

# Community- Based Defense Strategies against Insecurity in Rijiya Community of Gusau Local Government Area of Zamfara State, Nigeria

Adamu Mohammed<sup>1</sup> and \*Rabiu Garba<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Political Science, Faculty of Management and Social Sciences, Federal University, Gusau, Zamfara State, Nigeria

<sup>2</sup>Department of Political Science, Faculty of Management and Social Sciences, Federal University, Gusau, Zamfara State, Nigeria

\*Corresponding Author

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## ABSTRACT

Rural Communities in Nigeria have increasingly developed local security responses due to persistent insecurity, weak State presence, and the proliferation of armed banditry. This study examines community based defense strategies against insecurity in Rijiya Community, a rural settlement in Gusau Local Government Area of Zamfara State. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through in-depth interviews with 45 purposively selected respondents, including community leaders, vigilante members, youths, and household heads. Findings reveal that the community relies on informal security arrangements such as vigilante groups, neighborhood watch systems, intelligence sharing networks, youth patrols, and collaboration with traditional institutions. While these strategies have enhanced early warning, deterrence, and community cohesion, they are constrained by inadequate training, limited resources, poor coordination with formal security agencies, and the risk of abuse of power. The study concludes that community defense strategies remain critical for rural security. However, there is need for institutional support, regulation, and integration with formal security architecture to ensure effectiveness and sustainability.

**Keywords:** Community defense, rural insecurity, vigilantism, community policing patrol.

## INTRODUCTION

It is undeniable fact that insecurity has become one of the major challenges confronting Nigeria's Rural Communities, particularly the North-West part of the country. Rural Areas which were once considered peaceful have become vulnerable to armed banditry, kidnappings, cattle rustlings, and incessant violent communal attacks. These challenges disrupt agricultural activities, displace populations, and weaken social cohesion (Aliyu, Ahmed, & Mustapha, 2024).

Zamfara State, an agrarian State from Northern Nigeria is among the most affected regions due to its rural landscape, porous borders, and limited State security presence. Formal security agencies such as the Nigeria Police Force and the Military have struggled to provide effective coverage in rural areas due to manpower shortages, poor terrain, and limited intelligence (Arisukwu et al., 2020).

Consequently, rural communities have increasingly resorted to self-help security mechanisms, popularly described as **Community-based Defense Strategies**. These strategies involve collective actions by community members to prevent, detect, and respond to security threats using local knowledge and social networks. Rijiya Community in Gusau Local Government Area exemplifies a typical rural setting where insecurity has compelled residents to organize informal defense mechanisms. Therefore, understanding how these strategies operate, their effectiveness, and their limitations is crucial for informing rural security policy and strengthening community

resilience. This study therefore examines the nature, effectiveness, and challenges of community-based Defense strategies in Rijija Community of Gusau Local Government Area of Zamfara State.

## Problem Statement

Despite various government interventions, insecurity in rural Northwestern Nigeria continues to escalate. Communities in Zamfara State, particularly in Gusau Local Government Area, face persistent threats from armed banditry, kidnapping, and cattle rustling. The limited capacity of formal security institutions has created significant protection gaps, exposing rural populations to frequent attacks (Mustapha, 2025).

The inability of state security agencies to provide adequate coverage has eroded public confidence and compelled communities to adopt self-help security measures. While these community-based strategies have improved local vigilance and response, they operate largely outside formal legal frameworks and often lack adequate training, funding, and coordination (Nweke & Nwankwo, 2023).

Furthermore, existing studies have focused more on the causes of insecurity than on the operational dynamics of community-based defense strategies at the local level. This creates a gap in empirical knowledge, particularly in communities such as Rijija. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining the effectiveness and limitations of these strategies.

## Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine community-based defense strategies against insecurity in Rijija Community. The specific objectives are to:

- i. Examine the major forms of insecurity affecting Rijija Community.
- ii. Identify Community-based Defense Strategies adopted by residents of Rijija.
- iii. Assess the effectiveness of these strategies.
- iv. Examine the challenges facing their implementation.
- v. Analyze collaboration between community groups and formal security agencies.
- vi. Provide policy recommendations for improving rural security.

## Conceptual Clarification

The escalating insecurity in Nigeria characterized by armed banditry, kidnappings, communal conflicts, and other violent crimes has compelled scholars and policymakers to investigate Community-based Defense Strategies as complementary mechanisms to formal security institutions. Traditional policing structures have struggled to effectively mitigate localized threats due to issues such as weak community trust, inadequate manpower, and limited presence in rural areas (Nweke & Nwankwo, 2023; Adamu Aliyu et al., 2024). Consequently, community-driven defense and policing initiatives have emerged as adaptive responses aimed at enhancing local security and fostering collaborative frameworks between citizens and security actors.

