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Beyond Police Presence: Institutional Legitimacy, Community Policing and Capable Guardianship in Port Harcourt, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Community policing is widely promoted as a mechanism for strengthening urban crime prevention, yet its effectiveness depends not merely on police presence but on the institutional conditions that make guardianship credible, legitimate and actionable. This study examines how police conduct, community participation and informal security arrangements shape capable guardianship in Borokiri, Port Harcourt, Nigeria. Drawing on Routine Activity Theory, it addresses a neglected question in community-policing scholarship: what makes a formally present guardian substantively capable in contexts characterised by institutional distrust and plural security provision? A qualitative cross-sectional case-study design was employed, based on 62 semi-structured interviews with residents, community leaders, police personnel, local-government representatives and vigilante actors, conducted from March to June 2026. Thematic analysis revealed three interconnected patterns. Conditional effectiveness (community policing as hybrid guardianship), Institutional conduct, trust and the capacity of formal guardianship, and from fragmented security to accountable co-produced guardianship. Positive accounts of police patrols coexisted with critical experiences, suggesting that cooperation was conditional rather than uniformly absent. The study advances Routine Activity Theory by conceptualising capable guardianship as an institutional and relational capacity constituted through integrity, legitimacy, responsiveness, information exchange and coordinated action rather than physical presence alone. It argues that sustainable urban crime prevention requires accountable police reform, structured police–community co-production and complementary social and spatial interventions capable of addressing the conditions that reproduce neighbourhood insecurity. It recommends accountable police–community collaboration alongside rights-based regulation of informal actors and targeted social and spatial prevention. Because the study relies on interviews rather than administrative crime records, it documents perceived processes and does not estimate reductions in offending.

Keywords: Crime Prevention; Community Policing; Law Enforcement; Police Legitimacy; Routine Activity Theory

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Introduction

Urban crime is not only a problem of unlawful behaviour; it is also a problem of governance, trust and the everyday organisation of safety. In rapidly growing cities of the Global South, formal policing institutions often operate alongside vigilante groups, neighbourhood associations, private guards and other informal security providers. This plural security environment can expand the number of actors capable of monitoring streets and responding to threats, but it can also fragment accountability and weaken public confidence when residents encounter corruption, coercion, delay or uneven protection. The challenge is acute in residential neighbourhoods, where prevention depends on routine contact between residents and security institutions. Nigerian crime data show a persistent burden of violence, robbery, burglary, kidnapping and related offences (Oguntunde et al., 2018). The policy question is therefore not simply

whether police are present, but whether available guardianship is legitimate, responsive and capable of disrupting criminal opportunity.

Community policing has become one of the most influential responses to this problem. In principle, it replaces a narrow reactive model of policing with partnership, local intelligence, prevention and joint problem solving. The underlying proposition is that police cannot produce neighbourhood security independently of the populations they serve. Community members possess local knowledge of places, routines, emerging disputes and suspicious activities; police possess legal authority, investigative powers and coercive capacity. When these resources are combined, crime prevention should become more anticipatory and context-sensitive. Empirical work, however, shows that the concept is neither uniform nor automatically effective. Diphoorn and van Stapele (2021), examining Kenya, demonstrate that community policing can be weakened by competing definitions of community disputes over representation and limited local ownership. Beck and Jaffe (2019) similarly caution against assuming that policing models developed in the Global North travel unchanged to the Global South; policing practices are reshaped by local political orders, institutional histories and security markets. Even outside Africa, community-policing programmes have produced uneven outcomes, with Rukus et al. (2018) finding that community policing may be least effective in settings where social and institutional need is greatest.

These concerns are inseparable from the problem of police legitimacy. Community policing requires residents to report crime, provide information, attend meetings, identify local problems and cooperate with officers. Such behaviours depend on whether residents believe that police exercise authority fairly and effectively. Braga et al. (2019) show that effective policing is difficult to sustain where poor police-community relationships suppress cooperation and weaken the flow of information. African evidence is particularly instructive. Boateng et al. (2022b) find that police effectiveness and procedural justice both shape legitimacy, and that legitimacy is positively related to willingness to cooperate with the police. In Nigeria, Ike et al. (2022) identify deep scepticism about interventions intended to improve confidence in the police, including community-policing initiatives. More recent African research reaches a similarly relational conclusion, as Mutahi et al. (2024) demonstrate that repeated positive everyday encounters can generate incremental trust even in insecure, low-income settings where police misconduct and political interference remain concerns. The implication is that partnership is not created by establishing a community-policing structure alone; it is produced through credible, repeated and procedurally fair interactions.

Institutional misconduct complicates this relationship further. Police corruption can directly weaken crime prevention by raising the cost of reporting, protecting offenders, encouraging selective enforcement and reducing citizens' willingness to share information. Onyango's (2022) study of bribery at Kenyan checkpoints describes corruption as embedded in institutional routines and informal networks rather than as an isolated individual behaviour. Gillanders et al. (2024), using Afrobarometer data, find that police corruption is associated with reported victimisation and with feelings of insecurity across African settings. Police criminality also matters symbolically: when officers are perceived as participating in the same forms of misconduct they are mandated to suppress, the moral boundary between guardian and offender becomes blurred (Boateng et al., 2022a). For community policing, the consequence is severe. A strategy premised on cooperation cannot function effectively where citizens regard contact with formal law enforcement as risky, costly or futile.

In Nigeria, the October 2020 #EndSARS protests brought claims of police brutality, extortion and impunity into national debate and focused attention on the contested legitimacy of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad and policing more broadly (Amnesty International, 2020). Because the Borokiri interviews were conducted from March to June 2026, the protests are treated as relevant historical context rather than as a finding from the interview corpus or evidence that they directly shaped any particular respondent's views. Their significance for the present argument is conceptual: formal powers of enforcement do not, on their own, secure public consent, trustworthy information or accountable intervention.

Routine Activity Theory offers a useful basis for connecting these institutional concerns to neighbourhood crime prevention. The theory proposes that crime becomes more likely when motivated offenders and suitable targets converge in the absence of capable guardianship (Cohen & Felson, 1979; Andresen & Ha,

2017). In conventional applications, guardianship may be performed by police officers, residents, security personnel, surveillance systems or others capable of intervening. Yet the category of "capable guardian" is often treated as if presence were equivalent to effectiveness. In settings where officers are mistrusted, allegedly corrupt, poorly responsive or disconnected from residents, formal police presence may not translate into effective guardianship. Conversely, residents, vigilante groups and local leaders may possess high levels of local knowledge while lacking legal authority, professional training or oversight. This creates an important theoretical problem: guardianship is not merely a question of who is present in space, but of whether institutions and community actors can coordinate legitimate and effective action.

Cohen and Felson (1979) framed crime opportunity in terms of the convergence of likely offenders, suitable targets and the absence of capable guardians. Felson (1995) subsequently distinguished guardians of targets, handlers of potential offenders and managers of places, emphasising that responsibility and social relationships structure prevention. The present study builds on rather than replaces these distinctions: in plural security settings, capability additionally depends on whether these roles are institutionally legitimate, responsive and able to coordinate lawful intervention.

Port Harcourt provides a critical setting in which to examine this problem. The city is a major economic and administrative centre in the Niger Delta and has experienced persistent concerns about violent and property crime. The Borokiri neighbourhood combines dense residential development, waterside areas, mixed livelihoods and multiple formal and informal security actors. Within this environment, the study on which this article is based documented residents' experiences of police patrols, vigilante activity, neighbourhood watch, crime reporting, alleged police misconduct and the operation of community-policing arrangements.

