



Factors Influencing Communities to Take the Law into Their Own Hands: Implications for Public Security and Social Stability

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Abstract

Background: The practice of communities taking the law into their own hands through vigilantism, mob justice, and extrajudicial punishment has become a recurring response to insecurity in Nigeria.

Objective: This study aimed to identify the factors driving vigilantism, examine its consequences for public security, assess its effects on social stability, and recommend measures to strengthen the rule of law.

Methods: A qualitative documentary research design was adopted. Thirty-seven documents, including peer-reviewed articles, academic books, Nigerian legal instruments, and governmental and international reports, were purposively selected and analyzed using thematic content analysis guided by Social Disorganization Theory and Procedural Justice Theory.

Results: The findings identify declining public trust, perceived procedural unfairness, ineffective policing, judicial delays, corruption, and weak governance as major drivers of vigilantism. Poverty, unemployment, fear of crime, misinformation, and cultural acceptance of informal justice further reinforce these conditions. Community reactions to inmate release and amnesty remain perception-based concerns. Vigilantism undermines public security through human rights violations, retaliatory violence, and impunity, while weakening social cohesion and the reintegration of former inmates.

Conclusion: Strengthening public security and social stability requires improving police responsiveness and judicial efficiency, enhancing anti-corruption oversight, ensuring transparent inmate release and rehabilitation procedures, regulating vigilante groups through legal frameworks, and promoting lawful community engagement to strengthen institutional legitimacy and uphold the rule of law.

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INTRODUCTION

The protection of lives and property is one of the fundamental responsibilities of every government. Citizens expect state institutions, particularly the police and judiciary, to ensure justice, maintain law and order, and guarantee security. However, when these institutions fail to perform effectively, communities often develop alternative mechanisms for maintaining order. One of the most common responses is taking the law into their own hands through mob justice, vigilante groups, and other forms of self-help justice. In Nigeria, increasing insecurity, armed robbery, kidnapping, banditry,

terrorism, and cattle rustling have overwhelmed many security agencies (Babalola & Seiyefa, 2025). Consequently, many communities have established vigilante groups or resorted to instant punishment of suspected criminals (Ashindorbe et al., 2021). While such actions may temporarily deter crime, they frequently violate legal procedures and human rights, thereby threatening democratic governance and public confidence in the justice system.

Vigilantism refers to the practice whereby private individuals or organized groups assume the responsibility of enforcing laws, maintaining public order, investigating crimes, or punishing suspected offenders without legal authorization from the state. It usually emerges when citizens perceive that formal criminal justice institutions such as the police, courts, and correctional services have failed to provide adequate security and justice. Johnston, (1996) defines vigilantism as a form of organized social control undertaken by private citizens who believe that government institutions have failed to discharge their constitutional responsibilities. Similarly, Rosenbaum & Sederberg, (1974) describe vigilantism as an extra-legal response to crime driven by fear, frustration, insecurity, and dissatisfaction with law enforcement agencies. Vigilantism has also been defined more recently as the extralegal prevention, investigation, or punishment of offenses (Bateson, 2021), a conceptualization that accommodates both organized vigilante groups and spontaneous collective punishment.

Vigilantism has existed in different societies throughout history and has assumed different forms depending on social, political, and economic conditions (Lewis, 2023). In many developing countries, weak state institutions, increasing crime rates, corruption, delayed justice, and limited access to security services have encouraged communities to establish informal security groups to protect lives and property. While some vigilante groups complement the activities of law enforcement agencies through intelligence gathering and neighbourhood surveillance, others operate outside the law by engaging in arbitrary arrests, torture, unlawful detention, and extrajudicial killings. In many developing countries, including Nigeria, vigilantism manifests in various forms, including organized vigilante groups, community security outfits, and spontaneous mob actions commonly referred to as “jungle justice.”

In Nigeria, vigilantism has become increasingly common due to persistent insecurity arising from kidnapping, armed robbery, terrorism, armed banditry, cattle rustling, communal conflicts, and other violent crimes. Community vigilante groups, neighbourhood watch associations, and local security outfits have emerged in many parts of the country to fill perceived security gaps (Aina, 2024). Although some operate in collaboration with the Nigeria Police Force and other security agencies, the absence of effective regulation has enabled some groups to violate constitutional rights and undermine the rule of law. Consequently, vigilantism remains both a security response and a governance challenge with significant implications for justice, public safety, and social stability.

The urgency of this study arises from the fact that self-help justice has become a recurring response to insecurity rather than an isolated reaction to particular crimes. The literature consistently shows that although vigilantism may emerge as a response to insecurity, its consequences are largely detrimental to public security, justice, and democratic governance. Vigilantism weakens public confidence in state institutions. When citizens increasingly rely on self-help justice instead of the police and courts, the legitimacy of the criminal justice system is eroded. This creates a vicious cycle in which institutional weakness encourages vigilantism, while vigilantism further weakens state authority. This concern is heightened where communities perceive that persons accused or convicted of serious offences return to society through bail, parole, pardon, or amnesty without adequate transparency, since such perceptions may further erode confidence in formal justice institutions. Understanding these drivers is therefore a precondition for designing legal and policy responses that protect both public security and social stability.

