



COMMUNITY POLICING AS A STRATEGY FOR ADDRESSING THE SECURITY THREAT POSED BY SCRAP METAL SCAVENGERS (BABAN BOLA-BOLA) IN NIGERIA

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Abstract: The growing activities of scrap metal scavengers within Nigeria's informal waste economy have generated complex security concerns, including theft of public infrastructure, vandalism, and community-level disorder. While scavenging provides livelihood opportunities for marginalized populations, its unregulated nature has increasingly intersected with criminal networks, thereby posing threats to public safety and critical national assets. This study examines community policing as a strategic framework for addressing the security challenges associated with scrap metal scavenging. Drawing on Routine Activity Theory and the Broken Windows Theory, the paper argues that the convergence of motivated offenders, suitable targets, and weak guardianship combined with visible signs of disorder creates enabling environments for scavenger-related crimes. Using qualitative analysis and existing literature, the study evaluates how community policing can strengthen informal guardianship structures, enhance intelligence gathering, build trust between law enforcement and communities, and regulate informal actors without criminalizing poverty. The findings suggest that collaborative partnerships among residents, security agencies, and informal waste workers can reduce opportunities for crime while promoting social inclusion and accountability. The paper concludes that community policing offers a balanced, preventive, and locally grounded response capable of addressing both security threats and socio-economic vulnerabilities within the informal waste sector.

Keywords: Waste, scavengers, Baban Bola-Bola, Community Policing, ungoverned spaces, insecurity

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Introduction

Each year, the world generates over two billion tonnes of municipal solid waste (MSW), enough to fill shipping containers that, if placed end-to-end, would circle the Earth's equator 25 times—farther than a round trip to the moon (UNEP, 2024). Scrap metal scavengers play a significant role in global informal economy, providing livelihoods for thousands of unemployed and underemployed youth. However, the unregulated nature of the sector has created opportunities for criminal exploitation.

In Africa especially in Nigeria, the excesses have led to reports of stolen manhole covers, electric cables, rail tracks, telecommunication infrastructure, and household metal properties being channeled through scrap markets have raised serious concerns about public safety, economic losses, and national security (Thompson, Aina *et al* 2026). These activities not only disrupt essential services but also endanger lives and undermine public trust in security institutions.

Nigeria has continued to grapple with complex and evolving security challenges that strain the capacity of conventional policing structures. Beyond organized crimes such as insurgency, banditry, and kidnapping, emerging forms of urban and semi-urban criminality have become increasingly pronounced. One such development is the growing activities of scrap metal collectors, popularly known as *Baban Bola-Bola*, whose operations, though largely informal and economically driven, have in many instances been associated with vandalism, theft of public infrastructure, and breaches of community safety.

The persistence of these threats exposes the limitations of centralized and reactive policing approaches. The Nigeria Police Force, often overstretched and under-resourced, faces challenges in intelligence gathering, community trust, and proactive crime prevention (Osho, 2024; Osho, 2025a; Osho, 2025b; Osho, 2025c; Osho, 2025d). In response to such gaps, community policing has emerged as a strategic framework aimed at fostering collaboration between law enforcement agencies and local communities. By emphasizing partnership, trust-building, intelligence sharing, and problem-solving, community policing seeks to address the root causes of crime while enhancing local accountability.

Against this backdrop, this study examines community policing as a strategy for addressing the security threats posed by scrap metal collectors (*Baban Bola-Bola*) in Nigeria. It interrogates the extent to which community-driven security

mechanisms, traditional authorities, neighborhood associations, and local vigilante groups can complement formal policing structures in regulating scrap activities and preventing criminal infiltration of the sector. The study situates the issue within broader debates on informal economies, urban governance, and participatory security models in contemporary Nigeria.

By evaluating the potential and limitations of community policing in managing this emerging security concern, the study contributes to ongoing discourse on sustainable, locally grounded approaches to crime prevention and public safety in Nigeria. Data for the study is collected from secondary sources. This include desk publications of United Nations Agency, journals, extant literature and media reports.