The existing literature leaves three connected gaps. First, community-policing research gives limited attention to the contradiction that arises when the institution expected to provide guardianship is also perceived by residents as contributing to insecurity. Second, studies of corruption and legitimacy often operate at national or comparative scales, leaving the neighbourhood negotiation of institutional credibility underexplored. Third, Routine Activity Theory identifies capable guardianship as central to prevention but does not specify the institutional qualities that make a guardian capable where trust is weak and policing is plural. Treating guardianship as an institutional and relational capacity can therefore extend the theory in ways that are particularly relevant to Global South cities.

Accordingly, this study examines the relationship between law-enforcement performance, community policing and crime prevention in Borokiri, Port Harcourt. It addresses three questions: (1) how effective is community policing perceived to be in preventing and controlling crime in the neighbourhood; (2) how do institutional conduct, police legitimacy and public trust shape the effectiveness of formal law enforcement; and (3) what forms of police-community collaboration can strengthen capable guardianship in a context where residents also rely on informal security providers? By linking neighbourhood evidence to current African and international policing scholarship, the study contributes in three ways. Empirically, it provides qualitative evidence from a Nigerian urban residential setting. Theoretically, it reframes capable guardianship as a function of institutional integrity, legitimacy, responsiveness and cooperation rather than simple police presence. Practically, it identifies the conditions under which community policing may move from a nominal arrangement to a credible form of co-produced public safety.

Literature Review

The literature is organised around the three research questions. Across the review, Routine Activity Theory is used as the principal theoretical lens because it places capable guardianship at the point where everyday routines and crime opportunities intersect. However, the review also draws on legitimacy and community-policing scholarship to specify what makes guardianship effective in institutional terms. The central proposition is that community policing works through a relational chain: professional conduct and procedural fairness support trust and legitimacy; legitimacy increases reporting and cooperation; and cooperation improves the information and collective action available for crime prevention. Where misconduct disrupts this chain, residents may withdraw from formal policing and shift towards informal or self-help security.

The theoretical contribution is therefore deliberately bounded. Cohen and Felson (1979) already treated capable guardianship as more than simple police deployment, while Felson (1995) differentiated guardians, handlers and place managers. This study does not claim to discover those distinctions. It asks instead how credibility, lawful authority, timely response and coordination affect the practical availability of guardianship when formal and informal actors overlap. Police legitimacy is proposed as an enabling condition for information exchange and cooperation, not as an independently measured cause of crime reduction.

How Effective Is Community Policing as a Crime-Prevention Strategy in Urban Residential Neighbourhoods?

Community policing is most persuasive when understood as a mode of co-producing safety rather than as a discrete police programme. Its distinctive feature is the redistribution of crime-prevention work across police, residents and community organisations. The police retain legal authority, but the community contributes information, local diagnosis and social capacity. This emphasis is consistent with Routine Activity Theory because capable guardianship is strengthened when more actors are able and willing to observe, report and intervene. Andresen and Ha (2017) emphasise that guardianship may be human or non-human and that criminal opportunity depends partly on whether suitable targets are left unprotected. A community-policing model therefore seeks to increase the density and effectiveness of guardianship within routine neighbourhood life.

Evidence nevertheless cautions against treating the model as universally effective. Rukus et al. (2018) show that community policing can produce limited safety effects, particularly in communities where collective efficacy and institutional resources are weak. Koslicki et al. (2021) similarly find that several community-policing measures were not significantly associated with reduced police fatal force, illustrating the broader point that organisational labels do not guarantee substantive changes in police practice. These findings matter because they shift evaluation away from the existence of community-policing structures towards the quality of their implementation. A neighbourhood meeting, liaison officer or patrol partnership may be formally present while producing little change in residents' experience of safety.

African scholarship strengthens this implementation argument. Diphoorn and van Stapele (2021) find that community policing in Kenya is marked by divergent agendas, uncertain representation and conflicting ideas about who constitutes "the community". Community policing can therefore reproduce rather than resolve existing power relations. Beck and Jaffe (2019) reach a related conclusion through the concept of policy mobility: when community policing travels from one political context to another, it is translated through local institutions and governance arrangements. This is particularly important for cities of the Global South, where the state is rarely the sole provider of security and where residents may simultaneously interact with police, vigilantes, private guards and local authorities. The effectiveness of community policing consequently depends on how these actors are coordinated and governed.

The literature also shows that resident participation is not automatic. Lee et al. (2019) demonstrate that support for community-oriented policing varies with residents' perceptions of the police and the communities in which they live. Merenda et al. (2021) similarly show that citizen satisfaction is associated with aspects of police performance and community relations. Spasić and Radovanović (2019) identify insufficient community involvement and weak interdepartmental coordination as constraints on the ability of community policing to meet citizens' security needs. These studies indicate that community policing depends on active cooperation, and that such cooperation varies with institutional and community conditions. The police require information and legitimacy that cannot be produced unilaterally. The link is that effectiveness in Borokiri must be assessed by examining how residents actually experience and participate in policing.

A further dimension is the distinction between prevention and substitution. Informal groups may fill gaps left by formal policing, but their presence does not necessarily indicate a successful community-policing system. Where residents rely on vigilantes because they perceive formal police as inaccessible or ineffective, informal guardianship may represent institutional substitution rather than partnership. Conversely, when local groups share information with police and serious offences are transferred to

formal criminal-justice processes, the relationship may be complementary. The analytical task is therefore to identify whether plural policing creates coordinated capable guardianship or fragmented authority. This distinction provides the basis for evaluating the Borokiri evidence. A further evaluative criterion is sustainability. Partnerships that depend on a few personalities, temporary patrol surges or informal payments may generate short-term reassurance without establishing durable institutional routines. Sustainable community policing requires recurrent forums, dependable response procedures and organisational commitment that survives leadership changes. This reinforces the literature's movement away from measuring community policing as a programme input and towards assessing it as an institutional capacity for ongoing problem diagnosis, communication and collective action.

The Nigerian evidence also makes a distinction between community mobilisation and accountable policing indispensable. Meagher (2007) documents how locally organised protection can be appropriated by political actors, while Lar (2018) traces the plurality of state and non-state practices that shape everyday security provision. These accounts indicate that locally valued policing and institutionally answerable policing are not synonymous. The present case therefore asks not only whether informal actors can intervene rapidly but also who authorises intervention, how allegations are handed over, and what prevents informal protection from becoming an unreviewable parallel justice system.

How Do Institutional Conduct, Legitimacy and Trust Shape Law-Enforcement Effectiveness?

Police effectiveness is inseparable from legitimacy because crime prevention depends on citizens' willingness to engage the police before, during and after criminal events. Legitimacy refers to the belief that police authority is appropriate and ought to be obeyed, while trust concerns expectations that officers will act competently, fairly and in the public interest. Boateng et al. (2022b), analysing data from South Africa and Sierra Leone, show that both police effectiveness and procedural justice predict legitimacy and that legitimacy, in turn, predicts cooperation. Their finding is especially important for community policing: residents who consider the police ineffective or unfair have fewer incentives to provide information, report crime or participate in joint problem solving.

The Nigerian evidence indicates that this legitimacy problem is not peripheral. Ike et al. (2022) systematically reviewed interventions designed to build confidence in the Nigerian police and found scepticism, lack of trust and perceived ineffectiveness surrounding community-policing initiatives. Such perceptions can become self-reinforcing. When residents expect poor treatment or little investigative follow-through, they may avoid reporting; lower reporting then reduces the information available to police and weakens the capacity to investigate crime. Braga et al. (2019) explain this dynamic more broadly: effective crime control requires public support, and damaged police-community relationships undermine the cooperation required to identify offenders and hold them accountable.