Existing literature identifies several drivers that encourage communities to take the law into their own hands. These factors are institutional, socioeconomic, political, and cultural in nature, and they interact to weaken confidence in formal systems of justice and security. Within this body of work,

ineffective policing has been associated with the growth of non-state security arrangements (Baker, 2002), delayed and unfair legal processes with declining compliance and trust (T. R. Tyler, 2006), corruption with the loss of institutional legitimacy, fear of crime with support for self-help security measures (Garland, 2001), blocked economic opportunities with deviant adaptations (Merton et al., 1957), and weak states with the rise of alternative power structures (Migdal, 1988). Previous studies have examined these drivers from different angles. In a survey of residents of Accra, Tankebe, (2009) found that perceived police trustworthiness, through which the effects of procedural fairness operated, was among the strongest predictors of support for vigilante self-help, whereas perceived police effectiveness and experience of police corruption were not significant predictors.

Asif et al., (2022), in turn, proposed a cultural explanation in which vigilante violence arises from fear, anger, and the desire for retaliation when moral principles are violated, and becomes more likely where legal legitimacy is weak. These studies show that trust, procedural fairness, communal values, and collective emotions are central to understanding vigilantism, and Tankebe, (2009) results caution against assuming that every institutional weakness affects public support for self-help justice equally. However, they largely concentrate on single drivers or on particular forms of vigilantism, pay little attention to how communities react to the release of inmates through bail, parole, pardon, or amnesty, and seldom trace these drivers through to their combined consequences for public security and social stability or translate them into measures for strengthening the rule of law.

This study is anchored on Social Disorganization Theory developed and Procedural Justice Theory advanced by (T. Tyler, 1990; T. R. Tyler, 2006). These theories provide complementary explanations for why communities take the law into their own hands and the implications of such actions for public security and social stability. Social Disorganization Theory argues that crime and informal methods of social control are more likely to emerge in communities where social institutions are weak and unable to regulate behaviour effectively. In such environments, communities often develop alternative systems of maintaining order, including vigilantism and mob justice.

The theory is particularly relevant to this study because it links structural factors including ineffective policing, weak governance, poverty, unemployment, corruption, and declining public trust to the emergence of community self-help justice. It also explains why vigilantism is more prevalent in areas where formal institutions are unable to provide adequate security and justice. Procedural Justice Theory, developed by (T. Tyler, 1990; T. R. Tyler, 2006), emphasizes that citizens are more willing to obey laws and cooperate with law enforcement agencies when they perceive legal authorities as fair, transparent, impartial, and respectful. The theory argues that the legitimacy of state institutions depends not only on their ability to control crime but also on the fairness of their procedures and decision-making processes.

This theory is especially applicable to the present study because it explains how dissatisfaction with the police, judiciary, and correctional institutions contributes to public support for informal justice mechanisms. It also highlights the importance of fairness, accountability, transparency, and respect for the rule of law in reducing community reliance on vigilantism. The novelty of this study therefore lies in three aspects. First, it brings institutional failure, declining public trust, community reactions to inmate release and amnesty, and the cultural acceptance of informal justice into a single analytical account of why communities in Nigeria take the law into their own hands. Second, it links these drivers explicitly to their implications for both public security and social stability, rather than treating vigilantism solely as a crime-control problem. Third, it combines Social Disorganization Theory and Procedural Justice Theory to interpret documentary evidence drawn from academic, governmental, legal, and international sources.

The objectives are to identify the factors influencing communities to take the law into their own hands, examine the consequences of vigilantism on public security, assess the effects on social stability, and recommend measures to strengthen the rule of law and improve community security. Theoretically,

the study is expected to clarify how structural disorganization and perceived procedural injustice jointly sustain support for self-help justice. Legally, it underscores the constitutional guarantees of due process and fair hearing that vigilantism violates. Practically, it offers guidance for policymakers, security agencies, correctional authorities, and community leaders seeking to restore public trust and reduce reliance on extrajudicial justice.

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design using the documentary research approach. The qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study seeks to explore and explain the factors influencing communities to take the law into their own hands and the implications of such actions for public security and social stability. Documentary research enables the researcher to examine existing knowledge, policies, legal frameworks, and scholarly debates on vigilantism, mob justice, community justice, and criminal justice administration without relying on primary field data. The documentary approach is suited to each of the four objectives.

The factors that lead communities to take the law into their own hands (first objective) are already documented in empirical studies, theoretical works, and institutional reports, which can be compared systematically across contexts. The consequences of vigilantism for public security (second objective) and for social stability (third objective) are recorded in legal instruments, human rights reports, and scholarly analyses that would be difficult to observe directly within a single fieldwork setting. The measures proposed to strengthen the rule of law and community security (fourth objective) require an examination of existing statutes, policy frameworks, and evaluative literature against which their feasibility can be assessed.

Sources of Data

The study relied exclusively on secondary data obtained from credible and authoritative sources. These included peer-reviewed journal articles, academic textbooks, government publications, policy documents, reports of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the World Justice Project, Transparency International, the Nigeria Police Force, the Nigerian Correctional Service, the Federal Ministry of Justice, constitutional and statutory provisions, conference papers, dissertations, and other relevant scholarly publications relating to vigilantism, public security, criminal justice, and social stability.

Population of the Study

The population of the study comprised published literature, official documents, and policy reports addressing vigilantism, mob justice, community policing, criminal justice administration, correctional services, inmate reintegration, governance, and public security in Nigeria and comparable jurisdictions. In documentary research, this population is best understood as a document universe, that is, the full body of potentially relevant texts from which the analytical sample was drawn. The final analytical corpus consisted of 32 distinct documents, namely the sources listed in the reference list of this article after the removal of duplicate entries. Their distribution by document type is presented in Table 1.

