

# Neighborhood Vulnerability to Security Threats in Benin City: The Role of Informal Housing and the Built Environment

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**Abstract:** There is a climate of insecurity in Nigeria owing to pervasive violent crime across the country. Although the wide socio-economic gap between the rich and the poor, high rate of unemployment, and governance deficit are blamed for rising insecurity, analysts often neglect the role of the built environment. Informal housing and unplanned neighborhoods are often stigmatized as spaces of crime in the global South. Drawing from the conceptual framework of permeability and crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED), we investigate the vulnerability of residential neighborhoods to security threats in Benin City. Vulnerability was interrogated at two levels. At the neighborhood level, our findings showed that environmental risk factors associated with informal housing and incremental development render the neighborhoods permeable and limit crime policing. At the residential level, our findings revealed that inappropriate target hardening limits natural surveillance and communal use of outhouse facilities renders homes indefensible. Situational crimes such as burglary and robbery are high in the absence of regular police patrols and neighborhood watch. Conclusions point to the need to incorporate informal housing and environmental risk factors into CPTED literature in the context of the cities in the global South, establishment of neighborhood or community policing to partner with the Nigerian police in crime fighting, and settlement upgrading to enhance natural surveillance, police patrol and rapid response to distress calls in the event of criminal attacks.

**Keywords:** community, crime, offender, permeability, vigilantism

## Introduction

The widespread incidences of crime in Nigerian cities are often explicated as consequences of the wide socio-economic gap between the rich and the poor, high rate of unemployment, and inverted societal values among youths.<sup>1</sup> However, the lived reality of informal housing and unplanned neighborhoods as a contributing factor to urban insecurity has often been overlooked. Studies have shown that insecurity of urban neighborhoods is predicated on the

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materiality of informal housing and environmental risk factors.<sup>2</sup> Generally, informal housing in Nigeria does not conform to land and urban development regulatory frameworks.<sup>3</sup> Buildings are often constructed with sub-standard locally sourced materials and financed through individual savings or loans. More often than not, they are occupied before they are fully completed. Unplanned neighborhoods are characterized by haphazard development and mixed land uses with a lack of or inadequate public amenities. Neighborhoods of informal housing are therefore stigmatized as amorphous, anomalous and marginal which in turn shapes the opinion that they constitute spaces of crime.<sup>4</sup>

A recent work incorporates socio-economic inequalities and housing design as factors shaping crime and insecurity in African cities.<sup>5</sup> Employing the concept of 'hyper-permeability' in explaining the realities and properties of informal housing, Meth focuses on the materiality of informal housing. However, her attention was drawn away from the interface between the dwelling units and built environment in shaping crime occurrence and crime prevention.<sup>6</sup> We argue that neighborhood shapes individual exposure to crime and prevention of crime where housing varies remarkably. The focus here is on the specific environmental risk factors associated with informal housing and incremental development, placing neighborhood vulnerability at the center of analysis. Extending the concept of 'permeability' to capture the physical characteristics of neighborhoods and informal housing, this article argues that the permeability of neighborhoods in the absence of vigilantes and effective policing facilitates criminal access more than the permeability of informal housing with the prospect of incremental target hardening of individual dwelling units.

The nexus between the built environment and neighborhood security has long been recognized. Ray Jeffery developed the concept of crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED) to describe the planning, design and management of the physical environment in crime prevention.<sup>7</sup> The CPTED concept has variously been utilized in academic research and in the development of crime prevention policies.<sup>8</sup> The nature of the built environment is significant to crime occurrence and prevention since the built environment forms the space within which the police and other law enforcement agents operate.<sup>9</sup>

As a crime prevention methodology, CPTED addresses the relationship between the built environment and the incidence of crime. It is based on the notion that unplanned neighborhoods or inappropriate layouts and buildings can attract criminals and make it easier for them to commit crimes. This suggests that the nature of the built environment can change how people act in a place. The idea behind CPTED concept is that by incorporating security features in site and housing design, the built environment can discourage crime from occurring. CPTED methodology is based on the assumption that offenders are less likely to commit crime if people in buildings and neighborhoods are able to see what is happening around them. Therefore, CPTED incorporates principles such as surveillance and visibility, access control and escape routes, target hardening, territoriality, image and aesthetics.<sup>10</sup> These principles are fundamental in establishing the extent to which the built environment either reduces or increases opportunities for crime.<sup>11</sup> The significance of these principles in crime prevention is critical to the lived experiences of residents in informal housing in the global South.

The concept of 'guardianship' underpins the principles of CPTED.<sup>12</sup> Guardianship is the act of watching or supervision of people, or property by other concerned persons which may

prevent criminals from committing crimes in a given time and place.<sup>13</sup> Reynald et al. suggest a two-fold usage of guardianship in the literature namely; guardianship by people and guardianship by objects.<sup>14</sup> The two-fold usage of guardianship both broadly corresponds to community crime prevention through neighborhood watch and target hardening respectively. A major critique of CPTED focuses on the lack of attention given to social factors such as “neighborhood capacity, cohesion, community culture and connectivity” which shape crime in the context of informal and unregulated settlements.<sup>15</sup> Whereas environmental risk factors can be minimized by design, socio-economic inequalities which predispose people to committing crime cannot be mitigated by design.<sup>16</sup>

This article aims to contribute to the growing literature on how the built environment and socio-physical processes intersect in shaping neighborhood security from the perspective of cities in the global South where informal housing predominates. Neighborhoods in most cities of the global South evolved spontaneously without the guidance of urban planning principles and development regulations. Informal housing has received less attention in the CPTED literature despite its emphasis on environmental factors shaping crime and prevention.<sup>17</sup> The physical materials of informal housing and social capital of residents shaping crime prevention have not been sufficiently captured in contemporary CPTED literature, particularly that emanating from the global North.

