RELEVANCE OF COMMUNITY POLICING AS A STRATEGY FOR SAFEGUARDING LIVES AND PROPERTY IN IMO STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract
This study explored the relevance of community policing as a strategy for safeguarding lives and property in Imo state, Nigeria, amidst increasing acts of violence by groups like Boko Haram, bandits, armed robbers and secessionists. It questioned the relevance of community policing in addressing the growing insecurity in the region. The study hypothesized, among others, that a significant relationship exists between the perceived relevance of community policing and its performance, the research utilized a cross-sectional survey and mixed-method approach, employing Cochran's sample size formula to derive a sample size of 600 administered the questionnaire, after which 587copies were found useful for the analysis. In addition, in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions were also used. Descriptive analysis and Spearman correlation were used for the analysis and testing of hypotheses respectively, revealing a significant relationship between perceived relevance and performance in host communities. The study recommend, among others, prioritizing professional development for community police officers, urging governments and host communities to allocate resources for this purpose. This investment aims to equip officers with the necessary skills to address the unique challenges in their communities, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of community policing and public security in Imo state, Nigeria.

Key Words: Community Policing relevance, Community-Police relationship, Community police performance. Public Security, Imo State

Introduction

The prevailing insecurity in various regions of Nigeria, particularly in the south-eastern part, has become a cause for concern to individuals, security agencies, policy makers and the general public. Factors such as the quest for self-determination in the south-east and the release of Mazi Nnamdi Kanu, leader of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), contribute to the complex security landscape. Additionally, issues like kidnapping for ransom, herders-farmers clashes, and the presence of Boko Haram further exacerbate the situation in the Northern and Western regions. Formal security agencies, including the police and military, appear overwhelmed by the challenges.

Community policing has been in existence as a crucial strategy to address these security concerns, offering greater public involvement in decision-making and a heightened focus on civil rights and liberties. Key

scholars like Ibrahim, Saleh, and Mukhtar, (2016) emphasize the relevance of community policing, which enable community members to actively participate in crime prevention and resolution. The distinctive strategies of community policing, namely community partnership, organizational transformation, and problem-solving, set it apart from traditional policing methods.

In Imo State, various forms of community policing, such as the Vigilante Group of Nigeria (VGN), Eastern Security Network, Ebubeagu, and Biafra Liberation Army (BLA), operate to safeguard communities. The VGN, in particular, actively involves community members in security decisions and efforts (Ayisire, 2017). The philosophy of community policing, modeled after the UK and USA, started in Nigeria in 2004 (Ibrahim et al., 2016). The collaboration between the police and community members, as advocated by community policing, seeks to identify and address security challenges within communities (Ayisire, 2017). Community police of interest in this study focuses on vigilante group, otherwise known as VGN which is a development over the age grade system and masquerade secret society which were the earliest form of community police in Imo State (Aniche, 2015).

Statement of the problem

Despite the existence of community policing initiatives, Imo State faces various security threats, as reported by Obasi, Kanu and Ugwu (2017). Various forms of security problem such as kidnapping, Fulani herdsmen attack, among others, seem to be on the increase in recent times. One therefore wonders if community policing is still relevant in curbing crime and maintaining public safety in local communities of Imo state. Previous studies (Osayekemwen & Adeoluwa, 2022; Oke, Braimah, & Masajuma, 2021) emphasized the importance of community-community police collaboration for effective performance of Community Police. While there is a growing body of literature on community policing in the context of law enforcement, a noticeable gap exists in the specificity of the type of community police being referred to. There is a need to distinguish between Community Police (e.g VGN) and the broader Nigerian Police system. Previous studies (Audu, 2016; Umana & Amos, 2020) often conflate these entities, overlooking the unique characteristics and functions of Community Police (VGN) within the specific context. This oversight hampers a comprehensive understanding of the performance and relevance of community policing initiatives specifically VGN as it is applicable in Imo State. To the best of our knowledge, there is paucity of empirical data to provide such information. This study therefore aims to fill the existing research gaps and provide evidence-based information that can guide security intervention policies and strengthen community policing in Imo State.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The main aim of this study was to empirically examine the relevance of community policing as a strategy for safe-guarding lives and property in Imo state, Southeastern Nigeria. Specifically, the study examined the:

i. socio-demographic characteristics of the sampled population,
ii. relevance of community policing as a strategy for safeguarding lives and property in Imo State
iii. nature of relationship that exists between the host communities and community police (VGN) in the study area.
iv. performance of community police (VGN) towards securing lives and property in Imo State.

