



Socio-Political and Economic Determinants of Extra-Judicial Killings by Law Enforcement Agents in South-East, Nigeria

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Abstract

The study investigated the socio-political and economic determinants of extra-judicial killings in South-East, Nigeria. Extra-judicial killing is a serious issue that haunts the operational practice of different security agencies in the country and it refers to any death caused by a law enforcement authority without following the legal rules or due judicial process. The social disorganization theory was adopted as the theoretical framework for the study. The study employed the sequential mixed methods research design and the sample size of 1051 was statistically determined using Fisher's statistical method while the study participants include the town union members and self-employed youths resident in South-East Nigeria. Questionnaire and In-Depth Interview (IDI) Guide were the major instruments for data collection. The quantitative data collected were processed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 20 software and analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequency counts and simple percentages while manual content analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data. The study found that illiteracy and lack of professionalism among security agents are major determinants of extra-judicial killings. The study also found that poverty among children of the deceased and financial strain from legal bills are the economic consequences of the phenomenon, while grief, pain and the distrust of law enforcement agents are the psychological consequences of extra-judicial killings in South-East, Nigeria. This study strongly recommends that university graduates should be considered as the minimum and prioritized during the recruitment process as the educational background of the officers plays a key role in determining how they discharge their duties. Also, the Nigerian Police Commission should strictly investigate and sanction erring officers as this would serve as a deterrent to other officers and re-emphasize the need to adhere to the law and guidelines of the Police Act as enshrined in the Constitution.

Keywords: criminal justice system, extra-judicial killings, judicial process, law enforcement, security agencies

Introduction

Extra-judicial killings are killings that are not committed by the order of a judiciary or court under the laws of the land. They are killings which have been executed beyond judicial

process, as a result of which right to life of the victim is denied, therefore, all reasonable legitimate opportunities, remain inapplicable to the alleged sufferer (West Encyclopedia of America Law, 2008). If a death is caused by a law enforcement authority without following the legal rules or due judicial process, it can be considered as extra-judicial killing. In summary, extra-judicial killings are arranged in some categories according to Wallace (2012): (a) killings carried out by law enforcement officials or other security forces of alleged criminals, during attempts to extort civilians, politically motivated killings and many more. (b) Killings carried out during state of armed conflict in a country. (c) Targeted killings of suspected criminals and terrorists during counter-terrorism operations. (d) Killings by non-state actors which could include paramilitary group, vigilantes, gangs, private individuals and others. (e) Demises in custody, resulting from torture, poor health care, inadequate food, killings of inmates by guards, inter-prison violence and others. However, within the context in which the study falls into, an unlawful or extra-judicial killing is the killing of a person by governmental authorities without sanction from any legal process.

Akinsanmi (2020) argues that the cases of extra-judicial killings in Nigeria remain a contemporary challenge to grapple with as the cases of arbitrary detainment, human rights violation, torture, enforced disappearances and unlawful killings by the security forces; police inclusive, have continued unabated in Nigeria. The trend of extra-judicial killings has not only called into question the legitimacy of the police and its procedural justice, but it has also led to a strain on effective policing and security in Nigeria thus necessitating a public outcry. Extra-judicial killing is a serious issue that haunts the operational practice of different security agencies in the country as residents of the South-East, Nigeria are rough handled and brutalized in various ways through; beating, shooting indiscriminately and unlawful killings. However, a large portion of these cases are concealed by the Nigerian police officers in their stations, evidence is destroyed and proof of any such acts is also hidden from the public (Taiwo, 2018). This is pursuant to the fact that many at times, the victims' family members would be denied justice when they seek redress in the court of law. This corroborates the Mass Atrocities Casualties Report published by Global Rights which stated that 848 extra-judicial executions took place in Nigeria between January 2020 and June 2023, with 127 cases in the first half of 2023. However, the number of officers sanctioned for these killings indicates that very little or nothing is being done to curtail this menace. Nigerians have been living in

fear of brutality from law enforcement agents as a result. Sadly, across the nation and in South-East in particular, extra-judicial killings by the police have been a peril and the causalities keep soaring. According to Sahara Reporters (2023), South East is the worst hit in 2022 as Nigerian army and the police killed over 700 civilians, arrested 1000 suspects and burnt down over 600 private residences. It is against this background that this study examines the socio- political and economic determinants of extra-judicial killings in South-East, Nigeria.

