups volunteer to safeguard lives and properties. Many people expressed concern about the necessity of the complementary roles of the vigilante groups suggesting that many Nigerians feel that they are under policed. The Nigerian Police Force suffers from insufficient funding and equipment, mismanagement, abuse of power and corruption. Vigilante groups flourish not only in places where the state lacks the capacity to protect citizens from crime but also where the state is believed to be corrupt or untrustworthy (Kantor & Mariam, 2010).

Since the establishment of the Nigeria Police Force and its related agencies, insecurity has remained a major problem facing Nigeria as a developing nation. The police authorities have developed policy issues over the years with the intention of reforming the police force for better performance, but the implementation of such policies have always been the problem. This laxity together with apparent inefficiency of the formal police to tackle emerging security challenges in the country has led to invitations from different quarters for a change in the current police methods of operation, with options including dissolution of police powers from the central government to accommodate regional and state levels, community policing and incorporation of informal police institutions into mainstream policing for effective police system in the country (Ikuteyiyo & Rotimi, 2010). We should realize that no single agency can succeed in reducing crime. This fact is acknowledged by security experts who argue that any comprehensive strategy to reduce crime must not only include the contribution of the police and the criminal justice system but also the whole range of environmental, social, economic and educational factors which affect the likelihood of crime. To this end, many countries of the world due to the ravaging security challenges and the apparent inability of the conventional police to handle the situation alone satisfactorily have encouraged the establishment of partnerships between government organizations and private community organizations in addressing crime. Increasingly, comparative experiences have shown that this approach of incorporating a professional police service and a responsible public seems to be the most effective and fruitful ways to achieve positive

results and create a safer environment (Oppler, 1997). In other words, the informal police should complement the formal police in the area of crime prevention and control in the society.

Theoretical Orientation

The paper is anchored on broken window theory and situational crime prevention theory. Broken window theory was propounded by Wilson and Kelling (1982) and was further popularized by Bratton and Gulliani (1990). Broken Window theory is a criminological theory that states that visible signs of crime, anti-social behavior and civil disorder create an urban environment that encourages further crime and disorder, including serious crimes. The theory states that policing methods that target minor crimes such as vandalism, public drinking and fare evasion help to create an atmosphere of order and lawfulness, thereby preventing more serious crimes. Using broken window as a metaphor for disorder within neighborhoods, the theory links disorder and instability within a community to subsequent occurrences of serious crime. Wilson and Kelling (1982) saw serious crime as the final result of a lengthier chain of events, theorizing that crime emanated from disorder and that if disorder were eliminated, then serious crimes would not occur. In line with this, some scholars argued that informal social control can be an effective strategy to reduce unruly behaviour. For instance, Garland (2001) opined that community policing measures in the realization that informal social control exercised through everyday relationships and institutions is more effective than legal sanctions. Wilson and Kelling identified two types of groups involved in maintaining order and they are community watchmen and vigilantes. In earlier times, there were legal sanctions to follow, informal policing was primarily objective driven as stated by Wilson and Kelling (1982). Broken window theory is seen by many as a way to effect change quickly and with minimal expense by merely altering the police crime control strategy. It is far simpler to attack disorder than it is to attack such ominous social ills as poverty and inadequate education (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019). Broken window theory is relevant and appropriate in understanding the reasons for adopting informal policing structures as strategy for crime control. Vigilante groups are closer to the people and their presence in the communities helps to checkmate the excesses of individuals.

Hough and Clarke (1980) were the proponents of situational crime prevention theory. The central concepts of the situational crime prevention theory are influenced by other theories including the rational choice theory the routine activity theory and the crime pattern theory (Clark & Felson, 1993, Felson, 1994). The concept of situational crime started to gain recognition in the late 1940s when Sutherland (1947) argued that crime was either historical (influenced by previous personal history or situational (the environmental factors encompassing the crime scene). The decision to offend is made in response to the immediate circumstances and situation in which an offence is contemplated since the decision to commit an offence depends on the situation the offender finds himself. One of the preventive measures according to these theories is to ensure that situation must not be favorable to them. To them, being security conscious and keeping tight security are very vital.

