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Research article

Hybrid Policing: The New Structure of Policing for Crime Control in Contemporary Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The internal security crisis remains one of the most pressing challenges in Nigeria, where rising incidences of armed robbery, kidnapping, terrorism, communal violence, and banditry overwhelmed the capability of the formal state security. However, several serious concerns have engaged the minds of scholars and well-meaning individuals in the country, namely that state policing is insufficient, mistrusted, and lacks legitimacy. These concerns include Nigeria's weak security infrastructure, with the lowest police-to-population ratios globally. This has created a policing gap that hybrid structures attempt to fill. It then became imperative that hybrid policing is the non-state actor that understands the cultural and religious dynamics of the communities. The hybrid policing is not a replacement for state policing but a complementary mechanism shaped by Nigeria's weak security infrastructure, cultural systems, and governance realities. By institutionalizing, hybrid policing may gather intelligence more effectively than the formal state security. The methodology used in this study was a desk-based library method, in which the knowledge gained from various literature, as well as conceptual, theoretical, and empirical studies reviewed, forms the basis for the conclusions and recommendations. The paper recommended that hybrid policing actors should be allowed to operate within the framework of law. Also, the Governments should adopt it as a practical response to security crises, balancing limited formal state security capacity. To this end, peace, safety, and security are necessary for development and the attainment of a good quality of life in any human society.

KEYWORDS

Crime control; community; hybrid policing; non-state security actors; state security.

1. 1. Introduction

The internal security crisis remains one of Nigeria's most pressing challenges. This critical challenge resulted in rising incidences of armed robbery, kidnapping, terrorism, communal violence, and banditry. This also overwhelmed the capability of the formal state security agencies, particularly the Nigeria Police Force (Alemika, 2021; Ojedokun & Adepoju, 2023).

However, several serious concerns have engaged the minds of scholars and well-meaning individuals in the country. They observed that the state policing is insufficient, mistrusted, and lacks legitimacy (Bamidele, 2020).



These concerns include Nigeria's weak security infrastructure, with the lowest police-to-population ratios globally.

The United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice compares the size of police forces and the number of police per head worldwide. In 2006, an analysis indicated an approximate median of 300 police officers per 100,000 inhabitants. The highest median number of police officers, around 400, was observed in Western Asia, Eastern, and Southern Europe. The median number of police officers per population remained stable between 2002 and 2006, after increasing between 1995 and 2002.

In fact, according to Ripples Nigeria. (2022, May 17), The states with the lowest police-to-population ratios in Nigeria from 2016 to 2018 were Sokoto, Abia, and Bauchi. Also, in 2024, Ripples Nigeria analyzed data from the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) and observed that the number of police officers has been declining since 2016. In 2016, NPF had 244,756 police officers, protecting over 140 million Nigerians. In 2017, the number of police officers dropped drastically to 225,339, and again to 221,936 in 2018. The police–population (police-to-citizen) ratio within Nigeria's state security architecture does not meet the standard of officers per 100,000 population used in international datasets.

The Lapses are inadequacies in policing capacity, policy, and legitimacy (Lar, 2018; Abdullahi & Chukwuma, 2022; Alemika, 2021; Ojedokun & Adepoju, 2023).

Much of the concern is the contemporary security crisis of insurgency in the northeast, banditry and kidnapping in the northwest, and north-central. Others were the communal and resource conflicts in the Middle Belt, and rising organised crime and cyber threats. These crises signalled the structural and operational weaknesses of Nigeria's state security architecture.

In the Northeast, the security crisis persisted for over a decade. The activities of the Boko Haram insurgency and its splinter groups, such as the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), have destabilized the region through terrorism, mass displacement, and socioeconomic problems (Adeleke & Musa, 2022). The Insurgency transcends national borders and merges with the broader Sahelian insecurity. The jihadist networks linked to Mali, Niger, and Chad (Institute for Security Studies [ISS], 2023).