The next section provides the conceptual clarifications of neighborhood security. Section three offers an account of the study area and the socio-historical evolution of neighborhood vigilantism in Benin City. Section four explains the methodological approach adopted in the study. Section five presents the analysis of the data and discussion of the findings. Finally, the concluding section highlights some recommendations.

### **Conceptualizing Neighborhood Security**

The term ‘neighborhood’ envisions a sense of place and communal living with a mix of people and activities. Neighborhood is a socio-spatial unit of a city with a collection of individual dwelling units and households.<sup>18</sup> In other words, a neighborhood is a bundle of attributes comprising clusters of residences and other land uses.<sup>19</sup> Neighborhood provides the framework that shapes the urban region physically, economically, and socially. In its ideal form, a neighborhood is “a walkable place with clear boundaries and an identifiable center of local services and civic institutions.”<sup>20</sup> It is characterized by pedestrian friendly streets, mixed land uses, proximity to sources of livelihood, a range of housing types, variety of people with different social background, and social capital that creates a powerful identity and strong sense of ‘we-feeling’ and next-door-neighborliness. In Nigeria, the concept of neighborhood corresponds to community and they are used interchangeably in this paper. Security is an attribute of housing and residential neighborhood.<sup>21</sup> The security of lives and property resides largely in the neighborhoods. Hence, individuals, organizations or groups and government invest appropriately in neighborhood security. Neighborhood security, as used in this paper, is a situation of absence of any actual or perceived danger to the individuals’ or residents’ collective safety in a defined neighborhood.

Central to neighborhood security are control and prevention of crime.<sup>22</sup> This is often achieved through proactive and reactive measures with each having their successes and

failures. The reactive approach entails the police going to where crime has occurred in response to distress call by victims or concerned citizens. The proactive approach, on the other hand, entails the use of special police units which rely on informants, covert surveillance, and undercover agents to prevent crime before it occurs.<sup>23</sup> However, both approaches may overlap.<sup>24</sup> But too often crime policing and criminal justice systems are geared towards reacting to crime after the event, rather than preventing it before it occurs.<sup>25</sup> Thus, a realistic approach to policing emphasizes crime prevention through multi-agency partnerships and community involvement.<sup>26</sup>

Crime control, according to Moore et al, involves “fostering closer relations with the community to facilitate crime solving and building self-defense capabilities within the community itself” with the resultant effect of increased arrest of criminals.<sup>27</sup> While the police and other security agents are traditionally seen as responsible for crime prevention, residents also have to play a part in the process.<sup>28</sup> Effective policing involves the collaboration with community and exploitation of local knowledge and capacity to control crime. However, the pursuit of effective crime policing has led to compromising individual freedoms, particularly in developing countries where government and security agents more easily overstep their bounds and trample on individuals’ fundamental human rights. The general consensus arising from this reality is that ‘security is everybody’s business’ and hence the need for the collectivization of security through the social agency of local residents.

### **Benin City and the Socio-historical Evolution of Neighborhood Vigilantism**

Benin City is located in the mid-western part of southern Nigeria and is the administrative headquarters of Edo State. The 2006 National Population Census put the population of the city at 1.3 million. The city has grown to assume the status of a metropolis by encompassing the urbanized parts of five local government areas namely; Oredo, Egor, Ovia North-East, Umunwunode and Ikpoba-Okha with the headquarters of Oredo and Egor Local Government Areas nested within the city. The major driver of the spatial expansion of Benin City has been predominantly residential land use development.<sup>29</sup> The geographic growth rate of the city is 5.5 km<sup>2</sup>. Another study put the annual growth rate of the city at 1.5%.<sup>30</sup>

There are more than fifty urbanized neighborhoods in Benin metropolis. The residential neighborhoods were originally independent rural communities but have been assimilated into the growing urban complex. An outer moat (ditch) marks the physical boundary of the ancient city (see Fig. 1). As the city expands beyond the moat, it engulfs and assimilates the nearby communities around it. The central part of the city with the oldest neighborhoods forms the core with high residential density, and the zone outside the moat is comprised of the newly urbanized neighborhoods with a gradation of housing density and age of buildings from the city center. These urbanized communities are characterized by informal creation of layouts and housing construction often outside the land and urban development regulatory frameworks.<sup>31</sup> However, they gradually become consolidated and integrated into the expanding city through incremental development and housing improvement, and informal provision of social services.

