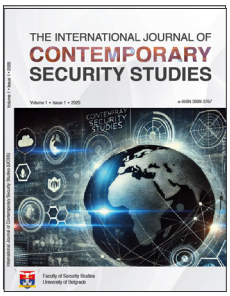
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Article

The Intersection of Informal Waste Scavenging and National (In)Security in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Informal waste workers play an important role in material recovery, recycling and urban waste management in Nigeria, yet their relationship with national security remains insufficiently examined. This study examines how the conditions surrounding informal waste work may create both security vulnerabilities and potential contributions to community security. Using a qualitative research design, the study draws on academic literature, documented security incidents and three purposively selected oral interviews. It applies the concept of people as infrastructure as an analytical framework for understanding how informal waste workers' mobility, local knowledge and social networks connect households, public spaces, waste sites and recycling markets. The findings show that informal waste work is not inherently criminal and that allegations of theft, vandalism and criminal impersonation should not be generalised to the wider occupation. However, limited institutional recognition, occupational precarity and weak regulatory oversight may create conditions that can be exploited by criminal syndicates, insurgent groups, unscrupulous scrap buyers, and opportunistic impersonators. The study also highlights the potential value of waste workers' local knowledge and regular presence within communities for community security when constructive relationships with authorities exist. Given the purposive interview sample and reliance on documented cases, the study does not establish the prevalence of security-related activities among informal waste workers across Nigeria. It argues for proportionate regulation that combines occupational protection, improved oversight of scrap markets and community engagement without treating informal waste workers as a security threat.

KEYWORDS

Informal waste workers; waste scavenging; national security; community security; people as infrastructure.

ONLINE FIRST

1. Introduction

In the contemporary global discourse on sustainable development, the informal waste economy has emerged as a critical pillar of the circular economy. Within the global space, scavenging is increasingly recognised not just as a survival strategy for the urban poor, but as an essential environmental service that drives recycling and reduces the carbon footprint of rapidly growing cities.

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In Nigeria, this sector is known locally as baban bola or omo gbonla, and it provides a vital, albeit precarious, livelihood for thousands of young men, particularly those displaced by economic hardship in the northern region. As nations struggle with the dual challenges of waste management and soaring unemployment, the economic and environmental contributions of scavengers have become indispensable to the socio-economic fabric of developing states. Recent scholarship on waste management further demonstrates that material recovery is connected to wider circular economy and disaster risk-informed approaches to waste governance (Gajović et al., 2025).

Despite growing recognition of their economic utility, the current academic literature on scavenging in Nigeria remains largely siloed into two primary domains: public health risks and poverty alleviation. Existing research has extensively documented the severe health hazards scavengers face due to toxic exposure and lack of protective equipment. For instance, Ogunbode et al. (2024) and Nzeadibe (2009) have highlighted the environmental implications and the systemic lack of social inclusion for these workers in urban waste management frameworks. Concurrently, from an economic perspective, scholars such as Gangaya and Mshelia (2021) and Ibrahim et al. (2022) have established that scavenging serves as a critical survival mechanism and a tool for poverty reduction among Nigeria's unemployed youth. However, there is a significant knowledge void regarding the intersection of this informal sector with national security. While scholars have focused on the "human" insecurity of the scavengers themselves, they have largely overlooked how the unregulated, opaque, and mobile nature of the waste economy allows it to be co-opted by criminal and insurgent elements. The literature has yet to adequately address how the societal marginalisation of this group creates a blind spot that non-state armed actors can exploit for intelligence and logistics.

This study addresses this gap by examining the circumstances in which informal waste work may intersect with security concerns in Nigeria. It considers how occupational mobility, access to residential and commercial spaces, weak institutional recognition and socioeconomic vulnerability may, under particular conditions, create opportunities for criminal exploitation, coercion or impersonation. Particular attention is given to reported cases involving theft, vandalism of public infrastructure and the alleged use of informal workers for information gathering. The study does not suggest that these activities are characteristic of informal waste workers generally. Instead, it examines how the structural conditions surrounding an economically important but weakly regulated occupation may produce specific security vulnerabilities while also considering the potential contribution of informal waste workers to community security.

2. Conceptualising Informal Waste Work and National Security

Informal waste work refers to the collection, sorting, recovery and sale of discarded materials outside formally regulated municipal waste management systems. Although terms such as "scavenger", "waste picker" and "scrap collector" are often used interchangeably in Nigeria, this study primarily uses "informal waste picker" as a neutral term for persons who recover reusable or recyclable materials for livelihood. "Scrap collector" refers more specifically to persons who collect or purchase discarded metal and related materials for resale. Where "scavenger" is used, particularly in reported incidents or established Nigerian usage, it carries the same occupational meaning unless otherwise stated.

An important distinction is made between legitimate informal waste workers and persons associated with criminal activity. A waste picker accused or suspected of an offence is described according to the available evidence and is not treated as guilty merely because of an allegation or arrest. Similarly, persons who disguise themselves as waste pickers to facilitate criminal activity are treated as impersonators rather than evidence of criminality within informal waste work. The study also distinguishes such cases from waste workers who may be recruited, coerced or exploited by criminal actors.

