

# “We Don’t Steal, Nor Vandalized, We Only Value Waste”: Scavengers Phenomenon in Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

The paper sought to juxtapose ‘We don’t steal nor vandalise; we only value waste’: the Scavengers phenomenon in Nigeria. Instances abound where scavengers have been caught red-handed engaging in property theft and vandalism. The work adopted ‘Crime Pattern Theory’ and the Broken Window Theory. The research design is explorative in nature. It employs both a quantitative and qualitative approach. The target populations for the study were residents in the Uviwe, Ughelli North, and Okpe local government areas, Delta State, towns where scavenging activities and large dump sites exist, and the sample size is 51. A questionnaire was used for the data collection developed by the researchers. An in-depth interview was used to elicit information. The interview questions were structured with an open and close approach. Simple percentage and item mean analyses were used to analyse the research questionnaires. Any item above the mean benchmark of 2.5 was considered accepted, but anything below was rejected. Content analysis was employed for the in-depth interview. Findings from the study revealed that some scavengers have been caught red-handed and engaged in theft. It was recommended that stakeholders and their foot soldiers be issued licences to operate. And when found culpable, the licence should be withdrawn, which will serve as a deterrent to themselves and others within the profession and also be prosecuted in accordance with the stipulated laws.

**Keywords:** Waste, Scavengers, Steal, value, Vandalize, Nigeria

## INTRODUCTION

The phrase waste to wealth ushered in a new form of economic activity known as waste scavenging. Scavenging from waste streams, though dirty in nature, is a great employer of labour in the world over, especially among developing cities and slum dwellers. The profession employs and empowers over 25 million people, generating an annual income of several billions of dollars (Sekyere, 2014). Waste scavenging is a popular informal activity that depends on the quantity and quality of waste generated by households and the general population. One major issue that has pushed many people to accept this occupation from the 1980’s until now is the deep economic crisis in the West African Region (Owusu-Sekyere, E., 2014).

Trending Scavenging activities occur across cities and villages; this is a result of the difficulty in securing jobs in the formal sector, causing a push for actors to engage in the occupation. They struggle and sift through the mountain of refuse for sustenance. From all indications, most of the foot soldiers engaging in

scavenging are in the occupation not by choice but due to increased levels of unemployment and poverty. For this reason, they considered the occupation a stepping stone to a much more dignified profession after making savings (Yusuf, 2021).

In Nigeria, waste management is a topical issue of discussion, as the profession has witnessed huge numbers of people trooping into this trade. The reason is that waste output (generated waste) is in great demand by industries for the purposes of recycling. Scavengers collect papers, glass bottles, plastic materials, and ferrous and non-ferrous metals from dump sites. In the course of collecting these wastes, waste collectors are exposed to various infectious diseases. This can be risky, as they are exposed to various infectious agents (Ray et al., 2004) and other carcinogenic diseases when collectors are exposed to toxins that have negative health implications (Owusu-Sekyere, E., 2014). In addition, scavengers are also subjected to negative labels that are usually derogatory to their social status from other members of society, generating hostilities that may instigate conflict if not well managed.

Different terminologies are employed to describe people who scavenge waste items either for sales or personal uses; these include reclaimers, recoverers, waste collectors, scavengers, and waste pickers' (Kingsley, 2012; GIZ and FMECD, 2011). Diverse countries use various terms to denote the activity. The concept of 'waste pickers' was adopted unanimously at the 2008 World Conference on Waste by the participants. Nigeria today has massively experienced an increase in waste recycling industries, an increase in both manpower capital and resource investment.

In Northern Nigeria, Magaji and Daykes (2011) maintained that waste scavengers largely collect oils and valued materials and sell them to recycling agents or directly to companies that operate recycling factories. Kwasghsende and Atser (2015) reported that 20–45 year-olds are statistically significant numbers of persons involved in waste scavenging. But in recent times, especially in Warri and Delta State in general, there has been a new narrative witnessed in this trade, and it involves the influx of minors into the occupation, especially those gaining encouragement from parents or guidance. Kwasghsende and Atser further maintained that waste scavengers consist of both males and females who are mostly unemployed. They proved that scavengers even travel several miles to gather materials. In southern Nigeria, there is also growing concern among scavengers about solid waste stream management.