Literature Review

There is a growing literature on informal waste generation and waste disposal management globally (ILO, 2013; Kaza *et al.*, 2018; Bening, Kahlert, & Asiedu, 2022; Morais *et al.*, 2022; UNEP, 2024). According to UNEP (2024), in areas where formal waste management is absent or inadequate, most waste collection, sorting, repair, and material recovery are carried out by self-employed workers, microenterprises, and small businesses. In developing waste systems, over 80% of waste management workers operate in the informal economy (ILO, 2013). These workers possess valuable, often undocumented knowledge about waste composition, sources, and market value. Informal waste collection provides critical livelihoods for individuals with limited education or alternative income sources (Morais *et al.*, 2022). Many workers are women, ethnic minorities, low-income individuals, persons with disabilities, youth, seniors, immigrants, and refugees, communities often facing poor living conditions, low education, and limited awareness of their rights (Kaza *et al.*, 2018; Bening, Kahlert, & Asiedu, 2022). Working conditions are frequently hazardous due to sharp or heavy waste, vermin, and harassment, with minimal social or physical protections. Despite risks, these informal actors play an essential role in recycling and sustaining urban waste management systems.

Globally, informal waste pickers play an indispensable role in the circular economy and urban sustainability. Chen (2022) and Gutberlet (2020) show that informal networks often achieve recycling rates surpassing formal systems, diverting millions of tonnes from landfills and reducing emissions. Yet, critical analyses highlight how their labour is co-opted for ecological modernisation

without rights or protections (Myers, 2023; Samson, 2021). Waste pickers perform vital civic and ecological functions but lack legal, social, and health security (Schindler & Demaria, 2023). This paradox underscores the (in)security nexus: they provide public goods while remaining socially stigmatized and politically invisible (O'Hare, 2022).

In Africa including, rapid urbanization, fiscal austerity, and structural adjustment have shaped complex waste governance systems. Lawhon *et al.* (2021) and Fokou *et al.* (2023) argue that cities produce hybrid “waste regimes” involving municipal authorities, private actors, community groups, and informal economies in often conflictual relations. States rely on informal labour for waste diversion yet periodically criminalize it to assert control or project modernity through clean-up campaigns (Adeyemi & Odeku, 2024; Oteng-Ababio, 2020). This generates cyclical insecurity, exposing waste pickers to eviction and harassment. In Nigeria, such precarity reflects “infrastructural violence” that deepens health and economic vulnerabilities (Nzeadibe & Anyadike, 2022). Thompson, Aina *et al.* (2026) argue that waste scavengers function both as contributors to society and as sources of concern. While their activities are sometimes associated with security and environmental challenges, the authors caution against rigid or militant community responses. Instead, they emphasize the need to recognize the significant role scavengers play in promoting environmental sustainability through recycling and waste diversion. They advocate for balanced approaches that address security concerns without undermining the ecological and economic benefits generated by informal waste workers.

On community policing, Ejiogu (2019) examines its potential to counter herdsmen terrorism in West Africa, advocating the concept of connected communities and multilayered intelligence partnerships to safeguard rural populations along transhumance routes. Similarly, Osho (2025b; 2025d) reiterates the capacity of community policing to reduce conflict and crime, particularly in ungoverned spaces. Nevertheless, a noticeable gap in the literature remains regarding how this framework can be applied to the informal waste economy, especially in addressing the activities and excesses of waste scavengers (*Baban Bola-Bola*).

Theoretical Framework

The paper adopts the routine activity theory and broken window theory. Routine Activity Theory, developed by Cohen and Felson in 1979, explains

crime as a product of everyday social interactions rather than solely as a result of individual pathology or deep structural inequality. The theory argues that criminal acts occur when three elements converge in time and space: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a capable guardian. Unlike traditional criminological theories that focus primarily on the motivations behind criminal behavior, Routine Activity Theory emphasizes opportunity and environmental conditions that make crime possible.

In the context of scrap metal collection activities in Nigeria, the theory provides a useful lens for understanding the prevalence of infrastructure vandalism and theft associated with some individuals operating within the sector. The presence of economically motivated offenders often driven by unemployment, poverty, or organized criminal incentives intersects with the availability of suitable targets such as exposed electric cables, rail tracks, telecommunication infrastructure, and public utilities. These materials are valuable, portable, and often poorly secured, making them attractive targets. Crucially, the absence of effective guardianship whether in the form of police patrols, community surveillance, regulatory enforcement, or technological monitoring creates an enabling environment for such crimes to occur.

Community policing becomes significant within this theoretical framework because it strengthens the element of capable guardianship (Osho, 2025b; Osho, 2025d). By fostering cooperation between residents and law enforcement agencies, enhancing information sharing, and encouraging collective vigilance, community policing reduces opportunities for crime. In this sense, the theory supports the argument that addressing scrap-related security threats requires not only punitive measures but also situational prevention strategies that increase guardianship and reduce criminal opportunities.