Corruption intensifies the legitimacy deficit because it changes the meaning of police contact. Onyango (2022) shows that bribery in Kenyan traffic policing is embedded in organisational routines and networks, suggesting that corruption can become institutionalised rather than exceptional. Gillanders et al. (2024) provide wider African evidence that police corruption is associated with crime victimisation and perceptions of insecurity. These findings are directly relevant to the idea of capable guardianship. A corrupt guardian may be physically present but functionally absent; more seriously, the guardian may become part of the opportunity structure that offenders exploit. Boateng et al. (2022a) reinforce this point by demonstrating that police criminality is an empirical phenomenon requiring organisational attention. The connection to Routine Activity Theory is therefore not that police misconduct "causes" all crime, but that misconduct can reduce the effective guardianship available to communities.

Trust is, however, neither binary nor irrecoverable. Mutahi et al. (2024) show that in Kenyan low-income settlements, positive everyday interactions between police and residents can build trust incrementally even amid insecurity, misconduct and political interference. Evidence from Ghana also indicates that professionalism and corruption are important predictors of public trust in the police (Dzordzormenyoh et al., 2024). The implication is practical: reform need not wait for complete institutional transformation before improving neighbourhood relations. Consistent responsiveness, transparent procedures, respectful treatment and credible follow-through can generate small but cumulative gains in legitimacy.

This literature suggests that perceptions of police conduct should be treated as analytically consequential even when individual allegations cannot be independently verified within a qualitative neighbourhood study. Residents act on their perceptions when deciding whether to call the police, cooperate with investigations, join local patrols or rely on informal providers. Consequently, the Borokiri interviews are not simply opinions about police reputation; they are evidence about the relational conditions under which guardianship operates. The link to the second research question is therefore clear: institutional conduct influences crime prevention indirectly by shaping the trust, information flows and cooperation on which formal policing depends. This also clarifies why police visibility can have contradictory effects. Visible patrols may reassure residents when encounters are professional and predictable, but the same visibility may increase apprehension where stops, demands or enforcement are perceived as arbitrary. The relevant variable is thus not visibility alone but the quality of contact. Community policing becomes credible when repeated encounters communicate competence, neutrality and respect, thereby converting physical presence into legitimate guardianship.

A further clarification comes from procedural-justice theory: perceived fairness in the exercise of authority is analytically distinct from assessments of crime-control success (Tyler, 2004). Accordingly, visible patrols may inspire confidence through perceived responsiveness, yet those same patrols may erode legitimacy when interactions are experienced as arbitrary. In this study, perceived legitimacy is treated as a potential enabling condition for information exchange and cooperation, not as a direct observation of lower crime rates. This distinction also leaves room for rival explanations, including spatial differences in patrol coverage, prior victimisation and inconsistent expectations of what police are legally authorised to do.

What Forms of Police-Community Collaboration Can Strengthen Capable Guardianship in Global South Neighbourhoods?

The strongest contemporary account of community policing is one of co-produced guardianship. Under this model, police do not transfer responsibility for safety to residents, and communities do not replace the state. Rather, each actor contributes distinct resources within an accountable partnership. Police provide lawful enforcement, investigation and access to the criminal-justice system; residents provide local intelligence, informal surveillance and knowledge of recurring problems; local leaders and civil organisations can facilitate communication and dispute resolution. The effectiveness of this arrangement depends on clear roles, ethical safeguards and channels through which community knowledge can shape police action.

Evidence from African settings demonstrates both the possibilities and limits of such collaboration. Mutahi et al. (2024) show that community-policing structures can create repeated spaces for interaction that improve police-community relationships. Diphoorn and van Stapele (2021), however, warn that representation and ownership remain central problems: if "community" representatives are selected in ways that exclude marginal groups, partnership may reproduce local inequalities. Beck and Jaffe (2019) likewise show that imported models are reshaped by local governance. Effective co-production therefore requires institutional design that is sensitive to local power relations rather than a standardised template.

Nigerian research cautions particularly against equating local approval of informal security with public accountability. Meagher (2007) traces how the Bakassi Boys emerged as an urban self-protection initiative in south-eastern Nigeria but became vulnerable to political appropriation. Lar (2018), examining plural policing in central Nigeria, shows that state and non-state providers may combine everyday protective functions with coercive practices, underscoring the importance of regulation and oversight. These cases are not treated as direct observations from Borokiri; they offer a comparative basis for assessing when hybrid guardianship complements lawful policing and when it becomes an unaccountable substitute.

Legitimacy scholarship adds a second requirement: cooperation must be voluntary enough to generate reliable information rather than being driven primarily by fear or coercion. Boateng et al. (2022b) demonstrate that procedural justice supports cooperation, while Braga et al. (2019) emphasise that poor relations in disadvantaged communities weaken police effectiveness. This means that the police-community interface is itself an operational resource. Respectful treatment, accessible complaint

mechanisms, predictable response and transparent case handling can improve the information environment in which police work. In Routine Activity terms, these practices increase capable guardianship by making it more likely that residents will report threats and by reducing the social distance between observers and formal responders.

A third requirement is complementarity with social prevention. Bui and Deakin (2021) show that youth crime is frequently intertwined with vulnerability, social disadvantage and risk. Community policing that focuses exclusively on surveillance and enforcement may therefore address immediate opportunities while leaving the social conditions that generate repeated offending untouched. In neighbourhoods facing unemployment, marginalisation and youth vulnerability, effective crime prevention requires links with education, youth services, public-space management and livelihood interventions. This does not dilute the role of policing; it positions policing within a wider prevention system.

The literature therefore supports an integrated framework for the third research question. Effective police-community collaboration should combine four elements: institutional integrity, representative participation, operational coordination and social prevention. Institutional integrity makes formal guardianship credible; representative participation ensures that local knowledge is not monopolised by powerful groups; operational coordination clarifies how informal actors interact with police; and social prevention reduces the recurring vulnerabilities and conflicts that enforcement alone cannot resolve. The Borokiri study is used to assess how far these conditions are present in practice and where the principal deficits lie. This integrated perspective also resists a false choice between enforcement and prevention. Formal enforcement remains indispensable for serious offences, but its effectiveness improves when embedded in trusted relationships and complemented by interventions that reduce recurring vulnerabilities. The literature therefore points towards a layered prevention system: situational guardianship manages immediate opportunities; legitimate policing sustains cooperation; and social policy reduces the conditions from which repeated insecurity emerges. Crucially, these layers should reinforce rather than undermine one another. Aggressive enforcement that damages legitimacy can weaken information flows, while community participation without formal follow-through can create frustration. Effective prevention therefore requires institutional alignment between what residents are asked to contribute and what public agencies are able and willing to deliver.

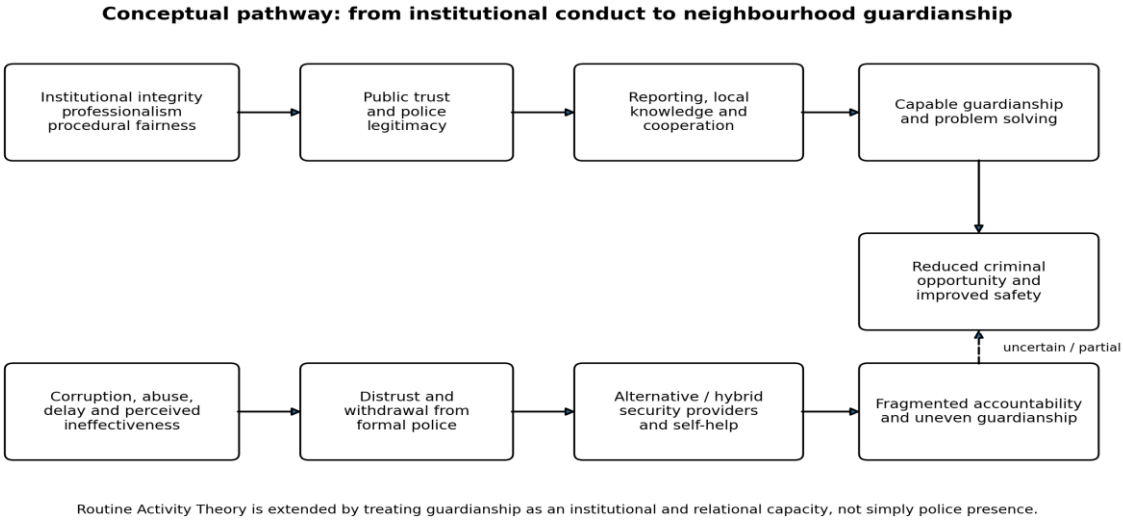


Figure 1. Proposed pathways linking institutional legitimacy, cooperation and guardianship (conceptual, not causally estimated).

