Public Perception of the Effectiveness of Vigilante Groups in the Prevention of Crime in Benin City

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Abstract

This study examined the public perception of the vigilante groups in the prevention of crime in Benin city. The study was mainly quantitative and the cross sectional research design guided the research methodology. This study population comprised residents in selected communities from the three (3) local government areas that form Benin City. The collection of quantitative data involved the participation of 388 respondents to whom semi-structured questionnaire was administered. The study used a purposive, simple random and a convenience sampling techniques in the selecting of the desired respondents for the study. The data generated from quantitative study was analysed with Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) using frequency and tables. The study discovered that the statutory responsibility of the vigilante groups in Benin city have successfully and effectively carried out, in terms of detection and prevention of crimes, maintenance of law and order. The study also found out that the members of the public rated in the vigilante groups high for their effective performance of their duties ad responsivities. The study recommended that there should be effective synergy between police and vigilante groups to achieve the shared goal of ensuring security more efficiently. Also, government should closely regulate and supervise the activities of the vigilante groups to avoid operating outside their

constitutional mandates. The study further recommendation better remuneration for vigilante members for effective performance.

Keywords: Vigilante groups, Crime, Prevention, Effectiveness, Public Perception.

Introduction

Provision of adequate security is a social requirement for the survival of any society. Therefore, security is fundamental as well as essential for social development in every society (Chikwendu, et al. 2016). Globally, every society takes appropriate measures to protect lives and properties of the people living within its territory or boundaries. This has often been the primary role of government and leaders in every society of human existence (Odikalu, 2005). Businesses and social activities may not go on freely without adequate security. This is fundamental and it is essential for security as it may be the reason why societies from time immemorial made frantic efforts to police their neighborhoods in order to secure them from criminal victimization (Ogbozor, 2016). Security has to do with the act of preventing and protecting in order to ensure that certain facilities, equipment's, persons or activities are safe from damage, destruction, murder or disruption.

Globally, the Vigilante or Vigilantism is not new to human society. As far back as the 1900, there have already been in existence, a vigilante structure. For example, in places like the United States of America, there exist some vigilante groups charged with the responsibility of protecting their coast as early as the 1900. Early study into the State of San Francisco between 1851 and 1856, reveal that the San Franciscan organized themselves into local forces or groups in order to help maintain law (Yahaya and Bello, 2019). To further underpin that the idea of Vigilantism is not novel to man, Roberg and Kukendall (1993) stated that the origin of the vigilante can be traced to about 27BC. He argued that then, it is basically the role of some appointed magistrates who constitute a set of unpaid individuals who are empowered to maintain law and order in the territory.

A Vigilante Group is that which consists individuals who become mindful of their insecurity problems and took upon themselves to protect themselves and

safeguard their people (Oyagi, 2016). The term "Vigilantism" has both Spanish and Latin origin. From the Latin verb: "Vigil" which means "watchful" or "alert" (Osborne, 2005) and the Spanish word: "vigilante" which means "watchman, guard, guardian, regulator" (Kirschner, 2011). According to Mocanda (2017), Vigilantism is a form of organised but collective response involving extra-legal sanctions in combating crime activities. From all the above, it can be learnt that vigilante is a group of people who come together to fight crime and criminal activities around them.

The increase in crime rate in the contemporary times has led to the emergence of community vigilante groups, especially when the Nigerian police force has been alleged to be inefficient in crime control, largely as a result of inadequate personnel. As the opinion of Nwanguma (2000) described the Nigeria police as a corrupt, ineffective and a weak organization. The public dissatisfaction with the response of government agencies in dealing with the increasing wave of crime and disorder has induced many communities to deeply rely on self-help measures or supporting strategies for the protection of life and security of properties within the respective neighborhoods. It is therefore necessary to examine against all odd the role of vigilante in the prevention of crime in Benin City, as it central to most state in southern Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

