



Vigilante Group Response to Distress Calls and Timely Intervention as Pillars of Community Crime Control in Cross River North Senatorial District, Nigeria: An Empirical Assessment

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Abstract

Rapid emergency response constitutes one of the most critical yet empirically understudied determinants of crime control effectiveness in communities where formal law enforcement capacity is chronically inadequate. This study investigates whether the response of vigilante groups to distress calls significantly impacts timely intervention and crime control in Cross River North Senatorial District, Nigeria. Grounded in Routine Activity Theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979) and Social Control Theory (Hirschi, 1969), the study employed a cross-sectional mixed-methods design with survey data from 384 respondents across three Local Government Areas, analyzed using Simple Linear Regression at a 0.05 significance level. Findings revealed a weak positive relationship between vigilante distress call response and crime control ($R = 0.251$, $R^2 = 0.063$, $F = 0.779$, $p = 0.457$), which did not attain statistical significance. The null hypothesis was retained: the response of vigilante groups to distress calls does not significantly impact timely intervention and crime control. However, 65% of respondents reported positive perceptions of vigilante emergency responsiveness, and qualitative data revealed that the absence of technological infrastructure, the inconsistency of communication channels, and the lack of formalized coordination protocols substantially constrain the potential effectiveness of distress call response mechanisms. The study concludes that vigilante distress call response, while valued by communities, requires fundamental infrastructural, technological, and organizational development to translate community confidence into statistically demonstrable crime control outcomes. Policy recommendations address technology integration, inter-agency communication frameworks, and community education on emergency reporting.

1. Background to the Study

Emergency response capability the capacity to mobilize security resources rapidly to the site of a criminal incident in progress constitutes one of the most operationally decisive factors in determining crime control outcomes (Chukwuma, 2019; Okafor, 2020). The criminological rationale for rapid response is straightforward: criminal incidents that are interrupted before completion not only prevent the immediate harm to victims but also increase the probability of offender apprehension, enhance the deterrent visibility of security response, and signal to both potential offenders and community members that criminogenic impunity is not assured (Cohen & Felson, 1979; Smith, 2019). Conversely, slow or absent response to distress calls communicates the inverse message that criminality is possible without consequence and leaves victims without the timely intervention that could prevent physical harm, property loss, and psychological trauma (Adeyemi, 2023; Ibrahim, 2020). The quality of emergency response is therefore not merely an operational concern but a foundational determinant of community safety and the perceived legitimacy of security institutions.

In Cross River North Senatorial District, as in many peripheral Nigerian communities, formal police emergency response operates under severe structural constraints that chronically undermine its effectiveness. Police divisions in the district are geographically concentrated, patrol vehicles are insufficient relative to the vast territorial coverage required, communication infrastructure is unreliable, and personnel strength falls far below operational requirements for meaningful rapid-response capacity (Egonmwan, 2016; Albert, Ojeka, & Ajani, 2015). Community members in the district have reported police response times ranging from several hours to no response at all to emergency calls in cases involving property crime and interpersonal violence a structural failure that leaves victims dependent on informal community actors for immediate security assistance (Chukwuma, 2019; Ibrahim, 2020). This gap between formal emergency response capacity and community security needs has positioned vigilante groups as the *de facto* first responders to criminal incidents across much of the district.

Vigilante groups respond to distress calls through a range of mechanisms: informal alert networks based on mobile telephone communication, physical whistles and drum signals in communities with limited mobile connectivity, community-based radio channels, and door-to-door mobilization of vigilante members in response to reported incidents (Abubakar, 2022; Bello, 2021). These mechanisms, while rudimentary by the standards of formal emergency dispatch systems, represent pragmatic adaptations to the technological and infrastructural realities of rural Cross River North. The effectiveness of these informal response systems depends critically on the speed of mobilization, the availability of vigilante members at the time of the call, the clarity and accuracy of the information communicated by distressed callers, and the physical distance between vigilante members and the incident location all of which vary substantially across communities and time periods (Chukwuma, 2019; Mohammed, 2023).