Table 1*Distribution of the analytical corpus by document type*

Document type	n	Documents analyzed (as listed in the references)
Peer-reviewed journal articles	12	Asif et al., (2022); Baker, (2002); Becker, (2016); Bottoms et al., (2012); Johnston, (1996); Merton et al., (1957); Rosenbaum & Sederberg, (1974); Tankebe, (2009)
Academic books and monographs	10	Abrahams, (1998); Baker, (2008); Bayley, (1994); Clear & Karp, (2018); Garland, (2001); Migdal, (1988); Okafor, (1997); T. Tyler, (1990); T. R. Tyler, (2006)
Reports and indices of international and non-governmental organizations	10	Nordin et al., (2021)
Total	32	

*Source: Compiled by the author from the documentary corpus.***Sampling Technique**

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select relevant documents for analysis. Only publications directly related to the objectives of the study and produced by recognized academic institutions, government agencies, and international organizations were included. Sources lacking scholarly credibility or relevance to the research objectives were excluded to ensure the quality and reliability of the findings. To make the selection transparent, relevance and credibility were operationalized through explicit criteria.

A document was included if it (a) addressed at least one of the four objectives, that is, the drivers of vigilantism, mob justice, or self-help justice, their consequences for public security or social stability, or legal and policy responses to them; (b) concerned Nigeria or a comparable African or developing-country context, or supplied a theoretical framework used in the study; (c) was a peer-reviewed article, an academic book from an established publisher, an official legal instrument, or a report issued by a government agency, statutory body, intergovernmental organization, or established non-governmental organization; and (d) was available in full text in English. Documents were excluded if they were news reports, opinion pieces, blogs, or social media content; lacked an identifiable author or issuing institution; mentioned vigilantism only incidentally without substantive analysis; or duplicated a document already included.

Method of Data Collection

Data were collected through extensive documentary review. Relevant literature was obtained from university libraries, online academic databases, government repositories, legal documents, institutional publications, and international organizations. Particular attention was given to publications discussing the causes of vigilantism, institutional weaknesses, procedural justice, public trust, inmate release, community policing, and the implications of self-help justice for public security and social stability. The search combined the terms “vigilantism,” “vigilante,” “mob justice,” “jungle justice,” “self-help justice,” “community policing,” “procedural justice,” “police legitimacy,” “inmate release,” and “amnesty” with “Nigeria” or “Africa.”

Scholarly sources were retrieved through Google Scholar and publisher platforms such as Cambridge Core, Oxford Academic, Wiley Online Library, Emerald Insight, SAGE Journals, and JSTOR, while legal instruments and institutional reports were obtained from the official websites of the issuing bodies. No lower date limit was applied to foundational theoretical works, whereas empirical, legal, and

institutional sources were drawn from the period 1994–2024. Retrieved documents were screened first by title and abstract (or executive summary) and then by full text against the inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the reference lists of included documents were checked to identify further relevant sources.

Method of Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic content analysis. The researcher carefully reviewed the selected documents, identified recurring themes, and organized them into analytical categories consistent with the research objectives. Major themes included ineffective policing, judicial delays, corruption, poverty, unemployment, weak governance, declining public trust, cultural acceptance of informal justice, insecurity, community reactions to inmate release, and the implications of vigilantism for public security and social stability.

The findings were interpreted in relation to Social Disorganization Theory and Procedural Justice Theory. Concretely, the analysis proceeded in five stages. First, each document was read in full, and its type, context, and principal claims were recorded in a data-extraction sheet. Second, the texts were coded using deductive codes derived from the four objectives and the two theories, supplemented by inductive codes that emerged during reading, such as misinformation and community reactions to inmate release. Third, related codes were grouped into candidate themes, which were reviewed against the coded extracts and refined. Fourth, each theme was compared across document types to determine whether it was supported by several categories of sources, by specific previous studies, or mainly by theoretical inference. Finally, the themes were organized under the four objectives and summarized in a thematic matrix (Table 2). On this basis, statements in the Results and Discussion are distinguished as (a) patterns observed across the reviewed documents, (b) findings reported by particular previous researchers, which are attributed to them by citation, and (c) the author's own interpretation.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To enhance the credibility and dependability of the study, information was triangulated across multiple authoritative sources, including academic publications, government reports, legal instruments, and international policy documents. Preference was given to recent and peer-reviewed literature while also incorporating seminal works that provide the theoretical foundation for the study. This process helped ensure consistency, accuracy, and balance in the interpretation of findings. Where sources diverged, the divergence was recorded rather than resolved in favour of a single source.

For example, several scholarly and institutional sources associate ineffective policing and corruption with the loss of public confidence ([Baker, 2002](#)), whereas Tankebe, ([2009](#)) survey in Accra found that perceived police effectiveness and experience of police corruption did not significantly predict support for vigilante self-help, while police trustworthiness did. In such cases, the claim was qualified in the Results and Discussion and its evidentiary status was indicated in Table 2. Official documents, which may present institutional performance favourably, were also read against academic and human rights sources in order to reduce the risk of institutional bias.

Ethical Considerations

As a documentary study, no human participants were involved, and no primary data were collected. Consequently, issues relating to informed consent and confidentiality did not arise. Nevertheless, the study adhered to accepted standards of academic integrity by accurately acknowledging all sources of information through appropriate citation and referencing in accordance with the law.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Discussion and Analysis of Findings

Factors Influencing Communities to Take the Law into Their Own Hands

The findings are presented in line with the four objectives of the study. With respect to the first objective, the reviewed documents point to a set of interrelated institutional, socioeconomic, and cultural factors that drive communities to take the law into their own hands. The findings of this documentary study reveal that communities resort to taking the law into their own hands primarily because of declining confidence in the formal criminal justice system. The literature consistently demonstrates that where policing is ineffective, judicial processes are slow, corruption is widespread, and governance institutions fail to provide adequate security, citizens increasingly rely on self-help justice.

