Centralised Versus State Policing in Nigeria: A Strategic Assessment of Implications for National Security and Security Governance

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ABSTRACT

This study provides a quantitative assessment of the implications of centralised and decentralised (state-based) policing models for national security and security governance in Nigeria. Although Nigeria operates a federal constitutional framework, it maintains a centralised policing system under the Nigeria Police Force (NPF), a legacy of colonial administration and prolonged military rule. Persistent security threats including insurgency in the Northeast, banditry in the Northwest, rising kidnappings for ransom, and recurrent communal violence combined with deficient police to population ratio have renewed demands from policymakers and civil society for more locally responsive policing, particularly through decentralisation of the NPF. Drawing comparative insights from policing frameworks in the United States, India, Brazil, and South Africa, the study evaluates how alternative policing arrangements influence national unity, federalism, and operational efficiency of the police. Data were collected from 420 respondents across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones using stratified random sampling and structured questionnaires, and were analysed through multiple regression, correlation, and ANOVA. The findings indicate that centralised policing strengthens perceptions of national cohesion but undermines operational efficiency of the police as well as local security responsiveness, and adherence to federal principles. By contrast, state or hybrid policing models show stronger associations with improved efficiency, accountability, and community trust, though they are perceived as more vulnerable to political interference and ethnic fragmentation. The study concludes that a carefully regulated hybrid system where the decentralised state policing operates under robust federal safeguards offers the most viable strategy for sustainable security governance in Nigeria.

Keywords: Centralised Policing, State Policing, National Security, Federalism, Police Reform, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Policing structures constitute one of the most consequential institutional design choices in any political system, particularly within heterogeneous and territorially extensive federations. The organisation of internal security power shapes not only crime-control outcomes but also the balance between authority and accountability, state legitimacy, and the practical functioning of federalism. In societies marked by deep ethnic, religious, and socio-economic cleavages, the distribution of coercive authority is especially sensitive, as policing institutions operate at the interface between state power and citizen rights. Nigeria presents a paradigmatic case of this dilemma. As Africa's most populous nation with over 200 million inhabitants across 36 states and 774 local government areas and more than 250 ethnic groups, Nigeria exhibits wide regional variation in security threats, governance capacity, and social cohesion. Yet, despite its formally federal constitution, the operates one of the most centralised policing systems among contemporary federations, a structure rooted in colonial policing traditions and sustained through prolonged military rule (Idowu, 2013). The Nigeria Police Force (NPF) remains the sole constitutionally recognised institution for routine internal security; this reflects a historical trajectory in which centralisation of coercive power served as a mechanism for political consolidation (Igba, 2026). The 1999 Constitution entrenched this legacy by placing policing on the Exclusive Legislative List, thereby depriving state governments of independent law-enforcement authority.

In practice, this configuration has generated persistent governance challenges. Although state governors are constitutionally designated as chief security officers, they exercise limited operational control over police deployment, investigative priorities, and personnel management. High level operational decisions are often delayed by bureaucratic hierarchies, intelligence remains poorly localised, and deployment patterns frequently fail to reflect region specific security dynamics. These weaknesses contribute to widespread insecurity and highlight the need for stronger linkages between security providers and local communities (Obasa, 2023). They have been widely identified as key factors underlying Nigeria's protracted insurgency in the Northeast, growing banditry in the Northwest, escalating ransom kidnapping, and recurrent communal and farmer–herder conflicts. In turn, public confidence in law enforcement has declined sharply; surveys consistently report pervasive perceptions of corruption, abuse, and ineffectiveness within the NPF, which undermine citizen cooperation and weaken community-based intelligence networks (Benson, 2022). Such perceptions undermine citizen cooperation, weaken intelligence networks, and further constrain crime prevention efforts.