Source: Author's conceptualisation based on Routine Activity Theory and the reviewed policing literature.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative, cross-sectional case-study design using interviews conducted between March and June 2026 to examine residents' and stakeholders' perceptions of law-enforcement

performance, community policing and crime prevention in Borokiri, Port Harcourt. The design is appropriate because the research questions concern how policing is experienced, interpreted and negotiated in a specific neighbourhood rather than the estimation of population-level causal effects. The unit of analysis is the neighbourhood-level policing relationship: the interaction among residents, formal law-enforcement agencies, community leaders, local government and informal security actors.

The research design is organised through the layers of the research onion of Saunders et al. (2019). At the philosophical layer, the study is positioned within an interpretivist orientation because it treats perceptions, meanings and lived encounters as central to understanding policing effectiveness. At the approach-to-theory layer, the study is primarily abductive: Routine Activity Theory provides an initial sensitising framework around capable guardianship, while the interview material is used to refine the meaning of guardianship in an institutional context. At the methodological-choice layer, the design is mono-method qualitative. The strategy is an intensive neighbourhood case study implemented through semi-structured interviews. The time horizon is cross-sectional, and the techniques and procedures comprise participant recruitment, stakeholder interviewing, verbatim transcription, inductive-deductive coding, thematic analysis and ethical safeguards.

Borokiri was selected because the neighbourhood has experienced persistent concerns about violent and property crime and because residents use both formal and informal security arrangements. The study-area map identifies Borokiri within Port Harcourt and situates the neighbourhood in Rivers State and Nigeria. The case is analytically useful because it enables examination of plural policing in a dense urban setting where police patrols, neighbourhood watch arrangements and vigilante activity coexist. The study does not claim statistical representativeness of Port Harcourt or Nigeria; its value lies in analytically explaining the mechanisms through which trust, institutional conduct and collaboration shape perceived crime-prevention capacity.

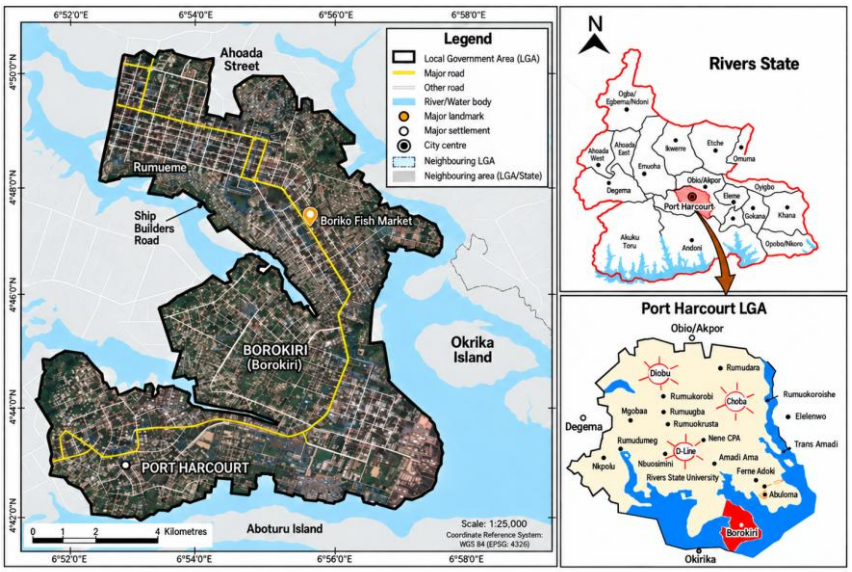


Figure 2. Location and spatial context of Borokiri, Port Harcourt.

Source: Designed by author

The study employed a combination of purposive sampling, snowball sampling and voluntary self-selection within a non-probability sampling framework. These complementary techniques were adopted to facilitate access to participants with relevant experiences of crime prevention, institutional policing and community-security arrangements in Borokiri, Port Harcourt. Purposive sampling guided the selection of the study area and stakeholder categories, gatekeeper-mediated recruitment facilitated institutional and community access, while snowball sampling and voluntary self-selection supported the recruitment of individual participants.

Borokiri was purposively selected because of its reported experiences of crime, coexistence of formal and informal security arrangements, and suitability for investigating institutional legitimacy and capable guardianship. Within the neighbourhood, potential participants were identified across relevant stakeholder categories, including residents, traditional and community leaders, police personnel, local-government representatives and vigilante actors. Additional community constituencies, including youth associations, market women's organisations, religious institutions and educational establishments, provided avenues for obtaining diverse perspectives on neighbourhood security.

Participant recruitment commenced through institutional gatekeepers. The Police Area Commander of Port Harcourt Metropolis served as the initial institutional entry point for accessing police personnel. This approach was necessary because police officers operate within a hierarchical administrative structure, making institutional access an important consideration when recruiting participants. Community recruitment was facilitated through traditional and community leadership networks, which provided access to relevant neighbourhood stakeholders. Gatekeeper involvement served to facilitate initial contact and institutional access, while individual participation remained voluntary.

Following the identification of initial participants through these access arrangements, snowball sampling was employed to extend recruitment to other individuals with relevant knowledge or experiences. Initial contacts and participants provided referrals to potentially eligible respondents, thereby facilitating access to community-security actors and other stakeholders who might otherwise have been difficult to identify or approach. Purposive selection remained important throughout this process because referrals were assessed for their relevance to the research questions rather than accepted solely on the basis of existing social or institutional connections.

Voluntary self-selection complemented these procedures by allowing eligible individuals who were willing to participate to contribute their experiences. Potential participants were informed about the research objectives, confidentiality arrangements and voluntary nature of participation before informed consent was obtained. The combination of institutional and community entry points, participant referrals and voluntary recruitment enabled the study to obtain perspectives from actors occupying different positions within Borokiri's formal and informal security systems.

Interviews were conducted at mutually convenient locations, digitally recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed for thematic analysis. Recruitment and interviewing continued until thematic saturation was attained at 62 interviews, when subsequent accounts no longer generated substantively new themes relevant to the research questions. The final sample was therefore informed by the informational adequacy and analytical depth of the interview material rather than statistical sampling requirements (Malterud et al., 2016).

The study got her ethical approval from the University of the Witwatersrand Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), protocol H20/04/18. Participants were informed of the research purpose, confidentiality protections, voluntary participation and their right to decline questions or withdraw, and informed consent was obtained before interviewing. Because participants discussed alleged misconduct, victimisation and local security practices, the manuscript removes potentially identifying details and treats allegations as reported experiences rather than adjudicated facts.

