

Supplementing the state conventional security agencies in crime prevention and control: A Visible option for community volunteers' guard in Benue State, Nigeria.

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Abstract

The increasing crime waves such as banditry, kidnapping, killings, robbery and community invasion by herders have negatively impacted Benue communities, necessitating the enactment of a Community Volunteer Guard by the State Government in 2022 to complement conventional security agents. This study presents a practical analysis of Community Volunteer Guards' activities, strategies and challenges in tackling the rising crime wave by leveraging materials from primary and secondary sources. A qualitative approach was employed to obtain information from 20 participants. Their responses were thematically analysed, and the study found that volunteer guards used checkpoints and routine patrol in crime control in the study area. The study also found that arresting armed robbers, recovering stolen property, and protecting the community against theft were effective areas the volunteer guard achieved in crime control. However, inadequate equipment, poor training, and indiscipline were challenges for the volunteer guard. This study concludes that the intervention of community volunteer guards in Benue State crime control has positively impacted lives and properties. Hence, the study recommends that a standard means of recruiting community volunteer guards be observed. Additionally, the state government should provide more modern and sophisticated equipment to members of vigilante groups in Benue State.

Keywords: Banditry, Community Volunteer Guards, Crime Control, Effectiveness, Kidnapping.

Introduction

In nearly every human civilisation, crime has been an endemic occurrence. The crime problem has grown substantially in recent years, particularly in metropolitan areas. The Crime Statistics Report (2022) and the U.S. Department of Justice (2022) performed a global study of crime in cities in 2022, which revealed a wealth of information about crime patterns. While the number of people detained in Indian jails for aggravated assault increased by 29% from midyear 2019 to midyear 2020, the number detained for domestic violence declined by 6%. The number detained for rape, sexual assault and other violent offences did not change; the study claims that crime rates in Europe increased by 4032 international homicides in 2020, a slight increase after decreasing since 2016 per cent (U.S. Department of Justice, 2022).

Africa has consistently ranked first in worldwide crime figures. In recent years, both South Africa and Nigeria have seen an increase in violent and non-violent crime. According to Africa Check (2013), the number of murders in South Africa grew from 15,609 in 2011/12 to 16,259 in 2012/13, an increase of 650 murder cases or 4.2 per cent when compared to the previous year's total number of murders. Murders and attempted murders committed during a violent robbery, inter-group conflict (such as gang or taxi violence), and vigilantism account for between 35 per cent and 45 per cent of all murders and attempted murders, according to the same research (Ukoji & Okolie-Osemene, 2016). In Nigeria, robbery, burglary, theft, and assaults were some of the crimes for which people were most concerned in 2022 (Statista Research Department, 2023).

The impact of crime on Nigerian society, particularly the Benue State, is immense. Not effectively managing crime can have negative economic, physical, medical, moral, and social implications for victims and society (Soyombu, 2009). The Nigerian government and business groups have strategised efforts to combat crime in light of the detrimental repercussions of crime in society. Government efforts in crime prevention and control include the formation of the Nigerian Police Force (NPF), Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC), Nigerian Immigration Service (NIS), Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC),

Independence Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC), and a slew of others. Despite the Nigerian government's attempts to combat the threat of crime in the country, the dreadful trend of crime has continued to increase (Soyombu, 2009). Due to this threat, the public and the government decided that another crime control agency (Volunteer Guards) was needed to support the police and other crime control organisations (Baker, 2002).

In light of the above, the Benue State Government reviewed the 2000 Benue State Vigilante Law in 2022. The law was created to supplement the state's traditional security agencies and solve new security challenges. The government had to amend the law to allow Community Volunteer Guards (CVG) to work alongside traditional security agencies to reduce state-wide insecurity. Community Volunteer Guards (CVG) groups are security organisations made up of volunteers who fight crime under the auspices of a communal agreement. They are either state or community policing categories. Reactive ad-hoc members characterise them and are frequently used to suppress crime through violence. Community Volunteer Guards are made up of dedicated persons at the micro level of the community who are formed either by the government or by community members to collect information on suspected criminals in their regions for use by the police to discover and prevent crime. Landlords, renters, community associations, and neighbourhood leaders form the groups which keep an eye on their neighbourhood and report questionable persons to the police. The community volunteer organisations support the police and other law enforcement authorities in protecting and preserving public property, as well as crowd control and peacekeeping during public occasions when needed. They also help by providing information on criminals and wanted individuals who are residents in the ward or local government to the police and other security authorities. The primary source of worry for this researcher, which inspired this study, is that many academics have studied vigilante organisations and crime control but have yet to pay attention to other elements. For example, Baker (2001) researched vigilante groups and crime control, focusing primarily on the responsibilities of vigilante groups in crime control and the obstacles they face while carrying out their tasks but ignoring whether the group effectively reduced crime. As a result, this void has become an issue for the researcher, and it is thought necessary to fill it.