Against this background, the demand for decentralised policing, commonly framed as "state policing," has gained renewed political and scholarly momentum. Advocates argue that Nigeria's highly centralised police structure undermines federal power sharing and limits effective policing in local communities, thereby strengthening calls for decentralised reform (Amobi et al., 2023). Critics have however caution that decentralization could exacerbate existing patterns of ethnic favouritism and nepotic appointments within the public sector (Chiamogu & Chiamogu, 2019). Recent policy developments, including high level executive endorsement of reform and legislative initiatives aimed at constitutional amendment, underscore the urgency of the debate (Balogun, 2025). Between November and December 2025, President Bola Ahmed Tinubu publicly endorsed the concept of state policing following the declaration of a national security emergency. At the same time, the introduction of House Bill 617—which proposes to move policing to the Concurrent Legislative List—signalled growing legislative support for structural change. Despite the intensity of these debates, empirical evidence on the governance consequences of alternative policing models in Nigeria remains limited. This study therefore addresses that gap by systematically evaluating how centralised and state-based policing arrangements are perceived to affect national security and security governance, drawing comparative insights from other federal systems.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Centralised Versus Decentralised Policing: Key Concepts

In federal and quasi-federal states, policing systems are commonly located along a continuum ranging from highly centralised to extensively decentralised arrangements. At the centralised end, a single national police organisation holds primary responsibility for internal security and law enforcement across the entire territory. Such systems are often defended on the basis of standardisation, ease of nationwide coordination, and the promotion of national cohesion in diverse or conflict-affected societies. Central authorities typically control recruitment, training, deployment, and operational priorities, enabling them to implement uniform policies and to mobilise resources rapidly against national-level threats. Also, such centralization is posited to enhance coordination in combating transnational threats while simultaneously bolstering national cohesion by reducing the potential for local disparities and separatism within pluralistic societies (Sambanis & Lee, 2023). These benefits, however, often come at the high cost of less local responsiveness, in which remote central command systems are unable to respond to subtle community-specific challenges, and less overall effectiveness at performing their tasks because of bureaucratic hierarchies that slow down decision-making and the process of deploying resources.

Decentralised systems, by contrast, distribute substantial policing authority to state, provincial, or local agencies. These arrangements are supported by the argument that subnational governments are closer to citizens, better understand local security conditions, and can therefore respond more quickly and appropriately to emerging threats (Amobi et al., 2023). Decentralisation can take different forms, ranging from state police and regional forces to municipal police services, sometimes operating alongside national agencies. The core claim is that such configurations strengthen responsiveness, accountability, and alignment with federal principles of shared rule and self-rule. However, this decentralisation has its own risks, such as a possible division of efforts at the national

level, unproductive overlapping of resources and infrastructure at different jurisdictions, or its susceptibility to corruption by subnational leaders who may use the police force to serve their political interests, ethnic nepotism, or oppression of opposition. Scholars distinguish between single centralized systems in Nigeria and Ireland, where unified national institutions exercise exclusive policing authority (Ekpu & Mukoro, 2024; Walsh, 2018), and multiple integrated decentralized systems in India and Germany, which utilize subnational forces coordinated through national structures (Danylevska et al., 2023; Kleinig et al., 2011). Conversely, multiple uncoordinated decentralized systems, typified by the United States, consist of thousands of autonomous agencies characterized by jurisdictional fragmentation and limited central coordination (Charbonneau et al., 2025).

Based on the theory of fiscal federalism, those who support it believe that decentralised policing may be significantly more effective in terms of resource allocation since local governments are closer to the people they represent and thus they are more likely to match policing resource allocation and policing strategies with real citizen preferences and priorities and therefore make better results, they prevent unnecessary and over-policing and produce better results (Lowatcharin & Stallmann, 2017). On the other hand, the centralised policing systems are often credited with superior performance in addressing violent crime by enabling standardized training curricula (Agboga, 2020, facilitating the seamless exchange of intelligence (Delpeuch, 2021; Phythian & Kirby, 2022), and utilizing specialized capacity to implement consistent, evidence-based methodologies nationwide (Agboga, 2020; Alcocer, 2024; Koziarski & Huey, 2021).. In highly diverse societies where ethnic, religious, or language divisions are prominent, centralised policing is often defended by the need to limit ethnic or regional fragmentation that might take shape as a result of autonomous local forces potentially reinforcing parochial interests or inter-group hostility. Both centralised and decentralised models present notable trade-offs. Centralised policing may result in insensitive "one-size-fits-all" approaches that fail to accommodate regional diversity in crime patterns, socio-economic conditions, and communal tensions. It also raises concerns about over-concentration of coercive power at the centre, marginalisation of subnational authorities, and reduced local input into security decision-making. Decentralised policing, on the other hand, can generate duplication of functions, disparities in resources and professional standards, and difficulties in coordinating responses to crimes that cross jurisdictional boundaries. It may also be vulnerable to capture by local political elites, who can deploy police forces for partisan objectives or to reinforce ethnic, religious, or regional divisions.

