


The role of vigilante groups and crime prevention in Orumba south local government area, Anambra state

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Keywords: <i>Crime, Community, Crime Prevention, Vigilante Groups, Security,</i></p> <p><i>Received : 05, May 2026</i> <i>Revised : 11, June 2026</i> <i>Accepted: 12, June 2025</i></p> <p>©2026 Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International</p> 	<p><i>Irrespective of the circumstances that surround social existence of certain individuals, all human beings aspire to live a fulfilling, satisfying and meaningful life. Security is indeed one of the basic needs for human beings to live a fulfilling, satisfying and meaning life. This study examines the role of vigilante groups and crime prevention in Orumba South Local Government Area, Anambra State. The study has three (3) objectives which include; to ascertain the extent of which vigilante groups have assisted in crime prevention Orumba South LGA, Anambra state; to identify the problems encountered by the vigilant groups in their effort to prevent crime in Orumba South LGA, Anambra; to ascertain the level of cooperation between the police and vigilante groups in Orumba South LGA, Anambra state with regards to crime prevention. It also reviewed and adopted community crime prevention theory as its theoretical framework. The study found that vigilante groups have an important role to play in crime prevention Orumba South LGA, Anambra state. Hence, it is recommended, that the vigilante groups should be properly repositioned and motivated through the provision of basic operational equipments and improved welfare packages, provisions of adequate funding, training and retraining, cooperation with other security agents to enable them to continue to contribute to the security of lives and properties in communities in Orumba South LGA, Anambra State.</i></p>

INTRODUCTION

Crime in Nigeria is no doubt very disturbing. The incidence of crime in the country has indeed assumed a frightening and disturbing dimension that hardly can a day pass without reports of one type of crime or another. Crime in Nigeria is an ever present danger which the sad reality is not if, but when one will fall a victim. Traditionally, crime prevention was the responsibility of all adults in the community. In the medieval society, all adult males were obliged to contribute toward the prevention and control of crime and disorder under the system of 'hue, cry and pursuit' and the 'watch and ward' that preceded the emergence of specialized police force as organs of the state (Okeanoife, 2012). But the emergence of the state, with its vast bureaucracies anchored on civilization, hierarchical authority/power structure, and professional staff changed the traditional policing philosophy rooted in the idea of policing as everybody's business (Chukwuma, 2000). The emergence of the state as an entity with monopoly over the means of legitimate violence in society resulted in the creation of specialized agencies such as the police and the armed forces for controlling the use of violence by other groups (Alemika & Chukwuma 2005).

Up till date, it is disturbing and alarming that despite the constitutional power granted to the police to maintain public peace and general security in Nigeria, the quality of the security has nothing to be proud of (Okeanonife, 2012). To this level, there is confirmed breakdown of public order and security in Nigeria that made the Nigeria police not useful and helpful in national security as there

are persistent cases of violence, robbery, inter-ethnic religious conflict, political assassination, kidnapping etc. In the pre-colonial Igbo society, prevention of crime was primarily the social obligation of the entire citizens at various capacities ranging from grown up males of kindred to the members of various age grades who are fit and agile. Oli 2012; Areh, Ajah, Ezeanya, Eze, Onwuchekwe and Onyejegbu (2021) argued that in the traditional Nigerian society there existed a traditional family support system which while recognizing male dominance equally sought to protect all members from aggression. Every male was vigilant and security conscious to detect any crime in the community (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2005).