Conceptually, the term Community-based Defense Strategies refers to locally initiated security arrangements in which community members collectively take responsibility of protecting their lives and property against internal and external aggressions. These strategies often include vigilante groups, neighborhood watch associations, intelligence sharing networks, and collaboration with traditional authorities (Bassey, 2023). These arrangements are typically informal, voluntary and embedded in communal norms and values.

Unlike formal policing, Community-based Defense differs from formal policing as it relies on local participation, voluntary service, and indigenous knowledge of terrain and social relationships (Ogungbemi, 2019). Scholars

such as Arisukwu (2020) argue that these strategies are particularly effective in rural contexts where trust among residents facilitates collective action.

Community-based Defense Strategies in Nigeria are rooted in the premise that localized involvement in security management fosters greater responsiveness, better intelligence gathering, and enhanced trust between communities and law enforcement agencies. Community policing as a central concept, emphasizes partnership, shared responsibility, and proactive engagement with local populations to prevent crime and disorder (Kenku & Umar, 2025). In Nigeria, community policing initiatives seek to bridge the gap between formal police services and communities by embedding security practices within the sociocultural fabric of local environments (Ekpenisi, 2025).

Similarly, community vigilantism and neighborhood watches have emerged as pragmatic defense strategies in instances where communities perceive state security apparatuses to be insufficiently responsive. For example, Adamu (2024) asserts that in Jibia Local Government Area of Katsina State, strategies such as neighborhood patrols, information sharing, and community surveillance have complemented formal security efforts to counter armed banditry, illustrating how community mobilization evolves in response to persistent threats.

Empirical studies highlight that community-based defense strategies can contribute meaningfully to crime reduction and crisis mitigation when adequately supported. In Katsina, respondents reported that local vigilance groups and community patrols have helped limit the activities of armed bandits by improving real-time information flows and strengthening community vigilance (Adamu Aliyu et al., 2024). In the South-East geopolitical zone, local vigilante formations have similarly been credited with reductions in armed robbery, kidnapping, and communal clashes, despite operational constraints (Nweke & Nwankwo, 2023). These findings align with research in Abuja's Kubwa community, where integrating community actors into broader security frameworks helped cultivate collaborative security governance (Adelani et al., 2023).

Moreover, specific models like the Lagos State Neighbourhood Safety Corps (LNSC) demonstrate that structured, community-oriented security units can positively impact human security by reducing crime rates and strengthening public safety (Ambali & Araba, 2020). These examples underscore the potential of community-based strategies to fill gaps left by formal policing particularly in contexts where law enforcement faces resource and trust deficits.

However, despite potential benefits attached to community based defense strategies, studies consistently report significant challenges undermining the effectiveness of community-based defense strategies. Principal among these are mistrust and weak communication between communities and police, inadequate training and funding for community security personnel, and the absence of robust legal and policy frameworks guiding their operations (Bappi et al., 2025; & Ekpenisi et al., 2025). Without formal regulation, some vigilante groups operate in legal grey areas, raising concerns about accountability, human rights, and the risk of abuses (Marvellous, 2025).

Community policing faces institutional obstacles as well. Scholars such as Mustapha (2025) identify systemic issues such as political interference, corruption, and inadequate operational capacities within the Nigeria Police Force, which can erode community confidence and limit collaborative potential. In some regions, calls for more decentralized policing structures including proposals for State police reflect broader dissatisfaction with Nigeria's centralized security architecture and the belief that localized forces would be more accountable and effective (Okojie & Iyere, 2025; Uzoka, 2023).

To enhance the contributions of community-based defense strategies, scholars advocate for integrated policy reforms and stronger institutional support. A recurring recommendation is the establishment of explicit legal frameworks that formalize community policing roles, clearly define responsibilities, and embed accountability mechanisms to prevent abuses (Ekpenisi et al., 2025). Strengthening partnerships between local governments, traditional leaders, and security agencies is also emphasized as critical to sustaining community involvement and trust (Aneke & Fayomi, 2024).

Additionally, capacity-building through training, adequate resourcing, and technology integration is highlighted as necessary to transition community security actors from reactive, informal groups into professional partners in public safety (Bappi et al., 2025). Ultimately, literature suggests that while community-based defense strategies cannot replace formal security institutions, they represent valuable, context-sensitive complements that if well-structured and regulated, can help mitigate Nigeria's multifaceted security challenges.

### **Community Policing and Vigilantism**

Community policing emphasizes collaboration between citizens and law enforcement agencies to identify and solve security problems (Eja et al., 2025). In practice, however, community policing in rural Nigeria often blurs into vigilantism due to limited state presence.