Asibor and Edjere (2017) and Alade (2018) showed that in Delta State, waste scavenging has developed into a means of earning livelihoods and as a means of employment for youths. Poverty caused by unemployment in developing countries leads to scavenging. The scavengers are involved in both on-site and off-site waste recovery. They recover re-usable and recyclable materials like plastics, aluminium, glasses, papers, scrap metals, and animal wastes like horns, bones, etc. They recover these materials because of their potential value. In some cases, the scavengers also process some of the recovered waste before selling it either to resource merchants or directly to the recycling industries (Auta & Paul, 2020).

Muhammad et al. (2022) observed that scavenging contributes to the reduction of the amount of solid waste disposed of and also helps to save natural resources, which lead to sustainable development. It creates jobs and extra income for people, especially the poor. Scavenging encourages family members to sort out materials from waste in exchange for money; it supplies raw materials for a lot of recycling enterprises, and this creates more jobs for people, especially the youths who dominate the activity. The importance of waste scavenging is huge, ranging from economical to environmental. It serves as financial support to unemployed citizens, ensuring that the environment is clean, supplying raw materials to recycling industries, and disposing of waste (Nzekwe, 2013). There are lots of economic benefits that derive from waste scavenging over the years. In recent times, reports of nefarious activities now abound among scavengers of waste in various communities in Nigeria. More so, Aliyu (2023) posits that the increased rate of crimes across the nation, after a routine security meeting, attributed the phenomenon to the influx of metal scavengers kicked out of neighbouring states over unwanted activities. The activities of scavengers led to their ban in Brono

and Yobe States, Nigeria, including those behaviours such as immoral dressing and carrying weapons, among others, that have been obstructing the peace and security enjoyed by our people.

Recently, the occupation has been paired with atrocities as actors engage in property theft, disguised as scavengers, in their daily activities. In a bid to survive and fund their habit, Gaetan, a scavenger, and colleagues at work would strip copper wires or lift corrugated iron and white goods off the streets, selling the metals—a common practice in the city of Port Louis. Lorraine Mallinder, the Al Jazeera Mauritian correspondence, on October 4, 2023.

To provide illumination for this work, it is pertinent to present the author's personal experiences. On October 14, 2023, at 6:40 am, very early in the morning, Abraka, Delta State, stepping out the gate to my house, there was a shout: 'ole ole, e thief my gen oooo; thief ooo, thief oooo; scrap man oooo; hold am ooo, hold am oooo' on the suspect's apprehension. It was to everyone's greatest amazement that the suspect was a waste scavenger. The next day, October 15, 2023, another scavenger tried to enter the premises of a neighbour without prior notice. When asked, he responded that he wanted to check if the occupants had a waste site in the compound.

Another vivid case is that of my personal experience in Asaba, Okpanam Road, very close to the Legislative Quarters. In the afternoon broad day light on September 28, 2023, I saw a scavenger pulling out net metal barricades used in demarcating the road lanes. To further buttress my point, cases abound where suspected waste scavengers have been arrested in Abuja, Lagos, and Delta for vandalising rail tracks. These and many more exist in our social media space as ample evidence that waste scavenging is associated with property theft. There is an absence of recognised institutions saddled with the responsibility to control and carry out the sight functions of scavenger recruitments, certifying or authenticating the sourced scrap before allowing sales to the recycler's agent. Could this be the cause of scavengers' property theft in Nigeria? On some occasions, waste scavengers have been arrested for property theft and other related crimes as a result of intelligent reports. From the foregoing, the writer wants to juxtapose 'We don't steal nor vandalise; we only value waste': the Scavengers phenomenon in Nigeria.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The main purpose of the study is to examine "'We don't steal nor vandalise; we only value waste': the scavenger phenomenon in Nigeria. Specifically, the study sought to

1. Identify the activities of scavengers in your locality.
2. Elucidate on "'We don't steal nor vandalise; we only value waste': the Scavengers phenomenon in Nigeria.