Literature review

The community's voluntary security guards are tasked with keeping people and property safe, resolving conflicts, apprehending offenders, and turning them over to the police for Punishment (Baker, 2000; Yaqub & Olamyi, 2004). According to Alemika and Chukwuma (2005), community volunteer guards are how citizens judge the government's effectiveness in preserving lives and property. He asserts that the organisation is tasked with upholding law and order. According to the author, both the police and vigilante groups have a responsibility to tell the police about suspects and make arrests of them (Ushie et al., 2023).

An essential component of a community's security is crisis management because the effects of how a crisis is handled can have a positive or negative impact on the welfare of a community. As an illustration, Voice Newspaper (2022) stated that "armed men attacked inhabitants of Aliade in broad daylight; this followed a series of other attacks on chosen houses, stores, and individuals, leaving locals despondent, in despair, and confused. The police had yet to respond when some young people who had organised community volunteer guards were asked for help in battling these underworld figures. Today, people report cases to the outfit for redress and the police in areas of tracing offenders, arresting disputants, recovering stolen property, and so forth on behalf of the police, who ultimately take those cases over for the law to take its course in recognition of the august role of the vigilante.

For the police to apprehend or monitor the activities of receivers of stolen property and 419 practitioners, community volunteer guards also help relocate their permanent or temporary residences, according to Rasheed (2013). They also assist in making beneficial contributions to the advancement, progress, and general well-being of the community by mobilising and supporting local development efforts. Community volunteer guards are widely visible nationwide, from village to ward, community to local government levels, claims Maliki (2003). They have ensured that they have representatives serving as informants on criminal activity in each hamlet, which has a population of 500. The vigilante's need for representative informants among the populace stems from their need to be near illegal activity to stop it from happening, apprehend those responsible, or assist individuals exposed to criminal activity (Igbe & Ushie, 2020).

According to Gyong (2006), volunteer guards are present in most villages and regularly patrol the neighbourhood daily to watch for potential criminal activity. According to Baker (2002), the system of beats and patrols organised and carried out by the vigilante unit under the command of the unit officer is the main approach of the community volunteer guards for crime prevention and control. According to Baker, a volunteer guards unit's territory or area of operation must be strategically divided into beats to implement preventative and investigative plans of action against crime. He asserts that there are two types of beats: the static beat, often known as the point beat, and the beat patrol. A vigilante cop on a static beat would stand sentry duty at a position designated to him for a set amount of time (work hours); such points or sites might be vulnerable to criminal hotspots or important strategic locations like banks, oil facilities, electric power plants, etc. On the other hand, the beat patrol entails a vigilante cop or officers monitoring a duty area of highways and streets with a radius of roughly two kilometres, moving up and down the length of the duty area while keeping an eye out for any illegal activity.

In their contribution, Anyo and Zumuve (2020) claimed that the patrol carried out by the community volunteer guards entails performing a regular, consistent, repeating circuit of a duty area to protect the region from criminal victimisation and recognise criminals. Adeniyi and Olusesan (2019) assert that community volunteer group members patrolling the streets and neighbourhoods to ensure volunteer guards officers' visibility constitute a potentially different force because it increases the perceived likelihood that offenders will be quickly identified, apprehended, and turned over to the police. That is to say, the likelihood of being arrested rises with frequent and continuous volunteer guards patrol. Alemika and Chukwuma (2005) have seen patrol vigilante personnel accidentally come across crime scenes, evade or escape criminals or criminal hideouts and conduct arrests. The patrolling vigilante squad interacts with members of the public, gathers pertinent data, and upholds the law while on patrol.