The increasing frustration throughout Nigeria about uncontrolled criminality, unmanaged violence and its associated problems has only highlighted the inadequacies of the police and its failure as a veritable law enforcement agency; and this created the need to established vigilante in communities (Sekhonyaane, 2002). Indeed, there is a wide gap between the police and the community they are supposed to protect (Ikuteyibo & Rotimi 2010). In recent years, many communities in Nigeria have witnessed crimes of various description. And Benin city is not an exception the police who are the primary agent to fight these crimes are unproductive. The issue of insecurity in Benin City ranges from kidnapping, theft, rape and armed robbery which stand as a threat to human society. Insecurity has been a major problem in Benin city as the police authority don't function due to various issues like being short staffed, little or no means of transportation, lack of determination and no good working equipment's and many more

Increase in crime and the need for everyone to take their own security into their own hands. Security, they say, is the duty of everyone. But the case in Nigeria and in Edo State may simply mean that you are on your own. Eke (2002) has noted that from time past, concerned men and women have taken it upon themselves to protect themselves and their families from harm, not just in Africa alone but also in Western Europe. He added that the vigilante was originally made to protect the subjects. Back here in Edo State, report shows that police are not quick to response and swift in cases of threat. Speculation even have it that you will phone the police and they will wait like 2-hours after the incident to show up.

The importance of security to social development of any nation cannot be overemphasized. People hardly migrate to trouble zones. In fact, there is a Migration Directorate that advises people on where to migrate to. This is very common in the Western world. These agencies advised their citizens not to travel to some states and countries especially in Africa and Nigeria. Same with investors. So many investors have run out of Nigeria due to insecurity (Oyagi, 2016). Security need to be brought closer to the people. Without a regular local security force on ground in place like Benin city life would have been wasted on daily basis. The vigilante swing into actions when they notice a security breach and long enough before the police intervenes. It is on the this stands that the study seeks to investigate the general perception of the public on the role of the vigilante in crime prevention in Benin city.

Objective of the Study

The main objective of the study was to examine the effectiveness of vigilante groups in the prevention of crime in Benin City.

Review of Relevant Literature

The Concept of Vigilante

The term vigilante is derived from the Latin word vigilans, which means to be watchful. However, the meaning of this concept, which has an old social history depended on the peculiarities of the situation where it existed (Akaayar 2010). While there is no precise scholarly definition or understanding of what vigilantism exactly is, it is commonly understood as "an organized attempt by a group of „ordinary citizens" to enforce norms and maintain law and order on behalf of their

communities, often by resorting to violence, in the perceived absence of effective official state action through the police and courts" (Sungusungu 1987). Vigilante-type organizations have existed in many cultures, in past and present times, in both rural and urban settings. According to Abraham (2007), vigilantism is an organized attempt by a group of ordinary citizens to enforce norms and maintain law and order on behalf of their communities, in the absence of effective official state action through the police. Vigilantism in Nigeria has been considered as a community reaction to crime. Similarly, Baker (2002) defined Vigilante as a security outfit mostly composed of volunteers operating under the mandate of communal consensus to fight crime.

Various studies also point to the effectiveness of these groups, and there are well-documented cases where vigilante success led to a dramatic decrease in crime. Of course, as the literature also demonstrates, "The history of vigilantism is filled with cases of mistaken identity, in which the wrong person was made to pay for someone else's deeds". The public image of these groups often presents a one-sided picture of vigilante groups. They are often described as mere brutal and undisciplined mobs or crowds consisting of mostly young people without any clear social or political identity and as emotional and spontaneous. Pratten (2008) argues that often vigilante activities are not solely focused on security. vigilantism serves a range of other functions in a community, such as disciplining children, sponsoring unemployed youth, recovering debts, and screening political candidates. It sometimes includes mediation and arbitration tasks. In Nigeria, groups created such as the Oodua People in the South West, Bakassi Boys in the South East, and Hisbah in the North have often been viewed as either vigilante or militia groups. This study recognizes the complexity of vigilantism, and looks beyond the one-sided picture of these movements as brutal gangs by examining it as an organized legal structure through the activities of the Vigilante Group of Nigeria (VGN).