Since the late 2010s, the Northwest states such as Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, and Niger have had escalated attacks by heavily armed criminal groups labelled "bandits" by the late Buhari administration. However, in fact, the criminal groups are Terrorist bandits (Ikelegbe & Ukeje, 2022). These groups engage in cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom, abductions of schoolchildren, and attacks on villages. They cause large-scale internal displacement and disrupt agricultural and market activities (Onuoha, 2020).

The Kidnapping across North-Central Nigeria (Plateau, Benue, Niger, and southern Kaduna) reflected both criminal entrepreneurship and political instability. The National Bureau of Statistics' Crime Experience and Security Perception Survey (CESPS) covering May 2023–April 2024, reported that over 51 million crime incidents and an estimated 2.24 million kidnapping incidents took place in those 12 months, with an estimated N2.23 trillion paid in ransoms (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024). In this region, the Kidnapping moved beyond high-profile mass abductions to a steady stream of targeted abductions of schoolchildren, commuters, and traders (Ikelegbe & Ukeje, 2022).

The Middle Belt of Nigeria (North-Central) has the highest consequences of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and threats to food security in such states as Benue, Plateau, Niger, and Kaduna. In fact, it is the focal point of a complex, recurring violent conflict of a broader security crisis. Thousands of fatalities, mass displacements, and severe disruptions to livelihoods were the order of the day (Lar, 2018; Abdullahi & Chukwuma, 2022).

Studies by (ACLED, 2023) observed that multiple forms of armed violence, such as farmer–herder clashes, communal vigilante and militia mobilizations, banditry and cattle rustling, and episodic spillover from Islamist insurgency tactics now coexist. The activities of these criminal groups remain the major drivers of fatalities and displacement in Nigeria. Ripples Nigeria (2025) reported that, within the second quarter of 2025, between April–June 2025, Northern states bear the brunt of the killing of over 3,132 people by terrorism, banditry, and communal clashes. The most affected states were Borno (571), Benue (548), and Zamfara (339). The casualties within the regions were North Central (1,016 deaths), North West (928), and North East (908).

2. 2. Conceptual literature on hybrid policing

2.1. Conceptual Framework

Hybrid policing has emerged over the past three decades as a key conceptual lens for understanding the pluralization and re-ordering of security provision in both the Global North and the Global South. Rather than treating policing as the exclusive preserve of public police forces, the hybrid policing concept highlights configurations in which multiple publics, private, customary, and community actors sometimes, with overlapping, co-produce order and safety (Ikelegbe & Olanrewaju, 2019; Alemika, 2021).

Hybrid policing refers to a security model that integrates formal state policing agencies (Dada et al., 2025; Garba & Akaan, 2025; Janković et al., 2025; Popović Mančević, 2025). It comprises the Nigeria Police Force, along with informal or non-state security actors such as vigilante groups, traditional rulers' security outfits, and community-based organizations. The idea no longer allows the formal state police alone to maintain order; it involves multiple actors—public, private, and community-based—working together to maintain law, order, and security. Examples included the Amotekun Corps in the Southwest, Hisbah in the North West, and EbubeAgu in Eastern Nigeria (Alemika, 2021; Onapajo & Okeke-Uzodike, 2022).

Hybrid policing recognizes that safety provision in society has become diversified across formal state police. It goes across private security companies, vigilante groups, traditional institutions, and community-based organizations (Loader & Walker, 2007).

Hybrid policing has emerged as a pragmatic approach to maintaining law and order when formal state security policing is weak and lacks public trust. In the same context, Nigeria, with its vast population, multi-ethnic composition, and history of insecurity, offers fertile ground for the application of hybrid policing (Alemika, 2021).

Bamidele (2020) explores the dynamics of vigilantism as a form of hybrid security governance in Nigeria. He focuses on how community-based structures supplement formal policing. The work argues that, in a context of state failure, weak law enforcement capacity, and pervasive insecurity, informal and vigilante groups emerge as legitimate security actors, filling gaps left by formal institutions (Bamidele, 2020).