### **Research questions**

Two research questions were stated in line with the specific objectives of the study:

1. What are the activities of scavengers in your locality?
2. Do scavengers steal/vandalize in the locality?

### **Crime Pattern Opportunity Theory**

Crime Pattern Theory integrates crime within a geographic context that demonstrates how the environments that people live in and pass through every day influence their criminality. The theory was developed by environmental criminologists Brantingham, Patricia, and Paul in 1993. The theory believes that a crime can only occur, when the activity space, a suspected offender, and a victim or target, all cross paths. Simply put, the emergence of crime is basically environmental negligence, therefore forming the opportunity for

criminality. Space awareness is what the offender capitalises on to commit crime (Wortley and Mazerolle, 2008). The theory is apt for explaining the scourge of waste scavenging in the country because of its parsimony, logical consistency, and explanatory power (Ogege, 2016).

Focusing on the place (crime space) and the failure in social control and guardianship that are considered important to managing crime. Further, acknowledging the place of neighbourhood structures and designs, as opportunities hotspots that scavengers capitalise on to engage in their criminal activities. This is a security fallout or negligence by neighbourhoods, emanating from inadequate protection to guard property. Another key factor is the lack of social control measures, weaved around government policy guidance lines and regulations to control, direct, or define those professions' activities.

### **Broken Windows Theory**

The Zimbardo 'car broken window experiment' in Palo Alto, California, and Bronx, NY, which later translated to "Fixing Broken Windows: Restoring Order and Reducing Crime in Our Communities," a text by Kelling and Coles, is a pointer that lags (broken windows) in our societies and communities can actually create greater leverage for criminals to thrive, capitalising on the window opportunity space to commit other forms of criminality. Kelling and Coles argue that these window vacuums can emanate from family background or parenting style, peer influence, greed, lack of contentment, weak social control, an insecure neighbourhood, weak moral training, poverty, a lack of regulations, and many more. All these and many more constitute and may account for the broken window frame, the understanding that the existence of an unfixed broken window will be a catch point of opportunity for people to offend.

The writers believe that the theory is appropriate in the area of logical consistency and parsimony. Cogently explaining that a lag exists at one point or another, (1) the offender level (poverty or weak morals), (2) the victim level (environmental structures and neighbourhoods), and (3) the institutional level (weak or no regulations from the state), all these cumulatively combined provide an apt opportunity for scavengers to commit property theft or vandalism.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The research design is explorative in nature. It employs both quantitative and qualitative approach. Survey research was used to sort for people opinion on scavengers activities and waste collection. In-depth interview for qualitative as well critical review of national newspaper as it relate to the titled of research work.

### **Population of the study**

The target population for the study was residents in the Uviwe Ekpan, Osubi, Okpe, and Agbarho, Ugheli North, local government area, Delta State; it was purposefully picked because these towns housed large waste scavenging sites and waste pickers lives and carried out their daily activities there.

### **Sample and Sampling Technique**

The sample size is 51 residents living close to dump sites in Ekpan, Uwie, Local Government Area (Niger CAT, along NPA Express Way, dump site), Osubi, Okpe, Local Government Area (Osubi Slaughter, close to PTI junction, dump site), Agbarho, Ugheli North, Local Government Area (Ewhere Road by Borrow Pit, dump site). The sites were chosen because of the belief that residents (respondents) have witnessed the activities of scavengers. Accidental sampling techniques were employed in picking the respondents, specifically those residing very close to the dump sites within the study scope. Also, in-depth interviews were granted to some security personnel in each of the selected local government areas of study.

## Research Instrument

A questionnaire was used for the data collection developed by the researchers. The questionnaires are structured to elicit information on the activities of scavengers as they relate to waste collection. The questionnaire has two parts: Part A contains biodata such as location, while Part B contains one section. Section A has five items as it relates to the activities of scavengers as it relates to waste collection. The respondent was required to tick yes or no on some items while also ticking among the four-point scale range from 4 to 1: strongly agree (SA), agree (A), disagree (D), and strongly disagree (SD), respectively. An in-depth interview was used to elicit information. The interview questions were structured with an open and close approach.

## Reliability of the Instrument

The questionnaire activities of scavengers as they relate to waste collection have a reliability coefficient of 0.83.