For these reasons, recent scholarly works increasingly emphasise hybrid or multi-level policing arrangements that seek to balance the advantages and mitigate the risks of both approaches. In such systems, state or local forces assume primary responsibility for community-level policing, while national institutions retain roles in setting minimum standards, coordinating intelligence and training, and handling serious or transnational crimes. The present study adopts this conceptual lens by viewing policing structures in terms of both the location of operational control (central versus subnational) and the strength of mechanisms for coordination, oversight, and standardisation. This framework guides the empirical analysis of how Nigerian stakeholders perceive the strengths and weaknesses of centralised, state-level, and hybrid policing models.

Policing and federalism in the Nigerian context

Nigeria presents a particularly important case for examining the relationship between federalism and police organisation. The country operates a federal constitutional structure with 36 states and 774 local government areas, and exhibits wide variation in population, socio-economic conditions, and security challenges. Despite this, the 1999 Constitution places policing on the Exclusive Legislative List, thereby establishing the NPF as the sole constitutionally recognised police institution and reserving control to the federal government. This centralised arrangement reflects Nigeria's colonial origins and lengthy periods of military rule, during which central control of coercive instruments was a key tool for regime security and territorial management.

In practice, the centralisation of policing authority has produced a notable governance paradox. State governors are designated as "chief security officers" of their states, but they have limited direct control over core policing functions such as deployment, investigation, promotion, and discipline. Operational decisions are usually taken through federal command hierarchies, which can slow responses and reduce the ability to adapt policing strategies to local realities. This structural misalignment has been widely linked to Nigeria's persistent insecurity, including insurgency in the North-East, banditry in the North-West, widespread kidnapping, and recurring

communal and farmer–herder conflicts. Public trust in the NPF is low, with numerous surveys and reports pointing to perceptions of corruption, abuse of authority, and ineffectiveness, all of which weaken citizen cooperation and reduce the flow of community-based intelligence crucial for effective policing.

These challenges have fuelled recurrent calls for decentralisation through the creation of state police or other subnational policing arrangements. Proponents argue that such reforms would better reflect Nigeria's federal character, enhance local ownership of security provision, and allow more flexible and context-sensitive policing. Critics counter that in an environment characterised by intense inter-elite competition and weak checks and balances, state-controlled police forces might be misused to harass political opponents, entrench ethnic or religious bias, or undermine national cohesion. Recent developments, such as federal endorsement of the principle of state policing in the context of a declared security emergency and proposed constitutional amendments to move policing to the Concurrent Legislative List have intensified these debates. At the same time, the emergence of regional security networks like Amotekun in the South-West and Ebube Agu in the South-East shows how state governments have already started experimenting with forms of decentralised security provision, even without explicit constitutional backing.

Within this contested environment, there is a clear need for systematic empirical evidence on how different stakeholder groups perceive the governance consequences of alternative policing arrangements. By analysing perceptions of centralised, state-level, and hybrid policing structures in relation to national unity, federalism, operational efficiency, accountability, and community trust, this study seeks to contribute evidence-based insights to an ongoing policy debate that is often dominated by normative or partisan arguments.

Comparative Policing Experiences in Some Federal Systems

Comparative analysis of policing arrangements in federal and quasi-federal systems demonstrates that no single institutional model guarantees optimal security outcomes. Instead, effective policing structures reflect historically grounded compromises between national cohesion, administrative efficiency, political accountability, and local responsiveness. The experiences of the United States, India, Brazil, and South Africa offer particularly instructive lessons for Nigeria, given their size, diversity, and complex governance structures.