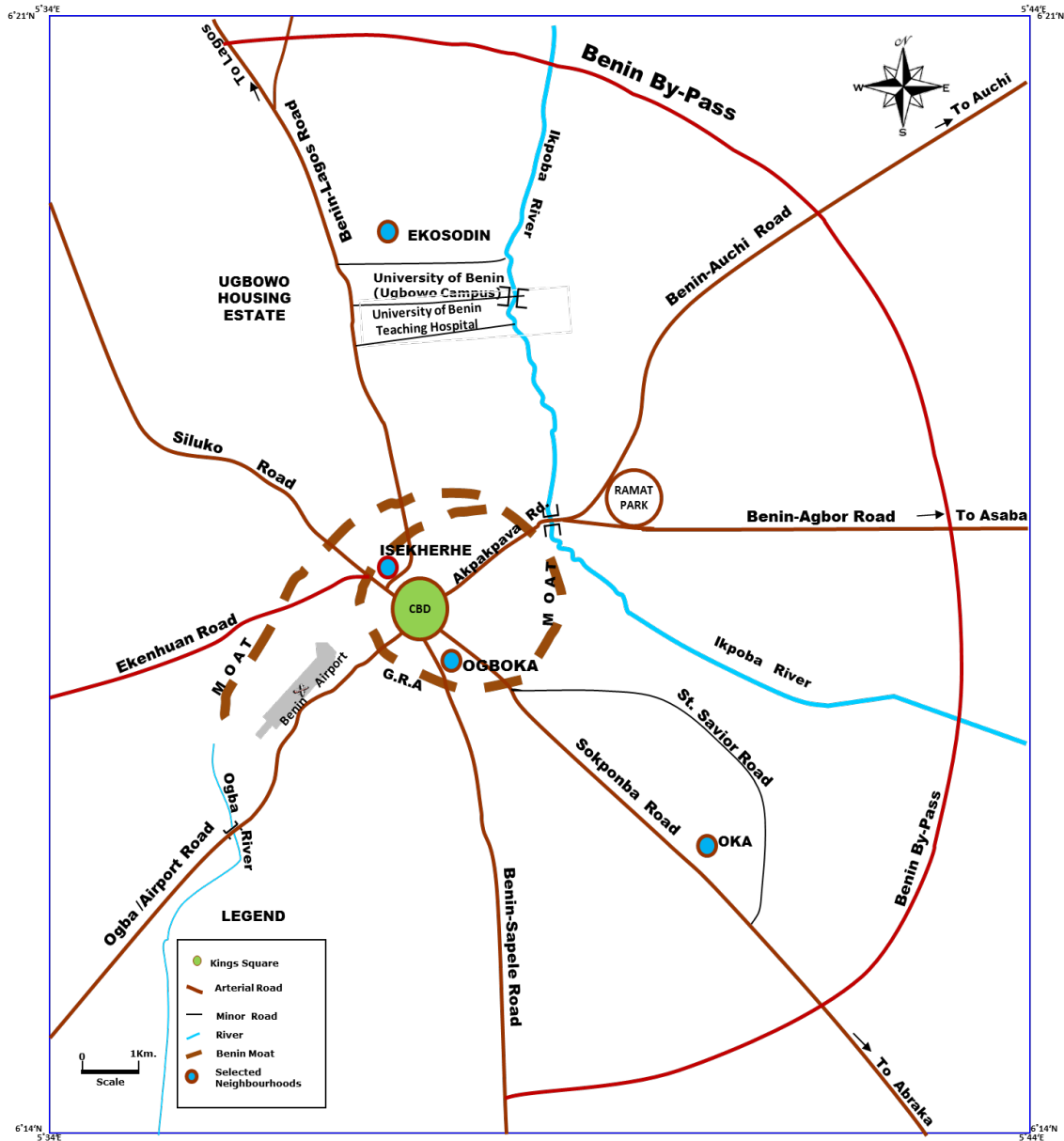


Fig. 1: Benin City Showing the Selected Neighborhoods

As an African city in transition, the unplanned nature and haphazard development of neighborhoods result in loss of community identity and sense of place. The fear of crime and insecurity produces a proliferation of walled and gated individual compounds which in turn engenders social segregation and erodes the next-door-neighborliness. Security in the city is largely the responsibility of the locals through the practice of neighborhood vigilantism (defined below). Benin City is well-suited for this research because it illustrates security and environmental challenges in expanding Nigerian cities, given its combination of an older center primarily made up of a mixture of modern and traditional homes or buildings, and the outlying

informal, unplanned neighborhoods. This combination of neighborhood types characterizes many cities in Nigeria.

For this study, we consider vigilantes as groups of people who undertake crime prevention in their neighborhood. Membership is usually composed of volunteered residents of the neighborhood. Communal consensus to fight crime provides the legitimation for the group to operate. The need for neighborhood vigilantism is borne out of the fact that crime is increasing and the ill-equipped Nigerian police are considered as incapable of effective policing.<sup>32</sup> Rapid population increase and other factors discussed below have produced vigilante groups to watch over neighborhoods both at night and during the day when people are not at home. Some vigilante groups are composed of volunteered home-owners and/or their representatives such as their children and tenants while female home-owners provide financial support. Others are groups paid by home-owners.

Vigilantism is not a recent practice anywhere in Nigeria but dates back to the pre-colonial time.<sup>33</sup> This is why Fourchard refers to it as “a new name for an old practice” of policing.<sup>34</sup> The dominant Bini ethnic group in this study area has a long history of neighborhood security arrangements. For example, *Ikhowa* and *Egbudu* were traditional security arrangements for neighborhood watch. *Ikhowa* (home guarding) is a security arrangement whereby a group of adult males and females takes turn to stay at home on each working day and watch over the neighborhoods while other residents of the neighborhoods go to work or farm. Besides watching over neighborhoods, the group is also saddled with the responsibility of taking care of the sick, elderly and children left at home. *Egbudu*, on the other hand, is a group which watches over the neighborhoods particularly at night. Nightwatch is locally called *Ude*. Unlike *Ikhowa*, *Egbudu* is male-dominated because members bear arms and charms while operating. Women are forbidden by custom to bear such charms. Although these traditional security arrangements are now largely confined to the rural areas, they (particularly *Egbudu*) form the spirit and soul of modern-day vigilantism. *Ikhowa* and *Egbudu* correspond with the concept of guardianship which is defined as any person or thing that discourages crime from taking place.<sup>35</sup> Guardians, as used in this context, represent people who are willing and capable of protecting their personal property and those of their neighbors.<sup>36</sup> This re-echoes the notion of what Simone refers to as “people as infrastructure” which emphasizes the collaboration among residents who are marginalized by centrally planned security arrangements.<sup>37</sup>