National security is understood here as the protection of the state, its population, communities and critical systems from threats capable of disrupting public safety and social order. The study focuses particularly on community security and critical infrastructure security. Community securi-

ty concerns threats such as theft, burglary, surveillance and other activities that affect the safety of people within their immediate environment. Critical infrastructure security concerns the protection of public assets and essential facilities, including electricity cables, telecommunications equipment, railway materials, drainage and manhole installations, and other public infrastructure vulnerable to theft or vandalism. Where informal waste activities intersect with organised criminal or armed groups, these localised concerns may acquire wider national security significance.

This distinction allows the study to examine security risks without presenting informal waste workers themselves as an inherently threatening population. Their economic contribution, occupational vulnerability and exposure to social exclusion remain central to the analysis. Security concerns arise from particular circumstances in which informality, weak institutional protection and limited oversight may create opportunities for exploitation, coercion, offending or criminal impersonation.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study applies AbdouMaliq Simone's concept of "people as infrastructure" as its analytical framework. Simone (2004) uses the concept to explain how relationships, practices and everyday forms of cooperation among urban residents enable cities to function where formal institutions and physical infrastructure are inadequate. From this perspective, people and the networks they create are not peripheral to urban life but form part of the arrangements through which goods, services and opportunities circulate.

The framework is relevant to informal waste work in Nigeria because waste pickers perform functions that formal waste management systems do not always adequately provide. Through the collection, sorting and movement of discarded materials, they connect households, streets, dumpsites, scrap dealers and recycling markets. Their mobility and knowledge of urban and peri urban spaces therefore constitute an informal infrastructure that contributes to waste recovery and recycling. This interpretation also recognises their economic and environmental contribution instead of approaching them primarily as a security problem.

The same framework helps explain their vulnerability. Many informal waste workers operate without formal occupational recognition, labour protection or sustained institutional engagement. Their mobility and familiarity with communities may therefore exist alongside social exclusion and limited regulatory oversight. Under particular circumstances, these conditions may expose workers to coercion or exploitation by criminal actors and may also make the occupation susceptible to impersonation by persons seeking access to residential areas or public infrastructure. This does not mean that informality or mobility causes criminal behaviour. The relevant relationship is between structural exclusion, occupational vulnerability and the opportunities that particular actors may exploit.

The framework is applied in this study through a simple analytical relationship. Institutional exclusion and occupational precarity can produce limited protection and weak engagement between informal waste workers and public authorities. These conditions may increase vulnerability to exploitation, coercion or criminal impersonation, which can create specific community and infrastructure security risks. Conversely, institutional recognition and constructive engagement may enable informal waste workers to contribute to community security through their knowledge of neighbourhoods and regular presence in public spaces. The framework therefore permits the study to examine both the security vulnerabilities surrounding informal waste work and the potential security value of waste workers as community actors.

4. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design and drew on academic literature, documented reports of security incidents and oral interviews to examine the intersection between informal waste picking and national security in Nigeria. Relevant literature on informal waste work, urban infor-

mality, social exclusion, waste management and security provided the broader context for the study. Documented incidents involving waste pickers or persons reported to have presented themselves as waste pickers were examined alongside the interview evidence. These sources were analysed thematically, with attention to occupational exclusion, livelihood vulnerability, community security and reported criminal exploitation or impersonation.

Three participants were purposively selected and interviewed specifically for the study in 2025 because of their professional knowledge or direct experience of relevant incidents. G. Ande, a security personnel, was interviewed face to face in Wukari on 25 May 2025 and provided a professional security perspective. Iliya Galadima, a teacher and resident of Kwambai who had witnessed criminal activities involving some waste pickers, was interviewed face to face on 2 June 2025. Monday Isaiah, a resident of Kuchikau who participated in apprehending persons allegedly stealing chickens and handing them over to the police to prevent mob action, was interviewed by telephone on 17 February 2025. Ande's account was treated as key informant evidence, while the accounts of Galadima and Isaiah were treated as eyewitness evidence where they concerned events personally observed.

All interviews were audio-recorded with the informed consent of the participants, who also consented to being identified in the study. The recordings are stored on a flash drive, with backup copies retained in the researcher's email account.

The evidence was analysed by source and evidentiary status. Allegations, apprehensions, arrests, prosecutions and convictions were not treated as equivalent, while cases involving persons allegedly disguising themselves as waste pickers were distinguished from those involving actual waste workers. Interview accounts were compared with documentary and scholarly evidence where possible. Since the study is based on three purposively selected interviews and documented incidents rather than a representative national survey, the cases are not used to estimate the prevalence of criminal activity among informal waste workers. They are used to identify and explain specific circumstances in which informal waste work may intersect with security vulnerabilities.