This finding supports Johnston, (1996) assertion that vigilantism develops when citizens perceive that the state has failed to discharge its constitutional responsibility of protecting lives and property. In the Nigerian context, the rise in kidnapping, armed robbery, banditry, terrorism, cattle rustling, and communal violence has further intensified public demand for alternative security mechanisms. Ineffective policing is one of the most widely cited causes of vigilantism.

The police constitute the primary institution responsible for crime prevention, law enforcement, and the protection of lives and property. However, studies indicate that inadequate manpower, poor logistics, corruption, limited intelligence gathering, and delayed response to criminal incidents reduce the effectiveness of policing (Baker, 2002). In rural and conflict-prone communities, the absence of visible police presence often compels residents to establish informal security arrangements. Citizens who perceive the police as incapable of controlling crime may support vigilante activities as alternative mechanisms for maintaining order. This situation is particularly evident in regions affected by armed robbery, kidnapping, cattle rustling, banditry, and communal conflicts.

The reviewed documents also show that ineffective policing is one of the most frequently cited drivers of vigilantism, although Tankebe, (2009) found that perceived police effectiveness did not significantly predict support for vigilante self-help in Accra, which suggests that its influence may operate through declining trust rather than through ineffectiveness alone. Comparable evidence from Pakistan likewise shows that perceived police unfairness and corruption, rather than perceived police effectiveness, were associated with approval of vigilante violence, partly through feelings of righteous anger (Asif, 2023). Communities experiencing delayed police responses, inadequate manpower, poor intelligence gathering, and insufficient security presence often establish vigilante groups or resort to mob justice as immediate responses to criminal activities. While such actions may temporarily reduce criminal activities in some communities, they undermine constitutional procedures by replacing lawful investigation and prosecution with instant punishment. This finding is consistent with Baker, (2002), who argues that weak policing encourages the emergence of informal systems of social control. The efficiency of the judicial system significantly influences public confidence in the rule of law. Long court processes, prolonged pre-trial detention, repeated adjournments, and delayed delivery of justice contribute to public frustration.

According to T. R. Tyler, (2006), citizens are more likely to obey laws when they perceive legal institutions as fair, efficient, and impartial. However, when justice is delayed, communities often perceive legal procedures as ineffective and may seek immediate punishment for suspected offenders. Judicial delays also create perceptions that offenders evade accountability, thereby encouraging acts of mob justice and extrajudicial punishment. Another important finding is that judicial inefficiency significantly contributes to community frustration. Delays in criminal investigations, prolonged court proceedings, repeated adjournments, and prolonged detention of suspects create the perception that offenders can evade punishment.

T. R. Tyler, (2006) theory of procedural justice explains that citizens are more willing to comply

with laws when legal institutions are perceived as fair, impartial, and efficient. Conversely, when justice is delayed or appears inaccessible, public confidence declines, thereby increasing support for extrajudicial measures. Corruption within law enforcement agencies, courts, and public institutions undermines the legitimacy of the state. Bribery, selective prosecution, political interference, and abuse of office contribute to perceptions that criminals can escape punishment through corrupt practices. Consequently, citizens may view vigilantism as a more effective means of ensuring accountability, despite its illegality and potential for abuse.

The study further reveals that corruption within law enforcement agencies and the judiciary weakens institutional legitimacy. Public perceptions that influential individuals can manipulate legal processes through bribery, political interference, or abuse of office reduce trust in formal justice institutions. Consequently, communities may regard vigilantism as a more effective mechanism for ensuring accountability, despite its illegality. This finding aligns with Transparency International's reports, which identify corruption as a major obstacle to effective governance, justice delivery, and public confidence in state institutions. Experimental evidence further indicates that signals of police anti-corruption reform can increase citizens' willingness to intervene to stop vigilantism, although they do not necessarily reduce support for it (Asif & Tankebe, 2025). Socioeconomic conditions, particularly poverty and unemployment, have been linked to both criminal behavior and support for vigilantism.

According to Merton et al., (1957), individuals may resort to illegitimate means when legitimate opportunities for economic advancement are limited. High youth unemployment and widespread poverty increase social frustration and weaken social cohesion. In communities facing severe economic hardship, residents may perceive crime as a direct threat to survival, thereby encouraging support for harsh and immediate punishment of suspected offenders. Unemployed youths may also participate in vigilante groups as a means of gaining social status, economic benefits, or a sense of belonging. Socioeconomic conditions also emerged as significant factors influencing community self-help justice. Poverty, unemployment, and inequality increase both criminal activities and public support for harsh punitive measures against suspected offenders. Many unemployed youths are recruited into vigilante groups because these organizations provide social recognition, economic incentives, and a sense of belonging.

This finding supports Merton et al., (1957), which explains that individuals may adopt illegitimate means of achieving societal goals when legitimate opportunities are limited. Fear of crime is another major factor influencing vigilantism. Persistent insecurity, high crime rates, and experiences of victimization create anxiety among community members. Research shows that individuals who feel vulnerable to criminal attacks are more likely to support self-help security measures and community-based enforcement mechanisms (Garland, 2001). In societies affected by kidnapping, terrorism, banditry, and violent crimes, fear often generates collective responses aimed at protecting lives and property. However, such responses may result in excessive force, wrongful accusations, and violations of fundamental human rights.