## Method of Data Collection

The researchers, with the help of five research assistants, distributed copies of the questionnaires to the respondents, briefing them on what the research was all about, and the filled-out copies were collected on the spot. An in-depth interview was granted to security personnel, specifically community vigilante personnel, youth leaders, and anti-cult personnel, on their experiences with this trend of property crime and vandalism. Content analyses were employed for the study. Also, in the review of the newspaper from 2019 to 2023, sections of crimes related to scavengers and metal theft were critically examined.

## Method of Data Analysis

Simple percentage and item mean analyses were used to analyse the research questionnaires. Any item above the mean benchmark of 2.5 was considered accepted, but anything below was rejected. Content analysis was employed for the in-depth interview.

## RESULTS

First in line are the results on the socio-demographic distributions of respondents within the study scopes; these features are represented in the table below.

**Table 1: Outcome of Respondents Demographic Features**

Variable		Frequency	Percentage/%
Gender	Male	26	51
	Female	25	49
	Total	51	100
Age	15-25	26	51
	26-35	15	29.4
	36 – above	10	19.6
	Total	51	100
Occupation	Artisans	21	41.2
	Civil Servants	10	19.6



	Traders/Farmers	10	19.6
	Waste Scavengers	10	19.6
	Total	51	100
Religion	Islam	15	29.4
	Christians	15	29.4
	Africa Religion	10	19.6
	Pagan	11	21.6
	Total	51	100

Table 1: As reflected above, respondent’s demographic features on gender: males top the chart with 51%, while females followed with 49%. On age distribution, respondents with a chronological age range of 15–25 top the list with 51%, followed by those within the age range of 26–35 with 29.4%, and lastly, those above 36 follow suit with 19.6%. The respondent’s occupational distribution indicated that artisans are the highest with 41.2%; traders and farmers (19.6%); civil servants (19.6%); and waste scavengers (19.6%). Religious practices of the respondents showed that 29.4% are Islam; Christians were also 29.4%; African Traditional Religion worshippers were 19.6%; and lastly, Pagans were 21.6%, respectively.

**Research question one:** What are the activities of scavengers in your locality?

Table 1, Simple percentage and mean responses of activities of scavenger

SN	Items	Yes %	No%	Decision
1	Are scavengers seen around your locality during odd hours of the day?	40(78.43%)	11(21.57%)	Accepted
2	Are there report of scavenger buying items, not from the rightful owner of the metal or others	27(52.94%)	24(47.059%)	Accepted
3	Would you say, some theft now disguise as scavenger, in other to steal in the locality	45(88.24%)	6(11.76%)	Accepted
		Mean		
4	Are there reports of scavenger picking metal from neighbourhood without authorization from the rightful owners	3.25		Accepted
5	Have scavenger being caught red handed with stolen items such as metal, wire and others in their possession in your locality.	3.57		Accepted
	Grand mean	3.41		Accepted

In Table 1, the respondents agreed from the various responses that some scavengers engaged in theft in their locality. Item 5: Has a scavenger been caught red-handed with stolen items such as metal, wire, and others in their possession in your locality? Their mean is 3.57, which is above the benchmark of 2.5.

**Research Question Two:** Do scavengers steal/vandalize in the locality?

**In-depth –interview:**

**FIRST RESPONDENT: VIGILANTE; EKPAN, UWIE-LGA**

I have lived in this area from more than 15 years, few years ago, the activities of scavengers were relatively

with genuine intention, they pick waste and even require your permission to pick any dispose waste in form of metals, bad television set from your surroundings, but today the exodus of a lot of people in the business have dent their organic intention. People now trace their value metal like generator, vehicle spare part that are metal in nature left outside but carried by some scavengers to the site, if luck you will find it before it is bushed into pieces. IDI/F/51

### **SECOND RESPONDENT: ANTI-CULT; OSUBI, OKPE-LGA**

The activities of these scavengers are becoming nefarious, just recently one was caught red handed with a boy of about eighteen months inside the sack. From his confessionary state after being beaten, said he sedated the child with drug inside the soft drink he gave to the child. I might not be 100% certain but kidnaper of child now disguise as metal scavengers in the cities and villages. IDI/M/39

### **THIRD RESPONDENT: YOUTH LEADER, AGBARHO; UGHELLI NORTH-LGA**

I used to call them, the street cleaner that make dirty money for themselves. My only fear for them is that nobody ascertains the waste they pick either metal or plastic as waste. Few of friends have complained about their activities such as if you leave your metal pot, gas cylinder outside and they pass it is gone forever. From a few I have witness security agencies raid their scavenging site, when one of the scavengers is caught. I will suggest there should be body saddle with the responsibility checking s scavenger's activities in streets. IDI/M/41

### **Exploration of Various News Papers from 2019 – 2023**

Excerpt from various newspapers from 2019 to 2023: The essence of this excerpt is mainly to draw concordance and a comparison analysis by giving illumination to the study: 'We don't steal nor vandalise; we only value waste': Scavengers phenomenon in Nigeria.