5. Evolution of Informal Waste Picking in Nigeria

The history of informal waste picking in Nigeria is closely connected to broader changes in sanitation, urbanisation, consumption and livelihood. Before the establishment of modern municipal waste systems, materials could retain economic and domestic value through reuse, repair and repurposing. These practices, however, should not automatically be equated with contemporary waste picking as a distinct occupation. The available historical literature provides a firmer basis for tracing organised waste removal and sanitation labour from the colonial period, when expanding towns created new problems of refuse disposal and public sanitation (Brown, 1992; Bigon, 2005).

The expansion of colonial towns brought waste disposal increasingly within the concern of government. Lagos provides one of the clearest documented examples. Brown (1992) demonstrates that between 1850 and 1900 Lagos experienced serious problems involving garbage, human waste and inadequate sanitation, while limited municipal resources restricted effective intervention. Bigon (2005) similarly shows that British colonial authorities recognised sanitation problems in Lagos but were reluctant to commit sufficient public resources to comprehensive sanitary reform. The growth of the colonial city therefore produced increasing tensions between population growth, waste accumulation and the capacity of government to provide effective sanitation services (Brown, 1992; Bigon, 2005).

Waste removal also developed as a recognisable form of labour within colonial sanitation arrangements. Alade (2025), in his study of the colonial hygiene programme in western Nigeria during the 1930s and 1940s, shows how African sanitary personnel operated within the colonial public health system. These included workers engaged in the physical tasks associated with maintaining sanitary environments. Such colonial sanitation labour should not be treated as identical to contemporary informal waste picking because it operated within a different administrative and economic context. Nevertheless, it demonstrates the increasing organisation of sanitation and waste-related labour as colonial towns expanded (Alade, 2025).

Following independence, population growth, urban expansion, industrial development and changing patterns of consumption increased the volume and complexity of municipal solid waste in Nigerian cities. Formal waste management institutions frequently struggled to provide adequate collection and disposal services, leaving important gaps within the urban waste system. Informal actors increasingly occupied these spaces by recovering materials that retained economic value and returning them to productive use. Agunwamba (2003) identifies scavengers as important participants in recycling activities across Nigerian cities, while Nzeadibe (2009) demonstrates the significant contribution of informal recyclers to waste management, employment and poverty reduction in Enugu.

Economic difficulties from the 1980s further strengthened the livelihood dimension of informal waste recovery. Rising unemployment, declining economic opportunities and reductions in social protection encouraged greater dependence on informal occupations. These developments coincided with Nigeria's adoption of market oriented economic reforms under the Structural Adjustment Programme from 1986. The relationship should not be interpreted to mean that structural adjustment created waste picking in Nigeria. Rather, subsequent research indicates that neoliberal economic conditions and the erosion of social safety nets contributed to an increase in waste picking as economically vulnerable urban residents sought alternative livelihoods (Nzeadibe & Mbah, 2015).

By the 1990s and 2000s, informal waste recovery had become increasingly connected to wider recycling markets. Waste pickers did not operate in isolation but formed part of networks through which discarded materials moved from households, streets and dumpsites to dealers and recycling enterprises. Research in Enugu demonstrates that informal recycling made important contributions to solid waste management, employment creation and poverty alleviation even though the sector received inadequate recognition within official waste management reforms (Nzeadibe, 2009). Studies of the Nigerian informal waste economy similarly demonstrate that waste recovery developed into an important component of urban livelihoods and material recycling despite continuing institutional marginalisation (Nzeadibe, 2013).

Contemporary scholarship also places waste recovery within broader systems of waste governance, resource recovery and resilience. Gajović et al. (2025) demonstrate the relevance of waste management to circular economy and disaster risk-informed practice, while Nikolić et al. (2025) show that waste governance can also shape perceptions of risk, institutional trust and community resilience. These perspectives help situate informal waste picking within a wider governance system rather than treating it as an isolated occupational activity.

The historical development of informal waste picking in Nigeria therefore reflects the interaction of urban growth, changing waste streams, inadequate municipal capacity, economic hardship and expanding markets for recoverable materials. Rather than originating as a security problem, waste picking developed principally as a livelihood and material recovery activity that helped fill gaps within formal waste management systems. Its contemporary security vulnerabilities should consequently be understood within this longer history of limited institutional recognition, livelihood precarity and weak integration into formal waste governance rather than as characteristics inherent in the occupation itself.

6. Socioeconomic Conditions of Informal Waste Work in Nigeria

Informal waste picking in Nigeria is closely associated with poverty, unemployment and limited opportunities within the formal labour market. For many participants, the occupation provides an accessible means of earning income where other livelihood opportunities are limited. Studies conducted in Mubi and Bauchi, for example, identify economic hardship and unemployment as important reasons for participation in waste picking, while research in Enugu demonstrates its contribution to employment and income generation within the informal economy (Gangaya & Mshelia, 2021; Ibrahim et al., 2022; Nzeadibe, 2009).

The demographic composition of waste pickers varies across locations. Ogunbode et al. (2024), in a study of 247 waste scavengers in Iwo, Osun State, found that the respondents were male and between 12 and 45 years of age. The study also reported that 96% of the respondents originated from

northern Nigeria. This finding is important but must be interpreted within the geographical limits of the study. It describes the sample examined in Iwo and does not establish that 96% of waste pickers across Nigeria originate from the North.

