THE UNDERPINNING OF COMMUNITY POLICING IN MANAGING AND REDUCING THE RISE OF CRIME IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Managing and reducing crime in a developing nation like Nigeria is a reachable goal, largely because the most visible manifestations of criminal activity occur at the local neighborhood level. Crime tends to flourish wherever poverty and economic hardship persist. In Nigeria, the surge in criminal activity reached a breaking point following the Civil War, as a vast amount of small arms and ammunition became widely available to both former combatants and those left destitute by the conflict. During this period, policing was also undergoing a leadership transition, and new recruits were not being trained to prioritize community partnerships. At the time, the public largely viewed the police as a force designed to suppress dissent or enforce state policies, such as taxation, especially since many high-ranking officers were not locals from the communities they patrolled. When the victim, the accused, and the police are all seen as integral members of the same community, crime is much easier to prevent. Conversely, when there is a disconnect, distrust grows, leading to avoidable loss of life, property damage, and overcrowded prisons—conditions that actually make it easier for dangerous gangs to recruit new members. Community policing offers an approach that allows for the identification, analysis, and management of crime through the active support of local residents. While this study acknowledges the hurdles facing this initiative—such as political interference, human rights abuses, and the heavy-handed use of coercion—it

examines the legal provisions for community policing committees and the Special Constabulary. Additionally, it highlights how information sharing serves as a vital strategy for building the confidence necessary to control crime within the community.
Keywords: Crime, Reduction, Managing, Upsurge, Police, Community Policing, Nigeria.

Introduction

Despite various reports claiming success in the fight against crime, these accounts often fail to reflect the reality on the ground, as Nigerians continue to struggle with insecurity in both urban and rural areas. Community policing is a strategy built on sustained engagement between the police and local residents, resulting in a clear, functional partnership. At its heart is the recognition that by working alongside the community, law enforcement agencies can find localized solutions to local problems. This approach recognizes that community members can play an active role in reducing crime in their own neighborhoods. Growing dissatisfaction with traditional policing methods, coupled with demands for greater accountability amidst rising crime rates, has provided the momentum for this shift. The foundation of community policing is a workable partnership where the community takes a proactive role in developing crime prevention strategies. Advocates for this model point to several key societal benefits:

- It mobilizes and empowers communities to identify and address their own concerns. By improving the physical and social environment of a neighborhood, community policing fosters more positive attitudes toward law enforcement.
- For the police force, the benefits include strengthened relationships with the public and an improved sense of institutional legitimacy. Officers also tend to experience higher job satisfaction.

Furthermore, this model reduces the potential for conflict between citizens and officers, leads to a measurable drop in crime rates, and opens lines of communication that encourage shared goals. This partnership ultimately leads to more effective crime prevention and management (Seagrave & Ratcliffe, 2004). The Nigerian Police Community Policing project was officially launched on April 27, 2004, by former President Olusegun Obasanjo. The police, a professional body legally tasked with detecting, investigating, arresting, and prosecuting offenders, are a legacy of the colonial era. The British established the Colonial Police in 1861, primarily to enforce sanitary regulations in Lagos and manage criminal law enforcement (Nigeria Police Force, 2025).

Before the British introduced colonial policing, security was rooted in traditional Nigerian societies. Communities were protected by age grades and vigilante groups, which corrected or punished violations of established values and social norms. Traditional policing was characterized by deep inter-group relations, where both the security providers and the community viewed each other as interconnected parts of the same social fabric.

In contrast, the complexity of modern, diverse societies often presents the police as a state agency used to maintain order and protect the interests of the dominant class, often to the detriment of the majority. This disconnect is precisely why community policing is necessary. To fulfill their essential role in managing and preventing crime, the police must be an integral part of the community, rather than an entity apart from it (Nigeria Police Force, 2025).

Conceptual Clarifications /Meaning of Crime

According to Black's Law Dictionary (9th Edition), crime is an act made punishable by law; it is a breach of legal duty that serves as the subject of criminal proceedings. Crime is conceptually distinct from a "wrong" (such as a tort) or a "sin" because it involves an injury to the state or the collective community. As Maine (2013) noted, the commonwealth itself steps in—either directly or through specific acts—to seek justice for the harm it has suffered. When a person commits or fails to perform an act required by law, they commit an offense that carries a punishment. Section 2 of the Criminal Code Act defines an offense as "an act or omission which renders the person doing the act or making the omission liable to punishment under this code, or under any Act or law." Protecting life and property is fundamental to human existence. Without legislation defining certain behaviors as criminal, society would likely descend into chaos, with killings and destruction becoming commonplace.