Vaaseh and Elinmore (2011) observed that “among the Igbo in Eastern Nigeria, available evidence states that a body of men known locally as “*Umụ̀òkóròbịa*” drawn mainly from the age-grade system performed police duties. The youths in Nri in Anambra state through their organized age grade system defend the community against internal and external hostilities (Chieme, 1990). Apart from the “*Umụ̀òkóròbịa*” who perform the responsibility of security maintenance and general enforcement; the masquerade cult, ‘*mámwụ̀*’ also performed traditional police duties. The police action of the ‘*mámwụ̀*’ was generally referred to as ‘*írí iwú*’. For instance Onyeneke (1987) stated that achikwu ocha (white) masquerade acts as village surveillance in communities in Enugu state. “The traditional policing system involved the prevention of crime through the identification, arrest and enforcement of sanctions by fines known as ‘*òrírí iwú*’ or by ‘*ìgbā mkpé*’, i.e. the public humiliation of a criminal. A special force, ‘*ìgà*’ kept surveillance over village streams during the dry season for the preservation of water resources” (Okafor, 2007, p.8-9). It could be argued that prior to Nigeria Police Force (NPF) formation in 1861; there was an informal social arrangement to prevent crime in the Igbo traditional setting.

Nigeria, like other societies has established laws and norms through which the activities of every citizen are regulated. These laws or rules are enforced through constituted institutions, one of which is the police. Section 214 of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and Section 4 of the Police Act established the Nigeria Police Force (NPF). They are bestowed with prevention and detection of crime, protection of life and property, preservation of law and order and maintenance of national security. As the national global existence continues to change with the prevalence in crime waves and sophistication of the criminal modus operandi, it becomes obvious that the institution of law enforcement represented by the police is failing in its statutory duties. Security could no longer be brought to the grass root communities and this has led to an increase in the demand for alternative security and law enforcement system that is citizen oriented. This led to the formation of Informal Policing System (IPS). This informal social arrangement has resulted in the establishment of the vigilante groups and neighborhood watches. Also as a response to the security challenges in the country, many communities and neighborhoods have made increasing recourse to informal security providers in a bid to improve their safety and security particularly since the country’s return to civilian rule on May 29, 1999. Reports indicate that as high as 50% of Nigerians patronize the services of these community based security operatives for their protection from criminal attacks (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2005).

Every constituted body is made with a general and a specific function in mind, and the relevance of any institution is always measured by its ability to fulfill its expected role (Onwuchekwe, Okafor & Madu, 2020). Vigilante groups in the South-East exist exclusively to take care of the violent crimes of armed robbery, kidnapping, rape etc. For example; the state sponsored and endorsed Anambra State Vigilante Service (AVS), the Abia State Vigilante Service (AVS), and the Imo State Vigilante Service (IVS). There are also vigilante groups operating in Ebonyi and Enugu State (as Neighborhood Groups). All these show that there is the yearning of the states in Nigeria to have their own law enforcement agents (Alemika & Chukwuma 2005). More so, it is the focus of this study to examine those challenges confronting and hindering effective discharge of duty of the vigilante in Enugu East, the level of assistance from the government and cooperation by the people. Poor funding,

illiteracy, lack of professional skills, poor logistics, inadequate or lack of working gadgets etc have also been identified as variables that are leading to poor or ineffective crime control of the vigilante groups. This study shall investigate these factors in Enugu East LGA in Enugu state.

2. Study Objectives

The general objective is examining the role of the vigilante groups on crime prevention in Orumba South LGA, Anambra state; and the specific objectives are as follows:

- i. To ascertain the extent of which vigilante groups have assisted in crime prevention Orumba South LGA, Anambra
- ii. To identify the problems encountered by the vigilant groups in their effort to prevent crime in Orumba South LGA, Anambra.
- iii. To ascertain the level of cooperation between the police and vigilante groups in Orumba South LGA, Anambra with regards to crime prevention.