Vigilante groups operate as informal security actors, conducting patrols, arrests, and sometimes punishment of suspected criminals. Although vigilantes are often praised for their effectiveness, scholars caution that lack of training and regulation can lead to excesses (Igwe Bassey, 2023).

### **Strategies/Programmes for Effective Community Defense in Nigeria**

For community defense to succeed in Nigeria and perhaps elsewhere, three essential practical strategies are strongly advocated in this study, viz: police-community partnership, police-community information sharing, and police involvement in community affairs. Police-community partnership programme is a strategy for making the public a serious partner in policing the community. This works by establishing the citizen advisory committees, which open channels of communication between the police and the public. These committees are usually composed of well-established members of the society who are charismatic and have the interest of the general community at heart. Ren, Cao, Lovrich and Gaffney (2005) are of the view that this programme permits the police to meet with local residents in order to discuss crime in the neighbourhood and to use personal initiative to solve problems. Even extant study acknowledged the significance of police-community partnership programme. For instance, police and community members establish "citizen advisory committees that would open up channels of communication between police and the community" (Sykes, 1978, p. 394).

In Nigeria, for instance, true representatives of citizen advisory committees are traditional rulers and members of their cabinet, town union and opinion leaders, and youth leaders. The committees meet regularly with police to discuss their welfare, crime related problems, police-community relationships, and then work out modalities on how to combat crime to the barest minimum. By implication, the committee members are equally security agents who pull their resources together with that of the conventional police in the fight against crime and criminals. When this synergy is formed, the general public "may find that officers are more respectful of citizenry; a condition that helps lower the number of complaints and improves community relations" (Davis, Mateu-Gelabert & Miller, 2005, p. 231). Although, whatever might be the need to ease tensions resulting from crime and criminalities in the community, the State retains the ultimate power to deal with offences and offenders while negotiating both compliance and co-operation with the community. Beyond this, the creation of citizen advisory committees paves way for the police system to succeed in the war against crime.

The poor are more likely to suffer disproportionately for breaking the same law than the rich. The realization of this ideal is important, particularly when there are disparities between the rich and the poor in the police treatment patterns (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2000). In criminal investigation, corruption is said to be present in most cases and is usually determined by the extent of bribe given by either parties to a case. The party that gives more is likely to influence the direction of investigation in his or her favour (Dambazau, 2007). Fortunately, police-community partnership programme has been instituted to remedy the situation. This programme always strives to maintain a balance and equilibrium, and democratic social order which are vital approaches to effective community policing in Nigeria. Under this programme, the police are expected to be fair in their enforcement of the law and also accountable to the citizenry instead of preying on them. The police are not expected to impose themselves on the community or become autonomous agents, driving the community as an entity by 'force' or 'fire' as tenable in Nigeria. The police are expected to act as public servants and civilized agents of peace, securing the society in a uniformly, morally and socially acceptable, democratic manner. This should be done

without recourse to partiality and perverting the course of justice based on socioeconomic status and social background to subject(s) or parties involved.

Police-community information sharing is the second significant strategy for effective community policing. In community policing, information sharing helps the police to establish the identity of crime suspects. When there is discrepancy between individuals’ actual social identity and their perceived identity, it leads to error and social control agents are not immune to error (Kelly & Clarke, 2003). Information sharing provides the facts necessary for bringing violators before the court, which is an approach that enhances community policing (Quinney, 1974). Perhaps, on the basis of this, it is established that people seek information for different needs and from varying sources. Their needs and reasons could range from educational, research, professional, recreational, security to pecuniary, or for personal development. Man by nature is security conscious, and are pushed to seek information so as to answer the ‘why’, ‘what’, ‘when’ and ‘how’ questions which are tied to police-community information sharing (Okogwu & Nnam, 2013).

Therefore, citizens’ participation in sharing information with police will assists in gathering socio-demographic data that could help to control the errors and difficulties sometimes encountered in the course of identifying law violators. Maintaining a good relationship between the police and community remains the primary means of overcoming the barrier in information gathering and dissemination, which gives rise to effective community policing. The police-community information sharing tends to provide police with vital crime information about a suspect and his or her activities and whereabouts. This development, undoubtedly, is useful in solving multitude of challenges confronting community policing in Nigeria. The essence of information sharing in community policing is to either deter crime before it occurs or tracks down offender and at the long-run achieve huge success in crime reduction.