Empirical studies and case reports show mixed but promising outcomes. There were reductions in opportunistic thefts and increased perceived safety in areas with organized local corps, especially in some Southwest states, following the deployment of Amotekun. There were also improvements in community reporting and occasional successes against kidnapping activities. However, measurable impact varies across contexts and over time, and rigorous long-term evaluations remain limited (Onapajo & Ozden, 2023).

2.2. Theoretical Framework

2.2.1. Communitarian Theory

The communitarian theory is based on the fact that security must not be solely the responsibility of the state, but must actively participate with the communities. It emphasizes that communities ensure the welfare and safety of their members through moral and social responsibilities (Ikelegbe & Olanrewaju, 2019). In the context of hybrid policing, the theory asserts that security must be a shared responsibility between the state's formal security agencies, such as the police, and informal or community-based actors, such as vigilante groups, traditional rulers, or neighbourhood watch groups (Loader & Walker, 2007).

The central idea is that the state should not monopolize policing. This is because the local communities possess the indigenous knowledge, social networks, and cultural legitimacy that can enhance crime prevention (Brogden & Nijhar, 2005). On that note, the scholars argued that Collective participation fosters trust, social cohesion, and accountability in security provision.

Amitai Etzioni formulated the Core tenet of communitarian theory in his seminar work "The Spirit of Community: Rights, Responsibilities, and the Communitarian Agenda" in 1993. The aim of Amitai Etzioni's theory was that balanced social order requires mutual responsibilities between individuals and the community. He argues that, from a communitarian perspective, law enforcement and public safety are partly social products

of community norms, membership, and reciprocal obligations (Etzioni, 1993). Therefore, a communitarian theoretical framework was centred on community values, obligations, and social norms, which are the foundation for social order and collective action. These also provide the normative and analytical concepts for understanding how hybrid policing can be organized, justified, and evaluated.

In Nigeria, communitarianism supports the coexistence of formal and informal policing institutions to address insecurity, particularly when state police are under-resourced or distrusted (Ikelegbe & Olanrewaju, 2019). Hybrid policing thus becomes a pragmatic response to the state's weaknesses and the failure of centralized policing in many developing contexts, such as Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa (Baker, 2008).

2.2.2. Democratic theory

The democratic theory is rooted in the idea that security and law enforcement should operate under democratic norms. These democratic norms include transparency, accountability, participation, and respect for human rights. It assumes that policing should not be monopolized by the state but shared with community-based, traditional, and informal actors. These arrangements uphold the rule of law and citizen consent (Ikelegbe & Olanrewaju, 2019).

Thus, democratic theory promotes citizen-centred policing, in which both state and non-state actors are accountable to democratic values. It also operates within a framework that guarantees equity, justice, and inclusivity. It is a democratic policing enshrined in normative and institutional ideals that ties policing to democratic values. The building blocks emphasised that police must be accountable to the law and to citizens. The policing practices must be procedurally fair and rights-respecting. The institutions must foster recognition and a sense of belonging to secure public legitimacy (Bayley, 2001).

David H. Bayley formulated the core tenet of democratic theory in his seminar work on "policing structures and reforms" in 2001. David Bayley's theory aimed to analyse the changing forms of policing to situate hybrid/plural policing arrangements and their democratic consequences. Central to his view was that Policing must be accountable to the law and not to the government; Police should protect human rights and citizen freedom; and must serve the entire community equally, not specific interests.

The empirical implications and application to Nigeria have shown that the contemporary policing in many states no longer fits the simple model of a single, monopoly public police force exercising coercive authority on behalf of a unitary sovereign. Instead, there has been a regional plurality of security actors, such as the formal police, private security companies, community vigilantes, paramilitary forces, and technology firms. These operate together or in parallel, producing hybrid policing arrangements (Ikelegbe & Olanrewaju, 2019). Democratic theory provides the normative lens for evaluating hybrid arrangements. It could be about the rule of law, equality, legitimacy, and civil liberties (Ikelegbe & Olanrewaju, 2019).