3. Conceptual review

Perception of the Services of Vigilante Group

According to Onwuchekwe, Ibekwe, Ezeh and Okpala (2023) irrespective of the circumstances that surround social existence of certain individuals, all human beings aspire to live a fulfilling, satisfying and meaningful life. Security is one of the basic needs for human beings to indeed live a fulfilling, satisfying and meaning life as submitted by the above authors. Chukwuma (2000) argued that perception of vigilante is divided and diverse. Some scholars argued that vigilante activities should be regulated and closely supervised by the national police while others called for the disbandment of vigilante groups and trial of their operatives who take delight in judging potential offenders without trial and in administering brutal punishment. Colunga (2012) observed that frustration with state's ineffectiveness in ensuring the protection of citizen's security and the meting out of punishment against those engaged in criminal acts; have to a varying degree led to the citizens of United State of America to take justice into their hands. The author observed that many American citizens express support for such citizen administered justice. In reference to a country like Mexico, (Colunga, 2012) argued that the attitude of the people can be fueled by the combination of low confidence in state law enforcement institutions and surprising high level of interpersonal trust among the people. The author stated that the dark side of social capital, high social cohesion combined with low perception of state effectiveness in ensuring citizens' security leads to more support for vigilante justice in Mexico. Distrust in state law enforcement institutions therefore increases levels of support for vigilante justice more strongly as level of interpersonal trust increases.

Burton, Plessis, Legette, Mistry and Vuuron (2004) assert that vigilantism in any community is the result of the public losing faith in government's ability to offer protection, with destructive consequences for the functioning of the criminal justice system. They equally maintained that the extent to which people use the services of private security or resort to vigilante activities is an expression of both their fears of crime and faith in the private and vigilante services. Minnaar (2001) observed that in South Africa, vigilante activity in the 1990's took a number of unlawful forms. While some of them are structured and organized, others tend to be more reactive to specific situations, that they are mostly not accountable or just even when some people feel responsible for protecting their communities from criminals. He also asserted that vigilante in South Africa is seen as a more fearsome and dangerous thing than what vigilantism stands to mean. That vigilantism in its crudest sense in South Africa is simply individuals in a community taking laws into their own hands and dispensing their own punishment on criminals. Minnaar (2001) concluded that the current vigilantism in South Africa is a brutal indictment of the whole criminal justice system and a failure and the inadequacies of the policing system.

A number of factors may have occasioned the emergence of vigilante groups in Nigeria. Chukwuma(2001) asserts that the inability of the police to protect the lives and properties of members of the society has given rise to community effort at ensuring their own security. Okoro (2007) identified corruption, brutality, oppressive and repressive postures, high level of extortion, high cost of assessment to police services, poverty, non-personal relationships, as some of the factors that made the people lose faith in the police and their consequent preference for services of vigilante groups.

Yarub and Olanyi (2004) observed that in many regions in Nigeria, parallel local organizations and vigilante groups have proved more effective in combating crime than the state law enforcement agencies. They equally remarked that in several cases, communities trust vigilante groups more than the police because of the effective, reliable and prompt ways they tackle criminal issues. Alemika and Chukwuma (2005) identified three key reasons why people patronize informal policing structure. They include; perceived reduction in crime, poor perception about the ability of the criminal justice system to respond to the needs of the victims of crime and inadequacies of the formal police service. Shaw (2010), confirmed by arguing that informal policing or community initiated policing rises out of perceived failure of the state to provide citizens with the protection they require. The growth of community policing is vital in development of policing emphasizing prevention, local beats, decentralization and community involvement (Darian, 1993). To him, the citizenry participation component of community policing takes various forms from neighborhood watch to community advisory board to auxiliary police force. The auxiliary police officers or community policing are those citizens whose duties and training mostly approximate the police whose activities blur the lines between police and civilians, volunteers and workers referred to “eyes and the ears of the police”. They primarily observe and report suspicious activities to law enforcement agencies as well as the mechanisms of crime control. It is important to note that traditional policing and vigilantism are acceptable in Nigeria by the citizens. Ajayi and Aderinto (2013) observed that vigilante groups in South West are still functioning effectively and people consult them on security issues. In the research setting, the citizens still recognize the vigilante groups because of their proximity to the community.