United States

The United States represents one of the most decentralised policing systems in the world, comprising more than 18,000 separate law enforcement agencies operating at federal, state, county, and municipal levels (Walker & Katz, 2022). This institutional fragmentation reflects the American constitutional emphasis on local autonomy and suspicion of centralised coercive power. Federal agencies such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) focus primarily on interstate crime, terrorism, organised crime, and federal law violations, while state and local agencies retain responsibility for routine law enforcement and public order. Coordination occurs through joint task forces, shared intelligence platforms, and intergovernmental agreements ((U.S. Department of Justice, 2022).

This multi-layered system enhances community proximity and democratic accountability, thus enabling policing strategies to adapt to local social and crime patterns. However, it also generates challenges, including jurisdictional overlap, uneven professional standards, and disparities in resources. The American experience demonstrates that decentralisation can succeed when supported by strong coordination mechanisms, professional training standards, and federal investigative capacity.

India

India operates a constitutionally federal but administratively centralised policing system. Policing is formally a "State Subject," meaning that state governments control police organisations within their territories. However, the Indian Police Service, a centrally recruited and managed cadre, occupies senior leadership positions across state forces, thereby ensuring national coherence and professional standardisation (PRS Legislative Research, 2023; Ministry of Home Affairs, 2023). Central agencies such as the Central Bureau of Investigation and the

National Investigation Agency handle crimes with national or transnational dimensions, including terrorism, major financial crimes, and interstate conspiracies.

This model preserves state-level responsiveness while maintaining federal oversight through personnel management, training institutions, and intelligence coordination. India's experience illustrates how decentralisation can coexist with strong central influence without undermining national unity, although critics note persistent political interference at both state and federal levels.

Brazil

Brazil presents a distinctive dual-force structure. Each state maintains two police organisations: the Military Police, responsible for uniformed patrol and public order, and the Civil Police, responsible for criminal investigation. In addition, the Federal Police addresses crimes against the federal government, organised crime, border security, and interstate offences (Constitution of the Federative Republic of Brazil, 1988, Art. 144). Importantly, the Military Police are constitutionally designated as reserve forces of the Brazilian Army, enabling federal intervention during severe security crises. This arrangement allows substantial state autonomy while preserving a constitutional mechanism for central corrective control.

Brazil's model demonstrates how decentralisation can be balanced with national security imperatives, although it also reveals risks of militarisation, institutional rivalry, and human rights violations when oversight is weak.

South Africa

South Africa operates a predominantly centralised policing system under the South African Police Service, with provincial structures that remain administratively subordinate to a national commissioner (Mabasa & Olutola, 2021). This configuration emerged from post-apartheid reforms aimed at dismantling racially fragmented policing and reinforcing national unity. While centralisation has promoted standardisation and integration, critics argue that it has limited local adaptability and responsiveness, particularly in communities facing high levels of violent crime. Provincial governments possess limited operational authority, which constrains their capacity to tailor policing strategies to local conditions.

South Africa's experience illustrates the limitations of excessive centralisation in diverse societies and underscores the importance of balancing national integration with local effectiveness.

Comparative Experiences and their Relevance for Nigeria

Experiences from other large and diverse federal or quasi-federal systems illustrate the range of institutional options available for organising policing. The United States is often cited as one of the most decentralised systems, with thousands of federal, state, county, and municipal agencies operating with significant autonomy. This "multi-layered" model strengthens local control and community-oriented policing but also produces coordination challenges, variation in training and standards, and unequal access to resources across jurisdictions. India adopts a mixed model: policing is constitutionally a state subject, yet the Indian Police Service provides a centrally recruited leadership cadre, and national agencies retain important roles in areas such as serious crime and counter-terrorism. Brazil combines state-level policing with a federal force and constitutional provisions that link state military police to the armed forces, creating a formal mechanism for federal intervention during serious crises. South Africa, by contrast, maintains a predominantly centralised national police service, which emerged from efforts to integrate fragmented apartheid-era forces, but centralisation has been criticised for limiting responsiveness to local crime patterns and socio-economic conditions.

