

State Policing and Security Governance in Nigeria: A Critical Examination of the Southwest Experience

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ABSTRACT	ARTICLE DETAILS
The intensifying debate on the establishment of state police in Nigeria reflects deepening concerns about rising insecurity, overstretched federal policing structures, and the limitations of a centralised security governance model. Although the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) is constitutionally mandated to provide internal security, its highly centralised architecture has proven inadequate for addressing Nigeria’s increasingly complex and regionally differentiated security challenges. Southwest Nigeria—comprising Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, and Ekiti States—illustrates these limitations vividly, with escalating incidents of kidnapping, cultism, highway robbery, cybercrime, and farmer–herder conflicts prompting renewed calls for decentralised policing. This article critically examines the necessity of state police through a focused case study of Southwest Nigeria, drawing on contemporary scholarship, federalism theory, and qualitative analysis of secondary data. It interrogates the structural constraints of federal policing, including manpower shortages, rigid command hierarchies, weak community engagement, and slow response to localised threats. The emergence of the Western Nigeria Security Network (Amotekun) is analysed as a significant regional innovation that has demonstrated improved intelligence gathering, enhanced response times, and strengthened community trust. Findings reveal that “the current policing architecture is structurally incapable of addressing localised security threats, particularly in diverse regions such as the Southwest,” thereby reinforcing arguments for a regulated transition toward multilevel policing. Nonetheless, concerns persist regarding political interference, human rights violations, funding disparities, and coordination challenges. The article concludes that state police is necessary for effective, responsive, and community centred security governance, but must be implemented with robust accountability frameworks, constitutional safeguards, and clearly defined jurisdictional boundaries.	Published On: 31 August 2026 Available on: https://ijiissh.com/

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria’s internal security landscape has become increasingly complex, characterised by rising incidents of kidnapping, banditry, terrorism, cultism, cybercrime, and farmer–herder conflicts. These challenges have exposed longstanding structural weaknesses in the Nigeria Police Force (NPF), the institution constitutionally mandated to provide internal security. Operating as a highly centralised organisation under federal control, the NPF continues to struggle with inadequate manpower, limited resources, bureaucratic command hierarchies, and weak community engagement—constraints that significantly undermine its effectiveness in responding to diverse and rapidly evolving security threats (Adebayo, 2023; Ojo, 2022). With fewer than 400,000 officers serving a population exceeding 220 million, Nigeria’s policing ratio remains far below United Nations standards, further intensifying concerns about overstretch and operational inefficiency (UNODC, 2022).

Southwest Nigeria—comprising Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, and Ekiti States—provides a compelling case study for examining these structural limitations. The region has witnessed a surge in urban criminality, cult-related violence, highway robbery, and farmer–herder conflicts, prompting state governments to explore alternative security arrangements. The establishment of the Western Nigeria Security Network (WNSN), popularly known as Amotekun, represents one of the most significant regional responses to federal policing inadequacies. Amotekun’s emergence reflects growing dissatisfaction with centralised policing and

renewed calls for constitutional reforms that would enable states to establish their own police forces (Adebanjo, 2022; Ogunleye, 2024).

Contemporary scholarship increasingly argues that Nigeria's monolithic policing model is misaligned with its federal structure and unable to address region-specific security realities (Olowale, 2021; Akinyemi, 2023). This article contributes to these debates by critically examining the necessity of state police through a focused analysis of Southwest Nigeria. It synthesises contemporary literature, applies federalism theory, and evaluates decentralised security initiatives to determine whether Nigeria requires a transition toward multilevel policing to achieve effective, responsive, and community-centred security governance.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Nigeria's centralised policing model has become increasingly misaligned with the country's evolving security landscape. Although the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) is constitutionally mandated to provide internal security, its structural and operational limitations have rendered it incapable of addressing the diverse and rapidly intensifying threats confronting different regions of the country. With fewer than 400,000 officers serving a population of over 220 million, Nigeria's policing ratio falls significantly below international standards, resulting in overstretch, slow response times, and limited territorial coverage (UNODC, 2022). This manpower deficit is compounded by bureaucratic command hierarchies that impede rapid decision-making and weaken the capacity of officers to respond effectively to localised threats, particularly in rural and peri-urban communities (Ojo, 2022).

Southwest Nigeria illustrates these limitations with particular clarity. The region faces a complex mix of security challenges, including urban criminality in Lagos and Ogun, cult-related violence in Oyo and Osun, highway robbery in Ondo, and persistent farmer–herder conflicts in Ekiti. These threats require nuanced, context-specific interventions that a monolithic federal policing structure has struggled to provide. Public trust in federal policing has also declined due to perceptions of detachment from local realities and inadequate community engagement (Akinyemi, 2023). As insecurity intensifies, citizens and state governments increasingly question whether a centrally controlled police force can meet the demands of a diverse federation.