In essence, crime is a legal wrong—an act or omission for which the offender is punished at the instance of the state. It represents a breach of duty and is inherently punishable because it harms both the individual and society. It is the intentional commission of an act that is socially dangerous and specifically prohibited by criminal law. Furthermore, crime is a deliberate action that causes physical or psychological harm, or loss of property. Merriam-Webster defines it as an illegal act punishable by the government, often involving a gross violation of the law. Kenny (2025) further defines crime as wrongs whose punishment can only be administered by the Crown, rather than by any private individual.

Meaning of Community

A community is a group of people living within a specific geographic area who share a sense of mutual identity, interdependence, or organized activity. The communities we grow up in often undergo massive changes during our lifetimes. Some changes are obvious, like seeing a favorite old building torn down to make room for a modern office complex or a new garage. Other changes are less visible but just as impactful; for instance, a street where you used to play as a child might become unsafe to walk on even during the day. In many cases, insecurity drives businesses to relocate to other areas, leaving fewer local job opportunities. While there are many reasons for these shifts, insecurity is often a primary driver. This paper explores the concept of "community" specifically through the lens of community policing.

The earliest communities, appearing over 35,000 years ago, were small, nomadic bands of hunter-gatherers. They lived a subsistence lifestyle, moving frequently to follow food sources. While there were few strict social hierarchies, men and elders generally held more status and power. Interestingly, there is little archaeological evidence of war-making tools or organized group attacks from this era (Lenski, et al., 2021).

The Neolithic Revolution brought about horticultural communities. Although horticulture involved small-scale farming using simple tools like hoes, it was grueling, backbreaking work. Nevertheless, it allowed the land to support more people, roughly doubling the population density (Lenski, et al., 2021). As farming techniques improved, these communities became larger and more complex. This era saw the rise of the first specialists in history—craftsmen who created the essential tools for survival (Lenski, et al., 2021). For about seven thousand years, technological breakthroughs—such as the use of metals, the invention of the plow, the use of animals for transport, and advanced irrigation—paved the way for the first urban communities (Lenski, et al., 2021). These advancements increased food supplies, freeing many people from manual agriculture and allowing urban centers to grow and diversify. This trend is evident in Nigeria's history: in 1960, the population was approximately 45.1 million, with only 16% living in urban areas. By 2024, the population had grown to 232 million, with 49% residing in urban centers (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024). An urban community is defined by a population that is not primarily engaged in food production (Patra & Hajima, 2021). While these communities grew slowly due to early political and social structures, they have become increasingly large and diverse over time.

In contrast, a small community is a tightly knit, geographically defined group where individuals can engage in all aspects of social life. Even with internal divisions—such as different families, clans, or ethnic groups—small communities provide a shared social identity and a sense of loyalty that often outweighs other affiliations. The social structure of a small community is often characterized by stability, homogeneity, and a resistance to change. However, modern technological advancements have brought about new challenges, most notably regarding security. Even in relatively small or homogeneous urban areas, constant population shifts can heighten feelings of insecurity. This reality underscores the urgent need for a strategic philosophy of law enforcement—one that is intentionally designed to partner with local communities to create safer neighborhoods and more effective crime prevention and management. Furthermore, disputes between different communities, or even within them, have historically escalated into massive conflicts involving loss of life and widespread destruction. To combat this, communities must adopt proven methods of crime control and law enforcement that involve the police while actively eliminating discrimination against ethnic, religious, or marginalized groups. Through this deliberate strategy, communities can intervene before local tensions escalate into criminal activity.

The Concept of Policing

Policing refers to the structures and processes used to curb crime and maintain social order. While the Cambridge Dictionary defines policing simply as the work of a police force, Collins Dictionary describes it as the actions taken by an authority figure or group to ensure fairness and legality in public life. At its core, policing involves the activities carried out by officers to preserve law and order and ensure public safety.