Educational background also shapes participation in the occupation. Gangaya and Mshelia (2021) found limited levels of formal education among a considerable proportion of the waste pickers they studied in Mubi. Limited education may restrict access to some forms of formal employment and contribute to dependence on occupations with relatively low barriers to entry. It should not, however, be interpreted as an indication of criminal behaviour. In this study, educational disadvantage is relevant primarily as part of the wider socioeconomic conditions within which informal waste workers seek livelihoods.

Migration is another feature of informal waste work in some Nigerian cities. The presence of northern migrants among waste pickers in Iwo suggests that labour mobility forms part of the organisation of the occupation in particular locations (Ogunbode et al., 2024). Waste picking itself also requires considerable movement as workers search residential areas, commercial spaces, streets and dumpsites for recoverable materials. Such mobility is primarily an occupational practice and should not in itself be interpreted as a security concern.

Beyond individual livelihoods, waste picking contributes to the wider economy through the recovery and circulation of reusable materials. Plastics, metals, bottles and other discarded materials are collected and sold to dealers, artisans and recycling enterprises, thereby returning materials to productive use. Research in Nigerian cities has shown that these activities contribute to recycling, employment and income generation while reducing the amount of recoverable material entering final disposal sites (Adeyemi et al., 2001; Nzeadibe, 2009). Waste pickers therefore occupy an important position within the informal recycling economy despite their limited recognition within formal waste management structures.

This economic contribution exists alongside considerable occupational vulnerability. Many waste pickers work outside formal employment arrangements and consequently have limited access to employment contracts, social protection and other forms of institutional support. Their work can also expose them to occupational hazards and social marginalisation. Nzeadibe and Mbah (2015) show how the livelihood opportunities created by informal waste work coexist with wider questions of vulnerability and social sustainability within Nigerian cities.

These conditions are relevant to the concept of people as infrastructure adopted in this study. Waste pickers rely on their labour, mobility, knowledge of local spaces and relationships with other participants in the recycling chain to connect discarded materials with markets where they regain economic value. In this sense, their everyday activities perform functions that formal waste systems do not always adequately provide. Their limited incorporation into formal institutions, however, means that an economically useful workforce may continue to operate without corresponding levels of recognition and protection.

Socioeconomic vulnerability must therefore be distinguished from security threat. Poverty, limited education, migration and informal employment do not make waste pickers criminals or establish a predisposition towards criminal behaviour. Their relevance to the security question lies in the precarious circumstances under which some workers operate. Limited institutional protection may, under particular circumstances, increase exposure to coercion or exploitation, while criminals may also take advantage of the familiar presence of waste workers by impersonating them. The concern of this study is therefore not the socioeconomic identity of waste pickers but the particular conditions under which an informal occupation may be exploited for unlawful purposes.

The relationship between socioeconomic vulnerability and security should also be understood within the wider Nigerian context. Unaam (2025) argues that environmental and resource pressures, when combined with livelihood disruption and governance failures, can deepen human insecurity and create conditions that armed groups may exploit. The relevance of this argument here is contextual rather than direct: it does not establish a connection between informal waste workers and terrorism. It instead reinforces the importance of examining the institutional and socioeconomic conditions within which vulnerable populations operate.

7. Societal Stigma and Marginalisation

Informal waste pickers often face negative attitudes because of the nature of their work. Their regular contact with refuse and discarded materials means that they are sometimes associated with dirt, poverty and low social status. In some communities, this perception extends to suspicion of theft and other criminal activities. Such attitudes can result in discrimination, hostility and exclusion, even though waste pickers provide useful services through the recovery of recyclable materials. Studies of informal waste work in Nigeria have shown that this economic contribution often exists alongside poor social recognition and marginalisation (Nzeadibe, 2009; Nzeadibe & Mbah, 2015).

Concerns about crime have added another dimension to this problem. Reports of theft and vandalism involving persons identified as scavengers can increase public suspicion of waste pickers generally. In Kogi State, for instance, concerns have been raised about individuals who allegedly presented themselves as scavengers during the day while using the opportunity to observe communities before engaging in theft (Balogun, 2025). Such reports cannot be dismissed, but they must also be interpreted carefully. An offence committed by a person identified as a waste picker does not establish that criminal behaviour is common among waste pickers. In the same way, a criminal who pretends to be a waste picker should be treated as an impersonator rather than as evidence of criminality within the occupation.

This distinction is important because suspicion can easily extend from particular incidents to an entire occupational group. Once waste pickers are generally regarded as potential criminals, legitimate workers may be subjected to hostility because of their occupation rather than their conduct. This can deepen the social exclusion already associated with informal waste work and make interaction between waste pickers and communities more difficult. It may also make it harder to distinguish legitimate workers from individuals who use waste picking as a cover for unlawful activities. The problem, therefore, lies not only in reported criminal incidents but also in the wider consequences that such incidents may have for workers who have no connection with them.

