

Assessment of Community Engagement in Crime Prevention in Karu Local Government Area, Nasarawa State, Nigeria

By

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Abstract

This study assessed community engagement in crime prevention in Karu Local Government Area (LGA), Nasarawa State, Nigeria. It examined the level of community participation in crime prevention and the challenges that hinder effective engagement. A descriptive survey design was adopted. The target population comprised 12,397 adult residents of three selected wards—Karu, Karshi I, and Karshi II—drawn from the Independent National Electoral Commission voters' register. The Taro Yamane formula produced a minimum sample of approximately 388 respondents at a 5% margin of error; the study used 400 respondents. The study collected data using a structured questionnaire, and a pilot test yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.70. The study used the mean and standard deviation to answer the two research questions. The findings showed generally positive community engagement in crime prevention ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 0.79$). Respondents reported participating in neighbourhood watch activities, reporting crime, attending community security meetings, and sharing responsibility for local security. However, fear of retaliation, inadequate government support, poor coordination, low trust between residents and security agencies, insufficient training, and socioeconomic difficulties constrained engagement ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 0.75$). The study concludes that sustainable crime prevention in Karu LGA requires stronger community participation and more effective collaboration between residents and formal security institutions. It recommends sustained police–community dialogue, structured training and oversight for community security groups, accessible security-awareness programmes, improved coordination among local stakeholders, and targeted socioeconomic interventions.

Keywords: community engagement, crime prevention, community policing, neighbourhood security, Karu LGA, Nigeria

Introduction

Crime remains a persistent social problem in many societies, particularly in developing countries such as Nigeria, where rapid urbanisation, unemployment, institutional limitations, and resource constraints complicate conventional policing. Community-oriented approaches have consequently received increasing attention because formal law-enforcement agencies cannot prevent crime effectively without timely information, public cooperation, and local knowledge. Community engagement in crime prevention refers to the active involvement of residents and other local stakeholders in identifying security concerns, reporting suspicious activities, supporting preventive initiatives, and collaborating with law-enforcement agencies.

In Nigeria, community policing, neighbourhood watch arrangements, vigilante groups, traditional institutions, youth associations, and other informal structures have increasingly complemented formal policing. Arisukwu et al. (2020) found that community participation can contribute to crime prevention where police resources are limited, particularly through local surveillance, information sharing, and collective responsibility. Such participation can also strengthen trust and improve the responsiveness of security institutions when engagement is structured, accountable, and sustained.

Karu LGA provides an important setting for examining these issues. Its proximity to the Federal Capital Territory, rapid population growth, urban expansion, and increasing socioeconomic activity create both

opportunities and security pressures. Residents may be willing to participate in local crime-prevention initiatives. However, fear of retaliation, inadequate institutional support, weak coordination, and distrust of security agencies can reduce the effectiveness of such participation. Against this background, the study assesses the level of community engagement in crime prevention in Karu LGA and identifies the principal challenges that hinder effective engagement.

Statement of the Problem

Crime prevention in rapidly growing peri-urban communities requires more than deploying formal security personnel. In Karu LGA, population growth, urban expansion, unemployment, land-related pressures, and other socioeconomic conditions create security challenges that require cooperation between residents and security agencies. However, police–community relations may be weakened by underreporting of crime, fear of retaliation, inadequate response mechanisms, and limited citizen participation in security decision-making.

Community-based security structures—including vigilante groups, neighbourhood watch teams, youth groups, and traditional institutions—can provide local intelligence and strengthen preventive surveillance. Their effectiveness, however, may be undermined when they are poorly coordinated, inadequately trained, weakly supported, or insufficiently integrated with formal policing structures. The empirical problem is therefore not merely whether such structures exist, but the extent to which residents actually engage in crime-prevention activities and the specific barriers that constrain that engagement in Karu LGA. This study addresses that gap by measuring the level of community engagement and identifying the challenges affecting effective participation.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of the study is to assess community engagement in crime prevention in Karu Local Government Area, Nasarawa State. Specifically, the study seeks to:

- i. determine the level of community engagement in crime prevention in Karu Local Government Area; and
- ii. identify the challenges affecting effective community engagement in crime prevention in Karu Local Government Area.