The study additionally demonstrates that fear of crime has become an important catalyst for vigilantism. Communities repeatedly exposed to violent crimes often prioritize immediate protection over legal procedures. Although fear-driven responses may appear rational from the perspective of vulnerable communities, they frequently result in wrongful accusations, mob violence, torture, and the killing of innocent persons. The increasing spread of misinformation through social media, rumours, and unverified reports further exacerbates this problem by encouraging spontaneous acts of "jungle justice" before proper investigations are conducted.

Recent scholarship highlights a growing trend in which unexplained crimes, rumors, misinformation, and distrust among community members contribute to spontaneous acts of mob violence. Unlike organized vigilante groups that operate with identifiable structures and objectives, mob vigilantism often emerges suddenly in response to allegations of theft, kidnapping, ritual killings, or

other serious offenses. Such incidents are frequently driven by anger, fear, and collective emotions rather than verified evidence.

The spread of misinformation through social networks, local gossip, and digital media has intensified this phenomenon. Experimental evidence from India and Pakistan shows that correcting such rumours reduces support for vigilantism and increases support for holding vigilantes accountable ([Badrinathan et al., 2025](#)). Communities that lack confidence in the ability of law enforcement agencies to investigate crimes effectively may react immediately to suspicions, leading to extrajudicial punishments before legal processes are followed. This form of “jungle justice” represents an expansion of vigilantism beyond organized community groups to spontaneous collective actions.

The consequences include wrongful punishment, human rights abuses, erosion of the rule of law, and increased social instability. Weak governance is another significant factor identified in the literature. Effective governance requires the provision of security, justice, public services, and accountability. Where governments fail to perform these functions, governance gaps emerge, creating opportunities for informal systems of authority and justice to develop. Migdal, ([1988](#)) argues that weak states often coexist with alternative power structures that perform functions traditionally associated with government institutions.

In such contexts, vigilante groups may gain legitimacy because they appear more responsive to community security needs than formal institutions. Public trust is fundamental to the legitimacy and effectiveness of state institutions. T. R. Tyler, ([2006](#)) argues that citizens are more likely to comply with laws when they trust legal authorities and perceive them as legitimate. However, repeated experiences of corruption, ineffective policing, and judicial inefficiency reduce confidence in the state ([Lamb, 2021](#)).

Declining trust in institutions such as the police, courts, and correctional services increases public support for informal justice mechanisms. Communities that no longer believe in the capacity of the state to provide justice may resort to vigilantism as an alternative means of dispute resolution and crime control. The findings further indicate that weak governance and declining public trust reinforce each other. Governments that fail to provide effective security, justice, and public services create governance gaps that are often filled by informal institutions, community vigilante groups, and traditional security arrangements.

While some vigilante organizations cooperate with formal security agencies by providing intelligence and neighbourhood surveillance, others exceed their mandates by engaging in unlawful arrests, detention, torture, and extrajudicial executions. Such practices weaken the rule of law and challenge the state's monopoly over the legitimate use of force. The release of inmates from custodial centres constitutes an important stage in the criminal justice process and represents the transition of offenders from institutional custody to community life. Under the Nigerian Correctional Service Act, 2019, correctional institutions are mandated not only to provide safe custody but also to rehabilitate, reform, and reintegrate offenders into society. Consequently, inmates may be released upon completion of their sentences, acquittal by a competent court, grant of bail, parole, presidential or gubernatorial pardon, amnesty, or the exercise of the prerogative of mercy.

Nevertheless, the release of inmates, particularly those accused or convicted of violent crimes such as terrorism, kidnapping, armed robbery, armed banditry, and murder, often generates public concern. Communities that have suffered from these crimes may perceive such releases as evidence that the criminal justice system has failed to protect victims or adequately punish offenders. These perceptions become stronger where inmate releases occur through executive pardon, negotiated settlements, or amnesty programmes without sufficient transparency, victim participation, or post-release supervision ([Aina, 2023](#)).

Where communities perceive that dangerous offenders are repeatedly released without accountability, confidence in formal criminal justice institutions may decline. Such perceptions may encourage the formation of vigilante groups and increase public support for mob justice as alternative

means of ensuring security. Conversely, transparent release procedures supported by effective rehabilitation, community sensitization, risk assessment, post-release supervision, and reintegration programmes can strengthen public trust, reduce fear, and contribute to sustainable peace.

Amnesty refers to an official pardon granted by the government to individuals or groups for offences committed, particularly in situations involving political conflict, insurgency, militancy, or national reconciliation. It is often adopted as a conflict-management strategy designed to encourage armed groups to surrender weapons, renounce violence, and reintegrate into society. In Nigeria, amnesty programmes have been implemented in the Niger Delta and have also featured in discussions concerning insurgency and armed banditry.

The granting of amnesty to individuals accused or convicted of capital offences remains controversial. Supporters argue that amnesty contributes to peacebuilding, national reconciliation, conflict resolution, and disarmament. Critics contend that granting amnesty for grave offences undermines justice, weakens deterrence, disregards victims' rights, and creates the perception that serious offenders can evade legal consequences through political negotiation (Egonu et al., 2024). Consequently, the debate over amnesty continues to raise important questions regarding the balance between peacebuilding, accountability, justice, and national security.

The analysis also highlights the relationship between inmate release, amnesty programmes, and public perceptions of justice. Where communities believe that individuals accused or convicted of serious offences such as terrorism, kidnapping, armed robbery, or banditry are released without adequate transparency, rehabilitation, or supervision, confidence in the criminal justice system declines. This perception may encourage citizens to support mob justice as a means of preventing suspected offenders from escaping punishment.