Broken Windows Theory, advanced by James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling in 1982, posits that visible signs of disorder and neglect within a community can encourage further criminal behavior. The theory is premised on the idea that minor infractions—if left unattended—signal a breakdown of social control and weaken the perceived authority of law enforcement (Wilson and Kelling, 1982). A single broken window in a building, if unrepaired, communicates that no one is monitoring or maintaining the property, thereby increasing the likelihood of further vandalism and eventually more serious crimes.

Applied to the issue of scrap metal-related vandalism in Nigeria, the theory suggests that the unchecked theft of public infrastructure can normalize

criminality within affected communities. When manhole covers are repeatedly stolen, streetlights vandalized, or rail tracks removed without swift response or accountability, a perception emerges that such acts carry little consequence. This perception can embolden offenders, attract organized criminal networks, and escalate minor theft into systemic infrastructure sabotage. Over time, the environment becomes characterized by visible disorder, eroding public trust and weakening communal cohesion.

Within this framework, community policing functions as an early intervention mechanism. By addressing minor infractions promptly, reinforcing community norms, and maintaining visible order, community policing helps prevent the escalation of disorder into more entrenched criminal activity. The collaborative engagement between police and community members restores informal social control and signals that deviant behavior will not be tolerated. Thus, Broken Windows Theory strengthens the argument that proactive, community-centered security strategies are essential in curbing the excesses associated with scrap metal collectors and in maintaining public order.

Contribution of the Scrap scavengers (Baban Bola-Bola) to Nigerian Society

Scrap collectors or scrap scavengers popularly known as *Baban Bola-Bola*, play a significant though often underappreciated role in Nigeria's informal economy and environmental management system. Despite growing concerns about security risks linked to unregulated scrap activities, the sector contributes meaningfully to livelihoods, recycling, and urban sustainability. Odogu (2024) defines scavengers as

The ones who collect waste products from dumpsites and landfills for onward conversion into useful products. In other words, the street scavengers should have their permanent workstations at the dumpsites where they are involved in waste management. They pick and sort; pile and stack; and haul and transport to the recycling plants. As key players in the waste management value chain, they are very crucial in the environmental sector (Odogu, 2024).

The scrap collectors help contribute economically to the society and livelihood generation. Scrap collection serves as a major source of employment for thousands of Nigerians, particularly urban poor, migrants, and unemployed youth. In a context of high unemployment and limited access to formal jobs, the scrap economy provides an accessible entry point into income-generating

activities with minimal capital requirements. Through the collection, sorting, and resale of recyclable materials such as iron, aluminum, copper, and household metal waste, participants sustain their families and contribute to local commerce. As a writer puts it

Beyond the environmental relief that the system provides society, the economic impact is just as significant. This is the source of livelihood for the thousands of people in the business, like Isah, who started this business in 2020. He has fed his family from the business and introduced some of them to it (Nworie, 2025)

The sector also supports downstream industries, including recycling plants, foundries, and manufacturing firms that depend on secondary raw materials. By supplying relatively affordable recycled metals, scrap collectors reduce production costs and stimulate industrial activity.



Figure 1: Some Baba Bola Bola scrambling for waste at dumpsite

Source: <https://hausa.legit.ng/1182759-an-kori-masu-tsintar-bola-daga-babban-birnin-tarayya-abuja.html>

Secondly, they help in environmental and waste management. Scrap collectors contribute significantly to environmental sustainability and urban sanitation. By recovering and redirecting metal waste from streets, dumpsites, and landfills, they help reduce environmental pollution and improve community hygiene. Their activities align with circular economy principles,

promoting reuse and recycling rather than disposal. In many Nigerian cities where formal waste management systems are overstretched, scrap collectors fill critical gaps. They enhance resource recovery rates and reduce the volume of solid waste that would otherwise burden municipal disposal systems.

