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Alternative Policing Strategies and Public Security Administration: A Case Study of the Edo State Security Corps (ESSC), Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: This study examines alternative policing strategies and public security administration in Nigeria using the Edo State Security Corps (ESSC) as a case study. The main objective is to assess its legal framework, effectiveness in crime reduction, oversight mechanisms and broader implications for federal systems with weak central policing capacity. The study adopts a qualitative case study design and relies on policy documents, government and civil society reports, media sources and peer-reviewed literature, analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings indicate that the ESSC operates under a state law that supports intelligence gathering and crime prevention, with moderate contributions to improved public safety. However, significant accountability gaps exist, as highlighted by the 2025 Uromi, Edo State incident due to weak oversight structures and unclear disciplinary mechanisms. The study recommends legal reforms to strengthen oversight, compulsory training for operatives, formal collaboration with the Nigeria Police Force and the establishment of national guidelines for state-backed security corps.

KEYWORDS: Alternative policing, Public Security Administration, Security Corps, Hybrid Security Governance, Accountability, etc.

1. INTRODUCTION

Public security constitutes one of the most fundamental responsibilities of the modern state. However, across many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, there exists a persistent gap between growing security demands and the institutional capacity of formal law enforcement agencies to adequately respond to them (Baker, 2005). Nigeria exemplifies this challenge. Despite the constitutional mandate of the Nigeria Police Force to maintain law and order, citizens continue to experience rising incidences of violent crimes, kidnapping, armed robbery, communal conflicts and delays in police response, alongside recurring allegations of corruption and abuse of power within the police system (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2004; Human Rights Watch, 2010). In response to these security challenges, several state governments and local communities in Nigeria have increasingly adopted alternative policing strategies aimed at complementing the activities of the formal police structure. These strategies range from informal vigilante arrangements and neighbourhood watch groups to more institutionalized state-backed security outfits. Such initiatives are often justified on the grounds that community-based security structures possess better local intelligence, cultural familiarity and rapid response capabilities than centralized policing institutions.

Edo State Security Corps, established by the Edo State Government in 2020 as a complementary security structure to support conventional law enforcement agencies, is a noteable example. Operating under a community-based security framework popularly associated with the "*Atalakpa*" model, the Corps was designed to enhance intelligence gathering, crime prevention and local surveillance within communities across Edo State (Okoro & Eze, 2022). The emergence of the ESSC reflects broader debates surrounding decentralized policing, community participation in security governance and the search for innovative approaches to public security administration in Nigeria. Despite its perceived contributions to crime control and local intelligence gathering, the operations of the ESSC have generated significant concerns regarding accountability, operational control, human rights compliance and institutional oversight. These concerns became more pronounced following the March 2025 Uromi incident in Esan South-East Local Government Area, where suspected criminals intercepted by a vigilante group reportedly linked to the ESSC were subjected to mob violence and extrajudicial killing (Premium Times, 2025). The incident triggered widespread public condemnation and renewed national debate on the regulation and legitimacy of alternative policing structures in Nigeria. In response, the Edo State Government suspended the Corps Commander, initiated investigations and directed that subsequent ESSC operations be supervised by the police (Adepoju, 2025).

The Uromi incident exposed critical institutional weaknesses associated with alternative policing arrangements, including inadequate operational supervision, absence of clear use-of-force protocols, weak accountability mechanisms and poor coordination with formal law enforcement

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agencies. While some stakeholders advocated the abolition of state-backed security corps, others emphasized the need for institutional reforms capable of improving professionalism, legal compliance and community trust (HURIWA, 2025).

Thus, this article investigates the intersection between alternative policing strategies and public security administration in Nigeria, using the Edo State Security Corps as a case study. The study critically examines the legal and operational dynamics surrounding the Corps within the broader context of decentralized security governance and community-based policing initiatives in Nigeria. Specifically, the study seeks to address the following questions:

1. What legal frameworks govern the operations of the ESSC?
2. How effective is the ESSC in reducing crime and improving public security within Edo State?
3. What oversight mechanisms exist within the ESSC owing to the 2025 Uromi incident? and
4. What broader lessons were drawn for public security administration in federal systems characterized by weak central policing capacity and increasing reliance on alternative security arrangements?