Finally, the police involvement in community affairs is another strong strategy that allows the police to display themselves as both private citizens and State agents of social control. Community policing under this programme or strategy presents the police as servants of the society who, should in a reasonable manner, enforce law and order and ensure public compliance with policies. Extant studies also attest that the involvement of police in community affairs has actually yielded fruitful results. For instance, Quinney (1974) affirmed that when the community collaborates with police personnel in maintaining social order, it helps the legal system also to be increasingly used in criminal justice administration. The police are viable instrument for building an inclusive and organized community policing in Nigeria. Police involvement in community affairs facilitates rapid and timely control of persistence rebellion, whether in outright political processes or behaviour that otherwise, violates the rules of the society. Community policing also helps the State policing actors to exercise its repressive force on the people in order to achieve compliance with the law (Kelly & Clark, 2003). This technique can be employed only in a physically and socially disorganised community. In more disorganised areas, some experts pointed out, police use aggressive tactics to reduce crime and ‘take back the streets’ before building relations with community leaders (Siegel, 2008 citing Nolan, Conti & McDevitt, 2004).

**Forms Of Insecurity In Rijija Community**

Respondents identified armed banditry, cattle rustling, night thefts, and fear of kidnapping as major security threats confronting the community. These threats have disrupted farming activities, reduced night- time mobility, and heightened fear among residents.

**Forms of Community-Based Defense Strategies**

Different forms of Communalty-based Strategies exist in Rijija as illustrated in the table below:

Table 2: Identified Community-Based Defense Strategies in Rijija

Strategy	Description
Vigilante groups	Local youths conducting patrols

Neighborhood watch	Surveillance at night
Intelligence sharing	Information exchange on suspicious Movements
Traditional authority involvement	Coordination by village heads
Community patrols	Joint patrols during high-risk periods

**Source: Researcher’s initiative, 2026**

**Vigilante and Youth Patrols**

The vigilante group constitutes the backbone of Community-based Defense action in Rijiya Community. The group composes of local youths; members conducting regular nights patrols and respond to distress calls. A male respondent who was interviewed in his house noted that:

If not for the vigilante group, criminals would have attacked us many times because the police are far from this community.

This assertion underscores the imperativeness of the activities of vigilante groups in rural areas where insecurity thrives.

**Intelligence Sharing and Early Warning**

Residents rely on informal communication channels such as community meetings, phone calls, and interpersonal networks to share security information. This system has improved early warning and preparedness against attacks.

**Collaboration with Formal Security Agencies**

Although limited, some respondents reported occasional collaboration with the Police and Civil Defense Corps mainly through information sharing and emergency reporting.

**Effectiveness of Community Defense Strategies in Rijiya Community**

Community Defense Strategies in Rijiya Community have demonstrated a degree of effectiveness in addressing local security challenges, particularly in response to armed banditry and rural crime. These strategies largely driven by local vigilante groups and supported by initiatives such as the Community Protection Guards (CPG) are adapted to the specific security realities of the community.

The effectiveness and successes recorded include:

**i. Rapid Localized Response:**

Vigilante groups in Rijiya Community provide immediate responses to security threats, especially in situations where formal security agencies may not arrive promptly. Their familiarity with local terrain, population dynamics, and movement patterns enhances early detection and intervention.

**ii. Improved Community Surveillance:**

The presence of organized patrols and community watch systems has strengthened surveillance across Rijiya, leading to improved monitoring of suspicious activities and reduced opportunities for bandit incursions. This aligns with findings that community-led security increases situational awareness and deterrence (SBM Intelligence, 2021).

### iii. **Reduction in Localized Attacks:**

Although insecurity persists in the wider region, residents report a relative decline in the frequency of attacks within Rijija Community itself. This improvement is attributed to consistent vigilance, community cooperation, and information-sharing with security agencies.

### iv. **Protection of Livelihood Activities:**

Community defense efforts have contributed to safer farming conditions, allowing residents to return to agricultural activities with reduced fear. Supports from units such as the Nigeria Security and Civil Defense Corps, Agro Rangers, where available, further reinforce this protection.

### v. **Strengthened Community Cohesion:**

Participation in local security initiatives has fostered unity and collective responsibility among residents of Rijija. This social cohesion enhances cooperation in intelligence gathering and crisis response, which is critical for sustaining community-based security systems.

In sum, community defense strategies have been relatively effective in providing immediate protection and reducing localized insecurity in Rijija Community. However, their success remains limited by broader structural challenges.

## **Obstacles to Community Defense in Rijija Community**

### **1. Lack of Trust and Social Cohesion**

Findings from the field reveal that distrust between residents and a security agency is a major constraint to community defense in Rijija Community. Many respondents expressed disbelief about the effectiveness and integrity of law enforcement personnel, citing concerns about corruption and delayed response to distress calls. This perception discourages residents from sharing intelligence or cooperating with authorities, thereby weakening community-based security efforts (Alemika, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2020).