Statement of problem;

In every society, policing and social control are fundamental for both law enforcement and criminal justice. The police have a wide-ranging mandate to protect lives and properties. Alongside this broad mandate, the respect of human rights, communal relations, and upholding the rule of law are key policing values (Osimen, 2021).

Consequently, the lawless situation in the South-East region and Nigeria at large has instigated weak relationship between the security agents and the people which has further heightened the security dilemma in all ramifications. Lives of several young and adult Nigerians; students, private and commercial drivers and some other innocent citizens have been cut short in the name of policing the country (Voorhoeve, 2017). This indicates that the problem still persists and has not been properly addressed and it collaborates the Mass Atrocities Casualties report published by Global Rights which stated that 848 extra-judicial executions took place in Nigeria between January 2020 and June 2023, with 127 cases in the first half of 2023 (Nigeria Human Right Commission, NHRC, 2023). Despite the Nigerian government's efforts to curb extra-judicial killings by the police, the phenomenon still persists and this has not only led to significant loss of life but has also led to a strained police-civilian relationship in the region. This has further exacerbated the security crisis and contributed to a cycle of violence evident in South-East Nigeria. It is imperative to examine the determinants of extra-judicial killings in South-East, Nigeria in order to develop comprehensive strategies for mitigating the phenomenon and promote sustainable peace and public trust in the police. It is against the backdrop of the foregoing problems that this study is designed to investigate the socio-political and economic determinants of extra-judicial killings in South-East, Nigeria.

Research Questions

Based on the foregoing, the following research questions were formulated to guide this study:

- 1. What are the socio-political and economic determinants of extra-judicial killings in South-East, Nigeria?**
- 2. How does the educational level of police officers influence extra-judicial killings in South-East, Nigeria?**

Literature

Socio-economic and Political Determinant of Extra-judicial Killings

A study was equally conducted by Austria-Cruz (2020) on the Public Perception of Extra-judicial Killings in the Philippines, particularly in the context of the government's war on drugs. The study adopted a descriptive research design, using a sample of 165 respondents, who were selected through a convenience sampling technique. Data for the study were collected through a Likert-type questionnaire, and the data collected were analysed using descriptive statistical methods. The study found that extra-judicial killings were perceived as a positive tool primarily used against narcotics producers, traffickers, and dealers; highlighting the role of political determinants such as leadership ideology, state-sponsored narratives, and institutional complicity are central to understanding the persistence of extra-judicial killings in politically charged environments like the Philippines.

A study was also conducted by Iwuno (2025) on the nexus of extra-judicial killings and security crisis in South-East, Nigeria. The study explored the intersection between extra-judicial killings and the broader security crisis in the region analyzing the underlying factors that fuel these unlawful acts and their implications for peace and governance. Using a qualitative research approach, the study draws from recent reports, legal frameworks and security analysis to assess the role of state and non-state actors in perpetuating violence. A purposive sampling technique was also utilized to select participants who have direct experience or extensive knowledge of extra-judicial killings in the region. The sample size included 20 individuals; 10 community members affected by such incidents, 5 human rights activists and 5 law enforcement officials. The findings revealed a complainer play between ineffective law enforcement, political instability and the rise of armed groups, contributing to a cycle of insecurity. The study also found that lack of accountability and inadequate

investigative mechanisms or deliberate shielding by superiors emboldens perpetrators and also signals a tacit acceptance of such behavior