Therefore, the theory on hybrid policing promotes citizen participation in security governance. It also demands accountability and oversight of both state and non-state actors. It ensures legitimacy through adherence to democratic values and bridges the gap between the state police and community security structures. In essence, it transforms policing from a state-dominated force into a collective democratic enterprise for public safety (Bayley, 2001).

3. Issues of crime control and effective contemporary policing in Nigeria

Drawing on the recent empirical literature, it argues that Nigeria's crime-control landscape in the 2020s presents a complete paradox. First, Nigeria experienced a dramatic escalation in organized criminality. The criminality ranges from large-scale armed banditry and mass kidnapping for ransom to insurgency, violent communal conflicts, and emerging cyber-enabled crimes (Ikelegbe, 2005).

The formal institutions charged with preventing and responding to crime have repeatedly struggled to contain, investigate, and prosecute these threats. Most notably, the mass school abductions and recurrent attacks in the northwest and northeast focused attention on systemic failures in intelligence, policing, and governance (Aina, 2024). The result is a vicious cycle that, in turn, erodes public trust and fuels alternative security.

In response to the perceived police failure, there is a growing reliance on the Proliferation of non-state security actors and on hybrid policing. Communities organize vigilante groups, local neighbourhood watches, and other hybrid security formations. These groups play mixed roles. They sometimes deter petty crime and offer rapid local responses. Nevertheless, they operate under inconsistent oversight, uneven training, and occasional rights abuses (Okoka & Kheswa, 2024).

Recent security governance scholarship emphasized that hybridity is the entanglement of formal state institutions and informal, private, and non-state actors in security provision. This is a valuable framework that understands contemporary Nigerian policing. Hybridity highlights that security outcomes are co-produced by a mix of actors operating under layered norms and incentives (Ikelegbe & Olanrewaju, 2019).

4. Methodology

This research employed descriptive and phenomenological approaches. It also used primary and secondary sources to obtain data. The primary source involved oral interviews, while the secondary source included books, journals, and internet materials. These furnished me with the basic information necessary for the comprehension, insight, and analysis of the relevant issue x-rayed in this paper.

5. Results/findings

The NPF Vision Statement above captures a devastating statistic on the deaths and loss of property in Nigeria within less than one year, between January and August, 2021. It becomes evident that the grip of security crises in Nigeria was appalling, shocking, and disturbing. The fundamental function of the Nigerian Police Force to protect life and property became very difficult to achieve. Nigeria is now relatively safe due to the reduction in various attacks and incidents of killings.

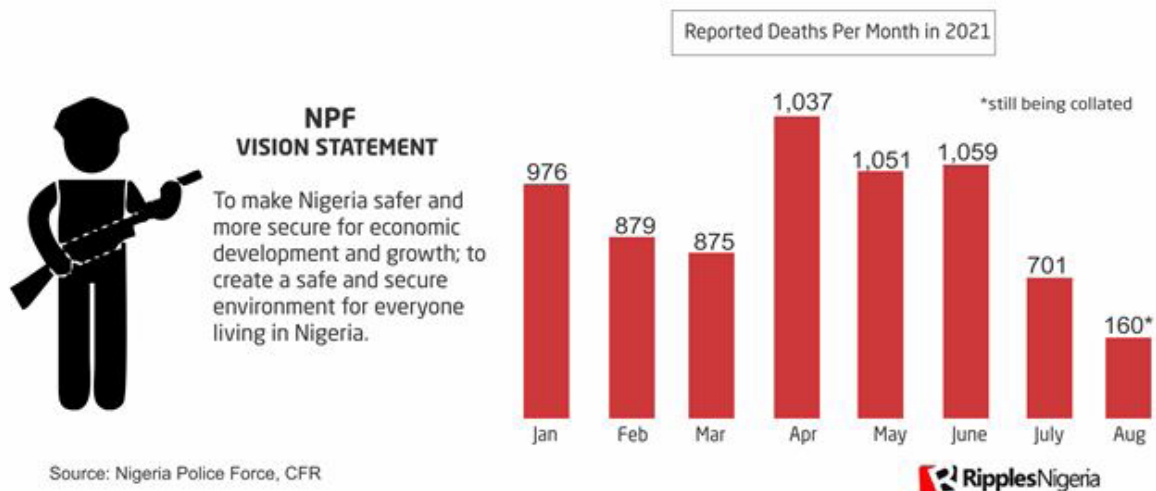
David & Salifu (2020) argued that the security system is highly centralized at the federal level, while contemporary threats occur in localized areas. To them, the formal state security system does not align with contemporary policing models because it was perceived as ineffective, had parallel authority structures, and could not effectively manage security.