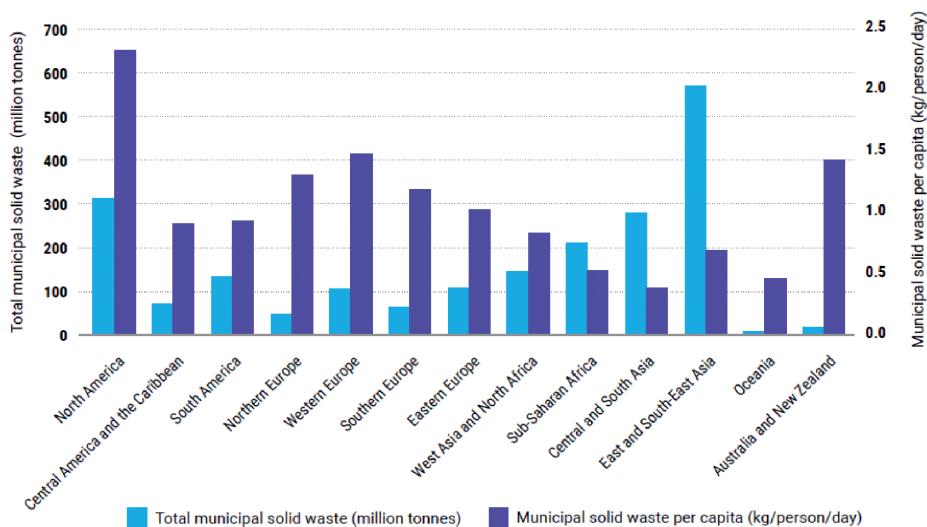


Figure 2: Municipal solid waste (MSW) generation by region: Total MSW (million tonnes) and MSW per capita (kg/person/day)

Source: UNEP (2014:16)

Third, resource conservation and industrial support. Metal recycling conserves natural resources by reducing the need for virgin mineral extraction. The recovery of scrap metals lowers energy consumption associated with mining and primary metal production. This has broader implications for environmental protection and sustainable development. By feeding materials back into the production cycle, scrap collectors indirectly support infrastructure development and manufacturing processes across sectors such as construction, automobile repair, and fabrication industries.

Finally, poverty reduction and social integration. The scrap sector provides economic inclusion for marginalized populations who may lack formal education or technical skills. It functions as a social safety net, absorbing labor that might otherwise remain unemployed. In this way, it reduces economic vulnerability and mitigates the risk of social exclusion. However, while acknowledging these contributions, it is important to distinguish between

legitimate scrap collection and criminal activities such as vandalism of public infrastructure. The challenge, therefore, is not the existence of scrap collectors per se, but the lack of regulation and oversight that allows criminal elements to infiltrate the sector.

Excesses of the Baban Bola-Bola in Nigeria

While scrap metal collectors contribute to environmental sustainability and livelihood generation, the sector has increasingly been associated with serious security and public safety concerns. The excesses attributed to some *Baban Bola-Bola* operators largely stem from weak regulation, poor monitoring, and the infiltration of criminal networks into the scrap value chain. These excesses often manifest in infrastructure vandalism, theft, public disorder, and unsafe operational practices.

Table 1: Some identified excesses/illegal practices of waste scavengers in Nigeria

S/N	Excess / Illegal Practice	Description	Security / Social Impact
1	Infrastructure Vandalism	Removal of electric cables, transformers, rail tracks, bridges, and telecom equipment for resale as scrap	Power outages, transport disruption, economic losses
2	Theft of Public Utilities	Stealing manhole covers, drainage grates, and streetlight poles	Road accidents, flooding, public safety hazards
3	Receiving Stolen Metals	Scrap markets purchasing stolen goods without verification	Encourages organized criminal networks
4	Trespassing on Restricted Sites	Entering construction sites, railway corridors, or private property to extract metals	Security breaches and property damage
5	Environmental Hazards	Unsafe burning of wires to extract copper	Air pollution and health risks
6	Public Disorder	Aggressive collection practices and conflicts with residents	Community tension and fear
7	Collusion with Criminal Gangs	Serving as outlets for stolen industrial materials	Strengthens illicit economic networks

Source: Generated from Thompson *et al* (unpublished); Odogwu (2024)

In many Nigerian communities, reports of stolen electricity cables, manhole covers, railway components, and telecommunication installations have been linked to scrap markets that provide ready buyers for stolen metals. Such

activities not only disrupt essential services but also endanger lives, increase government expenditure on repairs, and undermine public trust in security institutions.

The challenge, therefore, lies not in scrap collection as an economic activity, but in the unchecked and unlawful practices that compromise public safety and national infrastructure. As Odogu argues

It has become obvious that the FCT government is not capable of curbing the excesses of the scavengers. Granted, the security forces are constantly announcing that they have the situation under control, and intermittently parade scavengers caught vandalising government utilities. But this is not a sustainable method (Odogu, 2024).