Effectiveness of Vigilante in the Prevention of Crime

Effectiveness of vigilante group, generally, is subject to varied interpretations. It is subjective because it is influenced by the emotion and opinion of scholars. There is no agreement among scholars on which strategy is the best and the most effective. While some scholars exhibit optimistic view that the vigilante groups are

performing at their optimum. Others simply say that they are not better than those whom they are wrestling against. For example, Owumi and Ajayi (2013) expressed that the vigilante groups are working effectively and that people consult them in respect to security matters while Alemika and Chukwuma (2004) argued that these vigilante groups are effective since members are recruited from among members of the same community.

Yaqub and Olaniyi (2008) simply expressed that the vigilante groups are far more effective than the police. The argument of this scholar is that vigilante is doing more work or crime prevention than the police. More often than not, the vigilante shows up earlier than the police. They are more feared and respected. But the police are more equipped and trained than them. The police have better and refined techniques of crime prevention and detection than the vigilante. On the contrary, their effectiveness has been question by other scholars. These set of scholars' view vigilante groups as willing tools of the political class. Others accuse them of extrajudicial killings and unlawful tortures without opportunity for fair hearing (Human Rights Watch, 2002; Alemika and Chukwuma, 2004; Ololade, 2012).

Nevertheless, the formation of vigilante group is aimed towards maintaining peace and order (Yahaya and Bello, 2019). However, policing and crime works together. Vigilantism is part of policing but informal policing (Klockar, 1985 and Dambezzau, 2007). While Dambezzau (2007) explained that to police an area means a way of making sure lives and properties in in an area are safe while in the process identify certain actions as against the norms of that place. Therefore, it can be deduced here that the role of vigilante is not far from saving lives, properties as well as control other minor crimes as part of informal policing (Klockar, 1985; Eke, 2002; Dambezzau, 2007; Yahaya and Bello, 2019). Furthermore, to police an area is a great task that may require clearly mapped out strategies. These strategies vary from crime prevention measures to crime identification measures (Yahaya and Bello, 2019).

However, the effectiveness of the vigilante is directly proportional to the legitimacy they enjoy from the citizenry or members of the community which according to Eke (2002) have so far been commendable. Other scholars, no doubt,

accorded them some benefit of doubt. While some put forward that the vigilante group is effective and some simply overemphasized that they work better than the police (Alemika and Chukwuma, 2002; Yaqub and Olaniyi, 2008; Owumi and Ajayi, 2013; and Yahaya and Bello, 2019).

Research Methods

This study adopted a cross-sectional survey research design as it made use of people across different demographical features on the public perception of the effectiveness of vigilante in the prevention of crime in Benin City. The study used of a quantitative instrument of data collections and this includes the use of semi-structured questionnaire. This study population comprised residents in selected communities from the three (3) local government areas that form Benin City. This includes Oredo, Egor and Ikphoba Okha from which the selected communities would be New-Benin axis in Oredo, Uselu community in Egor and Iwogban community in Ikphoba Okha. According to the population projection at 3.5% by the National population commission in 2024, there are 1,905,000 million persons living in Benin City.

The sample size was 300 respondents which was systematically selected from the three (3) local government areas that makes up Benin City, Edo state. The respondents were persons with prior knowledge of the study and must have resided within the study location for more than two (2) years. The study used a purposive, simple random and a convenience sampling techniques in the selecting of the desired respondents for the study. The study used semi-structured questionnaire and elicit responses from the respondents. The questionnaire was made up of two sections. Section A which consisted of the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. Section B consisted of the research objective the public perception of the effectiveness of vigilante in the prevention of crime in Benin City.