These comparative experiences show that there is no single "best" model of police organisation. Instead, outcomes depend on how institutional arrangements balance central authority and local autonomy, ensure minimum professional standards, and provide effective accountability mechanisms. For Nigeria, several lessons can tentatively be drawn. First, decentralisation can work when clear constitutional and legal frameworks define roles and responsibilities, and when strong mechanisms exist for coordination and information sharing across

levels of government. Second, central governments can retain important integrative functions such as setting training curricula, maintaining national databases, and addressing interstate or transnational crime without monopolising day-to-day policing. Third, hybrid models that combine state-level operational control with federal oversight and crisis-management capacity can offer a practical middle ground between a fully centralised system and an uncoordinated patchwork of independent local forces.

This study situates Nigeria's current debate on state policing within this wider comparative context. By linking Nigerian stakeholders' perceptions of centralised, state-level, and hybrid policing with experiences observed in other federations, the study aims to identify which institutional features are most likely to support national cohesion, improve security performance, and strengthen democratic accountability in Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional explanatory survey design to examine how alternative policing structures such as centralised, state-level, and hybrid arrangements are perceived to influence key dimensions of security governance in Nigeria. The design made it possible to test relationships between perceptions of policing models and outcomes such as national unity, operational efficiency, accountability, and alignment with federal principles. Based on existing scholarly works on federalism and policing, the study tested propositions that: (a) preference for state or hybrid policing is positively associated with perceived operational efficiency, accountability, and federalism alignment; and (b) preference for centralised policing is positively associated with perceived national unity but negatively associated with local responsiveness.

The target population comprised adult Nigerians with direct or indirect involvement in security and governance processes. These included security practitioners, law enforcement personnel, policymakers, academics, and ordinary citizens. To ensure broad national coverage and capture Nigeria's diversity, a stratified random sampling procedure was adopted across the six geopolitical zones. Within each zone, selected states and localities were used as primary sampling points. Respondents were then approached through government institutions, security agencies, tertiary institutions, and community settings. Particular attention was given to zones and states experiencing high levels of insecurity, especially in parts of the North-East and North-West, to ensure that views from severely affected areas were adequately represented.

A total of 500 structured questionnaires were distributed. After screening for completeness and consistency, 420 questionnaires were retained for analysis, representing an effective response rate of 84%. The final sample included security experts, police personnel, and policymakers (47%) alongside a 53% majority of ordinary citizens, thereby balancing professional and grassroots perspectives. Respondents were drawn from all six geopolitical zones. Although slight variations in zonal proportions occurred due to access and security constraints, overall coverage remained reasonably reflective of Nigeria's regional composition. These minor deviations are acknowledged as limitations when interpreting the generalisability of the findings.

Data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire specifically developed for the study. Instrument development followed three stages. First, key constructs were identified from the literature, including national unity, federalism alignment, operational efficiency, local responsiveness, accountability, community trust, and perceived risks of political interference and ethnic fragmentation. Second, measurement items were adapted from previous empirical studies on policing and security governance, and additional items were developed to capture the Nigerian context more precisely. Third, the draft questionnaire was reviewed by academics in security and strategic studies, senior police officers, and policy practitioners to assess clarity, relevance, and content coverage. Their feedback informed revisions to item wording, question order, and instructions. A small pilot test with a sample of respondents not included in the main study further confirmed the clarity and length of the instrument and led to minor adjustments.

Key constructs were measured using multi-item Likert-type scales. Respondents indicated their level of agreement with statements on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Perceptions of national unity captured the extent to which a policing structure was seen as fostering a shared national identity and reducing regional distrust. Federalism alignment focused on whether the structure was

perceived as consistent with the division of powers and respect for state autonomy. Operational efficiency and local responsiveness were assessed through items on response times, adequacy of deployment, and ability to adapt policing strategies to local security conditions. Accountability and community trust were measured with items on transparency, citizen oversight, and citizens' willingness to cooperate with the police. Perceived risks of political interference and ethnic bias were captured through items asking respondents to rate the likelihood that governors or local elites would misuse decentralised police forces.