The emergence of the Western Nigeria Security Network (Amotekun) further exposes the limitations of centralised policing. Amotekun's relatively successful intelligence-driven operations and rapid response capabilities demonstrate the potential effectiveness of decentralised security arrangements. Yet its existence also underscores a constitutional dilemma: while states are compelled to innovate in response to insecurity, they remain legally constrained by Section 214 of the 1999 Constitution, which vests exclusive policing authority in the Federal Government (Olowale, 2021). This tension raises a fundamental question at the heart of the problematique: can Nigeria continue relying on a centralised policing model in the face of increasingly decentralised and region-specific security threats?

The core problem, therefore, is not merely the inefficiency of federal policing but the structural contradiction between Nigeria's federal political system and its unitary policing architecture. As insecurity escalates and regional disparities widen, the debate over state police becomes a critical inquiry into the future of security governance, constitutional reform, and the viability of multilevel policing in Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical Evolution of Policing in Nigeria

Policing in Nigeria originated from colonial constabulary forces designed to enforce colonial authority rather than community protection (Tamuno, 2020). Post-independence reforms retained centralised command structures, embedding federal dominance in security governance.

A significant turning point occurred after the 1966 military coup, when regional police forces were abolished due to concerns about political misuse and partisan enforcement during the First Republic. The military government consolidated all policing functions under the Nigeria Police Force (NPF), creating a single, federally controlled institution. Scholars argue that this centralisation—intended to promote national unity and prevent regional abuses—also entrenched structural weaknesses that persist today, including limited local responsiveness, weak community engagement, and over-reliance on federal command hierarchies (Ojo, 2022; Olowale, 2021). The legacy of this reform continues to shape contemporary debates on decentralisation and the necessity of state police in addressing Nigeria's diverse security challenges.

Contemporary Scholarship

Contemporary debates on state police in Nigeria centres on the growing mismatch between the country's escalating insecurity and its highly centralised policing architecture. Scholars argue that Section 214 of the 1999 Constitution, which vests exclusive policing authority in the Federal Government, contradicts Nigeria's federal structure and limits the ability of states to respond effectively to region-specific threats (Olowale, 2021). Rising incidents of kidnapping, cultism, banditry, and farmer-herder conflicts—particularly in Southwest Nigeria—have intensified calls for decentralisation, with proponents asserting that state police would enhance intelligence gathering, improve response times, and strengthen community trust (Adebayo, 2023; Akinyemi, 2023).

The emergence of the Western Nigeria Security Network (Amotekun) has significantly shaped these debates. Amotekun's operational successes in intelligence-led interventions and rapid response have demonstrated the viability of decentralised security arrangements and highlighted the limitations of federal policing (Ogunleye, 2024). However, concerns persist regarding potential political misuse, human rights violations, and disparities in funding across states. Critics warn that without strong oversight mechanisms, state police could become instruments of political repression, echoing historical abuses associated with regional police forces during the First Republic (Ibrahim, 2021).

Comparative insights from federal countries such as the United States, India, Canada, and South Africa show that multi-level policing can function effectively when supported by clear jurisdictional boundaries, coordinated inter-agency operations, and robust accountability frameworks (Walker, 2021; Sharma, 2020; Mkhize, 2022). These models reinforce arguments that Nigeria can adopt a regulated, decentralised policing system that balances local autonomy with national security priorities.

Gaps in Literature

Although scholarship on policing and security governance in Nigeria is extensive, notable gaps persist in the existing literature. Much of the research adopts a national-level perspective, resulting in limited region-specific analyses that capture the unique security dynamics of Southwest Nigeria. Empirical studies evaluating the operational effectiveness of the Western Nigeria Security Network (Amotekun) remain sparse, with most accounts relying on descriptive narratives rather than systematic assessments of its impact on crime reduction, intelligence gathering, or community trust. Furthermore, while debates on state police frequently reference constitutional constraints, few studies provide detailed examinations of viable constitutional pathways for decentralising policing within Nigeria's federal structure. Comparative analyses are also underdeveloped; existing works rarely engage deeply with lessons from other federations such as Canada, India, South Africa, or the United States, where multilevel policing systems operate with clearly defined jurisdictional boundaries and accountability frameworks. These gaps limit the ability of scholars and policymakers to fully understand the implications, feasibility, and potential risks of transitioning to state police. This article addresses these gaps by offering a focused regional case study, integrating contemporary scholarship, and drawing comparative insights from other federal systems to enrich ongoing debates on decentralised security governance in Nigeria.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