Hirschi and Gottfredson (1986) opined that although criminality is a necessary condition, it alone is not sufficient for a crime to be committed, crime also requires situational incentives found in the form of motivation and opportunity. The theory states that motivation to offend is neither constrained or beyond control rather, the motivation to offend is seen as dependent on the calculation of cost and reward and not on the result of inheriting or acquiring a disposition to offend. Clarke (1983) thoroughly defined the core of the theory and focused entirely his new approach on the event of the crime – the immediate physical and social settings as well as wider social arrangements instead of the perpetrator. Clarke went further to state that the theory is the science and art of decreasing the amount of opportunities for crime using measures directed at highly specific forms of crime that involve the management design or manipulation of the immediate environment in a systematic and permanent way (Clarke, 1983) an approach found to be much easier than to seek to reform the offenders themselves. Some initiatives aimed at preventing crime include iron fitting and use of detective hardware (e.g. alarm, tracking device, security hardware and property marking). It is worthy to note that not everybody can afford the installation of these security gadgets, some people may resort to the use of dogs to secure their environment.

According to McInnes, Jones and Berth (1982), neighbourhood watch programme operates as an alternative to the protection offered by the police. The vigilant groups which are part of informal police keep vigilance in the area and neighbourhoods alerting the community through the use of instruments such as gong and whistle. Crime prevention theorists note that preventive measures are centered on the individual by making the cost to be higher than the reward; by making the situation uncondusive to the deviants like modifying physical environment by using iron fittings, detection hardware and the presence of vigilante groups. Prevention techniques are aimed at decreasing the number of suitable victims and increasing the presence of control and guardian at all times. Situational prevention theory is thus suitable for a good comprehension of preference for informal police in crime prevention since the vigilante groups patrol the communities on a regular basis to prevent crime.

For practical purposes, an opinion poll was conducted. The view of Nigerians resident in Onitsha, Anambra State was sought on the issue of the effectiveness of local security operatives. Two hundred and six entrepreneurs purposively selected from the main market were asked three questions each: i) would you prefer that more police officers be sent to Onitsha while vigilante boys are withdrawn, ii) would you wish that more vigilante boys be employed rather than the police, iii) would you advice that vigilantes be accountable to market organizations or the police.

However, 81% of the respondents preferred employing more vigilante boys to deploying more police officers, and 67 percent of the respondents favoured the supervision of the vigilante by the police, and 33% preferred that the vigilante should be accountable to the market organizations.

These same questions were put to three hundred and twenty (320) non indigenes of Anambra State engaged in private businesses and trades, comprising of 146 South Westerns, 98 South Southerners, and 76 Northerners. Findings of the study indicate that

74% of the respondents in this category favoured more vigilante than police, while 80% preferred that the vigilante should be accountable to the police, and only 20% preferred that vigilante boys should be accountable to the market organizations.

The public view represented above could be interpreted to mean (by extrapolation) that most of the members of the business community expressed confidence in the ability of vigilante boys to curb/prevent crime. The respondents must have expressed their own, as well views of those people they have been interacting with over the security situation in the Country. It is also important to highlight the fact that most of the respondents agreed that the Police should supervise the vigilantes. It is thus persuasive to note that the public opinion around Onitsha is that vigilante should constitute the first tier of security operatives, while the police should be at the second tier.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The police as one of the components of the criminal justice system and a formal agency of social control have not lived up to expectation. The Nigeria Police Force has failed in discharging their national assignment which includes maintenance of law and order, security of lives and properties and protection of human rights. This has exacerbated the problem of criminality in Nigeria. No country can develop in an environment where there is insecurity. Security challenges impact negatively on the social, political and economic development in Nigeria. The only way to address and tackle police inefficiency is to establish and maintain informal policing structures in form of neighbourhood watch and vigilante groups to assist the formal police in crime prevention and control. It is believed that accepting informal policing structures as an alternative strategy to crime control is a step in the right direction and government should formalize and legalize the activities of vigilante groups.

Therefore, it is recommended that:

1. Attempts should be made to check the abuses committed by the vigilantes in various communities where they operate so that influential and wealthy individuals in the communities do not use them as tools to deal with their opponents and enemies.
2. The vigilante should be trained and equipped properly, while the police should remain as supervisory authority over the vigilante, at the state level. Proper equipping of the vigilante groups will go a long way in making them to be more effective and efficient in tackling crime in the society.
3. There should be a reorientation of the formal police. The formal police should not regard the members of vigilante groups as enemies or competitors rather they should see them as partners in progress. This attitudinal change will enhance the relationship between the two groups.
4. The vigilante group members should be appreciated and motivated by the communities and the government. This will make them to be more committed, dedicated and functional.
5. Vigilante group members should be sent on periodic training to enable them acquire adequate skills, knowledge and experience in crime prevention and control.

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