For each construct, responses were aggregated into composite indices by computing the mean of associated items, after reverse-coding negatively worded items where necessary. Higher scores indicated stronger agreement that a given policing model promoted the relevant governance outcome or risk. Internal consistency of the scales was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, and all indices recorded values above 0.80, indicating satisfactory reliability for social science research. Content validity was supported by the expert review process. Basic construct validity was examined by checking whether inter-correlations among related indices followed theoretical expectations (for example, positive association between perceived operational efficiency and community trust, and negative association between perceived political interference and accountability).

Data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 26. The analysis followed three main steps. First, descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) were used to profile respondents and summarise general attitudes toward centralised, state, and hybrid policing arrangements. Second, Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were computed to explore bivariate relationships among the key composite indices and provide preliminary evidence for the hypothesised associations. Third, multiple regression analysis was used to determine the extent to which preferences for specific policing arrangements (centralised, state, or hybrid) predicted perceived national unity, federalism alignment, operational efficiency, and accountability, while controlling for basic socio-demographic variables such as region, occupation, age, and educational level. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to assess whether perceptions differed significantly between professional groups (e.g., security practitioners versus ordinary citizens) and across geopolitical zones. All statistical tests were conducted at a significance level of $p < 0.05$. Given that the dependent variables were constructed as composite indices from multiple Likert items, they were treated as approximately continuous, consistent with common practice in public administration and governance research.

Ethical standards were observed throughout the study. Formal ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional committee. Participation was voluntary, and all respondents were informed about the objectives of the study, the approximate time required to complete the questionnaire, and their right to withdraw at any point without penalty. Informed consent was obtained from every participant before data collection. No personal identifiers were collected, and completed questionnaires were stored securely, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality. The reliance on perception-based survey data without parallel objective crime or performance indicators is recognised as a methodological limitation. This is explicitly acknowledged in the discussion, and future research is encouraged to triangulate perceptions with administrative crime statistics or independent performance evaluations of policing agencies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondents exhibited a clear preference for decentralised/state or hybrid policing arrangements, reflecting widespread dissatisfaction with the performance of the existing centralised system. Supporters of state and hybrid models highlighted perceived gains in response time, operational efficiency, community engagement, accountability, and alignment with "true federalism," whereas centralisation was more strongly associated with symbolic unity and reduced risks of regional fragmentation. Regression analyses confirmed these patterns. Preference for state policing significantly predicted higher operational efficiency and federal alignment, while centralisation remained positively associated with national unity. The models explained between 22% and 56% of variance across outcome variables, indicating substantive explanatory power for perceptual governance research.

Descriptive statistics indicate a moderate to strong preference for state or hybrid policing arrangements (mean = 3.82), coupled with high perceived alignment with federalism (mean = 4.52) and operational efficiency (mean = 4.04). By contrast, respondents associate centralised policing with comparatively higher scores on national unity (national unity index mean = 3.56), suggesting that the existing NPF continues to be viewed as a symbol of cohesion and a safeguard against fragmentation. These basic patterns already reflect the core tension at the heart of Nigeria's policing debate: citizens and stakeholders want more locally responsive and constitutionally congruent policing, but they remain concerned that decentralisation could undermine cohesion in an already polarised polity. The multivariate analyses sharpen this picture and move it beyond descriptive impressions. Regression models for national unity, federalism alignment and operational efficiency are all statistically significant, with adjusted R^2 values of approximately 0.22, 0.37 and 0.56 respectively, indicating that preferences and perceptions of policing structures explain a substantive share of variation in these governance outcomes. The operational efficiency model is particularly strong (R = 0.748, R^2 = 0.559, F = 175.60, p < 0.001), underscoring the extent to which respondents see policing design as directly linked to the practical performance of security institutions