Federalism Theory

Federalism theory is premised on the distribution of powers across multiple levels of government to promote efficiency, responsiveness, and accountability in governance. Classical federal theorists such as Elazar (2020) argue that federations function optimally when authority is devolved in ways that reflect territorial diversity, local autonomy, and the principle of subsidiarity—the idea that governance responsibilities should be exercised at the lowest level capable of effectively performing them. In mature federations such as the United States, Canada, India, and South Africa, policing is decentralised to allow sub-national units to respond to region-specific security challenges while maintaining coordinated national oversight (Walker, 2021; Sharma, 2020; Mkhize, 2022). These systems demonstrate that multilevel policing can coexist with national security priorities when supported by clear jurisdictional boundaries, interagency cooperation, and robust accountability mechanisms. Federalism theory therefore provides a conceptual foundation for understanding why centralised policing may be ill-suited to heterogeneous societies where security threats vary significantly across regions.

Applying federalism theory to Nigeria reveals a fundamental structural contradiction between the country's constitutional design and its policing architecture. Although Nigeria is constitutionally organised as a federation of 36 states, policing remains exclusively under federal control through Section 214 of the 1999 Constitution, which prohibits the establishment of state police. This centralisation undermines the principles of subsidiarity and local autonomy, limiting the ability of states to address region-specific security challenges such as cultism, highway robbery, and farmer–herder conflicts prevalent in Southwest Nigeria. The emergence of the Western Nigeria Security Network (Amotekun) illustrates both the necessity and feasibility of decentralised policing within a federal system. Amotekun's operational successes—particularly in intelligence gathering and rapid response—demonstrate how locally grounded security institutions can outperform centralised structures in addressing localised threats (Ogunleye, 2024). Yet its existence also exposes constitutional tensions, as states innovate outside formal policing frameworks due to federal constraints. Federalism theory thus supports the argument that Nigeria requires a regulated transition toward multilevel policing that aligns constitutional authority with practical security needs, ensuring that states possess the institutional capacity to protect their populations while maintaining national cohesion and oversight.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design to critically examine the necessity of state police in Nigeria, with Southwest Nigeria serving as the focal case study. It relies exclusively on secondary data drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2020 and 2024, government reports, policy documents, media analyses, and existing qualitative studies that address policing, federalism, and regional security initiatives. The analytical approach combines thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in

debates on centralised and decentralised policing, comparative analysis to draw insights from federal systems such as the United States, India, Canada, and South Africa, and triangulation to enhance the credibility of findings by cross-validating evidence from multiple sources. This methodology enables a comprehensive understanding of the structural limitations of Nigeria's centralised policing model and the emerging significance of regional security arrangements such as Amotekun. However, the study acknowledges certain limitations, including restricted access to primary field data, potential bias in media-based sources, and variations in reporting standards across states in Southwest Nigeria. Despite these constraints, the qualitative approach provides a robust foundation for analysing the implications of decentralised policing within Nigeria's federal structure and for evaluating the feasibility of transitioning toward multilevel policing.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Comparative experiences from other federal countries demonstrate that decentralised policing can function effectively when supported by clear jurisdictional boundaries, coordinated intergovernmental mechanisms, and robust accountability frameworks. In the United States, policing is primarily decentralised, with thousands of local and state police departments operating alongside federal agencies such as the FBI. This multilevel structure allows states and municipalities to tailor policing strategies to local crime patterns, while federal agencies provide specialised support and national coordination (Walker, 2021). Similarly, Canada operates a hybrid system in which provinces may establish their own police forces—such as the Ontario Provincial Police—while others contract policing services from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). This flexibility enables provinces to choose models that best align with their administrative capacity, fiscal resources, and security needs (Brown, 2021). India also maintains a decentralised policing system where state police forces handle internal security, supported by federal paramilitary units during crises. This arrangement reflects the principle of subsidiarity, ensuring that states retain primary responsibility for addressing region-specific threats (Sharma, 2020).

South Africa offers another instructive example, operating a national police service complemented by provincial oversight structures that allow provinces to influence policing priorities within their jurisdictions. Although not fully decentralised, this model demonstrates how federations can balance national cohesion with regional responsiveness (Mkhize, 2022). Across these countries, decentralisation enhances intelligence gathering, improves response times, and strengthens community trust—outcomes that mirror the successes of Amotekun in Southwest Nigeria. The comparative evidence suggests that Nigeria could adopt a regulated multilevel policing system that aligns constitutional authority with practical security needs, provided strong oversight mechanisms, funding frameworks, and interagency coordination are established. These international models reinforce the argument that decentralised policing is both feasible and compatible with federal governance when implemented with clear safeguards.