Although a comprehensive historical evolution of vigilantism in Nigeria is beyond the scope of this study, the use of vigilante groups to protect lives and property, with or without official support, has become part of policing strategies in Nigerian society.<sup>38</sup> Local vigilante groups have been identified for their effectiveness in community policing and crime fighting.<sup>39</sup> They are also found to be effective for political lobbying and spearheading contemporary political contests.<sup>40</sup> Vigilantes are increasingly being politicized and as ready-made foot soldiers in the hands of politicians and traditional rulers in fostering political agitations and ethnic agendas.<sup>41</sup> Being active in the politics of ethnic identity beyond community policing has led to their official support in recent times. Notable vigilante groups include the Bakassi Boys which operated in the South-East, particularly in Abia, Anambra and Imo States from the late 1990s to late 2000s. Similarly, the O’odua People’s Congress (OPC) has operated in the South-West since 1994. In northern Nigeria the Hisbah group is active in Zamfara and Kano States. Likewise, the

Egbesu Boys, Okrika Bush Boys, Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force, and Niger Delta Vigilantes were all formed in the early 1990s as a response to the environmental degradation engendered by oil exploitation and the perceived exclusion from the benefits of oil resource. The common aspect of all these groups is their ethnic-based membership. They derive their social legitimacy through ethnic support in their areas of operation. Each group represents different divergent aspirations for the future of Nigeria.<sup>42</sup>

Vigilantes are becoming increasingly formalized, as in the case of the recently formed South-West Security Network (SWSN) code-named *Amotekun*. The protracted nature of the Boko Haram insurgency in the North-East region and the armed banditry in the North-West region of Nigeria has further increased the acceptance of local vigilantes and prompted the formation of the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) in 2013. The CJTF was primarily composed of local hunters with the intention to protect their communities against Boko Haram insurgents but quickly became integrated into the government's official counter-insurgency operations. The success of the CJTF coupled with official state support for other ethnic-based vigilante groups across Nigeria led to the passing of a Bill establishing the Vigilante Group of Nigeria in 2016. The Vigilante Group of Nigeria is mandated to collaborate with the Nigerian police and military in combating armed banditry and insurgency.

## Methods

Benin City is broadly divided into two zones: the central city within the moat and the newly urbanized neighborhoods outside the moat. Two communities were purposively selected from each of the stratified zones for in-depth study because of their locational differences and their reputation as crime hotspots in the city (see Figure 1). The two communities selected from the central city zone are Isekhre and Ogboka. Whereas Isekhre forms part of the central business district (CBD) of the city, Ogboka is outside the boundary of the CBD. However, both communities are reputed for high commercial activities. The two communities selected from outside the moat are Ekosodin in the north-western part of the city and Oka in the south-eastern part of the city. Ekosodin serves as a dormitory for most students in the Ugbowo campus of the University of Benin and has a reputation for secret cult-related violence and criminal activities. Oka is a high density residential neighborhood which is often regarded as a high crime area. The similarities of the selected neighborhoods in terms of their informal and spontaneous growth allowed for a fair representation of other neighborhoods in the city.

A total of 400 resident homeowners were systematically selected for in-depth interviews from the four selected neighborhoods (see Table 1). To ensure a wider coverage of the selected neighborhoods, every third house of every street was selected. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the leaders of the two local vigilante groups in two of the selected communities and three Police Public Relations Officers (PROs) from the three Divisional Police Headquarters covering the area of study. All members of the vigilante groups were males and this speaks to the gender nature of vigilantism in the city. It has been the established practice, as noted earlier, that only men bear arms to watch over neighborhoods at night.

Participant Group	Size	Gender		Age			Academic Qualification		Civil/ Public Service	Busin ess Owne r
		Male	Female	30-40	41-50	51and above	Secondary Education	Higher Educat ion		
Isekhere Resident Home Owners (IRHO: n = 100)	100	86	14	Nil	2	98	96	4	91	9
Ogboka Resident Home Owners (ORHO: n = 100)	100	89	11	Nil	4	96	91	9	87	13
Ekosodin Resident Home Owners (ERHO: n = 100)	100	88	12	2	10	88	90	10	98	2
Oka Resident Home Owners (OKHO: n = 100)	100	77	23	5	7	88	95	5	96	4
Isekhere Vigilante Group (IVG: n = 5)	5	5	Nil	4	1	Nil	3	2	1	4
Ogboka Vigilante Group (OVG: n = 0)	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
Ekosodin Vigilante Group (EVG: n = 5)	5	5	Nil	2	3	Nil	4	1	2	3
Oka Vigilante Group (KVG: n = 0)	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
Police Public Relation Officers (PRO: n = 3)	3	2	1	Nil	2	1	Nil	3	3	Nil
<b>Total</b>	<b>413</b>	<b>352</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>371</b>	<b>379</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>378</b>	<b>35</b>

Table 1: participants' Information



Interviews focused on crimes committed in the neighborhoods such as burglary, armed robbery, rape, murder, car theft, and assault. Other data collected include neighborhood environmental risk and crime inducing factors, crime mitigating measures, and constraints to effective crime policing in the neighborhoods. Key observational notes were taken by the researchers while conducting the interviews for additional information on the features of the sampled homes and selected neighborhoods. Mixed methods of data analysis were adopted. Simple percentages were used to show the crime types and housing characteristics of the sampled homes while qualitative technique was used to analyze participants' responses and views. To ensure participants' anonymity, alpha-numeric symbols of participant groups were used to identify respondents' citations.<sup>43</sup> Respondents' direct quotations were italicized to highlight the voices and views of the participants.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

The perceptions and experiences of crime in the study area highlighted the significance of the intersection between neighborhood vulnerability and security threat. The responses from the interview participants were highly influenced by their personal experiences of crime rather than reported cases of crime in the news media. Those victimized either reported a particular crime committed against them or those they were aware of in their neighborhoods. Key elements of the research findings discussed in the following sub-themes are: nature and scale of crimes in the neighborhoods, security features bordering on target hardening of informal housing, environmental risk factors of neighborhoods, and neighborhood vigilantism.