The global literature on community-based emergency response has increasingly demonstrated the value of structured, technology-enhanced distress call systems as force multipliers for under-resourced security institutions. Johnson (2018) documented that mobile application platforms that enable direct communication between citizens and community security responders significantly reduced response times and improved coordination in urban Nigerian contexts. Bello (2021) demonstrated that mobile technologies with real-time location sharing and automated alert capabilities improved distress call management efficiency in rural Nigerian communities, enabling faster mobilization and more accurate deployment of community security resources. Abubakar (2022) found that the integration of community policing strategies with formalized distress call systems characterized by clear protocols, designated response teams, and coordinated communication channels produced significant improvements in response times and community confidence in security institutions. These international and national findings suggest that the effectiveness of vigilante distress call response in Cross River North is not inherently limited by the vigilante model itself, but by the absence of the organizational and technological infrastructure needed to operationalize its potential.

Despite the growing recognition of emergency response as a critical crime control variable, no prior empirical study has specifically assessed the relationship between vigilante distress call response and crime control outcomes in Cross River North Senatorial District, or indeed in any comparable rural Nigerian senatorial district context. Existing studies have focused primarily on urban contexts with more developed communication infrastructure, leaving the specific challenges and dynamics of rural emergency response empirically understudied (Chukwuma, 2019; Okafor, 2020). This study addresses that gap by providing the first systematic empirical analysis of vigilante emergency response effectiveness in the Cross River North context, generating evidence that is essential for targeted policy intervention and resource allocation.

2. Statement of the Problem

Criminal incidents in Cross River North Senatorial District inflict severe and immediate harm on victims who urgently require emergency intervention. Armed robbery, assault, communal violence, property theft, and sexual violence represent categories of criminal activity that demand rapid response harm continues and often escalates with every minute that elapses between the commission of the crime and the arrival of a security responder (Adeyemi, 2023; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). In communities where police response times routinely extend to hours or fail entirely, the difference between a victim who receives timely vigilante assistance and one who does not may be the difference between minor and severe physical injury, successful and unsuccessful robbery completion, and the apprehension or escape of the offender. The stakes of emergency response quality are therefore profoundly human as well as criminologically significant.

The problem is compounded by the structural inadequacies of the current distress call infrastructure available to communities in Cross River North. Many communities lack reliable mobile telephone connectivity, making voice communication during emergencies unreliable or impossible. Where mobile connectivity exists, vigilante groups often rely on informal, unadvertised mobile numbers rather than standardized, community-wide emergency numbers meaning that residents may not know how to contact vigilante responders during a crime in progress (Bello, 2021; Abubakar, 2022). Vigilante response teams frequently lack designated on-duty personnel, meaning that distress calls may go unanswered when group members are occupied with farm work, family responsibilities, or sleep during nighttime hours. The absence of documented protocols for distress call handling specifying who receives calls, how they communicate to fellow members, who deploys, and by what route means that response is characterized by improvisation rather than systematic coordination (Chukwuma, 2019; Mohammed, 2023). These organizational and infrastructural deficiencies collectively undermine the potential effectiveness of vigilante emergency response even in communities where vigilante members are committed, numerous, and willing to respond.

The human consequences of inadequate emergency response extend beyond the immediate victims to the broader community. Repeated experiences of delayed or absent emergency response erode community members' confidence in security institutions both formal and informal and may discourage future crime reporting, as residents conclude that reporting criminal incidents produces no beneficial outcome (Adeyemi, 2023; Ojedokun & Adebayo, 2018). This deterrence of reporting creates a vicious cycle: fewer reports mean less intelligence for security actors, which means less effective crime prevention, which means higher crime rates, which means fewer incentives to report. Breaking this cycle requires demonstrable improvement in the quality and speed of emergency response an improvement that can only be achieved through evidence-based organizational reform of how vigilante groups manage and execute distress call response in the district.

Beyond the communities directly affected, the problem has institutional dimensions that are relevant for state-level governance. The Cross River State Government has neither formally regulated

vigilante group operations nor provided systematic support for the development of their emergency response capacity, creating a situation in which informal security providers bear the operational burden of first response without the institutional support, accountability frameworks, or resource access that would enable them to fulfil this function effectively (Egonmwan, 2016; Albert et al., 2015). This governance gap between the de facto reliance of communities on vigilante emergency response and the de jure absence of state recognition and support for such functions represents a structural problem that empirical evidence on vigilante emergency response effectiveness can help to address by providing policymakers with the evidence base needed to justify institutional intervention.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Routine Activity Theory

Routine Activity Theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979) provides the primary analytical framework for this study's examination of vigilante distress call response and crime control. RAT explains criminal events as the convergence in time and space of three elements: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a capable guardian. The theory's core prediction is that factors which increase capable guardianship by making the detection, interruption, and apprehension of offenders more probable reduce the opportunity conditions for crime and thereby reduce crime rates (Felson & Boba, 2010; Wortley & Townsley, 2016). Rapid vigilante response to distress calls functions precisely as an increase in capable guardianship in real time: when vigilante members arrive at the scene of a criminal incident in progress before the offender has escaped, they transform a situation of absent guardianship into one of active guardianship, interrupting the criminal act and initiating offender accountability processes.