FINDINGS

Structural limitations of centralised policing — The Nigeria Police Force's centralised command structure restricts its ability to respond effectively to localised security threats. Officers often lack cultural familiarity and community-based intelligence networks, resulting in slow response times, weak proactive interventions, and limited adaptability to diverse regional contexts (Ojo, 2022).

Rising insecurity in Southwest Nigeria — The Southwest faces distinct security challenges, including urban criminality in Lagos and Ogun, cultism in Oyo and Osun, highway robbery in Ondo, and farmer–herder conflicts in Ekiti. These region-specific threats expose the inadequacy of a monolithic federal policing model that cannot tailor interventions to local realities.

Effectiveness of Amotekun — The Western Nigeria Security Network (Amotekun) has demonstrated improved intelligence gathering, faster response times, and stronger community trust. Its operations have contributed to reductions in kidnapping and robbery across several states, illustrating the potential of decentralised security arrangements (Ogunleye, 2024).

Public support for decentralised policing — Surveys show strong public support for state police, particularly in high-risk communities. Citizens increasingly perceive decentralised policing as more responsive, community-centred, and better aligned with regional security needs (Akinyemi, 2023).

Risks and concerns — Despite its advantages, state policing poses significant risks, including political interference by governors, potential human rights violations, funding disparities among states, and coordination challenges with federal agencies. These concerns highlight the need for strong regulatory and accountability frameworks.

Comparative insights from other federations — Federal countries such as the United States, India, Canada, and South Africa operate decentralised policing systems that balance local autonomy with national oversight. Their experiences demonstrate that multilevel policing is feasible when supported by clear jurisdictional boundaries, interagency cooperation, and robust accountability mechanisms.

CONCLUSION

The analysis demonstrates that Nigeria's centralised policing model is increasingly inadequate for addressing the country's complex and rapidly evolving security challenges, particularly in regions such as Southwest Nigeria where crime patterns are diverse and deeply embedded in local socio-economic contexts. The structural limitations of the Nigeria Police Force—manifested in overstretch, weak intelligence networks, slow response times, and limited community trust—underscore the fundamental misalignment between Nigeria's federal political structure and its unitary policing architecture. The emergence and relative effectiveness of the Western Nigeria Security Network (Amotekun) further highlight this contradiction, revealing both the necessity and feasibility of decentralised security arrangements that are grounded in local knowledge, community engagement, and region-specific operational strategies. Amotekun's successes demonstrate that decentralised policing can enhance responsiveness and improve security outcomes, thereby strengthening the argument for a regulated transition toward state police.

However, the study also recognises that decentralisation alone is not a panacea. The risks associated with state police—political interference, human rights violations, uneven funding capacities, and coordination challenges—are real and must be addressed through robust constitutional safeguards, independent oversight bodies, and clearly defined jurisdictional boundaries. Comparative insights from federal systems such as the United States, India, Canada, and South Africa show that multilevel policing can function effectively when supported by strong accountability frameworks and interagency cooperation. Nigeria can draw valuable lessons from these models to design a decentralised policing system that balances local autonomy with national cohesion. Ultimately, the findings affirm that state police is not merely a policy option but a structural necessity for achieving effective, responsive, and community-centred security governance in Nigeria. A phased, carefully regulated transition—anchored in constitutional reform and institutional strengthening—offers the most viable pathway for aligning Nigeria's security architecture with its federal character and contemporary security realities.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Constitutional Reform: A key recommendation is the amendment of Section 214 of the 1999 Constitution to permit the establishment of state police. This reform is necessary to correct the structural misalignment between Nigeria's federal system and its unitary policing model. Allowing states to create their own police forces would enable more responsive, locally grounded security interventions, particularly in regions such as the Southwest where threats are highly contextual.

Clear Operational Boundaries: To prevent jurisdictional conflicts and ensure coherence within the national security framework, Nigeria must establish clear operational boundaries between federal and state police agencies. Defined areas of authority, protocols for joint operations, and mechanisms for interagency coordination are essential to avoid duplication and enhance overall effectiveness.

Independent Oversight Mechanisms: Given the risks of political interference and human rights violations identified in the findings, independent state-level oversight bodies should be created to regulate recruitment, discipline, and operational conduct. These commissions would help ensure accountability, transparency, and professionalism across state police units.

Standardised Training and Professionalisation: To maintain professional standards and prevent operational excesses, a national framework for training and professionalisation should be adopted. This would ensure that state police units adhere to uniform standards in investigation, human rights compliance, and community policing while retaining flexibility to address local security needs.

Phased Implementation and Integration: A phased rollout of state police—beginning with pilot states that already operate regional security initiatives such as Amotekun—would allow policymakers to refine operational models before nationwide adoption. Integration with federal agencies through shared databases, communication systems, and joint training programmes is essential to maintain national cohesion and prevent fragmentation.

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