This establishes that a security crisis requires multi-scalar and multi-sectoral strategies and hybrid policing, thus filling the gap. Hybrid was effective in Nigeria because it pragmatically addresses gaps in formal state capacity while drawing on local legitimacy and knowledge. Hybrid policing describes a situation where both formal police institutions and informal community-based security actors work together to maintain law and order.

The study observed failures in the institutions' efficacy, the adequacy of resources, and the legitimacy of the force in the eyes of the public. The lack of investment in social development and good governance contributed to the sobering nature of insecurity in Nigeria.

The current centralised policing system does not meet the public's security needs. Some key structural deficits, including capacity, funding, and accountability, led to significant gaps in policing performance.

PROTECTING LIVES AND PROPERTY IS BECOMING MORE DIFFICULT FOR THE NIGERIA POLICE FORCE



The findings establish that citizens are not protected. We discovered that the northern parts of the country are effectively under the control of non-state actors such as the bandits, terrorists, kidnappers, and Fulani herdsman, who contributed to the mass killing of Christians in the area. The rising burden of insecurity has also resulted in the displacement, disruption of schooling, loss of livelihoods, and breakdown of community trust.

The study discovers that the failure of the policing system was linked to the activities of the Boko Haram terrorist group and its splinter groups, such as the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) in the Northern part of Nigeria.

We observed the informal mobilization of vigilante groups, community watches, which, regionally, constituted security outfits such as Amotekun in the Southwest, Ebubeagu in the Southeast, and Hisbah in the North, but without adequate modes of operation and informal rule of law.

In summary, the findings indicate that the formal police institution is no longer effective in crime control, but the security crisis requires multi-sectoral strategies.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, therefore, we established that an effective contemporary policing in Nigeria requires a holistic approach. This approach emphasises collaborative policing, an umbrella term that encompasses community policing, inter-agency partnerships, and hybrid arrangements between formal state police and local security actors (vigilantes, community watch, private security).

In addition, it does not necessarily replace state policing but complements it. Scholars argue that hybrid policing emerges when state policing is insufficient, mistrusted, or lacks legitimacy. Hybrid policing is visible through community vigilante groups, hunters' associations, traditional rulers' security networks, and regional formations.

In the Nigerian context, hybrid arrangements include the informal mobilization of vigilante groups, community watches, traditional institutions, and regionally constituted security outfits such as Amotekun in the Southwest, Ebubeagu in the Southeast, and Hisbah in the North. This summarizes current scholarship on why hybrid policing is applicable in Nigeria and the principal factors that have accounted for its perceived successes.

7. Recommendation

We therefore recommend an Operational modernization of policing in the following:

- Invest in national crime databases, open-access research partnerships, and regular independent assessments of reform progress.
- Prioritize forensic labs, digital case-management systems, and crime-analysis capacities.
- Professionalize the force through merit-based promotions, continuous training, and improved living-wage compensation to reduce petty corruption.
- Formalize the relationship between police and community security actors.

Nevertheless, regionally constituted security outfits such as Amotekun in the Southwest, Ebubeagu in the Southeast, and Hisbah in the North operate without adequate operational modes and an informal rule of law.

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