Research Questions

- i. What is the level of community engagement in crime prevention in Karu Local Government Area?
- ii. What challenges hinder effective community engagement in crime prevention in Karu Local Government Area?

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey design. Karu LGA has eleven political wards; the study focused on Karu, Karshi I, and Karshi II. The three wards were selected because the original study identified them as particularly relevant to the crime-prevention problem under investigation. The target population comprised adult residents aged 18 years and above in the selected wards. Population figures drawn from the INEC voters' register were Karu Ward, 4,829; Karshi I, 4,649; and Karshi II, 2,919, giving a total population of 12,397.

The minimum sample size was determined using the Taro Yamane formula, $n = N/[1 + N(e^2)]$, where n is the sample size, N is the population size, and e is the tolerable sampling error. With $N = 12,397$ and $e = 0.05$, the minimum sample is approximately 388 respondents. The study used 400 respondents. The study used cluster sampling to select respondents across the three study wards.

The study collected data using a structured questionnaire on community engagement and crime prevention. The instrument used a four-point response scale: Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2),

and Strongly Disagree (1). A pilot test yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.70. The study used the mean and standard deviation to answer the research questions. The study adopted a criterion mean of 2.50: item means of 2.50 and above indicated agreement, while means below 2.50 indicated disagreement.

Conceptual Review

Community Engagement

Community engagement refers to the active participation of residents and local stakeholders in initiatives intended to improve public safety, social wellbeing, and crime prevention. It involves collaboration among community members, law-enforcement agencies, civil society organisations, traditional institutions, youth groups, religious organisations, schools, and local authorities. The central premise is that communities possess local knowledge, networks, and informal social-control resources that can complement formal policing.

In crime prevention, meaningful engagement goes beyond attending meetings. It includes reporting suspicious activities, participating in neighbourhood watch arrangements, contributing to security planning, sharing information with law-enforcement agencies, supporting vulnerable residents, and building collective responsibility for public safety. Where these relationships are based on trust and clear roles, community engagement can improve intelligence gathering and strengthen local ownership of crime-prevention initiatives.

Concept of Crime

Crime is generally understood as conduct prohibited by law and subject to legal sanction. Beyond the legal definition, criminological perspectives also recognise crime as a social phenomenon shaped by prevailing norms, institutional arrangements, inequality, opportunity structures, and changing social conditions. Crime imposes direct and indirect costs on individuals and communities, including loss of life and property, reduced productivity, fear, psychological trauma, and deterioration in quality of life. For this study, crime is unlawful conduct that threatens community safety and requires preventive action by both formal institutions and residents.

Crime Prevention

Crime prevention encompasses measures designed to anticipate, reduce, or remove conditions that facilitate criminal activity. Prevention may operate at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels: primary prevention addresses environmental and social conditions associated with crime opportunities; secondary prevention focuses on persons or groups considered at elevated risk; and tertiary prevention seeks to reduce reoffending among persons already involved in crime. Community engagement is particularly relevant to primary and secondary prevention because residents can contribute local intelligence, informal surveillance, early identification of risks, and collective action.

Community Engagement in Crime Prevention

Community engagement broadens the reach of formal law enforcement by involving residents in shared responsibility for local safety. Arisukwu et al. (2020) reported that community participation in rural Nigeria can improve crime detection, reporting, and local ownership of security initiatives where formal police capacity is constrained. Neighbourhood watch programmes and community security groups can therefore function as complementary mechanisms, provided that their activities are lawful, accountable, and coordinated with formal security agencies.

The effectiveness of engagement depends not only on the presence of community security structures but also on trust, communication, training, coordination, institutional support, and residents' confidence that participation will not expose them to retaliation. These conditions are especially important in peri-urban areas where rapid population change can weaken traditional social networks while simultaneously increasing demand for locally grounded security arrangements.