Historically, in early civilizations, policing was informal and largely a private matter; citizens would band together in local watch groups to protect their neighborhoods from outsiders. Interestingly, this informal approach seems to be resurfacing in contemporary Nigeria (AbdulKadri, 2021). Beyond mere enforcement, policing can be seen as a societal mechanism for defining and responding to deviance and crime. While institutional structures vary, there is a global trend toward defining policing through its relationship with crime prevention and other societal objectives. In the modern era, policing has become more institutionalized and its meaning has evolved. While often referred to simply as "law enforcement," the concept encompasses much more than just enforcing rules.

Policing covers a vast range of roles aimed at regulating human interaction and maintaining legal order across various issues. In the centuries leading up to the formation of modern European states, the scope of policing was even broader, touching on health, fire safety, religion, trade, and education, essentially acting as an extension of governance. Because of its role in social control, the police maintain a unique relationship with the citizens they are tasked to protect. Consequently, police institutions develop specific structural and cultural identities that both facilitate their function and reflect the broader characteristics of the society they serve.

Historically and currently, policing is typically organized into specific locales, such as police stations responsible for designated areas known as Police Divisions. The ease with which residents can access the police varies by society; citizens can generally reach them through information lines or emergency numbers. In democratic societies like Nigeria, the ability of citizens to access the police is a vital component of institutional accountability (Metibobo, 2000). Technological progress, particularly the ubiquity of mobile phones, has revolutionized this access. In response, policing tactics have evolved to include rapid response teams, two-way radio systems, and the widespread use of patrol vehicles. While reactive strategies remain necessary, they are increasingly supplemented by proactive methods designed to prevent crime before it happens. Citizen-led initiatives, such as neighborhood watches, have accelerated these proactive efforts, while advanced data gathering and investigative techniques have enabled more widespread surveillance and monitoring throughout society.

The Concept of Community Policing

Community policing is a deliberate policy built on partnership, equity, and the opportunity for positive interactions between officers and residents. It is a collaborative

model that places the community at the heart of decision-making, neighborhood patrols, and recruitment processes. In Nigeria, this approach is formally recognized under Section 4 of The Police Establishment Act 2020. As an organizational strategy, community policing promotes and facilitates deep-seated partnerships through specialized officer training, strategic patrol assignments, clear performance metrics, and various departmental initiatives. Under this model, the police and the community share the responsibility for public safety and well-being, working together as partners to identify and resolve local problems and concerns. Community policing means different things to different people, yet most definitions shares a set of core, overarching ideals.

At its heart, community policing is driven by organizational strategy. Rather than being a side project tacked onto a law enforcement agency's main mission, it serves as the foundational strategy that guides decision-making at every level. This includes everything from hiring and deployment to performance evaluations—all of which directly impact the neighborhood. Ultimately, community policing is about the "co-production" of public safety. It is vital that residents have a genuine say in the priorities, strategies, and practices that dictate how they are policed. Because community members understand their own local challenges better than anyone else, they can offer invaluable insights into which methods will actually work, while also warning agencies about any unintended consequences that new rules or policies might cause.

The Role of the Nigeria Police and Community Policing in Reducing Crime

The Nigeria Police Force is tasked with maintaining public order, enforcing the law, and preventing crime. As a vital component of the criminal justice system, the police hold specific responsibilities aimed at crime prevention and control. The success of these duties relies heavily on their ability to detect criminal activity, uphold public order, and ensure laws are strictly followed.

Under Section 214 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended), the Nigeria Police Force is established as the national police body. It holds exclusive jurisdiction across the country to prevent and curb crimes against both Nigerian citizens and foreign residents. Beyond general policing, their documented functions include maintaining internal security and providing essential support to agencies such as the Correctional Service, the Drug Agency, the EFCC, Customs, and Immigration.

Legally, the police are empowered to search for and seize property suspected to be stolen or linked to criminal activity. They are also authorized to collect identification data, including measurements, photographs, and fingerprints. Statutorily, they have the power to investigate suspects, prosecute cases in court, and grant bail while investigations are ongoing or before a formal arraignment. Additionally, they serve summons and have the authority to regulate or disperse unlawful assemblies and processions, as stipulated in the Criminal Procedure Act.

As the need for more effective public safety measures grows, the community policing approach has gained significant momentum, overcoming much of the initial resistance it faced. This strategy focuses on building a partnership between the police and local residents to prevent and control crime more effectively.