Hypotheses: The study therefore, hypothesized as follows:

H_{01}: There is no significant relationship between the relevance of community policing and their level of performance towards securing lives and property in Imo State.

H_{02}: There is no significant relationship between the level of community-police relations and their level of performance towards securing lives and property in Imo State.

Literature Review
Community Policing and Public Security

Community policing is a form of policing that focuses on building trust and partnerships between community members and law enforcement officers. Its effectiveness can be measured by several factors, including crime reduction, community engagement, and officer accountability (Johnson, 2017). Experts argue that

community policing is essential for effective security in Nigeria (Vanguardngr.com., 2023, October 30). Previous studies, (Audu, 2016; Obasi, Kanu & Ugwu, 2017; Osayekemwen, & Adeoluwa, 2022; Usman, & Adamu, 2023) examined the effectiveness of community policing in Nigeria, and emphasize its impact on crime reduction. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) underscores the significance of police-community partnerships, and conducted workshops in 2023 to strengthen these connections in various Nigerian regions (Ileana, 2022). In contrast, a recent study (Modjatji, Khethiwe & Kholofelo, 2023) questions the effectiveness of community policing forums in crime prevention, citing resource limitations as a hindrance to their success. In Imo State, the study by Obasi et al (2017) found that the effectiveness of community policing in securing lives and property in Imo State is low, given the increasing level of public insecurity. However, there is paucity of empirical findings to support this claim. It would be germane to further investigate public perceptions concerning community police performance towards achieving public safety in Imo State.

The Concept and Importance of Public security
Public security is an important aspect of community wellbeing, encompassing safety and measures to protect lives and property of individuals. The concept revolves around ensuring a secure environment for community well-being. A range of studies (Jansen, & Bruinsma, 1997; Vale, 2005; Neimeth, 2010; Kielek, 2022) underscore the need for comprehensive security approaches in public areas, considering both physical safety and the safeguarding of information and data. Kiełek (2022) emphasizes the importance of security in urban spaces, with a focus on the use of aids such as cameras and lighting to enhance safety. Nemeth (2010) provides empirical evidence of the prevalence and intensity of security zones in public spaces, while Vale (2005) highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of the goals and challenges associated with securing public environments. Nonetheless, these studies are mostly urban focused, thus raising a concern for rural community-based studies.

Importance of Police-Community Partnership in crime prevention
The level of community-police relationship significantly impacts community police performance, with active community involvement contributing to effective performance measures (Osayekemwen & Adeoluwa, 2022). Trust and positive relationships between police and civilians are crucial for successful community-oriented policing (Perez, Nguyen, & Vogel, 2020). Studies (e.g Oke, Braimah, & Masajuma, 2021) provide practical recommendations for strengthening ties between community police and residents. Lack of transparency about police behavior undermines trust in law enforcement as observed by Singh (2022). Community-police dialogues can improve community perceptions, especially among youth (Perez, Nguyen, & Vogel, 2020). Trust in police hinges on whether their actions align with community values and principles of procedural justice (U.S. Department of Justice Community Relations Services). Ugwu, Kanu, and Ukpabi, (2023) suggests that collaboration between government and communities can enhance community policing effectiveness. However, the study (Ugwu, Kanu, & Ukpabi, 2023) reveals that there's insufficient data on community-police relationships in Imo State, Nigeria, highlighting the need for further empirical research. This underscores the need for more empirical studies to address the knowledge gap.

Relevance of community policing
The performance of community policing can significantly influence its relevance in host communities. A study by Awotayo, Oluwafemi, and Oderinde, (2023) examines the public perception of the Nigerian police regarding effective community policing in Southwestern Nigeria, highlighting its implications for the effectiveness and efficiency of community policing. A study by Nwogu and Anyanwu (2019) investigated the relevance of community policing in a Nigerian state, providing a basis for understanding the factors that contribute to its success or failure. Their research explores the perceptions of both the community and law enforcement agencies regarding the effectiveness of community policing. Oke et al 2021 argues that community policing is highly relevant as a strategy for safeguarding lives and property in Nigeria. The study reveals poor public perception of the Nigeria Police, emphasizing the need for a shift towards community policing to enhance crime prevention and control. Community policing, which focuses on building ties and