Social marginalisation also affects the relationship between waste pickers and public institutions. The concept of people as infrastructure draws attention to the importance of everyday relationships and cooperation in the functioning of cities (Simone, 2004). Waste pickers regularly move through streets, neighbourhoods, markets and waste sites as part of their livelihood. Their presence within these spaces gives them knowledge of the communities in which they work. When they remain socially excluded and have little engagement with public authorities, this local knowledge is rarely incorporated into formal community structures.

The relationship between stigma and security is therefore not straightforward. Stigma does not automatically produce insecurity, just as marginalisation does not turn waste pickers into criminals. Rather, persistent suspicion can weaken trust between legitimate waste workers, communities and public authorities. The importance of trust is also evident in wider research on waste-related risk. Nikolić et al. (2025) demonstrate that perceptions of environmental and disaster risk are shaped partly by governance, institutional trust and communication. Although their study concerns a landfill context in Serbia rather than informal waste workers in Nigeria, it highlights the importance of institutional relationships and communication in shaping how communities understand and respond to risk. This matters because better relations could make it easier to identify legitimate workers, report suspicious activities and prevent criminals from taking advantage of the occupation. Addressing stigma should therefore form part of efforts to improve the social protection of waste pickers while strengthening cooperation between workers, communities and relevant authorities.

8. Informal Waste Work and Security Risks

The relationship between informal waste work and insecurity in Nigeria requires careful interpretation. Available evidence does not establish that criminal behaviour is common among informal waste pickers. It does, however, identify particular cases in which persons described as waste pickers have been accused of theft, vandalism and other offences. There are also cases in which individ-

uals reportedly presented themselves as waste pickers to gain access to communities for criminal purposes. These situations are relevant to the security concerns examined in this study, but they represent different forms of involvement and should not be treated as evidence of a general relationship between waste picking and criminality.

One area where this relationship can be observed is property theft and the removal of valuable materials from public infrastructure. As shown in Table 1, documented incidents include the alleged theft of generators, cables, metal materials, industrial equipment and manhole covers. The evidentiary status of these cases differs considerably. Some involved apprehension or arrest, others proceeded to trial, while at least one of the documented cases resulted in a conviction. Edafe et al. (2024) report several incidents involving persons described as scavengers, although the available reports do not establish convictions in all the cases. The distinction is important because an allegation, apprehension or arrest cannot be treated as proof of guilt.

Table 1. Documented Incidents Linking Informal Waste Work or its Impersonation with Security Concerns in Nigeria

Date	Location	Security concern	Relationship to informal waste work	Evidentiary status/outcome	Source
January 2018	Statewide (Lagos State)	Alleged arms concealment and illegal dumping	Policy directive targeting informal cart pushers and wheelbarrow operators	Total ban declared by State Government under Cleaner Lagos Initiative	Vanguard (2018)
2018	Wuse, Abuja, FCT	Removal of manhole cover	One suspect reportedly identified as a scavenger	Police reported arrest while removing a manhole cover and recovery of previously removed covers	Daily Trust (2018)
July 2018	City Center (Abuja, FCT)	Vandalism, public nuisance, and alleged crime cover	Ban on Baban Bola (scavengers) operating within Abuja central district	Policy enforcement; scavengers restricted to outskirts/ dumpsites (e.g., Gosa)	Vanguard (2018)
4/12/2018	Kuchikau, Nasarawa State	Chicken theft	Persons identified as waste pickers	Eyewitness account; apprehended and taken to police to prevent mob action	Oral interview with Monday Isaiah, 17 February 2025
2022	Kwambai, Taraba State	Alleged information sharing with bandits	Person identified locally as a waste picker	Eyewitness/community account; reported apprehension and confession	Oral interview with Iliya Galadima, 2 June 2025
May–June 2022	Kala-Balge & Dikwa LGAs, Borno State	Target massacres by Boko Haram / ISWAP	Informal scrap collectors targeted in remote bush areas while gathering scrap	55 killed across Modu and Mukdala villages; state security council convened	Vanguard (2022)
24/05/2022	Dei-Dei / Jiwa, Abuja (FCT)	Unrest, alleged weapons concealment, and assault on police	Taskforce raid on forest enclaves post-market violent crisis	Over 15 suspects arrested; informal hideouts dismantled	Daily Post / THISDAY Live (2022)
25/07/2022	Bama, Borno State	Unexploded ordnance (UXO) explosion	IDP scavengers unearthed a dormant bomb in the bush and carted it toward town	13 killed, 3 injured; confirmed by military/militia sources	Al Jazeera (2022)
4/9/2022	Ogun State	Burglary	Person reportedly disguised as a waste scavenger	Reported arrest; police account described use of waste collection as a disguise	Edafe et al. (2024)
20/9/2022	Abuja, FCT	Theft of industrial equipment	Person described as a scavenger	Reported allegation and arrest order; final outcome not established	Edafe et al. (2024)