At the level of specific effects, the findings reveal a systematic trade off that mirrors the theoretical literature. Preference for state or hybrid policing significantly reduces perceived national unity (β = -0.296, p < 0.001), yet it strongly enhances perceptions of federalism alignment (β = 0.431, p < 0.001) and, most notably, operational efficiency (β = 0.586, p < 0.001). Conversely, centralised policing is perceived to support national unity ($\beta \approx$ 0.28, p < 0.001) but to undermine operational efficiency ($\beta \approx$ -0.32, p < 0.001) and federalism ($\beta \approx$ -0.25, p < 0.01), largely due to bureaucratic delay and detachment from local realities. These findings empirically validate long standing criticisms that Nigeria's highly centralised NPF is ill adapted to a federal and deeply diverse society, even as they confirm that many stakeholders still see single national police as a bulwark against centrifugal forces. The role of perceived risks is also instructive for current reform debates. Perceived risks of decentralisation such as gubernatorial abuse, ethnic bias and interstate fragmentation have a statistically significant negative effect on both national unity (β = -0.085, p = 0.001) and operational efficiency (β = -0.222, p < 0.001). This indicates that stakeholders worry not only that state police could weaken cohesion, but also that poorly regulated decentralisation might itself generate new forms of insecurity and inefficiency. Importantly, awareness of ongoing reform efforts (including the declaration of a national security emergency by President Bola Ahmed Tinubu and the clamour to move policing to the Concurrent Legislative List) does not have a significant independent effect in the models, suggesting that information about reform has not yet translated into greater confidence in the safeguards proposed. For policymakers, this implies that any transition toward state or hybrid policing must be accompanied by visible and credible institutional guarantees such as independent State Police Service Commissions, strengthened federal oversight and clear rules for federal intervention if it is to command broad societal trust.

Taken together, these statistical findings reinforce the argument that Nigeria's current policing configuration constitutes a "structural paradox" within its federal order. Centralisation offers perceived symbolic unity but systematically constrains operational effectiveness, local accountability and the practical expression of federalism. At the same time, unregulated decentralisation carries real risks of politicisation and uneven protection, which are clearly recognised by respondents. The evidence therefore supports neither a simple defence of the status quo nor a naïve embrace of unbounded state policing but rather points toward a constitutionally regulated hybrid model that combines state level responsiveness with strong federal safeguards, standardisation and crisis intervention capacity.

The comparative experiences of the United States, India, Brazil and South Africa provide important context for interpreting these results. The American case illustrates how highly decentralised policing can be compatible with national level coordination mechanisms; the Indian model demonstrates how state dominated forces can be embedded within centrally managed professional cadres; Brazil's dual military–civil police structure linked to the federal government shows how decentralisation can coexist with constitutional provisions for federal intervention; and South Africa's national service highlights both the integrative benefits and the local limitations of centralisation. The pattern of coefficients in this study suggests that Nigerian respondents are, in effect, intuitively converging on a similar hybrid equilibrium: they value the unifying function of a national police, but they strongly favour more local control, efficiency and accountability, provided that credible constraints on abuse

are in place. These empirical insights significantly strengthen the contribution of the study to ongoing policing reform debates in Nigeria. They provide quantitative backing for reform proposals that seek to move policing to the Concurrent Legislative List; establish state level police services under independent commissions; retain federal police with responsibility for interstate, organised and transnational crime; and embed the entire system within common national training, human rights and professionalism standards. By showing that preferences for state or hybrid policing are systematically and strongly linked to improved perceptions of operational efficiency and federalism, while simultaneously documenting the perceived risks that must be managed, the study moves the debate beyond abstract ideological positions toward evidence based institutional design. In a context of persistent insurgency, banditry, kidnapping and communal violence, and in light of active constitutional initiatives such as House Bill 617, these findings underscore that the question is no longer whether Nigeria should reform its centralised police, but how it can do so in a way that maximises security and accountability without sacrificing national cohesion. Accordingly, this study proposes some recommendations aimed at transitioning the centralised police structure to a hybrid model.