working closely with community members, has been recognized as an effective strategy for improving police-public relations and reducing crime (Dinne, Benjamin, & Okunola, 2022). On the other hand some other studies have raised concerns about the effectiveness of community policing in Nigeria. Audu (2016) found a lack of trust between the police and the public, which hinders the success of community policing. This sentiment is echoed by Ike, Singh, Jidong, Ike, & Ayobi, (2021) who noted public skepticism and perceived ineffectiveness of community policing interventions. This calls for more evidence-based data that can guide effective policies that would strengthen efforts towards achieving public security, particularly in Imo State where there is increasing level of security challenges.

Theoretical Framework

This research adopts the Social Capital Theory, particularly the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Robert Putnam as the theoretical framework for the study. Social Capital Theory posits that the networks and relationships within a community contribute to its collective well-being, a perspective that shed light on the dynamics of community policing and its impact on public security. Bourdieu (1986) as cited by Claridge (2020)defines social capital as the "aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships." In the context of Imo State, social capital becomes a crucial resource for collective action, with a focus on community policing initiatives. The strength of social capital ties within communities is examined for its potential impact on the effectiveness of community policing.

Putnam (1993) as cited by Claridge (2020) emphasizes the role of trust and cooperation in building social capital. These research findings support the claim that trust and cordial relationships existing between communities and community police influence residents' willingness to engage with the security agents in collaborative efforts towards safeguarding lives and property in the region, and by extension making the agency relevant.

Methodology

The research was a 12-month cross-sectional survey conducted in 27 communities across Imo State's Orlu, Owerri, and Okigwe zones. Employing random sampling, one community was chosen from each of the 27 Local Government Areas. Cochran's formula determined the sample size, resulting in 600 questionnaires distributed, with 587 deemed suitable for analysis. Accidental sampling was used for participant selection with consent. In-depth interviews involved 6 community members, 2 leaders, and 2 Vigilante Group members per community, totaling 270 participants. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) included 8 participants per group, totaling 216 individuals, selected based on demographic characteristics. Each interview lasted 45-60 minutes, while FGD sessions lasted 1.5 hours. Quantitative data analysis utilized Bar charts, and Spearman rank order correlation tested the hypotheses, while thematic analysis was applied to qualitative data. Data collection instruments included questions on community policing's relevance in crime control, nature of relationships between the community police (VGN) and host communities, performance of community police (VGN), and efforts to control crimes like robbery, burglary, murder, rape, and violent attack in Imo State's communities.

Results and Discussions

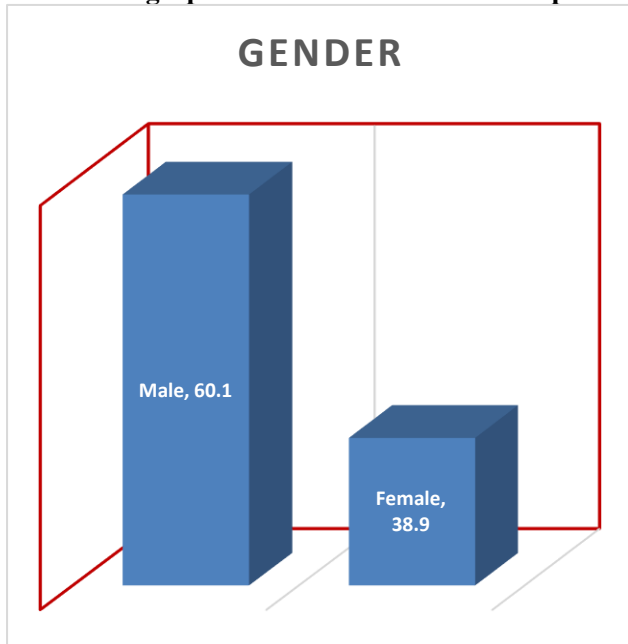**Socio-demographic Characteristics of the Respondents**