Theoretical Framework

Broken Windows Theory

The study is anchored in Broken Windows Theory, associated with Wilson and Kelling's foundational 1982 formulation. The theory proposes that visible disorder and the apparent absence of informal or formal social control can communicate that a place is poorly regulated, potentially encouraging further disorder and crime. From a community-engagement perspective, the theory highlights residents' role in identifying local disorder, maintaining shared spaces, reporting emerging problems, and cooperating with authorities before minor problems escalate.

The theory is relevant to the present study because community participation can strengthen informal social control and reinforce the expectation that residents and institutions will respond to threats to public order. However, its limitations must be recognised. Critics argue that disorder does not automatically cause serious crime and that aggressive order-maintenance policing can produce over-policing, unequal enforcement, and deteriorating police–community relations. Accordingly, this study applies the theory primarily to the preventive value of collective vigilance and early community response rather than as a justification for punitive enforcement of minor infractions.

Applied to Karu LGA, the framework suggests that neighbourhood surveillance, reporting of suspicious activities, community meetings, and coordinated resident–security agency action may strengthen local guardianship. At the same time, fear of retaliation, weak trust, poor coordination, and inadequate institutional support can weaken the informal social-control mechanisms on which effective community engagement depends.

Empirical Review

Arisukwu et al. (2020) examined community participation in crime prevention and control in rural Nigeria. Their findings indicated that residents participate in informal crime-prevention activities, including neighbourhood surveillance and reporting suspicious activities, while formal integration with law enforcement remains a challenge. The study is relevant because it demonstrates the complementary value of local participation but focuses primarily on rural communities.

Akinlabi and Ihemeje (2021) examined the role of vigilante groups in crime prevention and control in Ile-Ife, Osun State. Their work supports the view that community-based security organisations can complement formal policing institutions. Okoji (2022), examining residents' perceptions of community policing in Ilorin, similarly highlights the importance of public attitudes and police–community relations to the effectiveness of community-oriented security.

Recent Nigerian studies have continued to emphasise the importance and challenges of informal security structures. Anyo et al. (2024) examined constraints facing vigilante groups in Benue State, while Nlemchukwu et al. (2024) highlighted inclusion within informal policing arrangements. These studies show that local security structures alone do not guarantee effective engagement; legitimacy, coordination, participation, training, and accountability remain important.

The literature therefore establishes the potential contribution of community participation to crime prevention, but outcomes vary across local contexts. Karu LGA's peri-urban character and proximity to Abuja justify a context-specific assessment of both engagement levels and the barriers residents face.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Research Question One: Level of Community Engagement in Crime Prevention

Research Question One sought to determine the level of community engagement in crime prevention in Karu LGA. Table 1 presents the mean and standard deviation for the six questionnaire items.

Table 1

Mean and Standard Deviation of Respondents' Ratings on the Level of Community Engagement in Crime Prevention (N = 400)

Item	Mean	SD	Decision
Community members actively participate in preventing crime	2.98	0.78	Agreed
Residents regularly attend community security meetings	2.96	0.78	Agreed
I often participate in neighbourhood watch activities	2.99	0.81	Agreed
Community members willingly report criminal activities to authorities	2.95	0.77	Agreed
There is a strong sense of collective responsibility for security	2.97	0.79	Agreed
Community engagement reduces fear of crime	2.91	0.82	Agreed
Grand Mean	2.96	0.79	Agreed

Note. Decision rule: $M \geq 2.50$ = Agreed; $M < 2.50$ = Disagreed. Scale: SA = 4, A = 3, D = 2, SD = 1.

All six items recorded mean scores above the 2.50 criterion. The highest-rated item was participation in neighbourhood watch activities ($M = 2.99$, $SD = 0.81$), while the lowest was the view that community engagement reduces fear of crime ($M = 2.91$, $SD = 0.82$). The grand mean of 2.96 ($SD = 0.79$) indicates that respondents generally agreed that community engagement in crime-prevention activities occurs in Karu LGA.