Can community policing then break this deadlock? Put differently, can community policing save the day?

How Community Policing Can Address the Excesses of Baban Bola-Bola in Nigeria

Community policing offers a preventive, participatory, and problem-solving approach to addressing the excesses associated with some scrap metal collectors (*Baban Bola-Bola*). Rather than relying solely on reactive law enforcement, community policing emphasizes collaboration between the police, local residents, traditional institutions, youth groups, market associations, and other stakeholders to prevent crime before it occurs.

First, community policing helps in strengthening local surveillance and gather intelligence. Community policing enhances informal social control by encouraging residents to actively monitor and report suspicious activities. Since infrastructure vandalism often occurs within neighborhoods, railway corridors, or public utility spaces, local residents are strategically positioned to detect early warning signs. Through neighborhood watch groups, community development associations, and collaboration with security agencies, suspicious scrap movements, illegal dismantling of public property, or unauthorized access to restricted sites can be quickly identified and reported. This increases the presence of “capable guardians,” thereby reducing opportunities for theft and vandalism. The presence of community police helps to reduce any form of crime as a result of the Intel gathered and strengthen surveillance and gather intelligence on the nature of the trade, the recalcitrant scrap scavengers and those that are on wanted list of the ones who are thieves among them and the

places or markets where these stolen materials are sold as well as the buyers of such materials.

It helps in the regulation and monitoring of scrap markets. Community policing can facilitate partnerships between law enforcement agencies and scrap dealer associations to introduce registration, identification systems, and transaction monitoring. Requiring scrap collectors and dealers to maintain verifiable records of metal sources can help prevent the sale of stolen infrastructure materials. With community police, the trade can be regulated and monitored. For example there have been instances where people's belongings or materials are traced to the scrap market and sometimes, the scrap scavenger involved is arrested while selling or enjoying the loot for the sales of such stolen scraps. With community policing, the people involved and where they are selling it can be quickly established. Community leaders and local authorities can also assist in profiling legitimate operators while identifying suspicious buyers who serve as outlets for stolen goods. This regulatory collaboration disrupts the market for illicit scrap and reduces incentives for vandalism.

Third, community policing facilitates early intervention and a problem-solving approach. Unlike traditional policing, which often responds after crimes have occurred, community policing emphasizes identifying root causes. Police-community forums can explore factors such as youth unemployment, poverty, and weak regulation that contribute to criminal activities in the scrap sector. With community policing in place, residents can quickly report infringements by unregulated scrap scavengers, enabling intervention before crimes are committed. In cases of disputes over scrap ownership or legitimacy, community police can mediate conflicts before they escalate into retaliation or mob violence. Through dialogue and engagement, authorities can distinguish between legitimate scrap collectors and criminal actors, preventing blanket criminalization while targeting specific offenders. As Osho (2025b) puts it

This is why gathering intelligence through recognised and legally constituted community police is better. There are available technologies that community police can leverage to overcome the challenge of data gathering and other limitations that have led to numerous issues over time. The information gathered independently by community police and verifiable across different channels would facilitate liaison with other police force units, enabling them to deploy necessary security measures as needed (2025:125)

Furthermore, community policing promotes public awareness and reinforces societal norms. Civic education campaigns can sensitize residents about the dangers of purchasing stolen metals and the risks associated with infrastructure vandalism. When communities understand the economic and safety consequences of activities such as stealing manhole covers, electricity installations, or railway components, collective resistance against such practices is strengthened. Community policing also guides scavengers on acceptable practices, encouraging peaceful coexistence and mutual respect. In doing so, it restores moral order and reinforces shared norms regarding the protection of public property.

Community policing also fosters collaboration with traditional and informal institutions. In many Nigerian communities, traditional rulers, market unions, and vigilante groups hold significant informal authority. Integrating these actors into local security governance enables traditional leaders to impose sanctions within scrap markets, while vigilante groups complement formal policing in monitoring high-risk areas. By working closely with community members, law enforcement fosters trust and accountability, discouraging recalcitrant scrap collectors from jeopardizing peaceful community relations. This multi-layered approach not only enhances deterrence and local accountability but also provides valuable insights for policymakers and stakeholders on resolving tensions and maintaining community harmony.