Figure 1: The Chart Representing Gender of the Respondents

The gender distribution of respondents in this study indicates that 60% of participants were male, while 40% were female. The overrepresentation of males (60%) in the study may be due to the barriers faced by women due to a number of factors. Research consistently shows that rural women face significant barriers in accessing and providing information in their communities (Kiondo, 1998; Lamontagne-Godwin, et al, 2018; Patrick & Ferdinand, 2016), which have implications for understanding community policing perceptions and experiences. It suggests that the views and perspectives gathered may be more reflective of the male population, potentially skewing the overall findings.
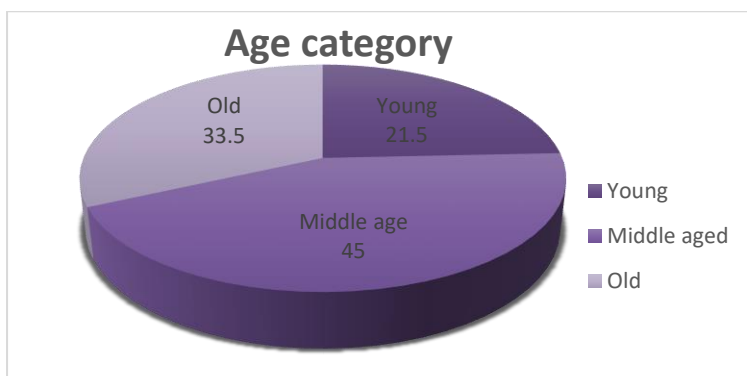

Figure 2 The Chart Representing age Category of the Respondents

In terms of age distribution, the majority of respondents (45%) fall within the middle-aged category. Elderly persons constitute 33.5% of the sample, and the youth group comprises the smallest proportion at 21.5%. Research suggests that middle-aged individuals may be more actively engaged in rural community affairs than the elderly and the young due to a variety of factors. For instance, Ubels, Bock, and Haartsen, (2020) suggests that the middle-aged individuals are more actively engaged in rural community affairs because the

elderly often prioritize other activities and may feel incapable of engaging, while the young may lack the life experience and resources to do so.
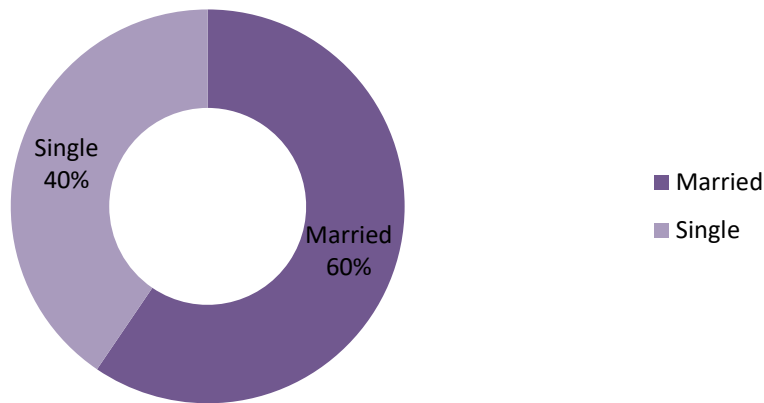

Figure 3: The Chart Representing Marital Status of the Respondents

Figure 3 presents the marital status distribution among respondents, revealing that 60% of participants were married, while 40% were single. The prevalence of married individuals (60%) in the study may indicate that the experiences and concerns expressed are more aligned with the family unit. Married individuals may have different priorities, safety concerns, and expectations from community policing compared to their single counterparts. Available literature (Lauer, Lauer, & Kerr, 1990;Katja, et al 2017) suggest that the stability and commitment associated with marriage may lead to a greater investment in community activities.
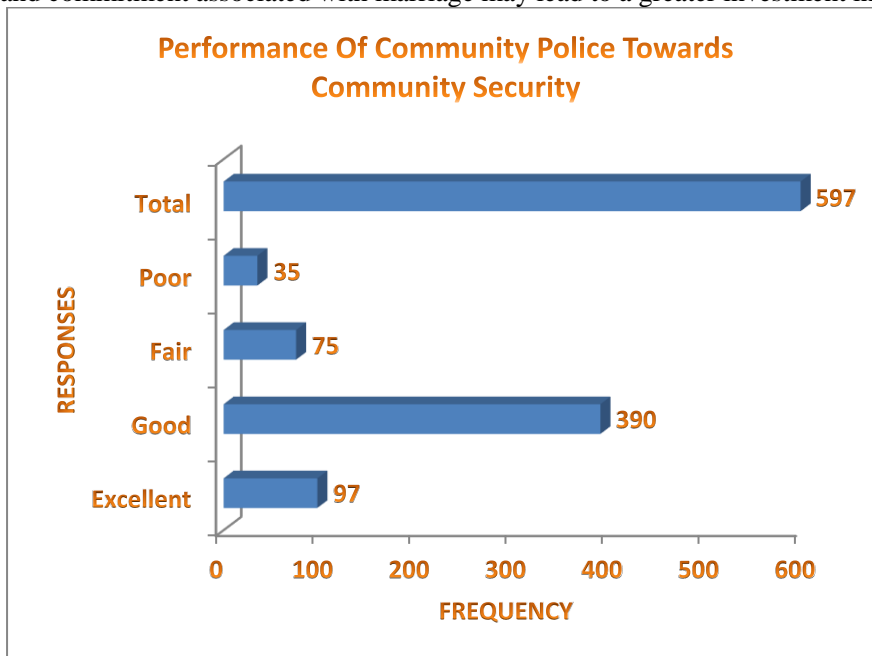