Methodological rigour was strengthened through comparison across stakeholder accounts, systematic coding and explicit separation between participant perception and independently established fact. Including multiple stakeholder categories created scope for contrasting accounts, although the supplied excerpts do not permit verification of the distribution of quoted voices across these groups. The case-study strategy provides contextual depth about how interviewees understood links among trust, policing practice and perceived prevention capacity. The principal limitations are also clear. Non-probability recruitment may over-represent participants with strong experiences or opinions; the cross-sectional design cannot establish temporal causality; and the absence of administrative crime records or independently verified case files prevents direct measurement of changes in crime attributable to community policing.

For analytical clarity, "formal guardianship" refers to police actors with legal enforcement powers; "informal guardianship" refers to residents, watch arrangements and vigilante actors involved in monitoring or incident response. "Perceived legitimacy" refers to interviewees' judgments about fair, trustworthy and appropriate authority. "Capable guardianship" denotes the proposed combination of access, willingness to intervene, legitimate authority and working links to other responders. These are interpretive constructs identified in interview accounts, not scale scores or independently observed effectiveness measures.

Analytical rigour was strengthened through systematic familiarisation with the interview transcripts, iterative coding, continuous comparison of participants' perspectives and progressive refinement of emerging themes. The analysis incorporated convergent and divergent accounts across stakeholder categories to capture the complexities of institutional legitimacy, community policing and informal security arrangements. Consistent with the principles of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), particular attention was given to thematic coherence, interpretive depth and the relationship between empirical evidence and theoretical explanation. The systematic integration of participants' narratives, contrasting viewpoints and established theoretical concepts enhanced the credibility, dependability and analytical robustness of the findings.

The interview was the unit of data production and the neighbourhood security relationship was the unit of substantive interpretation. Codes combined experiences of patrol, police response, reporting, perceived corruption, informal self-help, local access conditions and collaboration. The three themes were built by comparing how those issues intersect, not by treating every mention of an issue as independent corroboration. Quotations were selected to display a mechanism, contradiction or boundary condition; quoted perceptions are neither frequency estimates nor independently verified event reports. This reporting strategy is consistent with the emphasis on transparent selection, analysis and evidentiary quotation in the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) guidance (Tong et al., 2007).

Thematic analysis was undertaken in several stages. First, the full interview corpus was read repeatedly to establish familiarity with the data. Second, initial codes were generated to capture recurrent descriptions and actions. Third, related codes were grouped into candidate themes. Fourth, themes were reviewed for internal coherence and clear distinction from one another. Finally, themes were interpreted in relation to the three research questions and Routine Activity Theory. The analysis combined inductive attention to participants' accounts with deductive attention to guardianship, trust, institutional conduct and collaboration. Horizontal analysis compared common patterns across participants, while vertical analysis retained attention to distinctive stakeholder positions. Importantly, allegations concerning police misconduct are treated as participant perceptions and reported experiences; the qualitative design did not independently investigate or adjudicate individual claims.

The findings should therefore be interpreted as an analytically grounded account of perceived policing effectiveness and institutional relationships rather than as an experimental evaluation of crime reduction. Interpretive trustworthiness is pursued by explaining the link between reported experiences, themes and theoretical propositions, and by discussing affirmative and critical accounts side by side rather than forcing consensus. In qualitative terms, credibility rests on the depth and coherence of interpretation, while transferability depends on providing sufficient contextual description for readers to judge the relevance of the findings to other Nigerian and Global South neighbourhoods. Dependability is supported by the explicit account of recruitment, interviewing and thematic analysis, and confirmability by distinguishing empirical testimony from the author's theoretical interpretation. No frequency counts are used to imply statistical prevalence because the sampling strategy was qualitative and self-selected. Instead, salience is assessed through recurrence, explanatory depth, convergence across stakeholder categories and the importance of deviant or contradictory cases. This preserves consistency between the epistemological position, sampling design and form of inference.

Table 1. Stakeholder categories and their intended analytical roles (not a sample distribution).

Stakeholder category	Contribution to the study	Key perspective
Residents	Everyday experiences of crime, reporting, patrol, police contact and self-help security	Trust, safety perceptions and practical use of security providers
Traditional/community leaders	Neighbourhood governance, dispute management and collective security arrangements	Community representation and coordination
Police personnel	Formal law-enforcement role and interface with community structures	Patrol, investigation and official guardianship
Local-government representatives	Local governance and service context	Institutional coordination and prevention environment
Vigilante/local security actors	Informal surveillance, patrol and referral practices	Local knowledge, rapid response and accountability risks

Findings and Discussion

The findings are interpreted through the logic that each thematic claim is grounded first in participants' accounts, then examined through Routine Activity Theory and the policing literature, and finally connected to the research questions. Because this is a qualitative study, quoted accounts constitute primary evidence of how participants understood their security environment. Three related themes organise the analysis: the conditional effectiveness of hybrid guardianship; the effect of institutional conduct on trust in formal guardianship; and the prospects and risks of accountable, co-produced security. An anonymised R code identifies the source interview for each extract. Where the interview record supports a stakeholder description, it is included; otherwise the participant is described without assuming an unverified professional position. The wording of recorded answers is retained, local or non-standard expressions.

Routine Activity Theory provides a more precise interpretive structure for these accounts. Its central proposition concerns the convergence of a motivated offender, a suitable target and the absence of capable guardianship at a particular time and place (Cohen & Felson, 1979). The interviews illuminate how participants understood possible motivations, everyday exposure and the availability of formal or informal protection; they do not independently establish the three-way convergence in recorded crime events or test causal effects.

Conditional Effectiveness: Community Policing as Hybrid Guardianship

The first theme concerns the conditional usefulness of community policing. Participants did not consistently depict neighbourhood security as a choice between the police and the community. Instead, their descriptions suggested that local vigilance and formal authority could reinforce one another when roles were linked. A community respondent expressed this shared-responsibility argument explicitly:

> *"I don't think it's one man job, both the police, vigilante and members of the community have to put hands together to control crime."* (community respondent, R24)

This statement is significant because it locates capable guardianship in a relationship rather than in a single uniformed actor. Under Routine Activity Theory, protection depends on the presence and capacity of actors able to notice and interrupt opportunities for offending (Cohen & Felson, 1979; Felson, 1995). In Borokiri, participants associated those capacities with different resources: the recognition and proximity available to residents, the rapid observation of local routines by informal actors, and the lawful investigative powers of police. An expert interviewee explained why people embedded in the neighbourhood might notice emerging threats:

> *"They have a big role to play in terms of security because they are also living in same environment so they can easily detect when crime is about to happen"* (expert interviewee, R60)

The point is not that vigilante groups necessarily prevent more crime than police, but that residents attribute particular observational advantages to them. Another community respondent described the relationship more directly, saying

> *"They work together with the community security agents"* (community respondent, R13).

Taken together, these accounts support an interpretation of community policing as potentially co-produced guardianship: information and early warning may originate locally, whereas formal authorities retain responsibilities that cannot appropriately be transferred to informal groups. The emphasis on interaction is consistent with Mutahi et al. (2024) and Spasić and Radovanović (2019), although the quotations do not by themselves establish how frequently such collaboration occurred. The favourable argument was nevertheless qualified when participants considered the practical effects of police patrols. The respondent who advocated cooperation among police, vigilantes and residents also expressed reservations about patrol effectiveness:

> *"Police patrol is not very effective but at least it helps to reduce crime."* (community respondent, R24)

This is a revealing qualification, not a discrepancy to be removed. The respondent values patrols but questions whether the benefits match what the community needs. Other interviews show the range of judgements being made. One community participant asserted;

"The police is working better" (community respondent, R1), whereas another, despite acknowledging the presence of patrols, questioned their relevance:

> *"Not really because they patrol when there is and when there is no crime"* (community respondent, R14).