The study will make use of a onetime survey method in the administration and retriever of the questionnaire. This will be done on a face-to-face basis when the researcher will go to the field once to a particular location and retrieve the questionnaire administered that same day. The study will make use of the descriptive statistics in analyzing data collected from the questionnaire. This will

be done by using simple percentage, frequency, graph and chats where necessary.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Analysis of Socio-demographic Data

This section presents the data analysis of responses from the respondents on the effectiveness of vigilante in the prevention of crime in Benin city. Although three hundred (300) questionnaires were administered, only two hundred and eighty-eight (288) questionnaires were completely filled and returned. A total of twelve (12) questionnaires were lost.

Socio-Demographic Characteristic of the Respondents

Table 1: Sex Distribution of Respondents

Sex	Response	Frequency	Percentage
	Male	130	45.1
	Female	158	54.9
	Total	**288**	**100**

Source: Fieldwork 2024

From table 1 above, the result revealed that there were more female than male, as male respondents accounted for 45.1%, while female accounted for 54.9% of the total respondents.

Table 2: Age of Respondents

Age	Response	Frequency	Percentage
	18-30	127	44.1
	31-40	89	30.9
	41-50	40	13.9
	51-60 above	32	11.1
	Total	**288**	**100**

Source: Fieldwork 2024

Table 2 shows that the age group below 18-30 years has 44.1% of the total respondents, age group 31-40 years has 30.9%, while age group 41-50 has 13.9% of the total respondents and 11.1% was for age group 51-60 above of the total

respondents. This statistic therefore shows that study have the perfect age grades to elicit responses on research topic.

Table 3: Marital Status of Respondents

Marital Status	Response	Frequency	Percentage
	Never Married	139	48.3
	Married	115	39.9
	Divorced	23	8
	Separated	11	3.8
	Total	**288**	**100**

Source: Field Work 2024

The analysis in table 3 above shows that 139 respondents with 48.3% were unmarried while 39.9% of the respondents were married. And 8% of the total respondents were divorced and 3.8% of the respondents were separated. This statistic shows that the study recorded more respondents as unmarried among the sampled population.

Table: 4. Educational Qualification

Educational Qualification	Response	Frequency	Percentage
	Primary 6	58	20.1
	SSCE	40	13.9
	B.Sc.	102	35.5
	M.Sc./Ph. D.	88	30.5
	Total	**288**	**100**

Source: Field work 2024

From the table above 4, the result shows that majority of the respondents had Bachelor degree from different discipline as they made up 35.5% of the entire respondents, followed by the respondents who had Master's degree and Ph.D. as they constituted 30.5% of the entire respondent. This is necessitated as they must have had one or more experience while studying in the university. However, 20.1% of the entire respondents were primary school leaving certificate holder and the least among the respondents were those with Senior School Certificate Examination as they constituted 13.9% of the respondents.

Table 5: Religion f Respondents

Religion	Response	Frequency	Percentage
	Christian	156	54.2
	Muslim	98	34.0
	ATR/Others	34	11.8
	Total	**288**	**100**

Source: Fieldwork 2024

Table 5 shows that 54.2% of the respondents administered the questionnaires were Christian and 34% were Muslim respectively. Meanwhile 11.8% were ATR. The statistics revealed that the majority of the respondents were predominantly Christians.

Table 6: Occupation

Occupation	Response	Frequency	Percentage
	Trader/Business	116	40.3
	Civil Servant	98	34.0
	Student	53	18.4
	Others	21	7.3
	Total	**288**	**100**

Source: Fieldwork 2024

Table 6 shows that 40.3% of the respondents administered with the questionnaires were Traders and does business and 34% were Civil servant. While 18.4% were students and 7.3% were persons from other field of endeavour.