Figure 4: The Chart Representing Performance of Community Police (VGN) in Imo State

A large portion of respondents view community policing positively, with approximately 81.6% expressing satisfaction with its efforts in securing lives and property. This indicates a generally favorable sentiment

among those surveyed. However, concerns voiced by the 12.6% who rated performance as "Fair" and the 5.9% as "Poor" should be addressed for improvement. This contrasts with Ike et al.'s (2021) findings of public skepticism towards community policing. Interviews provide further insight, revealing divergent views but overall acknowledgment of impressive efforts hindered by inadequate resources and government interference. Community members noted challenges such as insufficient gadgets and political meddling.

"Our vigilante is actively working to keep the community safe, they are trying their best but the problem is that they lack the necessary security tools, and sometimes politicians create confusion to achieve their selfish interests.

"I feel safer knowing that our community police are actively engaged and work closely with us. It makes a real difference."

"The community police are doing what they can, but I think they need more resources. We need additional patrols and better equipment to tackle the growing challenges."

However, while there were many positive feedbacks about the performance of VGN, few community members raised concerns about being inconsistent and some bag eggs found in the group. The responses were captured thud:

"It's a mixed feeling. Some officers are great, but some others need more training on crime control."

"I appreciate their efforts, but there are inconsistencies. We need more consistency in how they handle different situations."
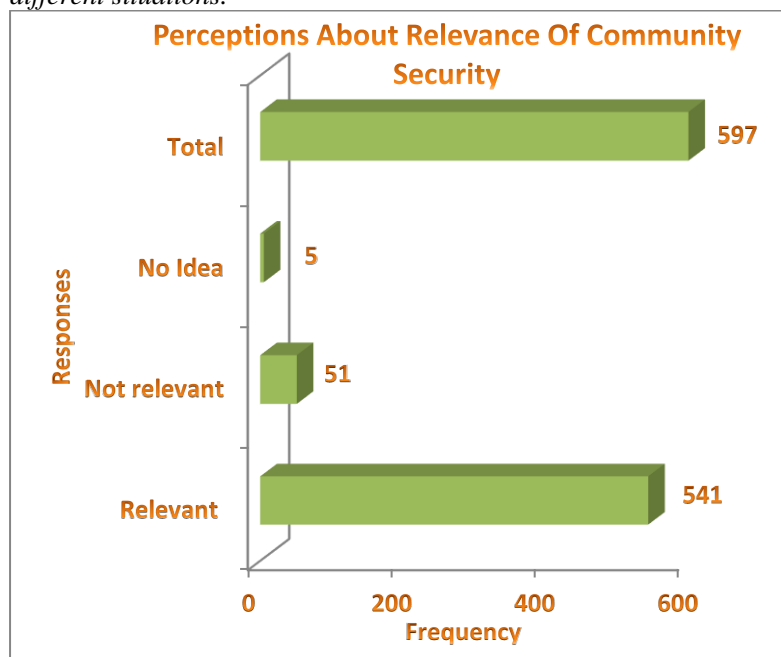

Fig. 5: The Chart Representing Perceived Relevance of Community Policing

The majority of respondents 541 (90.6%) perceive community policing as relevant for ensuring community security in Imo State. This suggests a widespread positive view regarding the importance of community policing in addressing security concerns. A smaller proportion of respondents 51(8.5%) consider community policing as not relevant. While this is a minority viewpoint, it still indicates that there are individuals within the surveyed population who question or do not see the relevance of community policing in enhancing community security. A very small percentage 5 (0.8%) of respondents indicated having "No Idea" about the relevance of community policing. This may reflect a lack of awareness or indecision among a negligible portion of the study participants.