These contrasting perceptions distinguish general approval of police from evaluations of when and how officers intervene. Increased visibility is not synonymous with capable guardianship if police presence is poorly timed, unevenly distributed or regarded as unresponsive. Assessments of overall neighbourhood crime likewise varied. Community Respondent R7, when asked about the direction of crime, replied simply *"It has reduced".* Although brief, this observation cautions against reading the collection of interviews as unanimous evidence of rising insecurity. Nor can a participant's perception of decline be treated as a verified reduction in recorded incidents. The analytic finding concerns divergent lived evaluations of security performance, which helps explain why the same policing arrangements may attract approval and criticism.

The interviews also reveal how participants understood the first element of Routine Activity Theory: potential offender motivation. These explanations concerned perceived economic and social pressures rather than direct evidence from identified offenders. One long-term resident, interviewed as an expert, attributed some offending to immediate material hardship:

> *"Poverty, the level is now on the high side. Hunger as a result. Most of these people do not commit crimes to become wealthy, but for their basic needs like food for the day." (long-term resident and expert interviewee, R62)*

This account explains the participant's interpretation of why someone might offend; it does not establish the actual motives of offenders or demonstrate that poverty causes crime. Routine Activity Theory generally takes the existence of motivated offenders as a starting condition and asks when opportunities arise, rather than explaining the social origins of motivation. The account becomes analytically relevant to the present study when placed alongside evidence about who may be exposed to offending opportunities and whether capable guardians can intervene. In that sense, reported hardship provides perceived context, while routine movement, accessible targets and guardianship supply the theory's more immediate opportunity mechanism.

Spatial access further complicated these judgements. For one expert participant, the salient location of insecurity was the waterside, identified as a problem because of limited routes of movement: *"The water side because there is no escape route"* (expert interviewee, R60). Another expert made the access problem more explicit, describing areas that could only be approached on foot:

> *"The water side areas, those areas that are not motorable. The access to those sides is only by walking. So, any goes in those areas. Even the police are afraid to get to those areas of the neighbourhood."* (expert interviewee, R61)

The second component "suitable targets" was also apparent in participants' assessments of everyday exposure. The same expert who described non-motorable waterside routes identified people whose daily routines placed them outdoors early or late as particularly vulnerable:

> *"The early risers and those that come back late." (expert interviewee, R61)*

Read alongside the waterside account, this describes perceived opportunities produced by the intersection of movement, location and the availability of help. Suitability here refers to possible exposure within routine activities, not to any responsibility on the part of people who travel at these times. R61's two statements are drawn from one interview, so they illuminate a connected perspective rather than independently confirming a crime pattern. No victimisation survey or geocoded incident data were collected to determine which routes or hours actually carried greater risk.

The two extracts make physical accessibility part of participants' understanding of guardian capability. Places that are difficult to reach may be harder to patrol, monitor or respond to promptly; however, the interviews do not constitute a spatial crime map, and the reported reluctance of officers to enter particular places was not independently verified. Such perceptions nevertheless clarify how the built environment can mediate the value of formal patrols (Rukus et al., 2018; Diphoorn & van Stapele, 2021). A resident's more pessimistic description shows what perceived exclusion can mean for everyday security:

> *"The only means of security is the one an individual provides by himself for himself and his household. Anyone living within this area just have to be vigilant. There is no form of security."* (neighbourhood resident, R26)

This account contrasts sharply with the shared-guardianship ideal expressed by R24. Whereas one respondent envisaged residents and police working together, another understood safety as a largely private household obligation. The difference suggests that community vigilance may emerge as a cooperative resource, but it may also represent a response to perceived gaps in public protection. The first research question is therefore answered conditionally: community policing was viewed as useful where neighbourhood knowledge, accessible patrols and reliable formal follow-through were connected; its limitations appeared where this relationship was fragmented. The evidence extends the application of Routine Activity Theory by showing why the presence of guardians must be distinguished from their practical accessibility and effectiveness.

Institutional Conduct, Trust and the Capacity of Formal Guardianship

The second theme concerns whether police are experienced as legitimate guardians. Participants' assessments were not uniformly hostile or favourable. Rather, trust appeared contingent on encounters with officers, the perceived treatment of suspects and the practical ability of security institutions to respond. One of the most serious accounts was given by a long-term resident interviewed as an expert, who alleged that a tricycle driver had been fatally shot after refusing a demand for money:

> *"Just last week a policeman was caught committing a crime. Early in the morning a tricycle came out to pick passengers, and the policeman demanded two hundred naira from the driver. When he refused to give the policeman, he was shot dead by the policeman."* (Resident, R29)

This is a grave participant allegation, not an independently corroborated report of a killing or a legal finding concerning any officer. Its analytical value lies in the perception it expresses: where residents associate police encounters with coercion or danger, a formally authorised guardian may become an object of fear. The legitimacy of guardianship consequently depends on conduct as well as institutional mandate. Concerns about police criminality and everyday corruption are discussed in the wider literature by Boateng et al. (2022a), Onyango (2022) and Gillanders et al. (2024), but those studies cannot verify the specific incident alleged in this interview.

Importantly, the same interviewee did not simply dismiss police work. Asked generally about officers' performance, the participant first responded *"They are doing their best."* (long-term resident and expert interviewee, R62). When pressed about its adequacy, however, the answer changed to *"Their best is not good enough because the police is also part of the crime problem in the country."* (long-term resident and expert interviewee, R62). The two quotations come from R62, not from different respondents. Their

proximity reveals the complexity of institutional assessment: recognition of effort can coexist with the belief that policing remains compromised by misconduct. A separate expert offered a more forgiving benchmark, observing *"We are trying our best since crime cannot be completely erased from the surface of the earth."* (expert interviewee, R60). This does not invalidate the critical accounts; it shows that interviewees used different standards to judge police performance, including the realistic expectation that crime cannot be eliminated altogether.

Beyond allegations about personal conduct, participants identified organisational conditions that could inhibit police responsiveness. A respondent speaking about the provision of policing resources described vehicle maintenance and fuel shortages in concrete terms:

> *"There is not enough arms and amenities and the vehicles are not in good shape due to lack of maintenance. I have been in this job for 16years and never has the D.P.O repaired a broken vehicle. And also lack of fuel for vehicles."* (policing-resources respondent, R19)

The account shifts attention from the moral character of an individual officer to the infrastructure required for effective intervention. Whether or not the details of maintenance can be independently confirmed, the testimony explains why residents may experience a gap between the existence of a police service and its capacity to reach incidents promptly. It can, however, be examined alongside residents' negative evaluations of everyday police practice. One community respondent alleged:

> *"I haven't seen any police patrol arresting criminals in this neighborhood, all they do is harassing young guys who are dressed up."* (community respondent, R32)

Here patrol is not read as protection but as selective harassment. This is a reported perception rather than proof of misconduct, yet it provides a contrasting case against accounts that describe police as effective guardians. Presence can be experienced as reassurance, surveillance, intimidation or neglect, depending on the interaction. In Routine Activity terms, formal guardianship therefore requires not only personnel and mobility but also behaviour that leaves residents willing to seek help and exchange information.

A further dimension of legitimacy emerged in dissatisfaction with how criminal cases were handled. The interviewee who had alleged the tricycle incident also complained about police procedures and the comparative appeal of community responses:

> *"The community is better off. The police process is too long and corrupt. When you apprehend a criminal, allow justice to prevail and others will learn their lesson."* (long-term resident and expert interviewee, R62)

The statement combines perceived delay, accusations of corruption and a demand for visible accountability. It does not establish that a particular investigation was corrupt or that a suspect released on bail was unlawfully freed. Bail before trial is not inherently improper, and police do not determine guilt or impose criminal sentences. Nevertheless, uncertainty about what happens after apprehension can damage confidence in police responsiveness. This corresponds with research on procedural justice and cooperation (Boateng et al., 2022b), insofar as residents' assessments of fair treatment and effective follow-through affect their willingness to regard police as legitimate guardians.