For instance, one respondent noted:

“Even if you report, nothing will be done on time. Sometimes information leaks back to the criminals.” (Respondent 4, Personal Communication, 2026).

In addition, intra-community distrust emerged as a critical issue. Respondents highlighted divisions based on social, ethnic, and economic differences, which hinder collective action. Suspicion among neighbours reduces willingness to participate in joint security initiatives (Okoli & Iortyer, 2014).

Fear of retaliation was also consistently reported. Many participants indicated reluctance to engage in vigilante activities or report suspicious behavior due to fear of attacks by bandits or informants within the community.

“People are afraid because if they know you reported them, they will come back for you.” (Respondent 11, Personal Communication, 2026).

These findings align with existing studies that identify fear and mistrust as key barriers to effective community security (International Crisis Group, 2021).

### **2. Limited Resources and Infrastructure**

The study further found that limited resources significantly constrain community defense mechanisms in Rijija Community. Respondents emphasized the lack of basic security infrastructure such as patrol vehicles, communication gadgets, and adequate lighting in residential areas.

“We don’t have equipment. Even vigilante groups use local weapons and sometimes nothing at all.” (Respondent 7, Personal Communication, 2026).

Poor infrastructure was also identified as a major challenge. Inadequate road networks and unreliable electricity supply make it difficult to monitor communities and respond quickly to security threats. These infrastructural deficits reduce the overall effectiveness of community-based defense strategies (World Bank, 2022).

Additionally, economic hardship in the community limits residents’ ability to contribute financially to security initiatives. Many respondents noted that poverty affects participation and weakens sustainability of community defense efforts (UNDP, 2021).

### **3. Communication and Mobilization Barriers**

Effective communication and mobilization remain problematic in Gusau. The study revealed that there are no well-structured communication systems for sharing security information across neighborhoods. Information dissemination is often informal and inconsistent, leading to delays in response to threats (Eke, 2018).

“Sometimes we hear about attacks late because there is no proper way to pass information quickly.” (Respondent 15, Personal Communication, 2026).

Time and economic pressures also limit participation. Many residents reported being too occupied with daily livelihood activities to actively engage in community defense programs (Ogundiya, 2013).

Furthermore, the findings indicate low levels of awareness and participation in organized security initiatives. In many cases, only a small group of individuals often vigilante members bear the responsibility for community defense, leading to fatigue and reduced effectiveness over time (Okoli, 2017).

“It is the same people doing everything. Others don’t want to get involved.” (Respondent 22, Personal Communication, 2026).

### **4. Lack of Accountability**

When groups lack oversight, they may become abusive or corrupt, eroding legitimacy and ensuring more harm than good.

In summary, effective community defense is not just about having more guns but having more trust and organisation to create a resilient local environment.

### **5. Intelligence Failure**

Bandits heavily rely on networks of local informants which often allow them to bypass community defense efforts.

### **Risks Of Informal Security Arrangements**

While community-based defense strategies provide immediate responses to insecurity, their reliance on informal structures presents significant risks that complicate their long-term sustainability. These risks are particularly evident in relation to accountability shortfalls, weak legitimacy, and human rights violations.

First, the issue of accountability remains a major concern. This is because vigilante groups in many parts of Nigeria, including Rijiy community operate outside formal oversight structures, with no clearly defined rules governing arrest, detention, and/or use of force. As noted by Baker (2002) and Higazi (2008), informal security actors often derive authority from community approval rather than codified legal systems, which limits mechanisms for redress in cases of abuse. This absence of institutional accountability increases the likelihood of arbitrary actions and misuse of power.

Second, legal legitimacy presents a structural dilemma. Although vigilante groups are sometimes tolerated or informally supported by State authorities, their activities frequently exist within a legal grey area. According to Meagher (2007), the proliferation of non-State security actors in weak governance contexts often reflects gaps in State capability but also creates parallel systems that challenge the authority of formal legal institutions. Similarly, Abrahams (1998) argues that vigilantism, while socially embedded, can undermine the rule of law when it operates without formal recognition or regulation.

Third, the risk of human rights violations is particularly significant. Empirical studies have shown that vigilante groups may engage in practices such as extrajudicial punishment, arbitrary detention, and excessive use of force (Amnesty International, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2020). In Nigeria, cases of mob justice and public punishment have been documented as consequences of weak regulation of informal security actors (Ojo, 2014). While such practices are often justified by communities as necessary responses to insecurity, they raise serious ethical and legal concerns regarding due process and the protection of fundamental rights.

These risks reveal a fundamental contradiction: while community-based defense strategies enhance collective security, they may also concurrently undermine individual rights and the rule of law. As Hills (2012) observes, the effectiveness of non-State security providers must be assessed alongside their potential to produce insecurity through unregulated practices.