The data suggests a predominantly positive perception of community policing's relevance in securing lives and property in Imo State. While there is a minority viewpoint questioning its relevance, the strong majority in favor indicates a broad acceptance of community policing as a valuable strategy for enhancing community

security. Policy makers and law enforcement agencies can use this information to reinforce the strengths of community policing and address concerns raised by those who perceive it as not relevant.
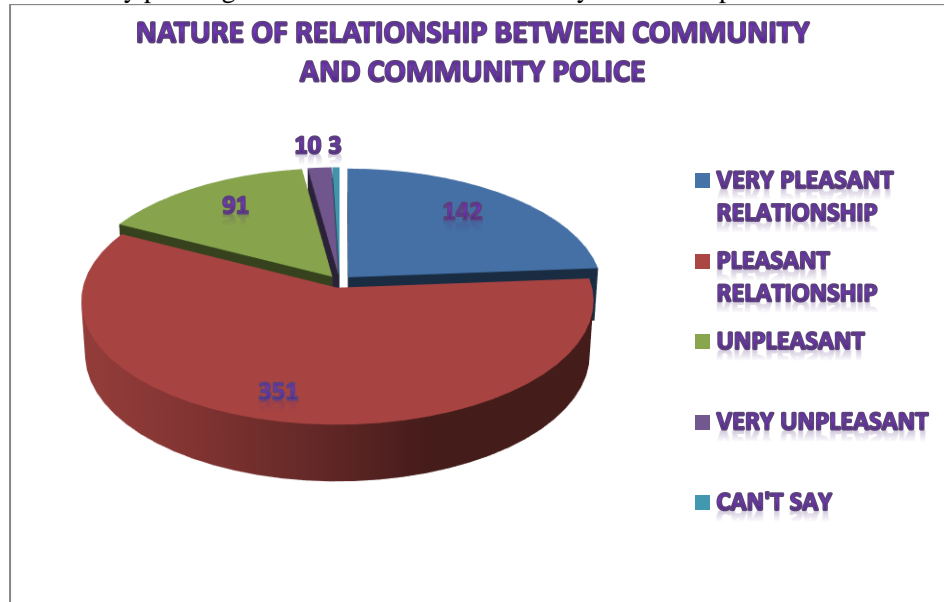

Fig. 6: The Chart Representing the Nature of Police-Community Relationship in Imo State

The responses below provide important insights into the public-police relations in the area

A significant portion of respondents, 493 (82.6%) perceive the relationship between the community and community police as either "Very Pleasant" or "Pleasant." This indicates a majority of positive perceptions, suggesting that the community generally views their interactions with the community police in a favorable light.

On the other hand a smaller but still notable proportion 91(15.2%) perceives the relationship as "Unpleasant." This suggests that there are segments of the community where interactions with the community police are not viewed positively. Furthermore, a minority of respondents 10 (1.7%) reported a "Very Unpleasant" relationship, indicating a more severe level of dissatisfaction. Additionally, a small percentage 3 (0.5%) expressed uncertainty or neutrality, stating "Can't Say." These responses highlight the existence of pockets within the community with particularly negative perceptions and a small degree of uncertainty.

The expressions below reflect the diverse perspectives within the rural communities studied, showcasing a range of opinions on community-police relations in the area. Various expressions are presented below.

"Our community police are like family; they genuinely care about our well-being because they are also members of our community."

"They're always present at community events, showing that they're part of us, not just enforcers. That way we feel safer"

"There's a sense of trust; we know we can rely on them when needed."

"They're approachable; you can talk to them without feeling intimidated."

"We appreciate the open lines of communication, making them accessible to everyone."

"They understand our community's unique needs and cultural nuances."

Below are some responses from members of VGN

"It's a partnership thing- we work together to address security issues and keep our neighborhood safe."

"The community usually involves us in decision-making, making it feel like a joint effort."