Theoretical Review

This research adopted the social disorganization theory by Shaw, Clifford and McKay (1942) as its theoretical framework. Social disorganization theory was used to explain factors influencing extra-judicial killings. The social disorganization theory has taken numerous directions explaining the phenomenon. In one direction, researchers have examined additional structural characteristics of communities theorized to cause disorganization including family disruption (e.g., divorce and single-parent households), education levels (e.g., residents with a low-school diploma), population density (e.g., population per square mile), and population composition (e.g., number of young males). Researchers have also been concerned with empirically testing the full social disorganization model by showing that neighborhood characteristics affect levels of social integration, informal social control and collective efficacy, which in turn affect crime rates (Shaw, Clifford & Henry, 2014). Therefore, the social disorganization theory was adopted because it is relevant and suitable in explaining the determinants of extra-judicial killings in South-East, Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

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Review of Relevant Literature

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Methodology

The study adopted sequential mixed methods research design. It involved administering of questionnaire and interviewing respondents. This research design was adopted so that the short comings of quantitative method can be complemented by the qualitative method and vice versa. Questionnaire was employed so as to elicit responses and other opinions different from that of the researcher, interview sessions were held in order to get full responses concerning the objectives of the study. The study area is South-East Nigeria. The South-East was selected as the study area for this research work because of the high rate of extra-judicial killings observed in the geo-political zone.

According to National Population Commission (NPC, 2020) the population of South-East Nigeria was reported to be estimated at 21,026,032. However, the sample size for this study was 1051, this was statistically determined using the Fisher (1967) formula, drawn from relevant population categories from the selected urban areas in South-East Nigeria. This is because members of these population categories are well informed about the research topic and are mentally developed enough to participate in a study of this nature and also they constitute the main victims of extra-judicial killings by security agents. This study employed both the probability and non-probability sampling methods. The probability sampling method gave every element of the population an equal chance of being selected. It also made it possible to generalize findings gotten from the research as the data were reliable due to the representative nature of the entire population. While the non-probability sampling method allowed the researcher to arbitrarily include any element he thinks will provide more insight to the phenomenon under study. Thus the multi-stage sampling procedure was adopted.

In first stage, South-East geo-political zone which is made up of five states was clustered into two clusters. Cluster A consisted of Anambra State, Abia State and Ebonyi State while Cluster B consisted of Enugu State and Imo State. Using a balloting method the researcher selected two states from each cluster which is Anambra State and Enugu State after which three urban areas were selected from the already selected States. In Anambra State, Nnewi, Onitsha and Ekwulobia were selected as the three urban areas while Trans-Ekulu, Achala Layout and New Heaven were selected as the three urban areas in Enugu State. The Proportionate Stratified Random Sampling (PSRS) technique was used to determine the size for each stratum based on the relative size of the stratum and the total population. This technique is very relevant as it ensured that the selected samples are representative of the population in terms of the distribution of characteristics within each stratum. On the other hand, purposive sampling technique was adopted to select the respondents for the qualitative aspect of the study based on their knowledge of the theme of the study.

The researcher developed questionnaire which was used to collect the quantitative data, while the In-depth Interview (IDI) was used to collect the qualitative data. The questionnaire was divided into two sections: Sections A and B. Section A consisted of items designed to obtain data on the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents while Section B consisted of substantive issues of the research. The quantitative data collected from the field were processed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 20 software. However, the data were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequency counts and simple percentages. The data were also presented using graphic illustrations such as bar charts, pie charts while the qualitative data collected through IDIs were analyzed using the manual content analysis.

Findings/Results

In this study, 1051 copies of questionnaire were administered by the researcher. However, 915 copies of the questionnaire were correctly filled and returned. Eighty four (84) copies of the questionnaire were lost in the field work while fifty two (52) were incorrectly filled. Consequently, the quantitative analysis for this study was carried out with the 915 correctly filled and returned questionnaire. This shows a response rate of 87.1%.