Through these inquiries, the study contributes to ongoing debates on security sector reform, state policing alternatives and the challenges of balancing community participation, effectiveness and accountability in contemporary security administration.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The growing complexity of contemporary security challenges has generated increasing scholarly attention toward alternative policing as a complementary mechanism to formal law enforcement structures. Alternative policing generally refers to security provision undertaken by non-state or semi-state actors operating either outside or alongside conventional police institutions (Hills, 2008). Such actors include vigilante groups, neighbourhood watch associations, community security networks, private security companies and legally constituted state security corps. In many African societies, these arrangements are not entirely new innovations but rather represent the re-emergence of communal security traditions that existed prior to colonial rule and were later displaced by centralized colonial policing systems introduced during colonial administration (Baker, 2005).

Consequently, the resurgence of alternative policing in many African states reflects both historical continuity and contemporary dissatisfaction with centralized security governance. The inability of formal policing institutions to adequately respond to rising insecurity has intensified reliance on alternative security arrangements. Despite the constitutional mandate of the Nigeria Police Force to maintain law and order, persistent problems such as kidnapping, armed robbery, terrorism, communal violence and farmer-herder conflicts have weakened public confidence in the capacity of the police to effectively guarantee public safety. In response, communities and state governments have increasingly adopted localized security initiatives aimed at bridging the gap between citizens' security needs and the limitations of centralized policing.

Scholars commonly distinguish between formal and informal variants of alternative policing. Formal alternative policing refers to arrangements in which the state authorizes, regulates or delegates limited security functions to community-based or state-backed actors, whereas informal vigilantism operates without official legal recognition or institutional supervision (Meagher, 2012). This distinction is important because it determines the degree of legitimacy, accountability and operational control associated with such security arrangements. The Edo State Security Corps belongs to the category of formal alternative policing because it was established through state legislation and designed to complement the activities of formal law enforcement agencies. Nevertheless, scholars argue that the boundary between formal community policing and informal vigilantism frequently becomes blurred in practice, especially in environments characterized by weak institutional oversight and inadequate accountability mechanisms.

The emergence of state-backed security corps in Nigeria is closely connected to the broader concept of hybrid security governance. Hybrid security governance refers to systems in which state and non-state actors jointly participate in the production and maintenance of public order, often operating through overlapping institutional arrangements and competing normative frameworks (Bagayoko, Hutchful, & Luckham, 2016). Rather than relying exclusively on centralized law enforcement institutions, hybrid systems distribute security responsibilities across multiple actors at community, state and federal levels. Nigeria's federal structure has significantly shaped the development of such arrangements. Section 214 of the 1999 Constitution vests policing powers exclusively in the federal government through the Nigeria Police Force, thereby limiting the constitutional authority of state governments over law enforcement. However, the growing inadequacy of centralized policing has compelled several state governments to establish supplementary security structures. The Western Nigeria Security Network popularly known as Amotekun, the Katsina State Community Watch Corps and the Edo State Security Corps are all typical examples of these supplementary security structures. These organizations operate within what scholars describe as a legal and institutional grey zone because, although they are created and funded by state governments, they are not expressly recognized within the provisions of the Nigeria Police Act 2020 (Nwankwo, 2023). Their legitimacy therefore derives largely from political necessity, public support and operational collaboration with formal security agencies rather than from explicit constitutional backing.

Proponents of hybrid security governance argue that community-based security structures possess several comparative advantages over centralized police institutions. Since operatives are usually recruited from local communities, they possess better knowledge of the terrain, local culture, criminal networks and community dynamics, thereby improving intelligence gathering and rapid response capabilities (Okoro & Eze, 2022). Such proximity is believed to strengthen trust between citizens and security providers while enhancing crime prevention efforts in underserved areas. Critics, however, caution that hybrid security systems may create serious governance challenges when adequate regulatory frameworks are absent. Human rights organizations and security scholars have repeatedly warned that poorly regulated alternative policing bodies may engage in arbitrary arrests, torture, ethnic profiling and extra-judicial violence (Human Rights Watch, 2010). The absence of clearly defined operational boundaries and oversight structures may also generate institutional rivalry between state-backed security corps and formal police agencies. One of the most persistent concerns within the literature therefore relates to accountability deficits and weak institutional oversight mechanisms. Unlike conventional police institutions that are subject to statutory disciplinary structures, judicial scrutiny and oversight