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October 2022	Abuja, FCT	Theft of generator, gas cylinder and cellphone	Defendant described as a scavenger	Reported guilty plea and 24-month custodial sentence	Peoples Gazette (2022)
July 2023	Statewide (Borno State)	Security threat to scavengers & public infrastructure theft	Statewide ban on informal scrap metal collection	Total ban ordered by Gov. Babagana Zulum across all 27 LGAs	Vanguard (2024)
19/7/2023	Kaduna	Theft of plastic chairs	Person identified as a waste scavenger	Reported arrest and trial; final judicial outcome not established	Edafe et al. (2024)
7/9/2023	Abuja, FCT	Theft of manhole covers	Persons described as suspected thieves/scavengers	Police crackdown/arrests; guilt not established merely by arrest	Edafe et al. (2024)
27/01/2024	Gubio, Borno State	Improvised explosive device (IED) detonation	Scavengers brought an unexploded device to a scrap collection point near a seminary	6 pupils (Almajirai) killed; reported by district authorities & militia	Vanguard (2024)
13/01/2025	Abuja, FCT	Infrastructure vandalism & economic sabotage	Restrictive ban on Panteka markets & Baban Bola operations	Two-week market closure; operations restricted to official dumpsites	Daily Post (2025)
03/04/2025	Taiwo Street, Lagos State	Ordnance dismantling & explosion	Scavenger attempted to dismantle a recovered grenade for metal scrap	1 killed, 3 injured in explosion; reported by Lagos State Police Command	BusinessDay (2025)
25/06/2026	Benin City, Edo State	School infrastructure vandalism	Scrap dealer bought stolen primary school roofing sheets and AC units	Arrest of dealer & recovery of stolen public assets by NSCDC and monitoring team	Daily Post (2026)
10/07/2026	Ilorin, Kwara State	Power infrastructure theft & dismantling	Scrap facility breaking down stolen TCN electrical materials	2 suspects arrested; trucks loaded with conductor poles & equipment seized	The Nation (2026)
17/08/2026	Coastal Highway, Lagos State	Mass manhole cover theft	Organized vandalism & sale of public road infrastructure to scrap links	10 suspects apprehended; recovery of stolen manhole covers	Punch (2026)

Note. The table distinguishes allegations, arrests, eyewitness accounts and convictions. Inclusion of an incident does not imply guilt where no conviction is reported, nor does it suggest that criminal activity is characteristic of informal waste pickers generally.

Public infrastructure is particularly vulnerable because the metals targeted by the scrap economy are often essential parts of public facilities. While waste pickers legitimately collect discarded items for recycling, valuable components like electrical cables, manhole covers, railway tracks, and streetlights are also stolen and sold as scrap. Because these public assets hold high resale value, the demand for scrap metal creates a strong financial incentive for infrastructure vandalism and theft. Reports from the Federal Capital Territory show repeated security operations concerning the vandalism of streetlights, traffic lights, manholes and other public infrastructure. In August 2023, for example, the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps arrested twenty persons during operations connected with reported night scavenging and infrastructure vandalism. The Commandant stated that intelligence reports linked much of the theft and vandalism of manholes, streetlights and traffic lights to nighttime activities, while also reporting cases of criminals disguising themselves as scavengers (TheCable, 2023). These reports establish a security concern surrounding the protection of recyclable public materials, but they do not establish that legitimate waste picking causes infrastructure vandalism.

The problem therefore extends beyond the person who physically removes an item. Stolen metal can acquire value because it enters a chain of exchange involving collectors, intermediaries, scrap dealers and eventual buyers. Once public infrastructure has been dismantled and mixed with other scrap materials, distinguishing stolen materials from legitimately recovered waste may become difficult. From a security perspective, attention must therefore extend to the wider movement and resale of scrap rather than focusing exclusively on informal waste pickers. Regulation directed only at collectors would address one part of a broader market through which recoverable metals circulate.

A different security problem arises when individuals allegedly present themselves as waste pickers to facilitate criminal activities. This should be distinguished from offences allegedly committed by persons who actually earn their livelihoods through waste picking. One documented case from Ogun State involved a person who reportedly disguised himself as a waste scavenger in connection with burglary (Edafe et al., 2024). Similar concerns have been expressed in Kogi State, where individuals were alleged to have presented themselves as scavengers during the day while observing residential areas before engaging in theft (Balogun, 2025). In the FCT, the NSCDC has also publicly reported receiving information about criminals disguising themselves as scavengers to attack residents and vandalise public infrastructure. These cases are more accurately understood as criminal impersonation than as evidence that waste picking itself is criminal.

The occupational character of waste picking helps to explain why such impersonation may be possible. Legitimate waste pickers regularly move through streets, residential areas, markets, dumpsites and other public spaces in search of recoverable materials. As discussed earlier, this mobility is a normal requirement of their livelihood and should not itself be regarded as suspicious. The security issue arises when another person takes advantage of the familiar presence of waste workers to gain access to places or information for unlawful purposes. Weak occupational recognition can further complicate the ability of residents and public authorities to distinguish legitimate workers from persons merely presenting themselves as waste pickers.