Relationship between Police and Vigilante Groups

The law establishing vigilantism in Nigeria recognizes the lawfulness of vigilante groups arresting suspected criminals provided they are unarmed and that the suspect is immediately handed over to the police (Agbo, 2013). But in most cases, the vigilantes have not lived up to this expectation, as they often arrest and detain illegally and threaten with arms. (Human Right Watch, (2002) holds that the traditional concept of vigilante in Nigeria refers to unarmed voluntary citizen groups created in local communities to help the security forces confront common criminality and social violence by arresting suspected delinquents and handing them over to the police. Elechi (2003) equally established that vigilante operations are often attempts to complement police operations rather than replace the police.

The police and vigilante groups are supposed to mutually collaborate in order to nip crime in the bud and ensure proper security of live and property. Olaniyi (2005) reasoned that the police must recognize the need to show greater understanding, and appreciation of the useful and positive roles that the vigilante groups could play in the effective maintenance of law and order. To confirm this, Baker (2003) observed that vigilante groups are committed people at the micro level of the community set up to collate information on suspected criminals in its area, for use by the police in detection and prevention of crime. However, there have been frequent clashes between the police and vigilante groups.

The crude operational methods and immediate extrajudicial judgments meted out by vigilante groups inevitably put them in direct confrontation with the police, whose core mandate is to enforce law and order while protecting human rights (Ikuteyijo, 2009). This systemic conflict of interest is

deeply rooted in broader regional vulnerabilities, where informal security measures often arise in response to severe public unrest and institutional gaps (Ezeanya et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the escalation of unchecked community violence is frequently compounded by a high prevalence of armed attacks, which severely destabilizes local security frameworks (Onwuchekwe et al., 2022). When communities face complex security threats ranging from property crimes driven by specific demographic and gender dimensions (Ajah et al., 2017) to large-scale resource crimes like rampant oil theft (Ikenna et al., 2025), the breakdown of formal oversight becomes more pronounced. Addressing these friction points requires structured institutional reform. This includes integrating advanced security innovations, such as artificial intelligence technologies, to better control resource-based crimes (Onwuchekwe et al., 2026), alongside establishing robust community reentry and rehabilitation frameworks for vulnerable institutionalized populations (Sunday Ume et al., 2026).

Often, vigilante groups seem to work in counter opposition to the police. Research records show that in a number of places, the vigilante groups arrest criminals and took custody of them and even dispensed justice without recourse to criminal justice system. A good example of this is the Anambra State Vigilante Service (AVS) (Human Right Watch, 2002). Ajayi and Aderinto (2013) emphasized that the youth who join the increasingly well equipped vigilante groups began to systematically exclude the police from communities by not including police in their information network and operation. There are cases where the vigilante groups are in close touch with the police. They rapport very well with the police and often go on patrol with the police (Chukwuma, 2000). He remarked that many of the groups are rooted in their communities and often work in close collaboration with the formal police. Shaw (2010) holds the opinion that not all vigilante groups work in counter opposition to the police. He noted that care must be taken not to generalize on the subject of vigilante groups not working with the police.

Shaw (2010), also observed that people have lost total confidence in the police and this appears to be the reason why citizens embrace informal policing structures. In many societies, Shaw maintained that the police are viewed as ineffective and the list of community grievances against the police includes corruption, incompetence, brutality and instructional failure. Uzodinma (2014) then observed that this is why the vigilante groups are more acceptable than the police because of lack of confidence and trust in the official police simply because they consider the police alien agent of the government. Olaniyi (2005) observed that the police have been infected by endemic corruption and its capacity and workforce are grossly inadequate to suppress the wanton incidence of insecurity. He maintained that communities and social groups relied on private and voluntary network to prevent crime, deter criminality, investigate offences, inhibit conflict and defend homes, neighborhood and properties. Olaniyi (2005) equally maintained that vigilante groups and other informal security outfits frequently operate independently from the police but in a large measure they complement police role in combating crime and maintaining peace.

A critical challenge in community policing is the deep-seated friction between formal law enforcement and local security structures. As Elechi (2003) observed, a profound lack of trust cripples the relationship between the police and vigilante groups. Vigilantes frequently accuse the police of corruption, claiming suspects are released without proper investigation or prosecution. Conversely, the police accuse vigilantes of operating outside the law through illegal detentions and extrajudicial executions. This mutual distrust ultimately undermines effective crime prevention.