RAT generates a clear theoretical prediction about the relationship between distress call response speed and crime control effectiveness: the faster and more reliable the response, the greater its guardianship effect, and therefore the greater its crime reducing impact. The theory also explains why slow response produces minimal crime-control benefit: if offenders have already completed the criminal act and escaped before vigilante responders arrive, the guardianship function arrives too late to disrupt the crime-enabling convergence, and the response produces only post-hoc documentation and victim support rather than crime interruption (Cohen & Felson, 1979; Smith, 2019). The theoretical implication for understanding this study's findings is that where vigilante distress call response fails to achieve statistical significance as a crime control predictor, it may be because the current response system lacking formalized protocols, designated on-duty personnel, and reliable communication technology is too slow and inconsistent to provide the real-time guardianship effect that RAT predicts would reduce crime rates (Felson & Boba, 2010; Abubakar, 2022).

3.2 Social Control Theory

Social Control Theory (Hirschi, 1969) complements the situational analysis of RAT by illuminating the social bond mechanisms through which vigilante emergency response affects crime control outcomes. Social Control Theory posits that individuals are restrained from criminal behaviour by their bonds of attachment to conventional others, commitment to conventional goals, involvement in conventional activities, and belief in the legitimacy of social norms (Hirschi, 1969; Pratt & Cullen, 2000). When vigilante groups demonstrate credible, consistent capability to respond to distress calls and intervene in criminal incidents, they reinforce the belief dimension of the social bond: community members who observe effective vigilante response update their belief that crime has consequences, that community norms are enforceable, and that security institutions even informal ones are capable of protecting them (Sampson et al., 1997; Adeyemi, 2023).

Conversely, unreliable or slow vigilante response erodes the belief component of the social bond by demonstrating that crime proceeds without meaningful interruption a demonstration that communicates

institutional incapacity and implicitly legitimizes criminal behaviour as a rational response to a context of absent accountability (Hirschi, 1969; Ojedokun & Adebayo, 2018). Social Control Theory also draws attention to the attachment and commitment dimensions of the community-vigilante relationship: the quality of interpersonal relationships between vigilante members and community residents, cultivated through consistent and responsive security service, determines the extent to which residents cooperate with vigilante operations sharing intelligence, reporting suspicious activities, and providing logistical support in ways that compound the crime-control effectiveness of vigilante responses over time (Lawal, 2019; Skogan, 2017). The theory therefore predicts that improving the quality and reliability of vigilante distress call response will produce not only direct crime-control effects through improved guardianship, but also indirect effects through the strengthening of community-vigilante trust bonds that enhance the overall security ecosystem.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Study Area

A cross-sectional mixed-methods research design was employed, combining quantitative survey analysis with qualitative in-depth interview data. The cross-sectional design provided systematic comparative data across three Local Government Areas at a single point in time, while the mixed-methods integration enabled the quantitative findings on distress call response effectiveness to be contextually interpreted through qualitative insights into the organizational and infrastructural dynamics of vigilante emergency response operations (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Bryman, 2016). The study was conducted in Cross River North Senatorial District, Nigeria encompassing approximately 4,624 square kilometres across five LGAs with Yala, Obudu, and Obanliku purposively selected on the basis of documented vigilante group activity and research accessibility. The combined projected population of the district is 760,347 (National Population Commission, 2016), with subsistence agriculture constituting the dominant livelihood activity across the selected LGAs.