Community policing is built on finding better ways to cooperate with neighborhoods to improve communication and intelligence gathering. By focusing on proactive detection and prevention, the police adopt new roles that differ from traditional, reactive models. In this framework, officers act as advisors, facilitators, and supporters of community-led initiatives. The core philosophy is to become an integral part of the community rather than an outside force, moving away from the outdated "reactionary" model. This shift helps mend the existing gap of distrust and disconnection between the police and the public.

Effective crime control is achieved when crime is addressed within specific geographic areas through localized analysis, targeted resource allocation, and citizen cooperation. It is important to note that residents and police may not always prioritize the same issues; for instance, while the police might view robbery as the most critical threat in a neighborhood, residents might be more concerned with issues like loitering or public sanitation. Under a community policing model, the police are expected to listen and prioritize the security challenges identified by the community itself.

Ultimately, community policing aims to restore a harmonious relationship between law enforcement and the public. In a democratic society, the police are the most direct link to the people, unlike the military or other paramilitary agencies that focus on more specialized roles. Community policing breaks down the impersonal bureaucracy of traditional policing by emphasizing direct communication with citizens. By fostering trust, respect, and collaboration, community policing enables residents to report incidents more effectively and work alongside officers to combat disorder. This is achieved through practical partnerships with traditional institutions, corporate bodies, family heads, and religious leaders. When the community is empowered, they are in a much better position to report irregularities. This proactive approach not only prevents crime but also promotes peace and stability, which in turn allows education, economic activity, and community life to flourish.

The formal introduction of community policing in Nigeria in 2004 by IGP Tafa Balogun was a concrete response to the need for a more strategic approach. It sought to integrate routine patrols, rapid response, and arrests into a much broader mission: the proactive prevention of crime and disorder within the community.

Conclusion

The changing dynamics of Nigerian society have raised expectations for the police and made the task of crime prevention increasingly complex. It has become clear in the 21st

century that the police cannot fight crime in isolation. While the Nigeria Police Force recognizes this reality, they have yet to fully deploy the tools necessary to meet these challenges. Moving forward, it is essential that the community policing strategy is fully embraced to meet the evolving security needs of our neighborhoods, both now and in the future.

Community policing is a strategy centered on active partnerships with local residents. In this model, every citizen acts as an ally in the effort to prevent and curb crime. This strategic approach provides a platform for residents to voice their concerns and participate directly in finding long-term solutions to emerging criminal trends within their society. At its core, community policing relies on the idea that a productive partnership requires a shift in attitude and a deep commitment from all stakeholders and residents. That said, we cannot overlook the fact that, by law, police officers are responsible for bringing these stakeholders together and creating the necessary structures to implement community policing at every level across the country. In fact, the Police Establishment Act of 2000 (s. 4(h) explicitly mandates that the Police Force must adopt community partnerships when carrying out its duties.
Recently, there has been a surge in security personnel operating under the guise of community policing, but a closer look reveals that many are not actual police officers. These groups, commonly known as vigilantes, often operate differently from formal law enforcement. While the work of some vigilante groups in controlling crime is commendable—particularly their success in tackling specific issues like kidnapping—they remain distinct from official police initiatives.

In parts of Southeastern and Southwestern Nigeria, groups like the Udogachi and Amotekun have seen verifiable success in preventing crime. However, there is a growing fear that these groups could eventually mutate into militant organizations, or that state and local governments might weaponize them for political vendettas. Unlike formal community policing, which is built on specific institutional frameworks, these groups lack legal safeguards like pensions or gratuities for members upon retirement. As the former IGP Tafa Balogun noted, true community policing is a strategic partnership designed to build trust and confidence, ultimately leading to better crime prevention. This strategy is intended to move away from the traditional, reactive, and often suppressive style of policing that has struggled to address Nigeria's rising crime rates.

The community policing approach prioritizes prevention. While research shows that it cannot absolutely guarantee a crime-free society, it has proven highly effective at reducing criminal activity. Generally, the quality of policing serves as a reflection of good governance, as it must strictly adhere to the rule of law and protect human rights. There is a growing public sentiment that the police should not be the sole guardians of order. Instead, if community members become actively involved—which is the very essence of this collaboration—citizens will enjoy greater safety and the economy can

truly flourish.