Ukoji and Okolie-Osemene (2016) assert that crime is a widespread problem that must be resisted tenaciously and resolutely. He contends that the outcome would not be admirable if government agencies could control crime independently. Hence, he asserts that everyone in any community should be concerned about security. As a result, many communities have turned to self-help guards, and even governments in other countries have embraced the concept of vigilante security to help the police win the battle against crime. Several state legislatures have integrated vigilante security into state legislation. The vigilante organisations occasionally arrange media public enlightenment programs to educate and inform the public on strategic topics surrounding crime prevention and personal safety to make it more effective and helpful in aiding the police in combating crime. Such media campaigns highlight the need for the public to alert vigilante organisations or the closest police station about crimes and suspect criminals in their neighbourhood. According to Baker (2002), this endeavour has produced outstanding

results. The community awareness and sensitisation policy is a grassroots conference organised by vigilante groups targeting local community members.

As the adverse effects of crime on the populace continue to increase daily, the government and other social control agencies have not relented in their efforts to curb the menace. In collaboration with the Ministry of Interior, the vigilante group of Nigeria holds a community policing seminar. The seminar titled "Community Policing and Crime Prevention" is targeted at how the police, community volunteer guards and other social control agencies will employ strategies to fight crime in society. The suggested strategies include special training and advanced technology, research studies by the vigilante and other crime control agencies, and a team of technocrats and experts to monitor crime activities (Ushie et al., 2023). According to Igbo (2006), the seminar has helped the volunteer guards' officers improve their strategies, resulting in a geometric reduction in criminal activities.

The volunteer guards' efforts in preserving peace and order in the society were also reported in Ahokegh (2012), where the Ushongo Local Government Chairman commended the community volunteer guards in Mbagwa for averting youth restiveness in the area, promising logistic support. The Tribune online (2022) reported that the Benue State government commended youths in the Akpehe area of Makurdi for arresting and handing over to the police two of the Makurdi prison inmates on the run after the last jailbreak left no one in doubt that vigilante groups are effective in fighting crime. Community members engage in self-help to redress the security loopholes by constituting themselves into vigilante groups. Maliki (2003) observed that given the United Nations' police distribution ratio of 1:500 and the Nigerian situation, where we have an average of 1:2000 for the population, it makes much sense to the positive impact vigilantes would have on reducing the crime rate in the country.

The Nations Newspaper (2007) also praised the vigilante: "Irritant Ijaw Youths in Brass have rounded up a suspected notorious gang and handed it over to police. This followed a series of attacks on oil installations in the area for several months and the futile efforts by the police to combat the culprits." This has also demonstrated the group's effectiveness in fighting crime in society. According to Punch Newspaper (2015), the extent to which the community volunteer guard has gone in the fight against crime is commendable. The volunteer guards in Cross River State recovered over one million rounds of ammunition, locally made pistols, assorted rifles and other types of military arms from a robbery gang that recently terrorised residents of Ugep and Obubra in Yakurand Obubra local government areas of the state, respectively. The command, which paraded two members of the gang and an arms supplier, also said it recovered a 14-seater Joy long Bus belonging to Anambra State government registered transport Service Company to the command; some members of the gang were killed during a gun battle while the group also lost a member. Since then, the command has handed them over to the police. This is also attributed to the glory of the group.

The Benue State Community Volunteer Guards in Makurdi received a huge recommendation when the operations of the command arrested six men who were over a long period partaking in a free fraud syndicate and job racketeers whose stock in trade was to dupe job seekers in Makurdi and environs of their money under the pretext of getting them employed. A purported paramilitary outfit known as Elite Community Initiative Corps of Nigeria, in a statement issued by the Volunteer Guards Public Relations Officer (VGPRO) of the command, said luck ran out of the suspected fraudsters when the vigilante, acting on a tip-off, swooped on them at 53, J.S. Tarka way Makurdi where they were allegedly training their victims. According to the VPRO, the victims, who were no fewer than 60, were men and women seen standing on parade while the suspects were in their brown colour uniforms sewn in paramilitary style. The fraudsters and others took to their heels when they spotted the vigilante officers, but