CONCLUSION

This study establishes that Nigeria's centralised policing framework is increasingly incompatible with the demands of contemporary security governance in a complex federal state. While centralisation supports national cohesion, it systematically constrains operational effectiveness and erodes federal principles. The findings indicate that a transition towards a constitutionally regulated hybrid policing system, combining state-level responsiveness with robust federal oversight, offers the most empirically supported pathway to enhanced security outcomes and democratic accountability.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The empirical evidence generated by this study demonstrates that Nigeria's highly centralised policing framework has become structurally misaligned with both the country's federal constitutional order and the complex security realities confronting it. Accordingly, a reform towards a constitutionally regulated hybrid policing system, combining state-level responsiveness with federal oversight is recommended. To achieve this, some policy recommendations are hereby proposed. These include constitutional and legislative amendments, establishment of institutional safeguards against political misuse, standardisation of training, ethics, and professional norms, development of sustainable and equitable funding mechanisms, and adoption of phased and pilot-based implementation strategies.

Constitutional and Legislative Amendments

Nigeria must undertake deliberate constitutional restructuring to relocate policing from the Exclusive Legislative List to the Concurrent Legislative List. Such reform would formally recognise the authority of state governments to establish and manage police institutions within their territorial jurisdictions, while preserving the oversight role of the federal government. Additionally, the constitutional reconfiguration must clearly define functional boundaries. For instance, Federal police institutions should retain responsibility for interstate crime, terrorism, organised crime, cybercrime, and threats to national sovereignty, while state police should focus on community safety, public order, and routine criminal investigation. This functional delineation of operational boundaries would minimise jurisdictional conflict and prevent duplication of effort.

Establishment of Institutional Safeguards Against Political Misuse

A central risk identified by both the literature and this study concerns the politicisation of decentralised police forces. To mitigate this risk, each state police organisation should be governed by an independent State Police Service Commission, insulated from executive interference and responsible for recruitment, promotion, discipline, and dismissal. Membership should reflect a balance of judicial officers, civil society representatives, and professional security experts. At the federal level, the Police Service Commission should be strengthened to exercise supervisory authority over minimum professional standards, human rights compliance, and inter-state coordination. Additionally, constitutional provisions with clear thresholds should authorise limited federal

intervention where state policing demonstrably fails or threatens constitutional order. This dual-layer oversight structure would reduce the likelihood that state police become instruments of partisan repression or ethnic exclusion.

Standardisation of Training, Ethics, and Professional Norms

Decentralisation must not result in fragmentation of professional practice. The federal government should therefore retain responsibility for setting national training curricula, ethical codes, and operational doctrines applicable to all police personnel, irrespective of jurisdiction. The various police training institutions could be mandated to deliver harmonised training programmes emphasising on Human Rights and Constitutional Policing, Community Engagement and Intelligence-led Policing, Forensic Investigation and Digital Crime Management and Inter-agency Coordination and Crisis Response. Such standardisation would ensure functional equivalence across state forces and preserve national coherence within a decentralised framework.

Development of Sustainable and Equitable Funding Mechanisms

Fiscal inequality among Nigerian states constitutes a major structural obstacle to decentralised policing. Without financial equalisation, poorer states risk maintaining under-resourced forces, thereby reproducing insecurity and institutional weakness. Therefore, there is the need for the establishment of a dedicated National Police Trust Fund, jointly financed by federal allocations, state contributions, and earmarked security levies. Disbursement formulas should reflect population size, crime burden, and fiscal capacity, ensuring that minimum operational standards are attainable nationwide. Furthermore, statutory auditing and public financial reporting must accompany such funding to prevent misuse and corruption.

Adoption of Phased and Pilot-Based Implementation Strategies

Rather than immediate nationwide decentralisation, Nigeria should adopt a phased reform strategy. Pilot state police programmes in selected states with demonstrated administrative capacity and accountability records would allow institutional learning, performance evaluation, and adjustment before national scaling. Performance benchmarks such as response times, crime clearance rates, citizen trust indices, and human rights compliance should guide expansion decisions. This evidence-based approach would reduce systemic risk and build public confidence in the reform process.

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