Personal Data of the Respondents

This section deals with personal data of the respondents such as gender, age, marital status, religious affiliation, level of educational attainment, place of residence of the respondents. The personal data of the respondents are presented in Table 1 below

Table 1: Personal Data of Respondents

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	480	52.5
Female	435	47.5
Total	915	100
Age		
18-22	177	19.3
23-27	259	28.3
28-32	200	21.9
33-37	102	11.1
38-42	91	9.9
43 and above	86	9.4
Total	915	100
Marital status		
Single	618	67.5
Married	210	22.9
Separated	50	5.5
Divorced	17	1.9
Widowed	20	2.2
Total	915	100
Level of Education		
No formal education	63	6.9
FSLC	150	16.4
WASSCE/SSCE	345	37.7
OND/NCE	117	12.8

B.Sc./HND	215	23.5
M.Sc. / Ph.D	25	2.7
Total	915	100
Religious affiliation		
Christianity	821	89.7
Islamic Religion	10	1.1
African Traditional Religion (ATR)	51	5.6
Atheist	33	3.6
Total	915	100
Occupation		
Unemployed	125	13.7
Civil Servant	79	8.6
Entrepreneur	229	25.0
Artisan	112	12.2
Business	310	33.9
Student	60	6.6
Total	915	100

Field Survey, 2025

Table 1 presents the personal data of respondents. The sex distribution indicates that 52.5% of the respondents are males while 47.5% of the respondents are females. This shows that male respondents are slightly more than female respondents in the study. The age distribution of respondents shows that the largest proportion 28.3% of the respondents, are within the age group of 23–27 years. This is closely followed by 21.9% of the respondents who are aged between 28–32 years. Those within 18–22 years make up 19.3% of the respondents, while 11.1% of the respondents are between 33–37 years. In addition, 9.9% of the respondents fall within 38–42 years while the least group is those aged 43 years and above, constituting 9.4% of the respondents. In terms of marital status, 67.5% of the respondents are single, 22.9% of the respondents are married, while a smaller proportion are separated 5.5%, divorced 1.9%, or widowed 2.2%. The educational qualifications of respondents reveal that 37.7% of the respondents hold WASSCE/SSCE qualifications making it the largest group while 23.5% of the respondents hold B.Sc. or HND qualifications. About 16.4% of the respondents have FSLC, 12.8% of the respondents possess OND/NCE while 6.9% of the respondents have no formal education. Only 2.7% of the respondents hold M.Sc. or Ph.D. degrees. This distribution shows that most respondents have at least secondary school education, which enhances their ability to provide informed responses to the study. The small proportion with no formal education highlights the persistence of educational disadvantage in some segments of the population.

The religious affiliation shows that 89.7% of the respondents are Christians, 5.6% of the respondents are worshippers of African Traditional Religion, 3.6% of the respondents are Atheists, and 1.1% of the respondents are Muslims. The overwhelming dominance of Christians is expected, as the South-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria is predominantly Christian. The presence of other religious groups, although small, reflects the diversity of religious affiliations within the area. The occupational distribution reveals that 33.9% of the respondents are engaged in business, which forms the largest category. This is followed by 25.0% of the respondents who are entrepreneurs, 13.7% of the respondents are unemployed, 12.2% of the respondents are artisans, 8.6% of the respondents are civil servants, and 6.6% of the respondents are students. This indicates that majority of the respondents are engaged in private businesses and entrepreneurial ventures, which is typical of the socio-economic structure of the Southeast where trading and self-employment are common. However, the significant proportion of unemployed respondents also reflects economic challenges in the area.

Table 2: Respondents' views on factors that necessitated the emergence of extra-judicial killings in South-East Nigeria

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Lack of professionalism	277	30.2
Illiteracy	179	19.6
Financial Crisis	115	12.6
Emergence of IPOB secessionists	122	13.3
Constant violent attack on police officers	85	9.3
Not applicable	137	14.9
Total	915	100.0

Field Survey, 2025

Table 2 presents the respondents' views on the factors contributing to the emergence of extra-judicial killings in South-East, Nigeria. The data reveal a hierarchy of perceived causes, with lack of professionalism among security operatives being the most significant factor, answered by 30.2% of the respondents. This is followed by illiteracy 19.6%, suggesting a perceived link between a lack of education and a disregard for human rights and proper policing protocols among security personnel. This is followed by the ongoing socio-political conflict in the region: the emergence of IPOB secessionists 13.3% and financial crisis 12.6%. This indicates that respondents believe that the secessionist agitation and the resulting economic hardship create a volatile environment that fosters violence from both state and non-state actors. Finally, constant violent attack on police officers 9.3% is seen as a motivating factor, where attacks on security forces are perceived to necessitate a violent, extra-legal response from them.