the group pursued and arrested them. He stated that the search conducted on the suspects led to the recovery of items, including one pair of paramilitary boots, one pair of shoes, and five belts, as well as forged recruitment forms of the purported paramilitary outfit with photocopies of the victims' credentials and passports. In another development, community volunteer guards in the Otukpo area of Benue State arrested no fewer than fifty (50) suspected cultists at different locations on Sunday night. The VGPRO said the suspected criminals and cultists were handed over to the police for further action (Igbe & Ushie, 2020; The Sun Newspaper, 2022).

According to Igbo (2008), "personnel of community volunteer guards and other social control agencies are burdened with work that complaints are often dismissed politely by advancing lack of staff as a convenient reason to vigilante failure to act quickly or achieve results". Umeifekweme (2022) and Igbo (2008) posit that a lack of adequate stock of arms and communication, both in quantity and quality, gives the criminals (whom the community volunteer guards are combating) access to more sophisticated weaponry, while the vigilantes are using inferior and substandard arms. This makes the volunteer guards a no match (or, at best, a poor match) for the daredevil, no-nonsense, drugged, trigger-happy armed hoodlums in the major cities and suburbs. Akinyeye (2001) argued that one of the fundamental problems of volunteer guards and other security outfits is communication gadgets. He maintained that vigilante groups that are supposed to supplement the police or work hand in hand with them to combat crime need to have sufficient and standard communication equipment. Commonly, every vigilante officer on duty is supposed to be equipped with communication gadgets as part of his or her official tool. He argued that most vigilante officers need communication devices in Nigeria and other parts of the world. Information exchange between community volunteer guards and unit officers on the beat or assigned posts is only possible with a communication apparatus. The effect of this communication gap is that fleeing bandits who are making a fast get-away in a vehicle cannot be intercepted or blocked by a vigilante patrol team or duty post located ahead of the fleeing gang because of the inability to establish quick contact with such vigilante patrol units to put them on alert.

In order to increase the performance and operational abilities of the community volunteer guards' personnel, Umeifekweme (2022) also underlined the importance of providing them with sufficient training and retraining. He insisted that the vigilante cops who are prepared to put in much effort are suffering as a result of the police and the general public's discrimination towards them. The author also asserts that there needs to be more incentives with the organisation. He said that most cops are slack in doing their duties since even the rewards granted to vigilante group members are not commensurate with the risk they incur. According to Newswatch Magazine (2009), the community volunteer guards forming throughout the federation need more functional cars. The article claims that "several state governments nationwide support the vigilante organisations in their respective areas by making significant gifts of field/patrol vehicles. The group has yet to fulfil its potential in this aspect. In each state of the union, many village volunteer guards' positions currently need vehicle access, even though they are intended to support the police in combating crime. Chronic maintenance issues exist in vigilante regions, stations, and posts with a small fleet of working vehicles.

The Tribune online (2022) said that community volunteer guards in Nigeria needed experienced and well-trained personnel to help battle crime in the community. According to Anyo and Zumuve (2020), most community volunteer officials operating checkpoints need to gain knowledge and be better trained to distinguish between different vehicle documents by their colour frequently. Many times, drivers have offered to watch after the documents of other vehicles and managed to flee unnoticed. Lack of equipment distorts vigilante operations,

allowing perpetrators to continue doing evil to their victims. Onwuegbusi (2017) asserted that the court system that is set up right now cannot effectively enforce the law and manage crime. The government needs to take volunteer guards into account. They should be given offices. They should have a way to communicate with the police regularly, and if feasible, uniforms should be supplied for easier identification and operation. Governments at all levels, communities, and other stakeholders should ensure that vigilante organisations are appropriately and adequately sponsored, according to Onwuegbusi (2017). This suggestion is essential because it will improve how well vigilante groups operate. This can be accomplished by establishing a unique vigilante trust fund (a community levy), asking for donations from philanthropists and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and more. This will support the community volunteer guards in maintaining their highest efficacy and efficiency.