"They listen to our concerns and take action together with us."

While the majority of respondents perceive a positive community-police relationship, there is a notable proportion expressing an unfavorable view. Such responses from community members and leaders were captured as presented below:

"I'd like to see more transparency in their actions. Knowing what they're working on and the results of their efforts would build trust in the community."
"They can do whatever they want without consequences. No one holds them accountable for their actions."
"It's crucial for the community police to keep us informed about their activities. Transparency can bridge gaps and foster better understanding."
Negative responses from members of vigilante group concerning community-police relationships are presented below:
"They don't relate well with us unless there's a problem. There's no effort to build positive relationships, it reduces our morale."
"Community policing is supposed to be about collaboration, but it feels more like an us-versus-them mentality.it doesn't help matters."
Addressing these concerns leading to the negative perceptions is crucial for fostering trust and cooperation between the community and the community police.

Testing Hypotheses
Table 1: Result of Spearman correlations between level of relevance of community policing and its Level of Performance in Imo State

Correlations			Level of Relevance of Community Policing	Level of Performance of Community Police
Spearman's rho	Level of Relevance of Community Policing	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.491**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	584	584
	Level of Performance of Community Police	Correlation Coefficient	.491**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	584	584
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).				

Table 1 tests the Hypothesis on the significant relationship between the level of relevance of community policing and its Level of Performance in Imo State. The result was accepted at [r (1) = 0.491, P < 0.01 df]. This means that the level of relevance of community policing is significantly related to its Level of Performance. In other words, the more the community policing is regarded as very important among the community people, the higher its level of performance at maintaining public security in Imo State.

Table 2: Community-Police Relations and Level of Performance.

Correlations			Community-Police Relations	Level of Performance of Community Police
Spearman's rho	Community-Police Relations	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.427**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	589	589
	Level of Performance of Community Police	Correlation Coefficient	.427**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	589	589

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 2 tests the Hypothesis on the significant relationship between the Community Police relations and its level of performance among members of the community. The result was accepted at [r (1) = 0.427, P < 0.01 df]. This means that the Community Police relations and its level of performance among members of the community is ncouraging.

Table 3: Community Police Performance and its level of acceptance among the community members

Correlations			Community Police Performance	level of acceptance among the community members
Spearman's rho	Community Police Performance	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.289**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	598	598
	level of acceptance among the community members	Correlation Coefficient	.289**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	598	598

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3 tests the Hypothesis on the significant relationship between the Community Police Performance and level of acceptance among the community members. The result was accepted at [r (1) = 0.289, P < 0.01 df].

This means that the Police performance on community security is significantly related to the level of acceptance of members of community.

Conclusion

The results indicate that community policing is more effective when it is perceived as highly relevant by community members. In other words, when community police perform its duties with greater enthusiasm, it is viewed as a valuable security intervention. Additionally, positive community-police relations contribute to enhanced performance. Therefore, establishing strong community police-public relations is crucial.

Recommendations

The study recommends as follows:

i)   A strong synergy should be encouraged between members of the community and the community police at every point in time. There is a need to create a committee dedicated to promoting and maintaining positive relationships between the community and the security outfits. This committee should include representatives from both the community and the security agents working together to enhance mutual understanding and cooperation.

ii)   There is a need to actively involve community members in the decision-making process of the community police force. This could include soliciting input on policies, initiatives, and strategies.

iii) For effective performance, the host communities should publicly acknowledge and recognize the efforts of community security officers who perform well. This could involve regular community awards, public commendations, or other forms of positive reinforcement in order to boost morale and performance.

iv)   The government should provide occasional training for community police officers specifically focused on community engagement, relationship-building, and effective communication. There is a need to equip officers with the skills necessary to navigate their responsibilities..

The limitations of the study

There was a restriction of free movement during data collections due to security challenges, however, maximum efforts were made by the researcher to collect data and conduct interviews. Organizing community members for a town hall meeting and distributing questionnaires also posed challenges, leading to increased time and resource allocation for both quantitative and qualitative processes. but through repeated visits the researchers eventually achieved the research objectives.

Some interviewees were reluctant to provide information, suspecting political motives, but moral suasion helped overcome this challenge.

The data collection instrument used captured only perceptions, lacking objective assessment. Future studies could benefit from employing standardized instruments to explore community policing dynamics more objectively.

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