Comparatively, evidence suggests that where community-based security initiatives are formalized, regulated, and integrated into State structures, the risks of abuse are significantly reduced (Kyed, 2009). This indicates that the core issue is not community participation itself, but the absence of institutional frameworks that ensure accountability and legality.

Inclusively, this study argues that informal security arrangements should not be uncritically celebrated; rather, their contributions must be balanced against their inherent risks to ensure that security provision does not come at the expense of justice and human rights.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on Collective Security. The theory is premised on the idea that security is a shared responsibility and that threats confronting one member of a social system ultimately affect the entire collective. Although the theory originated in international relations to explain cooperation among states against common threats, its core principles have been widely applied to community-level security, particularly in contexts where formal security institutions are weak or ineffective (Buzan, 1991; Booth, 2007). At the local level, collective security emphasizes cooperation, mutual obligation, and coordinated action in addressing insecurity.

The theory assumes that when insecurity is perceived as a collective problem, individuals are more likely to participate in joint security efforts, share information, pool resources, and enforce communal norms that promote safety. This collective orientation is often reinforced by strong social ties, trust, and shared values, which are common features of rural communities (Arisukwu et al., 2020). In such settings, security is not viewed solely as the responsibility of the State but as a communal duty requiring active participation by community members.

In rural Nigeria, Collective Security Theory provides a useful framework for understanding the emergence of community-based defense strategies. Persistent insecurity, combined with limited police presence and delayed responses to threats, have compelled rural communities to adopt self-help mechanisms such as vigilante groups, neighborhood watch systems, and youth patrols (Nweke & Nwankwo, 2023). These initiatives represent collective responses aimed at filling security gaps and protecting communal livelihoods from armed banditry, theft, and kidnapping.

The findings of this study strongly reflect the core assumptions of Collective Security Theory. In Rijija Community, residents have collectively organized informal defense arrangements to respond to recurring insecurity. Vigilante groups composed mainly of local youths conduct patrols, while other community members support these efforts through intelligence sharing and logistical assistance. Traditional leaders provide coordination and legitimacy, reinforcing communal norms and enhancing compliance. However, the findings

also reveal limitations such as inadequate training, limited resources, and weak coordination with formal security agencies, highlighting the need for institutional support to strengthen community-based collective security arrangements.

## METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative research design to capture in-depth perspectives of individuals on community-based defense strategies. This approach is appropriate for understanding live experiences, perceptions, and social processes within rural insecurity contexts.

### Study Area

The study was conducted in Rijiya Community, a rural settlement in Gusau Local Government Area of Zamfara State. The community constitutes one of the political wards in Gusau Local Government Area, and has twenty-two (22) polling units. The community is predominantly agrarian with farming and livestock rearing as major economic activities. Its rural setting and proximity to unsecured zones make it highly vulnerable to bandit attacks.

### Sample Size and Sampling Technique

A total of forty-five (45) respondents were purposively selected based on their knowledge and involvement in community security arrangements. The respondents comprised traditional leaders, vigilante members, youths, women representatives, and household heads. The choice of purposive sampling was informed by the qualitative nature of the study which seeks to obtain in-depth information from individuals who have direct knowledge and experience of insecurity in the study area. Respondents were deliberately selected based on their ability to provide meaningful insights into the research problem.

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents

Category	Number	Justification of inclusion
Traditional leaders	5	They coordinate community security, legitimize vigilante actions, and provide insights into organizational and cultural aspects of defense strategies.
Vigilante members	11	As frontline actors, they conduct patrols, respond to threats, and provide firsthand information on operational practices and challenges.
Youth representatives	12	Youths actively participate in patrols, intelligence gathering, and mobilization, providing perspectives on motivation, collaboration, and risks.
Household heads	12	They experience insecurity directly, engage in local defense measures, and provide information on the effectiveness of strategies at family and community levels.
Women Representatives	5	Provide unique insights on social impacts of insecurity, participation in intelligence sharing, and community mobilization roles.
<b>Total</b>	<b>45</b>	

**Source: Researcher’s initiative, 2026**

### Methods of Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and field observations. The interviews focused on forms of insecurity, existing defense strategies, their effectiveness, and associated challenges.

## Method of Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the systematic approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was considered appropriate due to its flexibility and suitability for identifying patterns of meaning within qualitative data. The analysis proceeded through the following stages:

- *Familiarization with Data:*

All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the researcher engaged in repeated reading of the transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' perspectives. Initial notes and observations were documented during this stage.

- *Coding Process:*

In this stage, inductive coding approach was adopted, where relevant segments of the data were identified and assigned descriptive codes reflecting key ideas and recurring issues. Examples of initial codes included "fear of attack," "vigilante patrols," "information sharing," "police absence," and "vigilante excesses." Coding was conducted manually to ensure close interaction with the data.