4.2 Participants, Sampling, and Instrument

Four hundred participants were purposively selected across the three LGAs Yala ($n = 173$), Obudu ($n = 132$), and Obanliku ($n = 95$) comprising 50 vigilante group members and 350 community members drawn from diverse occupational backgrounds including community leaders, traditional rulers, civil servants, farmers, and entrepreneurs. Of 400 questionnaires distributed, 384 were recovered in usable condition (96.0% response rate). Ten key informants were purposively selected for in-depth interviews based on their direct experience with vigilante distress call response operations. The research instrument included the distress call response subscale (Section B-iv, Items 21–24) measuring respondents' perceptions of vigilante emergency responsiveness, community awareness of distress call channels, willingness to report crimes, and confidence in technology-enhanced response, on a five-point Likert scale. Instrument content validity was confirmed through expert review, and Cronbach's Alpha for the distress call subscale was 0.82, indicating good internal consistency (George & Mallery, 2003).

4.3 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS Version 21, employing Simple Linear Regression to test the hypothesis that vigilante distress call response does not significantly impact timely intervention and crime control. Simple Linear Regression was selected because it enables the assessment of the predictive relationship between a continuous independent variable (distress call response quality) and a continuous dependent variable (timely intervention and crime control), and generates model fit statistics R , R^2 , Adjusted R^2 , F-statistic, and p-value that enable comprehensive evaluation of both the magnitude and significance of the hypothesized relationship (Field, 2018). Analysis was conducted at a 0.05 significance level. Qualitative in-depth interview data were thematically analyzed, with themes coded to address distress

call infrastructure, organizational coordination, community communication patterns, and the barriers to effective vigilante emergency response.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Descriptive Analysis of Distress Call Response

The descriptive analysis of the distress call response subscale revealed that 65% of respondents provided positive perceptions (Strongly Agree or Agree) of vigilante emergency responsiveness overall. Specifically, 64.9% agreed or strongly agreed that vigilante groups respond quickly to distress calls (SA: 37.0%, A: 27.9%); 65.1% agreed or strongly agreed that vigilante responses have improved community safety (SA: 35.2%, A: 29.9%); 65.1% agreed or strongly agreed that they feel more secure knowing vigilante groups respond to emergencies (SA: 34.4%, A: 30.7%); and 65.1% agreed or strongly agreed that the effectiveness of vigilante responses reduces crime (SA: 35.9%, A: 29.2%). A consistent 35% of respondents across items expressed either neutrality or disagreement, suggesting significant residual uncertainty about the reliability and effectiveness of vigilante emergency response among a substantial minority of community members. Mean scores of 249.75 for distress call response and 84.5 for timely intervention and crime control, with standard deviations of 0.430 and 3.774 respectively, confirm adequate distributional variability for meaningful statistical analysis.

5.2 Hypothesis one: Response to Distress Calls and Crime Control

The null hypothesis that the response of vigilante groups to distress calls does not significantly impact timely intervention and crime control was tested using Simple Linear Regression. The analysis yielded an R-value of 0.251, an R-squared of 0.063, an Adjusted R-squared of -0.404, a standard error of estimate of 2.740, and an F-statistic of 0.779 ($p = 0.457$). The regression equation was estimated as $Y = 228.298 - 0.432X$. Since the p-value (0.457) substantially exceeds the 0.05 significance threshold, and the F-test confirms that the model is not statistically significant, the null hypothesis was retained: the response of vigilante groups to distress calls does not significantly impact timely intervention and crime control in Cross River North Senatorial District. The R-squared value of 0.063 indicates that distress call response quality, as currently practised, explains only 6.3% of the variance in crime control outcomes a small and statistically non-significant explanatory contribution.

This finding, while counter-intuitive given the positive perceptions reported by the majority of respondents, becomes theoretically coherent when interpreted through the lens of RAT's capable guardianship mechanism. For distress call response to generate statistically significant crime control effects, it must be sufficiently fast, reliable, and consistent to interrupt criminal incidents in progress or to credibly threaten such interruption often enough to alter offender behaviour at the pre-crime decision stage (Cohen & Felson, 1979; Felson & Boba, 2010). The qualitative data from in-depth interviews revealed systematic organizational and infrastructural deficiencies that prevent current vigilante distress call response from meeting these thresholds: respondents reported that vigilante response was inconsistent and unpredictable, with some incidents receiving rapid response while others received none; that communication channels primarily personal mobile telephone numbers shared informally were frequently unavailable or unanswered; that vigilante members lacked clear on-duty protocols specifying who was responsible for response at any given time; and that the physical distances involved in the district's rural geography often rendered timely arrival at crime scenes physically impossible regardless of mobilization speed. These qualitative insights directly explain the statistical null finding by identifying the operational mechanisms through which potential guardianship capability fails to translate into actual crime-control impact.