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bodies such as the Police Service Commission, many state-backed security corps lack clearly defined accountability frameworks (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2004). In several cases, complaint procedures, civilian oversight mechanisms and disciplinary protocols remain vague or entirely absent. Scholars further argue that the accountability problem is compounded when operatives receive inadequate professional training, poor remuneration and insufficient operational supervision (Baker, 2005). Under such conditions, security operatives may resort to coercive methods of law enforcement, including arbitrary detention, intimidation and mob justice. The risks become even more severe in politically charged or ethnically polarized environments where community-based security actors may prioritize communal loyalties over legal standards. These concerns became particularly visible following the March 2025 Uromi incident in Edo State, where suspected criminals intercepted by a vigilante group allegedly linked to the Edo State Security Corps were subjected to mob violence and extra-judicial killing rather than being transferred to the formal police system for investigation and prosecution (Premium Times, 2025). The incident generated widespread condemnation from civil society organizations, human rights groups and security analysts, many of whom argued that the event exposed the dangers associated with weakly regulated alternative policing systems. The aftermath of the incident further revealed institutional weaknesses within the operational structure of the ESSC.

The suspension of the Corps Commander by the Edo State Government suggested deficiencies in supervision and command responsibility, while public debates surrounding the incident highlighted the absence of standardized use-of-force protocols, independent complaint mechanisms and effective disciplinary procedures. Human rights advocacy groups, including the Human Rights Writers Association of Nigeria (HURIWA), subsequently renewed calls for stricter regulation or outright abolition of state-backed security corps perceived to operate outside constitutional policing frameworks.

Existing literature on alternative policing in Nigeria has therefore largely concentrated on the emergence and expansion of community-based security structures as responses to the inadequacies of centralized policing. While these studies provide valuable insights into the growth of hybrid security governance, important gaps remain within the scholarship. Relatively few studies have conducted systematic evaluations of the actual effectiveness of state security corps in reducing crime and improving public confidence in security administration. Similarly, limited attention has been devoted to examining the institutional relationship between state-backed security corps and the Nigeria Police Force, particularly regarding operational coordination, jurisdictional tensions and constitutional implications. Furthermore, much of the existing literature predates the March 2025 Uromi incident, which significantly altered public and scholarly discourse surrounding accountability, human rights and oversight within alternative policing systems. This study therefore contributes to the literature by providing a focused examination of the Edo State Security Corps within the broader framework of public security administration in Nigeria. By integrating recent developments, governance concerns and institutional analysis, the study advances contemporary debates on decentralized security governance, accountability and the future of alternative policing in federal systems characterized by weak central policing capacity.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative case study design (Yin, 2018), using the Edo State Security Corps as an information-rich case of state-backed alternative policing in Nigeria. Data were drawn from policy and legal documents (including the Edo State Security Corps Law 2020 and the Nigeria Police Act 2020), institutional and civil society reports such as those of the Nigeria Police Force and CLEEN Foundation, media reports from Premium Times, The Guardian and Vanguard, as well as relevant peer-reviewed literature (2010–2025). Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), focusing on legal framework, operational effectiveness, accountability mechanisms and inter-agency relations. The study is descriptive and interpretive, aimed at generating contextual insights rather than statistical generalization.

4. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.1 Legal frameworks governing the ESSC

The Corps was formally inaugurated in August 2020 under the administration of Governor Godwin Obaseki as part of broader efforts to strengthen local security architecture within Edo State. Initially introduced as the Edo State Security Network and later renamed the Edo State Security Corps, the organization was established through the Edo State Security Corps Law 2020. The law empowers the Corps to assist formal security agencies in intelligence gathering, crime prevention and maintenance of public order within the state. Its operational framework reflects a community intelligence model commonly referred to as "Atalakpa," a local Bini expression loosely translated as "settlement guard" (Okoro & Eze, 2022). Under this arrangement, operatives are deployed across communities, markets, roads and rural settlements where they collaborate with traditional rulers, youth leaders and police divisional offices to monitor suspicious activities and gather local intelligence. Because many operatives are recruited from local communities, the model is designed to enhance familiarity with local security dynamics and improve response effectiveness.