- *Category Development:*

Codes with similar meanings were grouped into broader categories. For example, codes relating to surveillance and patrol activities were categorized under "community defense practices," while those relating to abuse and lack of regulation were grouped under "challenges and risks."

- *Theme Construction:*

Categories were further developed into overarching themes that captured patterned responses across the dataset. The final themes included:

- Forms of insecurity
- Community-based defense strategies
- Effectiveness of strategies
- Challenges and risks
- Gender roles in community defense

## Review and Refinement:

Themes were reviewed to ensure internal consistency and alignment with the dataset. This iterative process ensured that the themes accurately reflected participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## Validity, Reliability and Minimization of Bias

To enhance the credibility of the study, several strategies were employed:

### Triangulation:

Data were collected from multiple respondent groups, including vigilante members, traditional leaders, youths, women, and household heads. This helped to capture diverse perspectives and improve the validity of findings (Denzin, 1978).

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## Reflexivity:

The researcher maintained reflexive notes throughout the research process to critically assess personal assumptions and their potential influence on data interpretation (Finlay, 2002).

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The data obtained from field work indicated that Rijiya Community is confronted with multiple forms of insecurity, notably armed banditry, cattle rustling, night theft, and the persistent fear of kidnapping. Among these, armed banditry stands out as the most severe and recurrent threat, often involving violent attacks on villages, destruction of property, and disruption of farming activities. These forms of insecurity have not only endangered lives but have also produced significant economic and psychological consequences. Residents reported reduced farming activities, restricted movement especially at night and heightened levels of fear and uncertainty. This indicates that insecurity in the community extends beyond physical violence to affect livelihoods and social stability, reinforcing the multidimensional nature of rural insecurity in Northwestern Nigeria.

In response to these threats, the study further revealed that residents have developed a series of community-based defense strategies that reflect a collective approach to security provision. These strategies include vigilante groups, neighborhood watch systems, intelligence-sharing networks, community patrols, and the involvement of traditional authorities. Vigilante groups, largely composed of local youths, form the core of these efforts by conducting patrols and responding to security incidents. Complementing these are neighborhood watch systems and community patrols, which enhance surveillance and deter criminal activities. Intelligence-sharing networks, often facilitated through informal communication channels, enable the rapid dissemination of information about suspicious movements. The involvement of traditional leaders provides coordination, legitimacy, and social control, ensuring that community members adhere to agreed security practices. Collectively, these strategies operate as an informal but organized security system grounded in shared responsibility and local knowledge.

However, the effectiveness of these strategies varies across different dimensions. Vigilante groups are widely perceived as the most operationally effective, given their ability to respond quickly to threats and their familiarity with the local terrain. Their constant presence serves as a deterrent to potential attacks. However, intelligence-sharing networks emerge as the most strategically effective mechanism, as they enable early warning and preventive action, thereby reducing the likelihood of attacks. In contrast, neighborhood watch systems and community patrols play more supportive roles by reinforcing surveillance and community participation but lack the capacity for direct confrontation. This variation suggests that the effectiveness of community-based defense strategies is not uniform but rather depends on their specific functions, with overall success hinging on the interaction and complementarity of these approaches.

Despite the contributions of these strategies, their implementation is constrained by several challenges. A major issue identified is the lack of adequate training and professional capacity among vigilante members, which limits their ability to respond effectively to increasingly sophisticated security threats. Resource constraints, including the absence of modern communication tools, mobility equipment, and protective gear, further weaken their operational efficiency. Additionally, the absence of clear legal and policy frameworks governing the activities of community defense groups creates ambiguity regarding their authority and responsibilities. This lack of regulation contributes to accountability deficits and increases the risk of excesses, including the use of excessive force. Furthermore, weak coordination and mistrust between community members and formal security agencies undermine the effectiveness of collective security efforts, as opportunities for collaboration are not fully utilized.

The study also finds that collaboration between community groups and formal security agencies remains limited and largely informal. Where such collaboration exists, it is mainly restricted to information sharing, reporting of incidents, and occasional joint responses during emergencies. However, this relationship is often characterized by mutual distrust, poor communication, and delayed response from formal security actors. Community members frequently perceive formal security agencies as distant and ineffective, while state actors may regard community groups as unregulated and lacking professionalism. This weak and fragmented relationship reduces the overall effectiveness of security provision in the community and highlights the absence of a structured framework for integrating local and formal security efforts.