Analysis of the Effectiveness of Vigilante in Crime Prevention and Control in Benin City

Table 6: Vigilante Role in the Society

What has been their role in this community?	Response	Frequency	Percentage
	Reduce crime	109	37.8
	Maintain law & order	81	28.1
	Protect lives & properties	98	34
	Total	**288**	**100**

Source: Fieldwork 2024

Table 6 above shows the respondents opinion on the role of the vigilante in Benin metropolis and from the result, the study revealed that 37.8% of the respondents believed that the vigilante was established to reduce crime in Benin metropolis. Similarly, 28.1% affirmed that part of the role of the vigilante was maintain law and order in the society and 34% of the respondents also opined that vigilante could also protect lives and properties.

Table 7: Performance of the Vigilante

Have they been effective in the prevention of crime?	**Response**	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
	Yes	181	62.8
	No	107	37.1
	Total	**288**	**100**

Source: Fieldwork 2024

Result from table 7 above shows the respondent's opinion on the performance of the vigilante in the metropolis where the study was conducted, and from the result it was clear that most of the respondents agreed that vigilante has the capacity to perform their assigned duties and responsibilities in the prevention of crime, as they constitute 62.8% of the entire respondents and 37.1% of the respondents disagreed that the vigilante cannot perform effectively in preventing crime in the metropolis

Table 8: Rating of Vigilante Performance

In terms of crime control, how will you rate them?	**Response**	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
	High	121	42
	Moderate	94	32.6
	Low	73	25.3
	Total	**288**	**100**

Source: Fieldwork 2024

On the rating by the respondents, the result from table 8 above shows that majority of the respondent rated the performance of the vigilante very high, as they constituted 42% of the entire respondents. 32.6% of the respondents claimed that the performance of the respondents was moderate and 25.3% of the respondents affirmed that the performance of the vigilante was very low.

Discussion of findings

From the analysis of the stated objectives regarding the relationship between the effectiveness of vigilante groups and prevention of crime in Benin Metropolis, the finding among others revealed that the main responsibility of the vigilante is to prevent the commission of criminal activities by criminals within the metropolis. More so, the vigilante from the finding is also maintain and order and protect lives and properties among other responsibilities, in collaboration with the Nigeria Police Force in order to cover the incapacity of the police. This finding affirmed the assertion of Jibrin and Musa (2019) that opined that the Nigeria Police Force are incapable in crime prevention and control and the emergence of vigilante groups is to make up for the lack of capacity of the police to combat crime and criminality.

Also, it was discovered in the study that vigilante was very effective in the discharge of their statutory function which is the prevention and control of crime in the Metropolis. The finding aligns with Nwangbo et al. (2022) which states that the effectiveness of vigilante groups rest on that fact that there are communities or areas which are unreachable, which most times restrict the response of the police to prevent crime if the situation arises, in this situation the vigilante groups become important and necessary. It was asserted that vigilante groups within the Metropolis were rated high owing to the role they play and the preference members of the public accord to them in the discharge of their responsibilities.

Conclusion

It is the basic conclusion of this study that the effectiveness and the performance of vigilante groups is not in doubt, owing the high level of confidence and trust reposed on them by the general public. The study further noted that the emergence of vigilante groups in Benin Metropolis was to complement the functions of the Nigeria Police Force, who most times are confronted with a lot of sundry challenges. It is known fact from this study that vigilante groups are capable in crime prevention and control and also maintain law and order in order to make the society a better place to stay and business to thrive.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were suggested as a result of the findings of the study:

1. There should be synergy between police and vigilante group to achieve the shared goal of ensuring security more efficiently.
2. Vigilante group should be properly supervised by government and the Nigeria Police Force. The supervision will also help regulate the actions and behaviour of members of vigilante groups.
3. Also, there should be improved remuneration to motivate personnel. These could improve their performance and help them carry out their roles in combating crime in Nigeria.
4. The study recommends that the government should ensure frequent training for vigilante groups on mode of operation, weapons handling, public relations and civility. These trainings will make the general public trust on them and also enhance their effectiveness in the prevention of crime.

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