#### *Nature and Scale of Crimes in the Neighborhoods*

In Ekosodin, 40% of the resident home owners reported that they have been victims of crime. Oka ranked next at 35%, followed by Ogboka at 30% and Isehere at 15%. The respondents in Ekosodin indicated secret cult group attacks were very frequent in the neighborhood. Assault and vandalism are closely associated with cult group attacks and these accounted for 25% and 15% respectively in the neighborhood. In Ogboka, 10% of the respondents reported that they have been robbed outside their homes, 15% reported residential burglary, and 5% reported car snatching. In Isehere, 5% of the respondents reported residential burglary while 10% reported commercial store burglary as the crimes perpetrated against them. In Oka, 15% of the respondents reported that residential burglary and armed robbery had been committed against them and 20% reported street robbery and assault.

The differences in the crime types among the selected neighborhoods reflect their different characteristics and locations. Ogboka and Isehere which are located in the city center and close to the CBD experienced crimes largely associated with commercial areas. Ekosodin, being the dormitory for the majority of the students of the University of Benin, experienced assault and vandalism which are closely associated with secret cult groups. Cultism is a growing phenomenon in the city and youth are dominant members.<sup>44</sup> As in most Nigerian universities, secret cult-related crimes and violence are a growing menace in the University of Benin. Ekosodin is outside the security surveillance of the university's security agents. Often, students expelled or suspended for secret cult activities and other offences coalesce to initiate fresh students into their cult groups. Aghedo reports that many suspended students in Nigerian universities have cult related background.<sup>45</sup> A resident home owner in Ekosodin said that "it is

very difficult to tell, particularly among the boys, who are not a cultist in this area.”<sup>46</sup> This statement underscores the increasing number of student cultists in the neighborhood.

Oka, a predominantly low income residential neighborhood, experienced residential burglary, armed robbery, and assault as dominant crimes. With high youth unemployment in the city, armed robbery and residential burglary are thus common. “It is only God that is protecting us in this area,” laments one resident home owner. “They [i.e. the robbers] either rob us at night or burgle our houses before we return from work.”<sup>47</sup> Even here, rival cult groups clash from time to time and many innocent people are killed or wounded in the crossfire. According to one resident home owner, “My friend’s house was burnt down by a cult group. When they couldn’t get the boy in a rival cult group, they set his room ablaze and, in the process, the entire house was razed. The boy was only a tenant in the house. This area was like a war zone that day as the rival cult groups clashed and killings were recorded on both sides.”<sup>48</sup> Despite serving as a nursery for criminals, cultism offers protection for members because of the linkages that the various cult groups have with the powerful in society.<sup>49</sup> The emergence of large cohort of youth organizations increases the risk of outbreak of violence and crime in many cities.<sup>50</sup> Youth play a central role in urban violence in Nigeria.<sup>51</sup>

### *Securing Informal Housing*

The residents of the neighborhoods undertake individual security arrangement at the dwelling unit level through target hardening, access control, territoriality, and natural surveillance. Target hardening encompasses security features of the house such as fence, gate, locks, and burglar proof doors, windows and verandahs which limit or prevent access.<sup>52</sup> The use of multiple security features is a common feature of informal housing.<sup>53</sup> The goal of target hardening is to make criminal access more difficult.<sup>54</sup> Emphasis on target hardening is due to the weak structure of informal housing. The material properties of informal and unregulated housing facilitate criminal access.<sup>55</sup> The realization of these material properties of housing does fundamentally encourage target hardening. However, the use of multiple security features raises the cost of construction of informal housing and hampers rescue operations in times of hazards such as fire outbreak and flooding as well as in the event of crime.

Rooming houses constitute 65% of all sampled house types in Ekosodin. Apartment buildings constitute 35%, all of which have burglar proofing on windows and verandahs. Even though all the sampled houses have external security lights around them, 35% of the houses also have block wall fences 2-3 meters high. These are clearly above the permissible height of fence by the State Planning Law (Town and Country Planning Law, CAP. 123) which stipulates that height of fences should not exceed 1.8 meters. Fencing is a major feature of all residential buildings in the newly urbanized communities in Benin City where newly constructed houses are considered incomplete without burglar proof windows and verandahs. Although this reflects the security consciousness of the residents, high walled fence inadvertently renders a house vulnerable to criminal attack in the sense that it conceals criminals once they gain access into the compound. Fencing, as an access control mechanism, serves to limit opportunities and free access to criminals. Fencing is also used as an expression of territoriality and to separate public from private spaces based upon customary rules and local institutions governing land rights.<sup>56</sup> However, target hardening with high fencing negatively impacts the ability of police

and vigilante groups to monitor criminal activities in homes. It also makes it difficult for occupants to keep their eyes on the street and effectively monitor their immediate surroundings.

In Oka, apartment buildings comprise 55% and owner-occupied rooming bungalows constitute 45% that feature burglar proof windows and verandahs. Although all the sampled houses have security lights, 85% have fences of more than 2 meters wholly or partially surrounding them. Rooming and apartment buildings are dominant house types in newly urbanized communities in Benin City. The common notion is that high walled fences create a barrier for access. However, this is not always the case. According to one of the interview participants, “criminals sometimes entered the compound by destroying a section of the fence or waylaying occupants of the house on their way in.”<sup>57</sup> Smashing of doors or windows to gain entry was identified as common way burglars and armed robbers gain access into homes.<sup>58</sup> Criminals often target fenced and fortified houses in the belief that occupants are well off materially. This underscores the need to further interrogate the structural determinant of victimization in informal housing. On the other hand, occupants living in high-fenced houses believe that this prevents criminals from assessing their material wealth from outside. One wealthy resident home owner said that “although it may not guarantee security against crime, a high fence prevents criminals from surveying your compound from the street.”<sup>59</sup>

Rooming houses constitute 60% while apartment buildings constitute 40% of all the sampled house types in Isekhre, all of which are fitted with burglar proof windows and verandahs, plus security lighting around the houses. Only 5% of all the sampled houses in this community have block wall fences around them. Similarly, apartment buildings constitute 55% while rooming houses constitute 45% of all sampled house types in Ogboka. Here, 35% have high fences around them. Once again, all the sampled houses have external security lights and burglar proof windows and verandahs. Unlike the newly urbanized neighborhoods of the city, fencing is the new normal in central areas of the city in response to the rising wave of insecurity. Building facilities and neighborhood character mark different epochs in the context of security consciousness in the city.