It is necessary to enhance the working environment for the community volunteer guards. This can lessen the vigilante groups' squalor and miserable situation in proportion to their risk. Vehicles will make travelling easier and lessen the strain of making long-distance treks to monitor crime (Aina & Odiji, 2019). According to Aina and Odiji (2019), community volunteer guards should be legally recognised as crime-fighting organisations. This is required to end the debate about whether vigilante organisations can fight crime legally. Passing the Vigilante Act may be accomplished through a legitimate parliamentary procedure. According to Akinlabe and Ihemeje (2021), community volunteer guards should have the necessary equipment for their operations, including boots, blankets, raincoats, uniforms, batons, torch lights/batteries, and whistles. These facilities are required to enable members to prevent crimes as effectively as possible.

Conversely, Plangshak (2021) suggests that community volunteer guards should also get incentives. This is necessary to inspire and maintain the enthusiasm of vigilante group officers in crime prevention. Allowances, including hazard, special duty, and arrest allowances, might be implemented to accomplish this. According to Shaw (2000), to maximise police and volunteer guards' cooperation for long-term crime prevention, the connection between the two should be enhanced. This may be achieved by intentional, organised, and ongoing enlightenment efforts that foster mutual understanding based on trust and tolerance, improving communication channels, and repositioning the police/community volunteer guards relationship to foster dialogue and collaborative operations. Ikoh (2013) asserts that to increase their offices' capacity seriously, vigilante organisations should start focusing on increasing the effectiveness of their operations. This is required to keep them updated with new crime prevention strategies. Regular training sessions, workshops, seminars, and symposiums can be held with the police and other security agencies to accomplish this.

Methods

This research employed a qualitative approach. The rationale behind opting for qualitative research stems from the need to gather insights directly from individuals impacted by community volunteer guards, particularly considering the high illiteracy rate in Benue State. A sample size of 20 key informants comprising 15 community volunteer guards (15), police officers (5), and members of the public (5), respectively, were selected using saturation principles, a method widely endorsed in qualitative research circles for determining sample size. The participants, deliberately chosen from communities most affected by insecurity, were deemed knowledgeable about the study's focus. Purposive sampling was employed, whereby specific sites and individuals were selected to explain the issue comprehensively. This method, advocated by scholars like Creswell and Patton, ensures that participants contribute meaningful perspectives aligned with the research objectives. In qualitative research, the emphasis lies on understanding phenomena from the insiders' viewpoints. Hence, decisions regarding whom to

involve and how many sites or informants to include are crucial, guided by the principle of purposive sampling. This approach acknowledges the researcher's role as an instrument, leveraging their expertise to select eligible participants capable of offering valuable insights.

This study utilised both a snowballing sampling strategy and a broader purposeful sampling technique. Snowballing sampling, a form of purposive sampling, involves participants recommending others eligible for the interview during the research process (Creswell, 2012). This approach was chosen due to the complexity and limited understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. This method identified suitable participants within the Benue communities where the study took place. Despite further recommendations, careful measures were taken to prevent biases in participant selection. In this study, community volunteer guards, police officers, and public members were initially identified as meeting the selection criteria. They were then asked to recommend additional participants from the most suitable areas to address the research questions.

Qualitative research often draws from various data sources, including observation, interviews, and documents (Creswell, 2014; 2012; Merriam, 2009). These sources were employed to address the research inquiries effectively. Given the qualitative nature of the research, primary data were collected through in-depth interviews and observation to ensure the acquisition of reliable information encompassing the study's objectives. These data collection methods targeted individuals affected by insecurity in the study area. The meaningful analysis and interpretation of data are essential aspects of research. Qualitative data analysis involves navigating concrete data, description, interpretation, deductive and inductive reasoning, and abstract concepts (Creswell, 2013; King & Horrocks, 2010; Saldana, 2012; Yin, 2015). Consequently, this study presents its findings as themes, sub-themes, and explanatory accounts, providing a comprehensive understanding of the data.

Analysis and results

Word frequency is used to identify the most carefully selected words during research and to generate themes and sub-themes. This shows the central focus of the responses on the study's subject matter.