However, the study emphasizes that transparent release procedures, effective rehabilitation programmes, post-release supervision, victim participation, and community reintegration initiatives can reduce these fears and strengthen public confidence in the justice system. This is consistent with experimental evidence from Nigeria showing that public willingness to accept former fighters is shaped by perceived risk and fairness, with greater acceptance of those who were forcibly recruited and display remorse (Godefroidt & Langer, 2023). It should be noted, however, that the reviewed documents establish this link mainly at the level of public perception; they do not yet show that inmate release is a major determinant of vigilantism in its own right. Accordingly, the present study treats inmate release and amnesty as an exploratory, perception-based dimension rather than an established driver, and its causal weight remains to be tested through field-based research.

The theories also help explain community reactions to the release of inmates from custodial centres. Social Disorganization Theory suggests that where insecurity is high and institutions are weak, communities may perceive the release of offenders particularly those convicted of violent crimes as an additional threat to public safety. Procedural Justice Theory further explains that if inmate releases through bail, parole, amnesty, pardon, or completion of sentence are not transparent or accompanied by effective rehabilitation and reintegration programmes, communities may view the process as unjust and lose confidence in the criminal justice system. Such perceptions can encourage retaliatory actions, mob violence, and the formation of vigilante groups. Therefore, transparent release procedures, effective post-release supervision, victim engagement where appropriate, and community sensitization are essential to maintaining public trust and preventing communities from taking the law into their own hands. Cultural factors also play an important role in shaping attitudes toward vigilantism.

In many African societies, traditional institutions have historically played a role in resolving disputes and enforcing social norms. Customary practices often emphasize collective responsibility, communal values, and local mechanisms for maintaining order. While some traditional systems promote reconciliation and restorative justice, others may support punitive measures outside formal legal frameworks. The persistence of these traditions can contribute to societal acceptance of informal

justice practices, particularly where state institutions are weak or inaccessible. Furthermore, the study finds that cultural acceptance of informal justice contributes to the persistence of vigilantism.

In many African societies, traditional institutions have historically resolved disputes through customary mechanisms based on communal participation. Although these indigenous systems often promote reconciliation and restorative justice, they may also legitimize informal sanctions when formal institutions are perceived as ineffective. Therefore, strengthening collaboration between traditional institutions and formal justice agencies is essential to ensuring that community participation remains consistent with constitutional principles and human rights standards.

In the Nigerian context, many communities experience persistent insecurity arising from kidnapping, armed robbery, banditry, terrorism, cattle rustling, and communal conflicts. Where the Nigeria Police Force and other security agencies are perceived as ineffective or absent, residents frequently organize vigilante groups to protect lives and property. Although these groups may initially emerge to fill security gaps, inadequate regulation often leads to arbitrary arrests, torture, unlawful detention, and extrajudicial killings. Thus, Social Disorganization Theory explains how institutional weaknesses and social instability create conditions that encourage communities to assume law enforcement functions. When police investigations are ineffective, court proceedings are excessively delayed, corruption influences judicial outcomes, or released offenders are perceived as escaping accountability, public confidence in the criminal justice system declines.

As trust diminishes, communities become more likely to support vigilantism, mob justice, and other forms of extrajudicial punishment as alternative means of achieving justice. The combination of Social Disorganization Theory and Procedural Justice Theory provides a comprehensive explanation for the factors influencing communities to take the law into their own hands. Social Disorganization Theory explains how structural and socioeconomic conditions such as poverty, unemployment, weak governance, insecurity, and institutional failure create an environment conducive to vigilantism. Procedural Justice Theory complements this perspective by demonstrating that when citizens perceive the criminal justice system as unfair, corrupt, or ineffective, they lose confidence in formal institutions and increasingly rely on self-help justice.

Beyond restating the drivers identified in the literature, the cross-document comparison yields three insights. First, this study interprets the institutional drivers ineffective policing, judicial delays, corruption, weak governance, and non-transparent inmate release as converging on a common mechanism, namely the erosion of perceived procedural legitimacy. This interpretation is consistent with Tankebe, (2009) finding that police trustworthiness, rather than perceived effectiveness or experience of corruption, predicted support for vigilante self-help.

Second, the drivers differ in the strength of their documentary support (Table 2): declining trust and perceived procedural unfairness are supported by both theory and previous empirical research, whereas the roles of poverty and unemployment rest mainly on theoretical inference and the role of inmate release and amnesty remains at the level of public perception. Third, the analysis suggests that the drivers attach differently to the two principal forms of self-help justice: organized vigilante groups tend to emerge where policing and governance gaps are persistent, whereas spontaneous mob action is more closely associated with fear, misinformation, and collective emotions (Asif et al., 2022). These distinctions imply that policy responses should target not only the capacity of justice institutions but also their perceived fairness, and should differentiate between regulating organized groups and preventing spontaneous mob violence.

Implications for Public Security

The literature consistently demonstrates that although communities often resort to vigilantism and mob justice as immediate responses to crime and insecurity, such actions have far-reaching consequences for public security and social stability. While these informal security measures may produce short-term reductions in certain criminal activities, they frequently undermine the legal

system, weaken democratic governance, and generate new forms of insecurity. With respect to the second objective, the analysis shows that these practices carry serious consequences for public security. Public security refers to the protection of lives, property, and public order through lawful institutions responsible for crime prevention, law enforcement, and the administration of justice. When communities take the law into their own hands, several negative consequences arise.