The theoretical link requires a distinction between Routine Activity Theory and the literature on police legitimacy. RAT identifies the protective role of capable guardians; procedural justice and legitimacy scholarship help explain why community members may judge those guardians as usable, trustworthy or threatening. The interviews suggest a possible pathway in which perceived unfairness reduces willingness to approach police, share information or rely on their intervention, thereby weakening the effective guardianship available in an encounter. This is a theoretically informed interpretation of participants' expressed distrust, not a demonstrated behavioural sequence: the study did not independently measure reporting rates or police response times. The interview material also shows that dissatisfaction need not be comprehensive. When asked about justice-system performance, R32 gave a divided assessment:

> *"In some cases yes, and in some no, I said yes because some criminals have been dealt with squarely and no because anyone can go to court, bribe his way out and will not be sentenced for his offence."* (community respondent, R32).

This response recognises some effective outcomes while alleging opportunities for bribery in others; neither claim establishes the legal outcome of any particular case. A member of a landlord-and-tenant association similarly connected frustration over delay with the rejection of informal violence, explaining;

> *"They are not doing enough, the government have said that there should be no jungle justice, but most times, it takes the police a very long time to carryout justice."* (landlord-and-tenant association member, R33).

These accounts direct attention to the relationship between procedural transparency and pressure for unofficial enforcement. A slow or poorly explained formal process may be interpreted as ineffective even where legal safeguards are being followed. Other comments expressed broader institutional pessimism. R32 said;

> *"There is nothing like Police, from my observation, police need to put more effort in managing community crime."* (community respondent, R32).

A particularly informative negative case comes from R3, who answered a question about what police could do with *"They cannot do anything"* (community respondent and social-group member, R3), but later acknowledged, when specifically asked about patrols, that *"They help to control the crime".* Both answers are from the same social-group member, demonstrating that general disillusionment does not exclude recognition of a specific police function. The same participant described the group's response to misconduct as *"They punish the defaulter"* (community respondent and social-group member, R3). This last observation establishes a reported informal sanction but does not specify whether it involved physical punishment, deprivation of rights or any referral to police.

Taken together, these contrary assessments explain why institutional legitimacy cannot be inferred either from the presence of police patrols or from a single allegation about police conduct. The testimony suggests that capable guardianship is experienced through the combined effects of responsiveness, resources, respectful treatment and credible case handling. The second research question is therefore answered by treating legitimacy as an operational condition of policing: where residents perceive formal processes as arbitrary, inaccessible or unreliable, cooperation may weaken and informal sanctions may become attractive; where officers are seen to respond effectively, confidence can persist. These are interpretations of reported experiences, not proof that police actions caused particular crime trends. They nonetheless support the case for supervision of street-level encounters, transparent complaint procedures and clearer communication about case progression (Ike et al., 2022; Mutahi et al., 2024).

From Fragmented Security to Accountable Co-Produced Guardianship

The third theme concerns the relationship between formal policing and the wider field of neighbourhood security providers. The interviews depict a plural environment in which vigilante groups, local associations, households and the police may participate in different forms of surveillance and response. One long-term resident praised the practical contribution of local vigilantes and invoked OSPAC as an example:

> *"We have forces, registered forces in the country like the police. These local vigilante groups are even trying a lot. We have OSPAC, one local vigilante group, helping also in securing the roads, and they are doing a very good job. Because these hoodlums blocking people on the way are no longer there. Certain places that were No- go areas are now safe because of these local vigilantes available."* (long-term resident, R43).

This quotation illustrates how participants may grant practical legitimacy to informal security actors because they are perceived as active or successful, rather than because they possess statutory police powers. The geographical qualification is important: the ONELGA Security and Peace Advisory Committee (OSPAC) is associated with Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area in Rivers State. R62's positive reference does not, on its own, establish that OSPAC had a mandate or maintained patrols within Borokiri. The statement is therefore treated as an expression of perceived regional effectiveness, not direct evidence of the organisation's deployment in the study neighbourhood. Such distinctions are important in plural-policing research (Beck & Jaffe, 2019; Diphoorn & van Stapele, 2021).

Preference for locally available security did not necessarily imply the rejection of police authority. An interviewee whom the interviewer described as a security expert argued for a more deliberate alliance among residents, formal officers and local groups:

> *"I think they need to engage more or create a security alliance, alertness among individuals and also join forces with the vigilantes."* (interviewer-designated security expert, R25).

The emphasis here is on coordination, early warning and a joined-up response rather than a parallel justice system. This proposal is compatible with the respondent in Section 4.1 who urged shared responsibility among police, vigilantes and residents. Yet the transcripts also show disagreement over where community intervention should end. When asked about a suspected offender encountered through a community organisation, one respondent described referral to the police:

> *"Such person has been handed over to the police when he/she is been discovered."* (community respondent, R13).

This places the police at the point of formal criminal-justice action. Another respondent explicitly rejected community organisations dealing with criminal matters, responding *"No I don't support it"* (community respondent, R12). These views contrast with the landlord-and-tenant association member's account of internal sanctions:

> *"It depends on the type of crime though, if the person commits such crime, they happens to be members, most times he/she will be fined heavily to avoid repetition of such."* (landlord-and-tenant association member, R33).

The distinction among referral to police, opposition to community adjudication and association fines matters. They are not equivalent forms of informal guardianship, and a monetary sanction within a private association should not automatically be equated with lawful criminal punishment. More seriously, the interviews contain concern about extra-legal violence. A neighbourhood resident included "jungle justice" in an account of crime:

> *"Yes that first one crime was snatching, secondly, rape, thirdly false witness leading to jungle justice, theses are the crime that happens more regularly."* (neighbourhood resident, R26).

This is direct evidence that the possibility of extra-legal punishment entered a participant's description of neighbourhood insecurity. A defensible interpretation is that community-based enforcement can offer rapid local responses but also raises questions of legality, due process, proportionality and independent oversight. Institutional co-production therefore requires boundaries on coercion, not simply collaboration among all available security actors.

Accounts of practical guardianship also emphasised time and resources. The landlord-and-tenant association member who raised concerns about the pace of justice considered night patrols especially important:

> *"The relevance should gear towards the night time because no crime easily occur during the day. During the night time, police patrol helps to instill fear among the hoodlums."* (landlord-and-tenant association member, R33).

The night-time emphasis is instructive but should not be converted into a claim that criminal opportunity arises only after dark. The long-term resident quoted earlier also recounted an incident of alleged daytime victimisation while travelling on foot:

> "Yes, specifically under the flyover and it was during the day. I was walking and I got distracted by a trade fare before I could get back to myself, I got hit on my neck and they cut my gold necklace, and I shouted but to no avail and even the police couldn't save me." (long-term resident, R51)

The account is not an independently verified incident report, and its precise location should not automatically be treated as a mapped crime site in Borokiri. Nevertheless, it offers an especially clear illustration of how the three RAT elements can be considered together: an assumed motivated offender, a person carrying a valued item during an ordinary journey, and an apparently ineffective immediate protective response. The participant's mention of distraction is analytically relevant to the opportunity described, not a basis for blaming the victim. As a contrasting case, this testimony cautions against

equating capable guardianship solely with night patrols and suggests that prevention should also attend to daytime journeys and locations where assistance may be difficult to obtain.