These data are corroborated by the interviews conducted. Findings from the interviewees are presented below.

An interviewee stated:

You see, the problem is not just the gun; it is the mind of the man holding it. When I was in service, we had training on crowd control and human rights. But what do you see today? These young boys they are recruiting, some cannot even write a proper statement. How will they understand the rules of engagement? There is no patience, no wisdom. They see every young man as a threat, as IPOB. Instead of arresting, they shoot first. It is a failure of training

and a failure of character. The authorities just give them uniforms and guns without giving them the right mind to use it. It is pure unprofessionalism, and it is costing lives every day (Male, 55 Years, Married, Retired Police Officer, Nnewi, Anambra State).

Another interviewee stated:

The situation is a cycle of violence, and it is hard to say who started it. The security forces see us as enemies because of the activities of IPOB and ESN. Because some boys attack police stations and kill officers, now every soldier at a checkpoint looks at me, a young Igbo man, like a target. They are angry and scared, so they react with extreme force. And when they kill an innocent person, it makes more people angry and sympathetic to the agitators. So the attacks on police increase, and the police respond with more violence. It is a dangerous dance, and we, the ordinary people, are caught in the middle (Male, 24 Years, Single, Student, Trans-Ekulu, Enugu State).

Another interviewee also stated:

Hunger is the root of all this madness. When there is no money, young men become easy to recruit for any group that promises them food or purpose. And for the police, see how they are suffering. Their salary is poor, their families are hungry. So some of them become corrupt and ruthless. They see a young boy with a phone and they think it is Yahoo boy, they want to extort him. If the boy resists, anything can happen. This financial crisis is pushing everyone to the edge. A hungry man is an angry man, whether he is wearing a uniform or not (Female, 35 Years, Married, Trader, Onitsha, Anambra State).

Table 3: Respondents' views on factors directly influencing extra-judicial killings in South-East Nigeria

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Poor remuneration	115	12.6
Poor detention facilities	75	8.2
Uncontrolled anger/emotions	92	10.1
Use of illicit drugs/alcohol while on duty	57	6.2
Non-prosecution of indicted officers	183	20.0
All of the above	393	42.9
Not applicable	137	14.9
Total	915	100.0

Field Survey, 2025

Data in Table 3 indicate that there are a lot of factors directly influencing extra-judicial killings in South-East Nigeria with 42.9% of the respondents indicating that all the above mentioned factors directly influence extra-judicial killings in the study area while 20% of the respondents answered that the non-prosecution of indicted officers is a major factor directly influencing the phenomenon suggesting a perceived link between shielding perpetrators of extra-judicial killings and a continuous disregard for human life in the study region. Following suit, 12.6% of the respondents answered poor remuneration, 10.1% of the respondents indicated uncontrolled anger/emotions. This indicates that respondents believe that the poor welfare package of security agents and their uncontrolled emotions while on duty has also directly influenced extra-judicial killings in South-East Nigeria. However, 8.2% answered poor detention facilities, while 6.2% of the respondents indicated use of illicit drugs/alcohol while on duty. This indicates that respondents believe that a combination of systematic failures,

particularly non-prosecution of indicted officers significantly influence extra-judicial killings in the region.