Whereas it is easy to use the various means of target hardening and access control to express territoriality, a clear designation between private and public areas remains difficult to enforce in a given residential compound. Although a high percentage of the houses in the study area have appropriate lighting fittings in and around the houses to enhance natural surveillance, incessant electric power outages in the city often renders this ineffective. One home owner lamented: “We have not had light [i.e. electric power supply] for over three months now.”<sup>60</sup> Criminals take advantage of the epileptic power supply in the city. Although some houses are powered by generating sets for lighting particularly at night, the noise from these generating sets makes a house vulnerable to criminal attack. According to one home owner, “sometimes we don’t hear when robbers attack because of the noise from either our generator or our neighbors’ generators.”<sup>61</sup> This increases neighborhood vulnerability to crime and renders neighborhoods as indefensible spaces.<sup>62</sup>

*Environmental Risk Factors of the Neighborhoods*

There is a general degradation in neighborhood environmental quality from the city center to the fringes of Benin City. The state government usually concentrates its renovation efforts on the central part of the city. Newly urbanized neighborhoods often develop as informal settlements where relevant infrastructures are lacking or inadequate.<sup>63</sup> Land use ordinances, building codes, and by-laws as well as development control standards to aid the planning and management of the built environment are blatantly violated—often in connivance with town planning officials.<sup>64</sup>

The sampled neighborhoods are characterized by mixed land uses and residential accretion. Vacant plots in speculative holdings intersperse with residential homes. Ekosodin and Oka in particular, feature numerous uncompleted buildings; unoccupied buildings usually roofed but not fitted with doors and windows; unplanned footpaths linking streets; abandoned buildings, often in flood prone natural depressions; and flood pondages. There is a general lack of street lights, signposts, and house numbering. Roads/streets are generally unpaved, making them flood and erosion prone. These characteristics constitute environmental risk factors that also contribute to crime vulnerability. Indefensibility of a neighborhood is a function of multiple access and exit points as well as places that could be used for hiding by criminals.<sup>65</sup> Access control is undermined by footpaths running through residential compounds and vacant plots. “We normally block these footpaths with woods and cement blocks from time to time,” one resident home owner laments, “but unknown people always remove them in order to gain access.”<sup>66</sup> Footpaths are used as short-cut to minimize distance and this undermines access control.

Incremental development of homes results in uncompleted buildings, lack of street lighting, and dense growth of weeds or shrubbery in vacant plots. One resident home owner laments that “numerous footpaths linking streets make our neighborhood insecure. There are too many hideouts for criminals in our neighborhood.”<sup>67</sup> Another resident home owner added; “many times you see area boys [i.e. street urchins] hanging out in all these uncompleted buildings.”<sup>68</sup> The ease of movement through footpaths contributes to neighborhood vulnerability, extending Meth’s notion of permeability.<sup>69</sup> Outdoors or outhouse facilities such as kitchens, toilets, and borehole taps which are common features of informal housing in the study area particularly exacerbate vulnerability to crime. The communal use of outhouse facilities is particularly gendered as women and girls who utilize them in their daily chores are more likely to be victimized than boys and men.<sup>70</sup> Cases of rape outside homes usually take place on bush paths, or around unoccupied and uncompleted buildings. One woman whose daughter was raped in Oka laments: “My daughter was raped last month in that uncompleted building (pointing to an unoccupied storey building in the next street) by two boys while returning from the errand I sent her. This kind of thing is too common in this area.”<sup>71</sup>

The environmental risk factors identified above are more rampant in Oka and Ekosodin due to their status as newly urbanized communities. Ogboka and Isekhre, being the oldest and located at the city center, are denser due to in-fill development. As a result, they have less vacant plots and uncompleted or unoccupied buildings. They also have more urban facilities in terms of paved roads/streets and side drains which reduce flooding. However, this does not insulate them from crime and there can be a causal relationship between residential density and

situational crimes.<sup>72</sup> Good (paved) roads aid crimes as car snatching which is prevalent in Ogboka and Isekhre. Inadequate planned parking in the CBD forces car owners to park indiscriminately, often far away from shopping points. This makes car theft very easy as cars are not watched over while owners are shopping. One homeowner in Isekhre said that “many cars have been stolen before our eyes in this street thinking that the thief is the owner of the car.”<sup>73</sup>

High residential density enhances neighborhood vulnerability to crime, resonating with crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED) principles on access and public space.<sup>74</sup> The relative positioning of the houses and layout of the neighborhood and circulation corridors encompass the checklist provided by Armitage that shapes residential security.<sup>75</sup> The selected neighborhoods are characterized by narrow streets, frequently gridlocked intersections, many cul-de-sacs, and obstruction of streets by illegal structures or blockades. Poorly maintained roads/streets make police patrol or response to distress calls difficult and serve as incentive for criminals. The police implicated the lack of road maintenance in some of the crimes and slow response. A police Public Relations Officer (PRO) said that “some of the roads are so bad that these criminals know where a vehicle will be forced to slow down. That is where they lay ambush for motorists.”<sup>76</sup> Another complained that “it is practically impossible for the Police to man all the roads at the same time because we are not many enough. Even in the event of pursuing criminals, bad roads are our major challenges.”<sup>77</sup> Fear of crime and concern about neighborhood safety has consistently been related to deteriorating housing and neighborhood conditions.<sup>78</sup> This resonates with the basic assumption of the ‘broken windows’ thesis that ill-kept buildings and neighborhoods breed crime.<sup>79</sup>