Evidence from the FCT provides some support for this distinction. In an interview published in October 2023, Olusola Odumosu, Commandant of the NSCDC FCT Command, reported that more than one hundred persons whom he described as criminals disguising themselves as scavengers had been arrested within three months. He also alleged that some persons operating as scavengers served as informants for criminal elements by entering residential areas, observing the activities of security personnel and passing information to those who sent them (Simon, 2023). These statements represent the assessment of a senior security official and should not be treated as judicial findings or evidence that such behaviour is widespread among informal waste pickers. They nevertheless provide independent evidence that criminal impersonation and the possible use of scavenging activities for information gathering have become concerns for security agencies in the FCT.

The interview evidence collected for this study raises a similar concern. G. Ande, a security officer, stated that the movement and familiarity of some waste pickers with communities could make them useful to criminal and armed groups seeking local information (Ande, 2025). The significance of this account lies in the consistency of the concern among respondents with security-related experience. They do not establish the prevalence of such practices across Nigeria, but they provide qualitative evidence that the possible exploitation of waste pickers for information gathering deserves consideration.

The Kwambai case provides a local example of this concern. Iliya Galadima, a community resident, reported an incident involving a person locally identified as a waste picker who was accused of sharing information with bandits. His account is treated here as eyewitness and community evidence rather than a judicial finding. It therefore supports the existence of a reported security incident but cannot establish that information gathering for armed groups is a general practice among informal waste workers. This distinction between a documented local account and a wider occupational pattern is necessary to avoid drawing conclusions that the evidence cannot support.

The wider Nigerian security environment nevertheless demonstrates that armed groups have deliberately used vulnerable populations for intelligence and support activities. United Nations evidence on the conflict in north-east Nigeria verified the recruitment and use of 1,385 children by

Boko Haram between 2017 and 2019. The children were used as combatants, for intelligence and in support roles such as cooking and carrying messages (United Nations, 2020). This evidence establishes that the use of children for intelligence is part of the operational history of Boko Haram. It does not, however, establish that children involved in waste picking were specifically recruited because of their occupation. The vulnerability of young people working in informal waste recovery should therefore be treated as an area requiring further investigation rather than as evidence of an established pattern of terrorist recruitment among waste pickers.

The security significance of the scrap economy is also evident in the protection of critical infrastructure. In September 2023, the NSCDC reported arrests in Abuja involving suspected vandals and the recovery of communication cables identified as government property. The Command subsequently reiterated its responsibility for protecting critical national assets and infrastructure (Channels Television, 2023). Other operations in the FCT have involved suspected vandalism of streetlights, traffic lights and manhole installations. These incidents demonstrate that the theft of recyclable components of public infrastructure is a genuine security and governance problem. What remains more difficult to establish is the extent to which legitimate waste workers, criminal impersonators, specialised vandals and scrap dealers occupy different positions within the movement of stolen materials.

This distinction has important policy implications. Treating all waste pickers as potential infrastructure vandals may encourage indiscriminate enforcement without addressing the market that gives stolen materials their value. It may also expose legitimate workers to harassment because of offences committed by others. A more focused approach would distinguish legitimate collection from the unauthorised removal of public assets and strengthen scrutiny of the points at which metals and other high-value materials are purchased and resold. Such an approach would direct attention towards the transaction and the origin of suspicious materials instead of using occupational identity alone as an indication of criminal involvement.

These findings can be understood through the concept of people as infrastructure adopted in this study. Waste pickers develop practical knowledge of the spaces through which they move and depend upon networks connecting households, streets, waste sites, dealers and recycling markets. These relationships ordinarily support livelihood and material recovery. Under particular circumstances, however, familiarity with local spaces may be exploited by criminal actors, while the occupational identity itself may be appropriated by impersonators. The issue is therefore not that the informal infrastructure created by waste workers is inherently insecure. It is that limited institutional recognition and weak protection may create circumstances in which workers or their occupational identity can be exploited.

There is also another side to this relationship. The knowledge that informal workers acquire through their everyday presence in communities can have security value. Waste pickers regularly observe streets, public facilities, waste sites and changes within the neighbourhoods where they work. Their knowledge should not make them extensions of law enforcement, nor should workers be compelled to undertake security functions. Nevertheless, constructive relationships between legitimate waste workers, communities and relevant public institutions could provide voluntary channels for reporting suspicious activities, infrastructure damage or other threats encountered during their normal work.

This possibility is consistent with wider Nigerian experience concerning the value of local knowledge in security practice. Ajala and Murphy (2025) demonstrate how vigilante groups have been used alongside formal security forces in counterterrorism because of their knowledge of communities and local environments. Waste pickers are not vigilantes, and the two groups perform fundamentally different functions. The comparison is useful only in demonstrating that locally embedded knowledge can have security value when there are appropriate relationships between communities and formal institutions. In the case of informal waste workers, engagement should emphasise trust, protection and voluntary reporting rather than surveillance or compulsory intelligence gathering.