Vigilantism undermines the constitutional principle that only legally established institutions have the authority to investigate, prosecute, and punish offenders. When citizens assume these responsibilities, respect for due process, fair hearing, and judicial independence declines, thereby weakening the legitimacy of the criminal justice system. Mob justice frequently results in unlawful arrests, torture, assault, and extrajudicial killings of suspected offenders. Many victims are punished without investigation or trial, violating fundamental rights guaranteed under the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and international human rights instruments. Decisions taken by angry crowds are often based on rumours, suspicion, or misinformation rather than credible evidence. Consequently, innocent individuals may be subjected to violence or death before their innocence can be established, resulting in irreversible miscarriages of justice.

Rather than reducing crime, vigilantism may trigger cycles of revenge attacks, communal clashes, and retaliatory violence. Families and associates of victims may seek revenge, thereby increasing insecurity and undermining peace within communities. Public reliance on informal justice mechanisms reduces confidence in the police, courts, and correctional services. As communities increasingly depend on vigilante groups, formal security agencies may lose legitimacy and public cooperation, making intelligence gathering and crime prevention more difficult.

When individuals or groups administer punishment without legal accountability, a culture of impunity develops. Vigilante members may abuse their authority for personal interests, political purposes, or economic gain, further threatening public safety. Vigilantism poses significant governance and security challenges. Unregulated vigilante groups may exceed their mandates, become politicized, abuse their authority, or engage in criminal activities such as extortion and illegal detention. This weakens state monopoly over the legitimate use of force and threatens democratic governance.

Implications for Social Stability

With respect to the third objective, the consequences of communities taking the law into their own hands extend beyond immediate security concerns to the foundations of social stability. Social stability refers to the existence of peaceful coexistence, mutual trust, social cohesion, respect for laws, and the effective functioning of institutions within society. Communities taking the law into their own hands threaten these foundations in several ways. Mob justice creates fear, suspicion, and mistrust among community members. Wrongful accusations and violent reprisals divide communities, weaken interpersonal relationships, and reduce collective cooperation in addressing social problems.

The widespread occurrence of vigilantism reflects declining confidence in the government's ability to provide justice and security. When citizens perceive state institutions as ineffective or corrupt, public confidence in governance continues to deteriorate, reducing institutional legitimacy. Frequent resort to mob action normalizes violence as an acceptable means of resolving disputes. Young people who repeatedly witness extrajudicial punishment may become socialized into accepting violence instead of lawful conflict resolution, thereby increasing the likelihood of future criminal behaviour. Democratic societies are founded on constitutionalism, due process, and equality before the law.

Vigilantism bypasses these principles by replacing judicial processes with arbitrary punishment, thereby weakening democratic institutions and constitutional governance. Persistent insecurity arising from mob violence discourages investment, disrupts commercial activities, and reduces economic productivity. Businesses may relocate from insecure communities, while government resources are diverted from development projects to security operations, slowing socio-economic development. Certain groups, including ex-offenders, ethnic minorities, migrants, and vulnerable populations, may

become targets of suspicion and discrimination.

This exclusion undermines rehabilitation efforts, increases stigmatization, and reduces opportunities for successful reintegration into society. Equally, the practice discourages the successful reintegration of released inmates. Former inmates who have legally completed their sentences or benefited from rehabilitation programmes may face hostility, social exclusion, harassment, or violent attacks from community members. Such rejection undermines correctional objectives, increases stigmatization, and may contribute to recidivism. A multi-state Nigerian study likewise found low public confidence in the genuine reintegration of ex-offenders, with perceived community trauma fostering negative social identities towards them (Ike et al., 2025).

Communities affected by repeated incidents of mob violence often experience fear, anxiety, trauma, and reduced perceptions of personal safety. Victims' families, witnesses, and even members of vigilante groups may suffer long-term psychological consequences, affecting overall community well-being. Overall, the literature demonstrates that the decision by communities to take the law into their own hands may provide a temporary perception of security, but its long-term implications include erosion of the rule of law, human rights abuses, weakened criminal justice institutions, increased insecurity, poor reintegration of former inmates, and threats to public security and social stability.

Measures to Strengthen the Rule of Law and Community Security

With respect to the fourth objective, the reviewed documents suggest measures at both governmental and community levels. The literature suggests that addressing vigilantism requires coordinated efforts by both government institutions and local communities. Since vigilantism often results from weak governance, ineffective policing, delayed justice, and declining public trust, sustainable solutions must focus on strengthening the rule of law while promoting community participation within legal frameworks.

Scholars argue that the government plays a central role in reducing vigilantism by improving the effectiveness of the criminal justice system. One of the most important measures is strengthening the operational capacity of the Nigeria Police Force through adequate recruitment, modern equipment, intelligence-led policing, and continuous professional training (Baker, 2002). Attention to officers' well-being is also relevant, as depersonalisation associated with burnout has been found to weaken community policing practice among Nigerian police personnel (Okoka & Kheswa, 2025). A visible and responsive police presence reassures citizens and reduces the perceived need for self-help justice. Judicial reform is also essential.

T. R. Tyler, (2006) maintains that public confidence in the legal system increases when justice is delivered fairly, transparently, and without unnecessary delays. Governments should therefore reduce case backlogs, improve access to legal aid, establish more courts where necessary, and adopt digital case-management systems to ensure the timely administration of justice. Another important measure is combating corruption within the police, judiciary, and other public institutions. Transparency and accountability mechanisms, including effective disciplinary procedures, independent oversight bodies, and anti-corruption initiatives, help restore public trust and discourage citizens from resorting to extrajudicial measures.