The role of community volunteer guards and Crime Control in Benue state

We sought to obtain community volunteer guards' role in controlling crime in Benue state. The majority of the respondents (22%) reacted with the indication that community volunteer guards arrest criminals in their areas, most especially petty thieves. In comparison (17%) indicated that community volunteer guards assist in maintaining peace in their communities, (and 14%) maintained that routine patrol by the community volunteer guard assists a lot in scaring away criminals, especially unarmed ones. In contrast, (1%) maintained that community volunteer guards help in manning/guarding residential houses to prevent criminals from penetrating. While (14%) indicated that community volunteer guards serve as informants to the police in most cases where the criminals are hardened. Moreover, (11%) maintained that "protection of lives and properties are the roles played by vigilante groups; they stressed that the groups carry out this duty most especially at night. On the role community volunteer guards play in crime control in Benue state, the following responses were captured:

Community volunteer guards play many roles in controlling crime, especially at night. We chase away criminals in our areas. The government must only establish a cordial relationship with the Volunteer guards to assist more in crime fighting (*Volunteer Member/30years/KII/Madurki Unit*).

Similarly, one of the key informants interviewed described the role this way:

Community volunteer guards, especially the night guards who help man residential houses, play some roles in crime control in the Zaki-Biam area of Ukum Local Government Area. Sometimes, their presence scares away petty thieves (*Village Head from Zaki-Biam, behind Yam market*).

A female Volunteer guard respondent interviewed asserted that:

Yes, we operate in the Bridge area of Kastina-Ala. We have different units in Kastina-Ala. We assist a lot and play roles like protecting lives, settling local disputes and arresting criminals (*A female volunteer guard respondent from Kastina-Ala*).

Also, a Volunteer guard respondent interviewed through an unstructured interview claimed that:

Since the introduction of community volunteer guards, activities such as shaming and beating criminals have increased crime control in our locality (*A male community volunteer guard respondent from Agatu Local Government Area unit*).

A community volunteer guard respondent asserted that:

Community volunteer guards play roles in controlling crime using native guns, double-barrel guns, cutlasses, and other poisonous substances to either arrest criminals or scare them away from committing crime (A female respondent from Guma Local Government Area Volunteer unit, Guma). Also, a male volunteer respondent agreed that volunteer guards help much in crime control. The respondent also mentioned cemetery guard and night vigilance as other vigilante groups' roles in their locality (*A male respondent at volunteer unit Udei market*).

A youth leader in one of the communities interviewed asserted that:

The community volunteer guard operates in the Nyihemba area of Kwande Local Government Area. They have different units in Nyihemba. They assist a lot and play roles like protecting lives, settling local disputes, and arresting criminals (*A female volunteer guard respondent from Nyihemba*).

Methods used by community volunteer guards in Crime Control

On the perception of respondents on the strategies/measures adopted by community volunteer guards in crime control in Benue State. However, most respondents (66%) indicate that community volunteer guards use checkpoints, road blocks and patrols to help control crime. They added that the community volunteer guard members are on highways to check vehicles with stolen and suspicious properties and block the highways when there are reported crime cases in a particular location. Whereas (5.5%) indicated the use of an intelligence team, which enables the community volunteer guard to get hold of hidden criminals in their localities, and (11.1%) indicated the use of telephone/GSM by community volunteer guard as one of their crime control measures. The essence of this strategy is to call their office or Police station to deploy more officers to places where they are faced with open fire and also to call the office to increase staff strength to enable them to win field battles or make arrests of notorious criminals.

Data from the interview shows that community volunteer guards use different measures, especially mounting checkpoints, roadblocks, and day and night patrols. The group also establishes a cordial relationship with members of the public to get information about hidden criminals. According to the interviewees, vigilante groups' strategies have gone a long

way towards minimising the crime rate in their location. The respondents maintained that, with the aid of the measures/strategies adopted by volunteer guards, it is easier for the groups to get information about criminals in their areas. One of the volunteer guard respondents affirms that:

The vigilante groups occasionally hold meetings with community members, imploring them to disclose any criminal tendencies or hideouts so that we (vigilantes) can eradicate crime in our area. Sometimes, we apply the strategy of appealing to them in the area, especially when criminal activities occur without us detecting them (*A male volunteer respondent from the Abagu volunteer unit Gboko*).