### *Neighborhood Vigilantism*

Local vigilante groups have evolved across the Benin metropolis in response to rising insecurity. Although only two of the four selected neighborhoods have vigilante groups, there appears to be a high level of cooperation among residents in all the selected communities for the security of their neighborhoods. Whereas the vigilante group in Ekosodin comprises volunteer resident homeowners or their caretakers and tenants, those of Isekhre are paid vigilantes. According to the leader of one of the groups, “paying the members of vigilante is the only way to make sure that everybody supports and participates in civil defense.”<sup>80</sup> In all cases, vigilante groups are duly registered by the police. Leaders of the vigilante groups said they work closely with the police. According to one of them, “We call the police when we see criminals in our area, and any criminal we catch is handed over to the police.”<sup>81</sup> In Ekosodin, 85% of the homeowners said they or their neighbors would respond to distress calls in the event of criminal attack, either by calling members of the vigilante group or the police. This coincides with the third dimension of guardianship which is the willingness of people to intervene when necessary.<sup>82</sup> However, there appears to be more confidence in members of the vigilante group than in the police. According to respondents in the community, “there is no police patrol of the neighborhood.”<sup>83</sup> Although the estimated distance from the nearest police post to the neighborhood is only two kilometers, one respondent said that “it would take the police more than an hour to respond to our distress call in the event of criminal attack.”<sup>84</sup>

Similarly, 75% of the resident home owners in Isekhere said they or their neighbors would respond to distress call in the event of criminal attack either by calling members of the vigilante group or the police. According to one home owner, “we all have the phone numbers of the police and members of the vigilante group.”<sup>85</sup> However, 25% of the respondents said that the police do respond quickly in the event of criminal attack because of the close proximity of the police station which is about one kilometer to the neighborhood. The paved roads and streets also enable the police to respond quickly to distress calls and patrol the neighborhood regularly, thus suggesting a strong link between the quality of the built environment and regular neighborhood policing.

Ogboka and Oka have no vigilante groups watching the neighborhood but the levels of cooperation among residents against crime is high. 85% of the respondents in Ogboka and 75% in Oka said they and their neighbors would reciprocally respond to their distress calls in the event of criminal attack. However, while 70% of homeowners in Ogboka said they would call the police in the event of criminal attack, 70% of respondents in Oka said they would call their neighbors rather than the police. According to one home owner; “I do personally go and help my neighbors out in the event of criminal attack. Some of us [i.e. home owners] have guns.”<sup>86</sup> This contrast reflects the low level of confidence in the police within Oka. “There is no need calling the police,” one resident home owner lamented, “because any time we call them they will be blowing siren to scare away the criminals. All the criminals that have been caught in this area were caught by us, not the police.”<sup>87</sup> The low level of confidence in the police within Oka is echoed by 75% of respondents who said that there is no regular police patrol of the neighborhood. Although the estimated distance from the police station to the neighborhood is not more than two kilometers, 55% of the respondents said it will take the police more than 2 hours to respond to a distress call. The poor condition of the roads/streets in the neighborhood is partly responsible for this as unpaved streets are frequently flooded during the rainy season and littered with sand deposits during the dry season. Yet effective police patrol can instill confidence in residents as 75% of respondents in Ogboka said that there is a regular police patrol of the neighborhood. However, good quality paved roads and streets made this possible. With the nearest police station less than one kilometer distant, one home owner confidently said that “it will take the police only 20 minutes to respond to distress call in any part of the neighborhood.”<sup>88</sup>

## Conclusion

This study reveals a significant relationship between security threat and various neighborhood infrastructures. Our findings indicate that vulnerability to security threats is higher at the neighborhood level than at the residential level. However, both need security reinforcement. Whereas individual houses may be designed or reinforced with security protection, neighborhoods have not been planned or built with such considerations. Unplanned neighborhoods need guardianship, e.g. vigilantism, to supplement weak police presence while informal housing requires target hardening. There is a broad need to incorporate guardianship and environmental design (CPTED) principles in the context of the cities in the global South.

This study also illustrates how location affects the crime profile of a given neighborhood. Whereas the neighborhoods in the city center are affected by crimes associated with commercial

activities such as burglary of stores and car snatching, newly urbanized neighborhoods outside the city center are mostly affected by residential burglary, armed robbery, and secret cult-related crimes such as murder, assault and rape.

The nature of neighborhoods in Benin City suggests benefits from a stronger synergy between police and local vigilante groups. Besides intelligence gathering, local knowledge of the environment is crucial in crime fighting. Given the unplanned layout and haphazard nature of residential development, only residents can fully ascertain all the 'nooks and crannies' of the neighborhoods. The reliance on neighborhood vigilantism is reflected in higher resident confidence in local vigilante groups than in the police. This underscores the need for effective community policing, i.e. a true partnership between local citizens and the police in crime fighting. Residents of a given community or neighborhood understand their immediate environment, culture, and language more than professional police officers who are often posted from different parts of the country.

More needs to be done to reduce the vulnerability of urban neighborhoods to security threats. First, neighborhoods must be upgraded in terms of road and street maintenance to enhance police patrol, access, and rapid response to distress calls. Basic facilities such as street lighting, signposts, and house numbering should be put in place for easy identification in the event of response to distress call. Second, development control standards should be more strictly enforced in terms of building density and height of walled fences around residential compounds in order to enhance natural surveillance. Lastly, new residential layouts should be planned in accordance with basic CPTED principles by incorporating these into city planning and building codes.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Ajaegbu 2012; Agbiboa 2015.

<sup>2</sup>Meth 2017; see also Caldeira 2000.