#### **Punch News Report on 23 February 2023**

It was reported that Kadiri, a professional scavenger in Ibandan, Oyo State, was trialled for allegedly vandalising and stealing cable wires used in the construction of street lights along the Awotan axis.

#### **The Guardian Newspaper of 4<sup>th</sup> September, 2022**

Operatives of the Ogun State Police Division in Itele, Awori, arrested 21-year-old Ibrahim Adamu. On investigation, the officials reported that the culprit disguised himself as a waste scavenger to perpetuate the act. The Guardian reported that the suspect confessed that they specialise in burgling into people's houses, invading the area on the pretence of waste collectors, and carting away their valuables there.

#### **Punch Newspaper Reported on The 20<sup>th</sup> September 2022**

Karu Grade I Area Court in Abuja on Tuesday ordered that a scavenger, Kabiru Abubakar, be arrested. The police public relations officer maintained that the suspect stole equipment from a block moulding industry and sold it to a waste recycler agent (Murtala Abubakar) for a relatively lower cost.

#### **Daily trust reported on the 7<sup>th</sup> of September 2023**

The police in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) have clamped down on suspected thieves carting away irons used to cover manholes to prevent passersby and vehicles from entering drainages in the nation's capital.

### **The News Agency of Nigeria, July 19<sup>th</sup> of 2023**

Adamu Suleiman, a waste scavenger and suspect, was arrested and tried in Kaduna for stealing plastic chairs. The News Agency of Nigeria reportedly alleged that the said culprit was apprehended in the act by a vigilante group during the operation.

### **The Premium Times of January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019**

Adamu Suleiman, a waste scavenger and suspect, was arrested and tried in Kaduna for stealing plastic chairs. The News Agency of Nigeria reportedly alleged that the said culprit was apprehended in the act by a vigilante group during the operation.

## **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

The findings from this study outline the nefarious activities of individuals or groups disguised as scavengers to perpetuate theft under the auspices of collecting waste. Reasons abound for why they indulge in such crimes but are not justified in acting to escape the law. This finding is consonant with Aliyu (2023) that the increased rate of crimes across the nation, after a routine security meeting, attributed the phenomenon to the influx of metal scavengers kicked out of neighbouring states over unwanted activities. The activities of scavengers led to their ban in Brono and Yobe States, Nigeria, including those behaviours such as immoral dressing and carrying weapons, among others, that have been obstructing the peace and security enjoyed by our people.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study concluded that there is no laid-down precedent for scavenger recruitment and checking the scavenged waste in the open market, where items are sold to recyclers. A few desperate individuals have hijacked it. It has the opportunity to be disguised as a scavenger to engage in the theft of property in the neighbourhood. Reports of scavengers paraded as thieves awash the media on a daily basis. With these occurrences, one might be tempted to probe if the scavenged wastes sold to recyclers are legally gotten from waste or stolen items in disguise in order to make quick money to escape unemployment and poverty.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Based on the conclusion above, the following recommendations were made:

1. The government should create a dodge-head regulatory framework in the form of a policy to checkmate the recruitment process and the activities of waste scavengers and scavenging in the country. This policy should consider all open opportunities and seek avenues to close those opportunities for scavengers to commit property theft.
2. There should be an institution charged with the responsibility and regulative powers to checkmate this waste scavenging, effecting social control measures on all activities associated with the occupation. This will be a way of creating jobs, as a taskforce on waste scavenging will be created to monitor all activities.
3. Stakeholders and their foot soldiers should be issued a licence to operate. And when found culpable, the licence should be withdrawn, which will serve as a deterrent to themselves and others within the profession and also be prosecuted in accordance with the stipulated laws.



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