Another volunteer respondent asserted that:

The volunteer guards in Akata Junction, Kastina-Ala, have resulted in foot patrols at night, especially recently, when the community has recorded high cases of petty thieves (*A male volunteer respondent from the Akata Junction volunteer unit*).

A female volunteer respondent from the Gwer-West in Local Government Area unit asserted that:

Volunteer guards in their area use detectives (created out of vigilante units) who will come and sit amid people and listen to their discussions. If the discussion is criminal, the team will call the office, and the operation team will make an arrest immediately. She stressed that this has been very helpful in curtailing crime recently (*A female volunteer for 38 years/IDI/ Naka unit*).

The effectiveness of community volunteer guards and crime prevention and control in Benue State.

Information was gathered from the respondents on how effective the establishment of community volunteer guards was in crime control in the study area. All the public members who participated in this study opined that community volunteer guards are effective in fighting crime because they make arrests of armed robbers, help scare away petty thieves, destabilise criminal activities, and recover stolen properties and hand them over to the police for proper identification and collection. One of the respondents openly asserted that:

Volunteer guard members need to be given kudos for what they do. They are highly effective at fighting crime in my area. In fact, on November 1st, 2022, they arrested and handed over notorious criminals to the police for further action. Community members are so impressed with them (*A yam seller/45 years/IDI/ Naka market*).

In one of the interview sessions conducted, a participant in Kwande Local Government Area stated that:

Community volunteer guards are crucial in controlling crime, especially at night. They chase away criminals in our areas. The government only needs to establish a cordial relationship with the community volunteer guard to assist more in crime fighting (*Volunteer Member/30years/IDI/Jato-Aka*).

Similarly, one of the key informants interviewed described the role this way:

Some community volunteer guards, especially the night guards, prevented crime in the Adikpo area of Kwande Local Government Area. These

guards help manned residential houses and sometimes scare away petty thieves (*A taxi driver/26 years/IDI/Adikpo, behind the Ushongo market*).

Also, a male community volunteer guard respondent interviewed claimed that:

Since the introduction of volunteer guards, activities such as shaming and beating criminals have increased crime control in our locality (*A male volunteer respondent from the Wadata volunteer unit*).

Challenges encountered by community volunteer guards in their efforts to fight crime in Benue state

Even though community volunteer guards have contributed immensely to controlling crime in Benue state, most respondents indicated they lack weaponry. Others indicate that they need adequate personnel. Some indicate that community volunteer guard members need more training. Others pinpoint that they are corrupt and indiscipline.

A female volunteer respondent at the Agarbe unit asserted that:

Even though their vigilante group is tiny in number and has insufficient weapons, they respond to distress calls faster than the police, who sometimes arrive at the scene after the crime. She said that despite being female, she is unafraid of going to the battlefield. She admitted that volunteer guards are hard-working (*A female volunteer member, 22 years, IDI, and Agarbe unit*).

Another volunteer respondent asserted that:

We, the vigilante groups, are ready and willing to work, but, as you can see, our office still needs to be fully finished with the needed comfort. No motivation, my brother! One cannot expect to deliver high productivity with this nature of office and atmosphere (*A male volunteer respondent from the Wadata vigilante unit*). Also, another vigilante respondent said that, as you can see, our job is hazardous, and we need advanced weapons such as AK 47 rifles, stainless pistols, standard Toyota Hilux vans, and communication gadgets. As you can see, this is our office, and little is found. Can we use our bare hands to fight armed robbers? No, I said a capital 'No'. These are some of the problems we are facing. Please advise the government to assist us (*A male /30/years/IDI/volunteer respondent from the Modern Market unit*).

A respondent interviewed indicated that the constituted authorities offer volunteer members minimal opportunity in their quest to fight crime. Sometimes, they are entirely deprived of such privileges. According to the respondents, if the government wants crime to be adequately controlled, it should give the volunteer guards just 15% of the support offered to the Nigerian Police Force, and they will see effective results (*A place officer/45y years/IDI/ GRA, Gboko*).