<sup>3</sup>Agheyisi 2015; 2016.

<sup>4</sup>Caldeira 2000.

<sup>5</sup>Meth 2017.

<sup>6</sup>Meth 2017.

<sup>7</sup>Jeffery 1971.

<sup>8</sup>Cozens, Hillier and Prescott 2001a; Kruger et al. 2001; Kruger 2005a & 2005b; Armitage 2013; Meth 2017.

<sup>9</sup>Monday et al. 2013.

<sup>10</sup>Kruger 2005b.

<sup>11</sup>Kruger et al. 2001.

<sup>12</sup>Mawby 2018; see also Reynald 2009.

<sup>13</sup>Felson and Cohen 1980.

<sup>14</sup>Reynald et al. 2018.

<sup>15</sup>Cozens et al. 2005, p. 342.

<sup>16</sup>Stollard 1991.

<sup>17</sup>Meth 2017.

<sup>18</sup>Galster 1986.

<sup>19</sup>Galster 2001.

<sup>20</sup>Calthorpe and Fulton 2001, p. 32.

<sup>21</sup>Kay et al. 2010.

<sup>22</sup>Moore et al. 1988.

<sup>23</sup>Moore 1983.

<sup>24</sup>Moore et al. 1988.

<sup>25</sup>Mawby 1999, p. 7.

<sup>26</sup>Mawby 1999, p. 7.

<sup>27</sup>Moore et al. 1988, p. 2.

<sup>28</sup>Laycock and Tilley 1994; Tilley and Laycock 2018.

<sup>29</sup>Ikhuoria 1984; Onokerhoraye 1995.

<sup>30</sup>Ogunbodede and Balogun 2013; Odjugo et al. 2015.

<sup>31</sup>Agheyisi 2015; 2016

<sup>32</sup>Fourchard 2008.

<sup>33</sup>Pratten 2008.

<sup>34</sup>Fourchard 2008, p.16

<sup>35</sup>Cohen and Felson 1979; see also Reynald 2009.

<sup>36</sup>Reynald 2009.

<sup>37</sup>Simone 2004, p. 407.

<sup>38</sup>Spencer 2017.

- <sup>39</sup> Spencer 2017.
- <sup>40</sup> Pratten 2008.
- <sup>41</sup> Adigwe 2013; see also Casey 2007; Fourchard 2008.
- <sup>42</sup> Pratten 2008.
- <sup>43</sup> Lombard 2016; Agboola et al. 2017.
- <sup>44</sup> Aghedo and Airhihenbuwa 2016.
- <sup>45</sup> Aghedo 2015.
- <sup>46</sup> Interview with homeowner 1, Ekosodin, 15 December 2019.
- <sup>47</sup> Interview with homeowner 45, Oka, 23 December 2019.
- <sup>48</sup> Interview with homeowner 90, Oka, 23 December 2019.
- <sup>49</sup> HRW 2007.
- <sup>50</sup> Moser and Rodgers 2012.
- <sup>51</sup> Oruwari & Owei 2006; HRW 2007; Ajaegbu 2012.
- <sup>52</sup> Cozens et al. 2005.
- <sup>53</sup> Meth 2017.
- <sup>54</sup> Gardner 1995.
- <sup>55</sup> Meth 2017.
- <sup>56</sup> Cozens et al. 2005; Meth 2017.
- <sup>57</sup> Interview with homeowner 10, Oka, 23 December 2019.
- <sup>58</sup> Meth 2017.
- <sup>59</sup> Interview with homeowner 10, Oka, 23 December 2019.
- <sup>60</sup> Interview with homeowner 11, Oka, 23 December 2019.
- <sup>61</sup> Interview with homeowner 11, Oka, 23 December 2019.
- <sup>62</sup> Cozens et al. 2001.
- <sup>63</sup> Agheyisi 2015; 2016.
- <sup>64</sup> Omuta 2005.
- <sup>65</sup> Armitage 2006.
- <sup>66</sup> Interview with homeowner 36, Oka, 23 December 2019.
- <sup>67</sup> Interview with homeowner 12, Ekosodin, 15 December 2019.
- <sup>68</sup> Interview with homeowner 12, Ekosodin, 15 December 2019.
- <sup>69</sup> Meth 2017; see also Armitage 2006.
- <sup>70</sup> Meth 2017.
- <sup>71</sup> Interview with homeowner 81, Oka, 23 December 2019.
- <sup>72</sup> Stark 1987.
- <sup>73</sup> Interview with homeowner 39, Isekhre, 22 December 2019.
- <sup>74</sup> Kruger 2005b; Meth 2017.
- <sup>75</sup> Armitage 2006; 2013.
- <sup>76</sup> Interview with Public Relation Officer 1, Ugbekun Police Division, 16 December 2019.
- <sup>77</sup> Interview with Public Relation Officer 3, Ugbowo Police Division, 16 December 2019.
- <sup>78</sup> Skogan and Maxfield 1981; Borooah and Carcach 1997.
- <sup>79</sup> Wilson and Kelling 1982.

- <sup>80</sup> Interview with Isehere Vigilante Group 3, 22 December 2019.
- <sup>81</sup> Interview with Ekosodin Vigilante Group 1, 15 December 2019.
- <sup>82</sup> Reynald et al. 2018.
- <sup>83</sup> Interview with homeowner 2, Ekosodin, 15 December 2019.
- <sup>84</sup> Interview with homeowner 12, Ekosodin, 15 December 2019.
- <sup>85</sup> Interview with homeowner 5, Isehere, 22 December 2019.
- <sup>86</sup> Interview with homeowner 2, Oka, 23 December 2019.
- <sup>87</sup> Interview with homeowner 7, Oka, 23 December 2019.
- <sup>88</sup> Interview with homeowner 12, Ogboka, 24 December 2019.