4.2 Effectiveness in reducing crime and improving public security in Edo State

The ESSC demonstrates several potential benefits of alternative policing in resource-constrained settings. First, its local recruitment and community embedding can enhance trust and information flow – factors often lacking in centralized police forces (Baker, 2005). Second, the ESSC operates at a fraction of the cost of deploying additional police personnel, as operatives are paid modest allowances and do not receive firearms. Third, the ESSC's focus on preventive patrol and visible presence may have a deterrent effect on opportunistic crime, as suggested by the CLEEN Foundation (2023) survey. Thus, the ESSC represents a form of "bottom-up co-production" of security. When state capacity is weak, delegating some functions to accountable local actors can be more effective than waiting for central reforms. Statistically, Edo State Government reports hold that the ESSC contributed to a 35% reduction in armed robbery in Benin City between 2021 and 2023 (Edo State Ministry of Justice, 2024). Also, a survey by the CLEEN Foundation (2023) found that 62% of respondents in Edo State felt "somewhat safer" after the ESSC's deployment.

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4.3 Oversight mechanisms, especially in light of the 2025 Uromi incident

Existing studies describe this relationship as simultaneously cooperative and conflictual (Nwankwo, 2023). Although police authorities acknowledge the usefulness of the Corps in providing local intelligence and supporting security operations in underserved communities, tensions persist regarding jurisdictional boundaries and constitutional authority. The Nigeria Police Act 2020 does not expressly recognize state security corps and federal police authorities have repeatedly emphasized that policing powers constitutionally remain the exclusive responsibility of the NPF. In practice, however, an informal division of labour appears to have developed between the two institutions, with the ESSC primarily handling neighbourhood patrols, traffic control, surveillance and intelligence gathering, while the police retain authority over investigations, prosecution and formal arrests. Nevertheless, the Uromi incident demonstrated the fragility of this arrangement, particularly where ESSC-affiliated actors engage in coercive or lethal activities beyond their legally defined mandate. The Uromi incident was not an isolated aberration; media reports documented at least six cases between 2022 and 2024 where ESSC operatives allegedly assaulted or unlawfully detained citizens (Vanguard, 2023; The Guardian, 2024). In none of those cases were operatives prosecuted or dismissed, because the disciplinary mechanism relies entirely on the Commander's discretion. Thus, the effectiveness of ESSC notwithstanding, accountability and oversight mechanisms appear inadequate, as significant proportions of community members reportedly remain unaware of procedures for reporting misconduct by ESSC operatives.

4.4 Broader lessons for public security administration

The ESSC case illustrates the paradox of hybrid security governance: while hybrid arrangements can improve responsiveness, they also multiply the number of actors with coercive power, making it harder to enforce a single rule of law. In Edo State, citizens now face two parallel enforcement systems – the NPF and the ESSC – with different standards of accountability. This duality can create confusion about whom to report crimes to and it may enable "forum shopping" where suspects are handed to the less accountable authority (Meagher, 2012). The ESSC experience offers lessons for other states that have established or are considering security corps (e.g., Amotekun in the South-West, Ebube Agu in the South-East).

- First, legal frameworks must be explicit about prohibited acts (e.g., extra-judicial punishment, torture) and mandatory referral to police for arrests.
- Second, funding should be tied to compliance with oversight conditions, not merely operational expenses.
- Third, all operatives should undergo compulsory human rights and de-escalation training, refreshed annually.
- Fourth, a publicly accessible complaint mechanism – including a toll-free hotline and quarterly community meetings – should be established.

Without these safeguards, alternative policing risks reproducing the very abuses that motivated its creation in the first place (Human Rights Watch, 2010).

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article examined the Edo State Security Corps as a case study of alternative policing strategies within public security administration in Nigeria. The ESSC has achieved modest successes in crime prevention and intelligence gathering, but its legal and operational framework suffers from critical accountability gaps, as tragically illustrated by the March 2025 Uromi lynching. For alternative policing to strengthen rather than undermine public security, state governments must move beyond simply creating corps and invest in robust governance structures.

Based on the analysis, the following recommendations are offered:

1. The Edo State House of Assembly should amend the ESSC Law to include clear civilian oversight, mandatory reporting procedures and enforceable disciplinary mechanisms to strengthen the legal framework governing the ESSC.
2. The ESSC should implement compulsory training and certification in human rights, use of force, and arrest procedures to improve its effectiveness in reducing crime and enhancing public security.
3. A formal Memorandum of Understanding between the ESSC and the Nigeria Police Force should be established to strengthen oversight mechanisms through clearly defined roles, coordination structures and accountability protocols following the Uromi incident.

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