Ultimately, community policing is being advocated as a vital way to tackle security challenges, especially in rural areas where crime is high and law enforcement presence is thin. As various governors call for the establishment of State Police, the emphasis on community policing as a solution to insecurity continues to grow. However, successful implementation remains hindered by significant hurdles, including public distrust, lack of funding, and inadequate training.

Recommendations

Community policing is a proven strategy for boosting resident satisfaction and improving the relationship between neighborhoods and law enforcement. To ensure this approach is successfully adopted, the following measures should be implemented:

I. Establishing a Legal Framework for State Police

Nigeria's federal system is structured across three tiers: federal, state, and local government. While the constitution empowers these levels to function and legislate, the current scope of law-making is divided into exclusive and concurrent lists. At present, policing remains the exclusive domain of the federal government. The President appoints both the Minister of Police Affairs and the Inspector General of Police, who leads the force. There is a critical need for a legal framework that reconciles the Police Act of 2020 (which provides for community policing committees) with the constitutional duties of the Nigeria Police Council. Since state governors make up 36 of the Council's 39 members, a legal bridge is necessary to give state governments the authority to recruit, train, and manage police officers within their specific communities. Such a framework would minimize response times, ensuring that local officers can act immediately on security threats without waiting for distant commands from the federal level.

II. Fostering Community Policing Partnerships

To effectively curb rising crime rates, the police must build genuine partnerships with the public. This requires fostering trust through consistent, inclusive dialogue and regular community forums. Community policing offers unique, informal opportunities for relaxed interactions where residents and officers can collaborate on local security concerns. In these partnerships, responsibility and decision-making are shared; information is not just passed along—it is actively exchanged, leading to joint actions and more effective outcomes.

III. Prioritizing Capacity Building and Training

Officers assigned to community policing must be equipped with specialized skills in community engagement, alternative dispute resolution, and conflict management through continuous training and workshops. It is also vital that they receive education on cultural sensitivity, human rights, and the specific rights of women and children.

Investing in capacity building strengthens police legitimacy. When officers are trained to handle communication, gender sensitivity, child protection, and community diversity with professionalism, they gain the respect of the public. This ensures that the unique security needs of a community are met with accountability and empathy.

IV. Emphasizing Local Recruitment and Representation

Recruitment efforts should prioritize individuals from the local communities they are meant to serve. Hiring locally naturally improves language proficiency, cultural awareness, and resident trust. When officers come from the community, residents feel a sense of "ownership" over their local security. Leveraging an officer's innate understanding of the local terrain is a powerful tool for crime prevention. This community-centered approach creates a more responsive, accountable, and transparent force, helping to dismantle barriers like corruption and cultural insensitivity. Locally recruited officers understand the local dynamics, face fewer legitimacy challenges, and can respond to incidents much faster.

V. Implementing Awareness and Enlightenment Programs

Public perception of the police is often negative, with many viewing them as an adversary rather than a protector. Awareness campaigns are essential to change this narrative and encourage the public to participate in the community policing strategy. Educating residents helps build a stronger bond and mitigates the fear that collaborating with the police makes one a "spy." By breaking down barriers of apathy and mistrust, enlightenment programs create a constructive environment for teamwork. Through school outreach, media campaigns, and presence at community gatherings, the police and residents can maintain mutual accountability, ultimately creating a safer environment for everyone.

VI. Ensuring Adequate Funding

Finally, there must be a commitment to improved and adequate funding. Historically, insufficient funding has been a massive hurdle for Nigerian policing, with budgetary provisions often falling short of actual needs. While some state governments and corporate social responsibility initiatives have stepped in to help, these efforts are not enough to sustain a comprehensive community policing strategy. The government must make the adequate funding of community policing a deliberate and prioritized policy. Providing sufficient funding for community policing is essential to ensure high-quality training, the procurement of modern equipment, better pay for officers, and improved infrastructure. At present, a lack of funding hampers the police's ability to control rising crime rates, which in turn fuels community distrust and operational inefficiency. With adequate resources, better communication and information-sharing channels can be established between residents and the police, leading to more effective crime prevention and control. Furthermore, when officers are fairly compensated and their welfare is prioritized, they are far less likely to engage in corrupt practices and are much more likely to be responsive to the public. Developing a dedicated community policing

app—one capable of transcribing comments and translating various local dialects into English—would greatly support residents' efforts. Such a tool would streamline communication and improve response times, ultimately helping to control and reduce the surge in crime.

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