This adversarial dynamic mirrors broader systemic issues within regional security and governance frameworks. For instance, the challenges of state-level oversight and accountability heavily influence public perceptions of law enforcement (Nwosu et al., 2022). Furthermore, security crises are often compounded by deep-rooted community-level skepticism regarding institutional interventions (Onwuchekwe et al., 2020). When formal systems fail to inspire confidence, public trust in the broader judicial and rehabilitative architecture erodes significantly (Onwuchekwe et al., 2023).

Unresolved systemic friction not only disrupts community safety but also mirrors the domestic vulnerabilities and behavioral stressors found in highly volatile environments (Areh et al., 2021), where institutional support is lacking. Addressing these systemic gaps requires structured interventions to mitigate the acute burnout experienced by individuals operating within these high-stress social frameworks (Iremeka et al., 2021). Furthermore, establishing clear operational jurisdictions is as vital for local security as defining international legal rights is for foreign nationals (Ajah et al., 2025).

4. Theoretical framework

Community Crime Prevention Theory

This theory was propounded by Tyler (1984). It was grounded in several basic theoretical models; firstly, that reduction and fear of crime are the by-products of various overlapping and interactive processes which include:

- a. Vigorous enforcement of societal norms (Baker, 2003). That prevention of crime depends on the level of enforcement of societal norms. If the enforcement body of the community is weak, the end product still remains that societal norms will not be adequately enforced. The lapses in the enforcement can be due to the changing pattern of community in the area.
- b. The establishment of stronger sense of the community and increased social interaction (Colunga, 2012). The theory holds that crime can be prevented depending on how the community can increase or have stronger interaction. This aspect of interaction, as a mechanism for crime prevention was only workable in oversea countries where people avoid interaction with delinquent youths.

Secondly, community crime prevention theory was rooted in “an opportunity reduction model”, which emphasizes the deterrence value of designing or modifying the physical environment to enhance the safety and security of commercial and residential setting (Ugwu, 1992). This model incorporates the promotion and maintenance of a vigilante and informal citizenry that will minimize vulnerability to criminals. The latter is often achieved through formal educational campaigns sponsored by the media, law enforcement officials and citizen groups to increase awareness of crime and crime prevention strategies.

This perspective is criticized for being ‘anti-social’ because it does little to help individuals prone to committing crime. Also, others reject the displacement on theoretical and methodological grounds. Since the rational choice theory rejects the notion of human drives, however, many of its proponents reject the theoretical possibility of displacement. Secondly, even those who accept that displacement argued that displacement can lead to less serious crimes being committed. Some others also argued that there are huge difficulties in measuring displacement and this may explain why the vigilante groups are facing difficulties in the fight against crime in their various communities.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

The provision of security is a social pre-requisite for the survival of any society. Every society takes appropriate measures to protect the lives and property of people living within its boundaries. Business and social activities may not go on freely without adequate security. As a response to ensure crime is prevented most communities have set up vigilante groups to guide and protect them. Residents of Orumba North local government area are not left out in using vigilante groups like other communities to prevent crime in the area. They have indeed employed the services of the vigilante groups in crime prevention in various villages in the local government. Members of these vigilante groups are made of young youths. Vigilante groups in the study area have indeed proved to be effective in combating crime. In most cases, members of the communities in Orumba North trust vigilante groups more than the police because of the effective, reliable and prompt ways they tackle crime. The study therefore concludes that use of vigilante to prevent crime is effective and makes the

following recommendations; the vigilante groups should be properly repositioned and motivated through the provision of basic operational equipments and improved welfare packages, provisions of adequate funding, training and retraining, cooperation with other security agents to enable them to continue to contribute to the security of lives and properties in communities in Orumba South LGA, Anambra State.

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