R33's preference for night patrols and R51's account of daytime victimisation are therefore better read as distinct perceived exposure patterns than as competing estimates of crime incidence. Routine Activity Theory directs attention to their shared question: at which times and places do everyday activities create opportunities that available guardians cannot readily interrupt? The interviews cannot establish the temporal distribution of offences. Proposed patrol coverage must also be assessed against the personnel, equipment and infrastructure available for intervention. An expert interviewee summarised these perceived constraints as follows:

> *"No sufficient arms and ammunition, poor welfare for police officer, and poor infrastructure."* (expert interviewee, R61).

These are perceived material limitations, rather than independently audited budget or staffing data. Read alongside the concerns about waterside access in Section 4.1, they point to guardianship as a situated capability: officers cannot intervene effectively simply because they have legal authority; access, mobility, staffing and public cooperation also matter. This does not justify transferring the responsibilities of arrest, investigation and adjudication wholesale to vigilante organisations.

Indeed, an interviewee who had earlier described household vigilance as the only dependable security still recognised the police's separate responsibility in more serious matters:

> *"Yes, it depends on the type of crime which the person committed, although, I might not be knowledgeable of theses crime, but the police are in the right position to ensure the right action is taken."* (neighbourhood resident, R26).

This final counterpoint is central to the third research question. A person who feels insufficiently protected may nevertheless accept that legal authority and formal case handling should remain with the police. The implication is not to select either state control or informal self-help as the sole solution, but to design accountable co-production: neighbourhood actors contribute recognition, information and early warning, while police provide lawful intervention and transparent follow-through. Local-government and planning interventions are also relevant where insecurity is understood in relation to poor access, youth disadvantage and unmaintained public spaces (Bui & Deakin, 2021).

Across the three themes, the study therefore advances an institutional and relational interpretation of capable guardianship. Participants valued local knowledge and collaboration, but disputed the quality of patrols; some praised police effort while alleging coercion or procedural failings; and some endorsed informal security while recognising the need for formal legal responsibility. The relevant analytical unit is not merely a police officer, vigilante or patrol vehicle in isolation, but the relationship among security actors, the neighbourhood spaces they can reach, the procedures they follow and the public confidence their actions generate. Rather than changing Routine Activity Theory's foundational proposition, the Borokiri evidence refines its application to plural urban security: physical presence matters, but so do accessibility, institutional integrity, legitimate authority, cooperation and accountable response.

This brings the full Routine Activity Theory configuration into focus. Participants described perceived motivations linked to hardship and youth unemployment, potentially exposed targets along secluded routes and during early or late travel, and contrasting experiences of police, vigilante and household guardianship. The reported daytime robbery complicates a simple night-risk narrative, while accounts of inaccessible waterside routes complicate the assumption that police presence implies effective reach. These are interview-grounded interpretations of possible convergence, not independently observed links between offender motivation, target suitability and a specific guardian's absence in each case. The theoretical contribution lies in specifying how access, coordination, public trust and lawful authority may condition capable guardianship in Borokiri, not in claiming to replace or causally validate RAT.

Recommendations

The principal recommendation is to develop accountable, complementary guardianship rather than to increase police presence alone. Community actors can contribute neighbourhood knowledge, early warning and information about changing exposure, while the police and other competent public authorities remain responsible for action within their lawful mandates. Reports of shared responsibility, referrals to the police, and concerns about informal punishment make this division of responsibilities especially important. Community approval or perceived effectiveness should never be treated as authorisation for coercive punishment, unlawful detention or parallel criminal adjudication. Likewise, reference to OSPAC does not provide a basis for assuming that the organisation operates in Borokiri; any proposed institutional partnership must first establish the identity, mandate and accountability of the actors involved.

Reform should proceed through connected institutional and spatial measures. Police leadership should strengthen supervision, accessible complaint reporting and timely explanation of case progress, responding to the contrasting assessments of police effort, allegations of misconduct and dissatisfaction with justice processes. Security agencies should also assess patrol vehicles, fuel, response capacity and operating practices in light of concerns raised by some respondents. With local government and neighbourhood representatives, they should review pedestrian routes, waterside access, lighting and other environmental conditions that may limit protection. Such assessments should be guided by verified local information rather than assuming that locations named in interviews are established crime hot spots. Patrol planning should address exposure across the day as well as after dark, given one of the respondents emphasis on night-time coverage and reported daytime victimisation.

A formal police–community coordination protocol should define how observations are reported, which information can be shared, when suspected offences must be referred to police and how abuses can be challenged. Participation should be deliberately inclusive of women, youth, tenants, traders and less-visible residents to avoid allowing a narrow set of gatekeepers to speak for the entire neighbourhood. Social and preventive services should form a parallel strand: education, youth support, livelihood opportunities and accessible public spaces address concerns about hardship and vulnerability without assuming that unemployed residents are offenders. These measures should be piloted and evaluated prospectively. Useful indicators include response time, case communication, the completion of referrals, complaints and their resolution, perceived procedural fairness, willingness to report, and independently verified patterns of victimisation. The interview evidence provides reasons to test these interventions, not proof that they will succeed.

Conclusion

This study examined perceptions of law-enforcement performance, community policing and crime prevention in Borokiri, Port Harcourt, through a qualitative analysis of interviews with neighbourhood and institutional stakeholders. The findings show neither unqualified confidence in formal policing nor wholesale rejection of it. Respondents described the potential value of patrols, local knowledge and police–community cooperation, while others questioned the adequacy of patrols, reported constraints on access and resources, or alleged misconduct, delay and unfair treatment. Important counterexamples were retained: some participants recognised useful police functions despite broader criticism, and favourable accounts of neighbourhood security appeared alongside continuing insecurity. These contrasts support a conditional account of community policing rather than a single verdict on its success or failure.

The theoretical contribution is to elaborate the application of Routine Activity Theory in a setting of plural and unevenly accessible guardianship. Participants offered perceived explanations of offender motivation, described potentially exposed targets during everyday journeys and identified differences in the reach, conduct and coordination of guardians. Reports of inaccessible waterside routes, concern about night travel and an account of daytime victimisation illustrate how opportunity may vary across places and times. Yet capable guardianship is not simply a matter of physical proximity: neighbourhood observation becomes more useful when linked to a lawful and responsive authority, while distrust, inaccessible routes or inadequate operational capacity may weaken the protection that formal presence is expected to

provide. Scholarship on procedural justice and police legitimacy helps explain these relational conditions; the study does not claim that Routine Activity Theory itself originally defined guardianship as police visibility alone.

The evidence also indicates why informal security arrangements require both recognition and restraint. Their perceived proximity and responsiveness may make them attractive, but their legitimacy cannot be inferred solely from popularity, and reports of community sanctions or "jungle justice" raise distinct concerns about rights and accountability. The preferred policy direction is therefore co-produced yet differentiated guardianship: community actors contribute information and prevention, police exercise their lawful powers with procedural fairness, and local government addresses environmental access and wider vulnerabilities. Claims of criminal misconduct, changes in crime prevalence and specific organisational deployments remain unverified by these interviews; the selective presentation of extracts cannot establish theme frequency or verified agreement across all stakeholder groups.

A testable implication of this institutional–relational interpretation is that, among neighbourhoods with comparable exposure and police presence, more credible police contact, better case follow-through and functioning police community referral arrangements should be associated with greater cooperation and more timely protective intervention. Comparative or longitudinal research should measure the time and location of verified offences, routine exposure, patrol deployment and response, procedural-justice experiences, trust, complaint resolution, referral performance and victimisation outcomes. Findings of effective cooperation where legitimacy and coordination remain weak, or no improvement where these conditions strengthen, would challenge the proposed mechanism. The present cross-sectional interviews cannot resolve those tests, but they identify the questions that a more comprehensive evaluation of urban capable guardianship should address.

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