Another male volunteer guard respondent asserted that:

Suppose the government supports us (volunteers) with surveillance, logistics, and intelligence gathering. In that case, I assure you that crime will never be mentioned again (*A male/19 years/IDI volunteer respondent/ Ihotu, Agatu volunteer unit*).

A female vigilante respondent said that,

If the government wants the volunteer guards to work effectively, it should fund the group adequately. She maintained that inadequate funding of vigilante groups has seriously challenged their efficiency. She advised the government to work hard not to discourage vigilante members through inadequate funding because the agency is beneficial (a 20-year-old female volunteer respondent from the North Bank unit).

Discussion

This study found that community volunteer guards play a role in managing crises. This is done by community volunteer guard members intervening in cases that, if neglected, will result in a bone of contention, such as angry mobs preparing to set ablaze armed robbers and land dispute crises. The study also found that community volunteer guards' routine patrol and investigative roles have helped the members arrest hardened criminals. This finding is supported by the view of Aluko (2000) that community volunteer guards are aimed at enforcing laws and preventing crime.

We also found that road blocking by community volunteer guards during patrol, mostly at night, has drastically resulted in the recovery of stolen items and the discovery of crimes secretly carried out at night. Such crimes include kidnapping, human trafficking, and armed robbery. The beats system used by community volunteer guards has thoughtfully injected fear into criminals. Beat system means arranging 4-5 community volunteer members over a distance of up to "a kilometre. Also, using the telephone and surveillance by community volunteer guards has helped them know the perpetrators of crime or people who indulge in criminal activities, making arrests very easy. This, in turn, has reduced the crime rate.

We also found that the effectiveness of community volunteer guards is enormous, ranging from the recovery of illegal ammunition from criminals to handset snatching, restiveness, and property vandalism. This finding agrees with Adeola (1996) that crime is a pandemic that must be fought. The result will not be commendable if it is left to government agencies to fight crime. He, therefore, posits that security is the concern of every individual in any society. He argues that as a result, many communities have turned to self-help guards, and even governments of other nations have succumbed to the idea of vigilante security to assist the police in winning the war against crime.

The study also found that the challenges encountered by community volunteer guards include lack of adequate personnel, lack of weaponry, lack of training for community volunteer guards, and corruption, which has affected the performance of community volunteer guards in Benue State. This finding echoed the work of Akinyeye (2001), who asserted that one of the fundamental problems of vigilante groups and other security outfits is communication gadgets. He maintained that the community volunteer guards, who are supposed to work hand in hand with the police to combat crime, need more standard communication equipment.

Conclusion/policy recommendations

The study's findings allow one to rightly conclude that the intervention of community volunteer guards in controlling crime, particularly in Benue state, has tremendously impacted people's lives. The output also has a visible impact on property and life protection and maintaining social stability, which is desirable for functional growth needed by the people for orderly co-existence and development of the Benue state.

To this end, this study recommends that to checkmate the rising wave of crime in Benue state and Nigeria at large, there should be joint efforts by all organised security agencies like the Police, Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corp (NSCDC), Nigerian Army (N.A.), Nigeria Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), National Agency for Food, Drugs

Administration and Control (NAFDAC), to mention but a few, to regularly organise workshops to sensitise the members of the public about the importance of vigilante groups and to enlighten them to see why it is not in their interest to withhold information from vigilante officers. There should be an orientation for members of the public by the police and other crime control agencies through the help of the National Orientation Agency so that the public will accept and trust vigilante groups as agents of crime control. The orientations should cut across the nooks and crannies of Benue state. Through the campaign, more youths will join vigilante groups to quench the issue of the dearth of staffing. Regarding logistics, the government should, as a matter of urgency, provide more modern and sophisticated equipment that can match, if not surpass, those of armed bandits to members of community volunteer members in Benue state and Nigeria at large. They should also imbibe a maintenance culture so that the vehicles, among other logistics attached to them by the government and other corporate bodies, will stand the test of time. Since this research has uncovered the sub-standard nature of recruitment exercises into vigilante groups, which consequently leads to the recruiting of criminals into the agency, it is recommended that a standard means of recruiting vigilante officers should be observed. This should be done outside of corruption, favouritism, and nepotism. If this is strictly adhered to, issues such as illiterate officers and criminals among volunteer officers will be reduced.

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