Table 4: Respondents' views on whether law enforcement agents' level of education also influences extra-judicial killings in South-East, Nigeria

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	783	85.6
No	26	2.8
I don't know	106	11.6
Total	915	100.0

Field Survey, 2025

Data in Table 4 show that majority (85.6%) of the respondents indicated that the law enforcement agents' level of education influences extra-judicial killings in South-East, Nigeria while 11.6% of the respondents were undecided. In addition, 2.8% of the respondents were of the opinion that the law enforcement agents' level of education does not influence extra-judicial killings in the region.

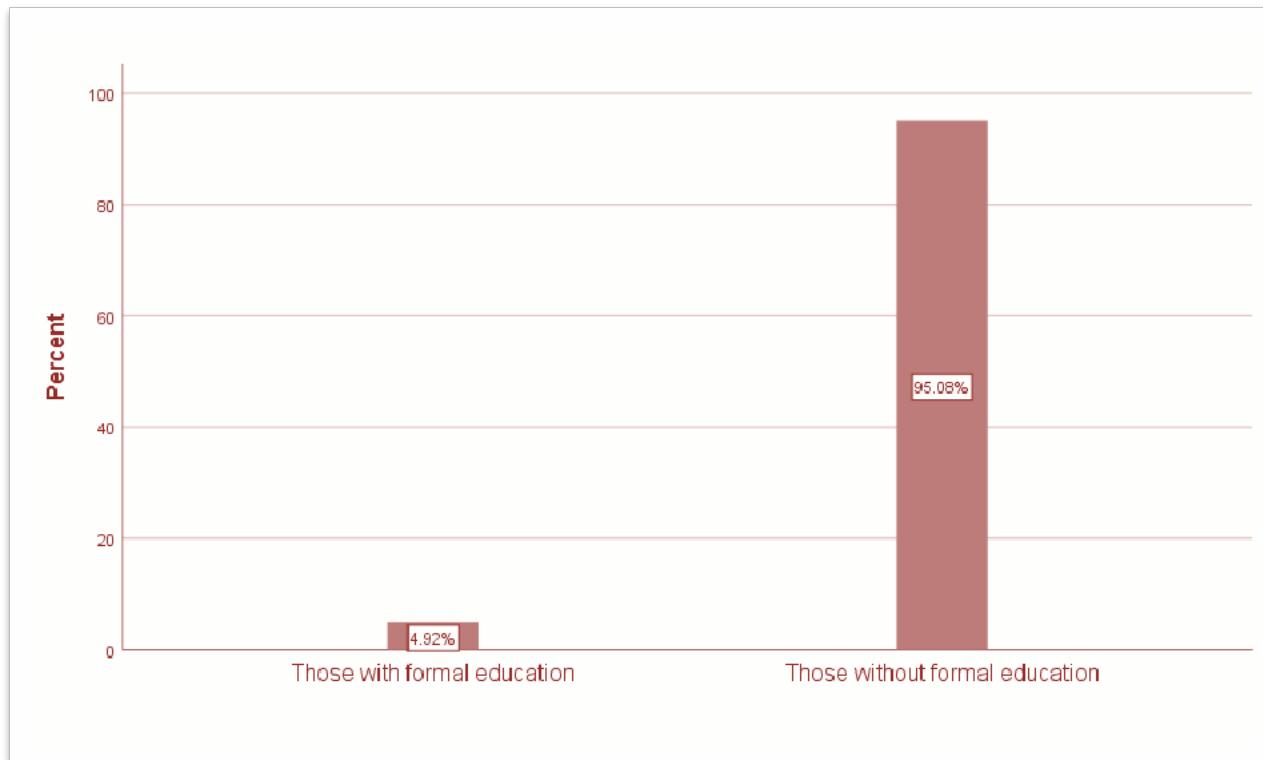


Fig. 1: Respondents' views on the category of security agents that is more likely to engage in extra-judicial killings in South-East Nigeria

Field Survey, 2025

Fig. 1 shows that majority (95.08%) of the respondents said that security agents without formal education are more likely to engage in extra-judicial killings in South-East, Nigeria, while 4.92% of the respondents disagreed and indicated that security agents with formal education are more likely to engage in extra-judicial killings in the region. This result implies that majority of the respondents agreed that security agents without formal education are more likely to engage in extra-judicial killings in South East, Nigeria.