From a policy perspective, the findings underscore the importance of community participation in security governance while also revealing the limitations of relying solely on informal arrangements. The effectiveness of intelligence-sharing mechanisms suggests that preventive approaches should be prioritized alongside reactive strategies. At the same time, the risks associated with informal security arrangements particularly issues of accountability, legal ambiguity, and potential human rights violations point to the urgent need for formal regulation and oversight. Strengthening collaboration between community actors and formal security agencies is essential for building a more coherent and sustainable security framework. Additionally, addressing the underlying drivers of insecurity, such as poverty, unemployment, and rural underdevelopment, remains critical for achieving long-term stability.

## CONCLUSION

Drawing from the findings of the study and secondary sources of data reviewed, the study concludes as follows: the study examined Community-based Defense Strategies in Rijjiya Community, Gusau Local Government Area of Zamfara State. It established that the community is affected by persistent insecurity, including armed banditry, cattle rustling, night theft, and kidnapping threats, all of which have significantly disrupted livelihoods and heightened fear among residents. In response, community members have developed a series of informal security mechanisms such as vigilante groups, neighborhood watch systems, intelligence-sharing networks, community patrols, and the involvement of traditional authorities to curb the menace. These strategies collectively function as a locally driven security architecture that seeks to compensate for the limited presence and responsiveness of formal security agencies.

The study further concludes that while these community-based strategies play a critical role in enhancing local safety, their effectiveness is uneven. Intelligence-sharing networks emerged as the most effective preventive mechanism, while vigilante groups were more effective in providing immediate operational response to threats. However, neighborhood watch systems and patrol structures function mainly as supportive mechanisms with limited enforcement capacity. Despite their contributions, the sustainability and effectiveness of these strategies are constrained by inadequate training, poor resources, weak institutional support, absence of clear legal frameworks, and limited collaboration with formal security agencies.

Importantly, the study highlights that while informal security arrangement is necessary in contexts of State weakness, it also presents significant risks related to accountability, legality, and potential human rights violations. These contradictions suggest that community-based defense strategies cannot serve as standalone solutions to rural insecurity. Rather, they function best as complementary mechanisms within a broader, well-regulated security framework.

In conclusion therefore, addressing rural insecurity in Rijjiya Community and of course elsewhere in Northwestern Nigeria requires a balanced approach that integrates community participation with formal security structures. Strengthening institutional support, improving coordination between community actors and security agencies, and addressing the structural drivers of insecurity such as poverty and unemployment are essential for achieving sustainable peace and stability.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Addressing rural insecurity in Rijjiya Community requires a multifaceted approach that strengthens community initiatives while ensuring legality, accountability, and sustainability. The following recommendations are proposed:

First, there is an urgent need for the formalization of community-based defense groups. Government should establish clear legal and policy frameworks that define the roles, responsibilities, and limits of vigilante operations. Such frameworks should include mechanisms for oversight, reporting, and sanctions to prevent abuses and ensure accountability. This will help transform informal arrangements into structured and lawful security partners.

Second, professional training should be prioritized. Members of vigilante and community defense groups should receive regular training in areas such as intelligence gathering, conflict management, human rights standards, and rules of engagement. This will enhance their operational effectiveness while reducing the risk of excessive use of force and rights violations.

Third, government should provide adequate financial support to community defense actors. This includes communication equipment, transportation (e.g., motorcycles), protective gear, and basic allowances. Without such support, these groups will remain limited in their ability to respond effectively to increasingly organized security threats.

Fourth, there is need to reinforce synergy between community groups and formal security agencies such as the Police and Civil Defense Corps. This can be achieved through the establishment of joint security committees, regular information-sharing platforms, and coordinated patrol systems. Institutionalizing these relationships will surely improve trust, enhance intelligence flow, and ensure quicker response to threats.

Fifth, intelligence-sharing systems should be formalized and technologically enhanced. Community-based early warning mechanisms should be supported with mobile communication networks, emergency reporting channels, and structured information management systems. Given that intelligence sharing emerged as the most effective strategy, strengthening this area will significantly improve preventive security.

Sixth, efforts should be made to integrate women into community security structures. Women should be included in decision-making processes, intelligence networks, and community safety committees. Providing them with training and leadership opportunities will enhance inclusiveness and improve the overall effectiveness of security strategies.

Seventh, strong measures must be implemented to ensure accountability and protection of human rights. Monitoring mechanisms involving community leaders, local authorities, and civil society organizations should be established to oversee vigilante activities. Clear complaint and redress systems should also be created to address cases of abuse or misconduct.

Finally, the government must address the root causes of insecurity through sustained rural development initiatives. Investment in agriculture, job creation, education, and infrastructure will go a long way in reducing poverty and unemployment which are key drivers of crime and violence. Without addressing these structural factors, security interventions alone will produce only temporary results.

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