The weak but positive R-value of 0.251 suggests that the theoretical relationship between distress call response and crime control is present in the data but masked by organizational and infrastructural noise a pattern that implies that structural improvements to the distress call response system could unlock a

statistically significant crime control relationship that the current system is unable to deliver. This interpretation is supported by the international evidence base: Bello (2021) demonstrated that technology-enhanced distress call systems incorporating real-time location sharing, automated alerts, and dedicated response team rosters produced significant improvements in response times and crime control effectiveness in comparable community security contexts. Abubakar (2022) found that structured integration of community policing strategies with distress call protocols produced significant gains in both response quality and public confidence in security institutions. The implication is that the failure of current vigilante distress call response to achieve statistical significance does not reflect an inherent limitation of the vigilante model but rather a remediable organizational deficit that evidence-based reform can address.

The discrepancy between positive community perceptions and the non-significant statistical result warrants careful consideration. Respondents' endorsement of vigilante emergency responsiveness may reflect their assessment of vigilante intentions and effort relative to the formal police alternative, rather than an objective evaluation of outcomes a comparative rather than absolute effectiveness judgement (Adeyemi, 2023; Ojedokun & Adebayo, 2018). Communities that have experienced entirely absent formal police response may genuinely experience informal vigilante response even when slow and inconsistent as a meaningful improvement, and accordingly report positive perceptions, without this representing a statistically demonstrable crime control effect at the aggregate level. This interpretation is supported by the Social Control Theory prediction that the quality of the community-vigilante trust relationship built through demonstrated responsiveness, however imperfect independently influences community security perceptions and collective efficacy even when direct crime-control effects are not statistically detectable (Hirschi, 1969; Lawal, 2019). These trust and legitimacy effects are real and valuable, even if not captured by the aggregate crime control regression model used in this study.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study provides the first systematic empirical assessment of the relationship between vigilante distress call response and timely intervention and crime control in Cross River North Senatorial District, Nigeria. The central finding that the response of vigilante groups to distress calls does not produce a statistically significant impact on crime control outcomes ($R = 0.251$, $R^2 = 0.063$, $F = 0.779$, $p = 0.457$) reveals a critical gap between the community confidence that vigilante emergency response enjoys and its demonstrable crime-control effectiveness. This gap is attributable not to the inherent inadequacy of the community-based emergency response model, but to specific, remediable organizational and infrastructural deficiencies that prevent the model from realizing its crime-control potential. The qualitative evidence identifies these deficiencies precisely: absent response protocols, unreliable communication channels, the lack of designated on-duty response personnel, and geographic constraints that render timely arrival at crime scenes impossible under current operational arrangements.

The following recommendations are advanced for policy and practice. First, the Cross River State Government should provide targeted funding for the development of a standardized community emergency communication infrastructure across Cross River North including widely publicized emergency numbers, mobile communication devices for vigilante response teams, and basic radio communication networks for communities with limited mobile connectivity to establish reliable communication channels as the foundational prerequisite for effective distress call response. Second, vigilante groups should develop and implement formalized distress call response protocols specifying designated on-duty personnel, rotation schedules for emergency duty, chain-of-communication procedures for mobilizing response teams, and documentation requirements for incident reports, thereby replacing the current ad hoc improvisation with systematic coordination. Third, technology integration should be prioritized as a force multiplier for distress call response: mobile applications that enable real-time location sharing, automated alert dispatch, and documented response tracking should be introduced, piloted, and evaluated across the district's vigilante groups in partnership with telecommunications providers and development organizations (Bello, 2021;

Abubakar, 2022). Fourth, formal coordination protocols between vigilante distress response teams and the Nigeria Police Force should be established, enabling information sharing about ongoing incidents, joint response operations for high-risk situations, and seamless referral of apprehended suspects to formal custody a coordination framework that simultaneously enhances the effectiveness of both formal and informal emergency response actors (Mohammed, 2023). Fifth, community education campaigns should be conducted to ensure universal awareness of distress call channels, thereby maximizing the utilization rate of whatever emergency communication infrastructure is developed. Future research should employ longitudinal impact evaluation designs to assess whether the implementation of these recommendations produces the statistically significant crime-control improvements that current theory and qualitative evidence suggest are achievable.

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