The philosophy underpinning inmate release is based on the principles of rehabilitation and reintegration. Modern correctional administration recognizes that offenders who have successfully completed correctional programmes should be provided opportunities to become productive members of society. Educational programmes, vocational training, psychological counselling, religious guidance, and behavioural modification initiatives are intended to reduce recidivism and promote successful reintegration. Governments should also strengthen correctional and rehabilitation programmes under the Nigerian Correctional Service Act, 2019. Effective rehabilitation, vocational training, psychological counselling, and structured post-release supervision reduce recidivism and reassure communities that released inmates are being properly monitored.

Transparent procedures for inmate release, parole, amnesty, and executive pardon, together with victim participation where appropriate, can reduce public suspicion and prevent retaliatory violence. Furthermore, governments should enact and enforce laws regulating community security and vigilante groups. Community security organizations should operate only under legal frameworks, with defined responsibilities, accountability mechanisms, human rights training, and close supervision by law enforcement agencies. Public enlightenment campaigns should educate citizens on constitutional rights, due process, and the legal consequences of mob justice. Addressing the socioeconomic drivers of crime is equally important.

Investments in education, youth employment, poverty reduction, and social welfare programmes reduce the conditions that contribute to both criminality and support for vigilantism. Strengthening local governance and improving the delivery of public services further enhance citizens' confidence in state institutions. Community justice refers to the active participation of citizens in maintaining peace, preventing crime, resolving disputes, and supporting public safety at the local level. Unlike vigilantism, community justice is intended to function within the framework of the law through cooperation between citizens and formal justice institutions. Clear & Karp, (2018) argue that community justice seeks to improve public confidence in the criminal justice system by encouraging meaningful community participation while ensuring that legal procedures, accountability, and respect for human rights are maintained.

Historically, African societies relied on traditional rulers, elders, religious leaders, and customary institutions to resolve disputes and restore social harmony. These indigenous systems emphasized reconciliation, restitution, mediation, and restorative justice rather than punitive sanctions. Such mechanisms strengthened social cohesion and promoted peaceful coexistence within communities. However, community justice loses its legitimacy when citizens abandon lawful procedures and resort to mob violence or vigilante actions. Where suspected offenders are punished without investigation, fair hearing, or judicial determination, community justice transforms into vigilantism. Such actions violate constitutional guarantees, undermine democratic governance, and weaken public confidence in formal institutions. Sustainable community justice therefore depends on effective collaboration among communities, the police, the judiciary, correctional institutions, traditional authorities, civil society organizations, and government agencies.

Communities also have a critical role in preventing vigilantism while promoting lawful approaches to crime prevention. The literature emphasizes community policing as an effective strategy for building trust and cooperation between citizens and security agencies. Through regular communication, information sharing, and joint problem-solving, communities can assist law enforcement without taking the law into their own hands. However, a recent national survey found that most Nigerians were unaware of key aspects of community policing and dissatisfied with its current state, although the majority expressed willingness to participate through technology (Otuu et al., 2025). Traditional rulers, religious leaders, youth associations, women groups, and civil society organizations should promote peacebuilding, mediation, and respect for the rule of law. Community leaders can discourage mob justice by educating residents about legal procedures and encouraging the peaceful resolution of disputes through recognized institutions.

Public awareness campaigns are equally important in countering misinformation, rumours, and false accusations that often trigger spontaneous mob violence. Community education should emphasize the presumption of innocence, respect for human rights, and the importance of allowing the police and courts to investigate criminal allegations. Neighborhood watch groups should operate strictly within the law by focusing on surveillance, intelligence gathering, and reporting suspicious activities to security agencies rather than arresting or punishing suspects. Collaboration between community members, the police, the judiciary, and correctional authorities strengthens crime prevention while preserving the rule of law. Communities should also support the reintegration of rehabilitated former inmates by

reducing stigma and facilitating access to employment, education, and social support. Successful reintegration reduces recidivism and minimizes fear among residents, thereby lowering the likelihood of retaliatory violence against released offenders.

Finally, the literature recognizes that while community participation in crime prevention is essential, such participation must operate within legal frameworks. Effective community policing, intelligence sharing, neighbourhood surveillance, and collaboration with law enforcement agencies are more sustainable approaches than mob justice or extrajudicial punishment. Governments must therefore strengthen policing, judicial efficiency, correctional rehabilitation, transparency in inmate release, and public awareness, while communities should promote peaceful conflict resolution, human rights, and respect for due process.

Together, these theories suggest that reducing vigilantism requires more than increasing police presence. Government must strengthen the effectiveness, fairness, transparency, and legitimacy of criminal justice institutions while addressing the socioeconomic conditions that contribute to insecurity and public distrust. Improving policing, accelerating judicial processes, combating corruption, enhancing correctional rehabilitation and reintegration, promoting community policing, and expanding economic opportunities are essential measures for restoring public confidence and strengthening the rule of law.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the factors influencing communities to take the law into their own hands and their implications for public security and social stability in Nigeria. The findings revealed that vigilantism and mob justice are largely products of ineffective policing, judicial delays, corruption, weak governance, poverty, unemployment, and declining public trust in state institutions. Although communities frequently justify vigilantism as a response to insecurity, extrajudicial justice undermines the rule of law, violates constitutional guarantees, and creates opportunities for human rights abuses and retaliatory violence. These practices weaken state authority, undermine social cohesion, increase communal tensions, and threaten social stability. Strengthening the rule of law, improving governance, enhancing public trust, ensuring accountable criminal justice institutions, and addressing underlying socioeconomic drivers remain essential strategies for sustainable public security and social stability in Nigeria.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

The author was solely responsible for the conceptualization, research design, literature review, data collection, thematic analysis, interpretation of findings, and manuscript preparation. The author also reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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