The possibility of community participation is consistent with wider research on community-based risk reduction, which emphasises active participation, institutional support, inclusion and cooper-

ation in strengthening local resilience (Cvetković et al., 2025; Cvetković, 2026). In the context of informal waste work, however, participation should remain voluntary and protective. Waste workers should not be transformed into informal intelligence agents or extensions of law enforcement. Their possible contribution lies in the local knowledge generated through their ordinary work and in the opportunity to establish trusted channels through which concerns can be reported.

The evidence therefore points to a complex relationship between informal waste work and security. Documented incidents show allegations and, in some cases, established offences involving persons identified as waste pickers, while other cases concern individuals allegedly impersonating waste workers. Security officials and interview respondents have also raised concerns about possible information gathering for criminal actors. At the same time, the evidence does not establish the prevalence of these practices among Nigeria's informal waste workers and provides no basis for treating the occupation generally as a security threat. The more defensible conclusion is that particular features surrounding informal waste work, including weak occupational recognition, the value of recoverable materials, access to public spaces and limited institutional engagement, can be exploited under particular circumstances. Addressing these vulnerabilities therefore requires protecting critical infrastructure and investigating criminal activity without criminalising legitimate informal waste workers whose labour continues to support livelihoods, recycling and urban waste management.

9. Conclusion

This study has examined the relationship between informal waste work and national security in Nigeria. It has shown that waste picking is primarily a livelihood activity that contributes to material recovery and the wider recycling economy. Yet the work is carried out with limited institutional recognition, weak occupational protection and considerable social stigma. These conditions shape how waste workers relate to communities, authorities and the wider security environment.

The evidence does not support treating waste pickers as a security threat as a group. The cases examined point to different situations, including allegations of theft and vandalism involving some individuals and instances in which offenders allegedly presented themselves as waste workers. These distinctions are important. An arrest is not proof of guilt, and the conduct of an individual cannot be used to establish criminality within an entire occupation.

The study also identifies security concerns that warrant attention. Stolen cables, manhole covers, streetlights and other public assets can enter informal scrap networks, extending the problem beyond individual waste pickers to dealers, buyers and others involved in the movement of scrap materials. Oral evidence raised similar concerns about the possibility that some individuals within these networks may gather information useful to criminals. Such accounts indicate a security concern, but they do not establish how widespread the practice is.

The study contributes to global scholarship by bringing informal waste work into debates on security that have largely centred on livelihoods, poverty, environmental management and the informal economy. The Nigerian case shows that an informal occupation can have security implications without being inherently criminal or constituting a security threat. It also extends the application of the people as infrastructure perspective to informal waste work. The networks linking households, streets, collection points, scrap dealers and recycling markets are part of the everyday infrastructure of communities. These networks can be exploited for criminal purposes, but they can also provide local knowledge that may contribute to community security. Informal workers therefore occupy a more complex position than the simple distinction between economic actors and security threats suggests.

These findings call for a proportionate security response. Security agencies should distinguish legitimate waste workers from persons accused or convicted of offences, those coerced into criminal activity and offenders who use the appearance of waste work as a disguise. Regulation should also extend to scrap dealers and buyers, particularly where public infrastructure materials are involved. Measures designed to improve identification and oversight should include safeguards against harassment, discrimination and unnecessary surveillance.

Recommendations

To effectively address the nexus between scavenging, informal networks, and insecurity in Nigeria, a comprehensive, multi-faceted policy framework is required:

- Implement a mandatory, state-level licensing and registration system for all scavengers and waste pickers.
- Integrate informal waste pickers into municipal solid waste management systems. This could involve forming cooperatives, providing designated collection points, and offering direct contracts for material recovery.
- Provide Training and Capacity Building
- Implement Social Welfare Programs: Extend social protection mechanisms, including health insurance and pensions, to informal sector workers, including scavengers.
- Strengthen collaboration between formal law enforcement agencies and local communities, including informal community leaders and vigilante groups.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future studies should investigate the feasibility of using digital identity systems or mobile-based registration to formalise the scavenger workforce while preserving their economic flexibility.

Further research is needed to compare the security scavenging nexus in Northern Nigeria with other urban centers in the Global South to determine if similar patterns of co optation by non-state actors appear in different political environments.

Future research should specifically examine the unique protection risks faced by women and minors within the informal waste value chain, even though this study highlights the involvement of young males and children.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate: The study received ethical approval from the Federal University Wukari Research Ethics Committee before the commencement of the interviews. All interview participants provided informed consent to participate in the study. Participants also consented to being identified by name in the manuscript. The interviews were conducted specifically for this research and were audio recorded with the participants' consent.

Data Availability: The data supporting the findings of this study consist of published and publicly documented materials, together with qualitative oral interview data collected by the researchers. The interview recordings are not publicly available because they contain identifiable information and were collected on the basis of participant consent for use in the research. Further information concerning the data may be obtained from the corresponding author, subject to appropriate ethical and confidentiality considerations.

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