Research Question Two: Challenges Affecting Community Engagement**Table 2****Mean and Standard Deviation of Respondents' Ratings on Challenges Affecting Community Engagement (N = 400)**

Item	Mean	SD	Decision
Fear of retaliation discourages residents from reporting crimes	3.18	0.74	Agreed
There is low trust between the community and security agencies	3.12	0.76	Agreed
Community members lack training on crime prevention	3.09	0.75	Agreed
Poor coordination affects community security initiatives	3.14	0.73	Agreed
Lack of government support limits community involvement	3.16	0.74	Agreed
Socioeconomic challenges hinder active engagement in crime prevention	3.10	0.75	Agreed
Grand Mean	3.12	0.75	Agreed

Note. Decision rule: $M \geq 2.50 = \text{Agreed}$; $M < 2.50 = \text{Disagreed}$. Scale: SA = 4, A = 3, D = 2, SD = 1.

All six challenges recorded mean scores above the criterion mean. Fear of retaliation was the highest-rated challenge ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 0.74$), followed by lack of government support ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 0.74$) and poor coordination ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 0.73$). The grand mean of 3.12 ($SD = 0.75$) indicates broad agreement that structural, institutional, and socioeconomic barriers constrain effective community engagement in crime prevention in Karu LGA.

Discussion of Findings

The first finding indicates that respondents generally perceive community engagement in crime prevention to be present in Karu LGA. Participation in neighbourhood watch activities, attendance at security meetings, crime reporting, and collective responsibility all received mean ratings above the decision benchmark. This is consistent with Arisukwu et al. (2020), who found that community participation can complement formal policing through local surveillance and information sharing. It also accords with Akinlabi and Ihemeje (2021), whose study underscores the complementary role of vigilante organisations in local crime prevention.

The second finding shows that multiple barriers constrain community engagement. Fear of retaliation was the most highly rated challenge, followed by inadequate government support and poor coordination.

The study also identified low trust between residents and security agencies, insufficient crime-prevention training, and socioeconomic difficulties. These results suggest that willingness to participate is not sufficient on its own; effective engagement requires credible protection for informants, dependable institutional response, structured coordination, appropriate training, and sustained trust-building between residents and formal security agencies.

Taken together, the findings support the theoretical expectation that local vigilance and collective responsibility can strengthen informal social control, while weak trust and coordination can undermine it. The policy implication is that community engagement should be institutionalised as a lawful, accountable partnership rather than treated as an informal substitute for professional policing.

Conclusion

The study concludes that community engagement constitutes an important component of crime prevention in Karu Local Government Area. Respondents generally reported participation in neighbourhood watch activities, community security meetings, crime reporting, and collective responsibility for local safety. At the same time, fear of retaliation, inadequate government support, poor coordination, low trust between residents and security agencies, limited training, and socioeconomic pressures constrain the effectiveness of such engagement. Sustainable crime prevention in Karu LGA therefore depends on strengthening community participation while improving the institutional arrangements that connect residents with formal security agencies.

Recommendations

- i. Security agencies, particularly the Nigeria Police Force, should institutionalise regular police–community dialogue in Karu LGA through town-hall meetings, accessible complaint and feedback channels, and transparent communication on local security concerns.
- ii. The Nasarawa State Government and relevant local authorities should provide structured training, clear operating guidelines, and appropriate oversight for recognised community security groups to improve coordination, accountability, and respect for human rights.
- iii. Confidential and accessible crime-reporting mechanisms should be strengthened to reduce residents' fear of retaliation and encourage timely provision of actionable information.
- iv. A standing LGA-level coordination mechanism should bring together the police, community security groups, traditional rulers, youth associations, religious leaders, and civil society organisations, with clearly defined roles and communication protocols.
- v. Community-based security-awareness programmes should be sustained and delivered in accessible formats and relevant local languages, with emphasis on lawful crime prevention, reporting procedures, personal safety, and collective responsibility.
- vi. Government and development partners should complement security interventions with youth employment, skills development, and poverty-reduction initiatives that address socioeconomic conditions capable of weakening sustained community participation.

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