These data are corroborated by the interviews conducted. Findings from the interviewees are presented below.

An interviewee stated:

Most of these officers, especially during arrest can go to any length to discharge their duties, even though the amount of force necessary for these operations are clearly spelt out in section 6 of the Administrative Law of Criminal Justice Act of Nigeria, where procedures of arrest as well as the suspects' rights are made known. That you are arrested does not mean you are guilty, however, the uneducated officers are often not aware of these laws, they most times rough handle their suspects which has led to the unlawful killings of suspects both during and after arrests in Nigeria. (Male, 32 Years, Single, Lawyer, Ekwulobia, Anambra State).

Discussion of Findings

The study focused on the socio-political and economic determinants of extra-judicial killings by law enforcement agents in South-East, Nigeria. It was observed from the study that extra-judicial killings are prevalent in South East region, and the findings showed that lack of professionalism among security agents is a major determinant of extra-judicial killings. To underscore this fact, most of the respondents identified lack of professionalism as a key factor necessitating the emergence of extra-judicial killings. This finding is in tangent with qualitative research by Igbo (2017) on the use and abuse of police powers in Nigeria, which found that inadequate welfare packages and necessary structures for the police contribute to unethical behavior. This implies that unprofessional conduct among security agents, driven by poor training and inadequate resources, leads to extra-judicial killings. They also pointed out that illiteracy and financial crisis are significant factors. The need to supplement poor income through extortion and bribery often results in the use of excessive force. They also noted that security agents without formal education are more likely to engage in extra-judicial killings. This finding is corroborated by Farok, and Lee (2022), who noted that personal interests of police officers which include monetary inducements can lead to corrupt practices and extra-judicial killings. This implies that poor remuneration, educational expulsions and economic hardship drive security agents to engage in unethical acts, including extra-judicial killings.

Conclusion

Extra-judicial killings by law enforcement agents have been a constant phenomenon undermining peace and security of lives and properties in the region. The findings of this study highlighted a ubiquitous abuse of power by law enforcement agents which was necessitated by numerous socio-political and economic factors and has exacerbated the security crisis and contributed to a cycle of violence evident in the region.

Addressing this multifaceted problem requires an extensive overhaul geared at enhancing training for security agents, curbing corruption and prioritizing formal education during recruitment of security agents with the aim of safeguarding human rights. Adopting these measures would not only halt the impunity perpetrated by security agents in the region, it will also go a long way in restoring confidence in the security agents and usher in a new dawn in South-East Nigeria.

Recommendations

Based on the findings from this study, the following recommendations are made for possible implementation;

1. There should be a proper police reform and this should not be a mere change of name and uniform as it has been in the past but a total overhaul of the Nigerian Police Force which

will include periodic mental and psychological examination to ascertain the mental fitness of the officers.

2. University graduates should be considered as the minimum and prioritized during the recruitment process as the educational expulsion of the officers plays a key role in determining how they discharge their duties.
3. The salaries, benefits and allowances of the police officers should be reviewed to capture the economic realities and situations in Nigeria, an upward review of their salaries would eradicate the need for extortion and bribery in the course of discharging their duties.
4. The Nigerian Police Commission should strictly investigate and sanction erring officers as this would serve as a deterrent to other officers and re-emphasize the need to adhere to the law and guidelines of the Police Act as enshrined in the Constitution.
5. The use of vigilante and militia forces should be abolished in the country, the existing ones should be disbanded and disarmed and subsequently trained and if found fit should be incorporated into the force as that will play a key role in curbing the culture of impunity witnessed in the region.
6. The government should promote community engagement that is geared at fostering collaborations between security agencies and local communities to rebuild trust and improve intelligence gathering.
7. The government should also review and amend existing legislations as well as implement new laws to ensure they provide safeguards against extra-judicial killings and other human rights abuses.

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