Finally, it builds trust between the Police and the communities. A significant challenge in Nigeria's security system is the prevailing distrust between citizens and law enforcement agencies. Community policing seeks to bridge this gap by promoting transparency, dialogue, and mutual respect. When residents develop confidence in the police, they are more likely to share information about suspicious scrap-related activities. Moreover, when communities observe that the excesses of scrap scavengers are promptly addressed through the presence and intervention of community police, it reinforces public confidence in law enforcement. This strengthened trust facilitates better information flow, which is essential for disrupting and dismantling criminal networks operating within scrap markets.

Theory, scrap scavengers and community policing

The paper has found that the scrap scavengers play important roles in the society. From helping to remove wastes that cannot be removed by formal

waste collectors as a result of poor waste misgovernance, they fill the gap. More so despite the challenges that they face, such as hazardous substances and air pollution, they have continued to contribute to cleaner environment, providing source of income, metal for industries and artisans in construction. Ibrahim *et al* , 2022; Thompson, Aina *et al* 2026). Mukhtar (n.d) exposes the positive contributions they make to the society ranging from job provision to reduction to livelihood.

The paper also finds some disturbing excesses with the activities of the scrap scavengers. The excesses of scrap scavengers (Baban Bola-Bola) in Nigeria can be understood through criminological theory, particularly Routine Activity Theory and Broken Windows Theory. Routine Activity Theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979) posits that crime occurs when three elements converge: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of capable guardians. In the scrap sector, motivated offenders often include unemployed youth or organized criminals seeking profit. Targets such as manhole covers, electrical cables, and railway tracks are frequently exposed, while weak monitoring and enforcement create opportunities for theft and vandalism. Community policing addresses this by increasing guardianship through collaboration between law enforcement and local residents. Residents act as informants, reporting suspicious activities and monitoring scrap collection points, thereby reducing opportunities for crime. Broken Windows Theory (Wilson & Kelling, 1982) suggests that visible signs of disorder encourage further criminal behavior. In communities where vandalized or stolen infrastructure is left unchecked, offenders perceive law enforcement as weak, normalizing deviance. Scrap scavengers exploit this disorder, escalating minor infractions into more serious crimes and eroding public trust. Community policing counters this by promoting early intervention and visible enforcement. Minor infractions and disputes over scrap ownership are promptly addressed, preventing escalation. Partnerships with traditional authorities, market unions, and civic education campaigns reinforce norms, raise awareness about the risks of vandalism, and encourage collective responsibility for public property.

Together, these theories provide complementary insights: Routine Activity Theory highlights the opportunistic conditions that facilitate scrap-related crimes, while Broken Windows Theory emphasizes the symbolic and normative consequences of visible disorder. Community policing integrates both perspectives, reducing crime opportunities, restoring social order, and

maintaining scrap collection as a legitimate economic activity rather than a source of insecurity.

Conclusion

This study has examined the security implications of scrap metal scavenging within Nigeria's informal waste economy and assessed the viability of community policing as a sustainable response strategy. While scrap scavenging (popularly known as *baban bola*) remains an important survival mechanism for economically marginalized populations, its increasing linkage to infrastructure vandalism, theft of public utilities, and neighborhood disorder has elevated it from a mere economic activity to a significant security concern. The challenge, therefore, lies not in criminalizing poverty but in managing the criminogenic conditions that enable abuse within the sector.

Using Routine Activity Theory, the study demonstrated how scavenger-related crimes emerge from the convergence of motivated offenders, suitable targets such as railway tracks, electrical cables, and public installations, and the absence of capable guardianship in poorly regulated or ungoverned spaces. Weak surveillance systems, limited police presence, and community distrust of formal security institutions further intensify these vulnerabilities. The Broken Windows Theory additionally explains how visible disorder, illegal dumpsites, unregulated scrap markets, and unchecked petty theft gradually normalizes deviance, weakens informal social control, and escalates into more serious crimes.

Community policing provides a pragmatic and preventive alternative to reactive, enforcement-heavy responses. By strengthening partnerships between law enforcement agencies, local leaders, residents, and even legitimate waste pickers, community policing enhances capable guardianship and restores collective efficacy. Intelligence sharing, neighborhood surveillance, registration and regulation of scrap dealers, and community-based dispute resolution mechanisms can reduce anonymity and disrupt criminal networks operating within the informal waste economy. Importantly, this approach balances security enforcement with social inclusion, recognizing scavengers not solely as offenders but as stakeholders whose economic realities must be acknowledged.

However, for community policing to be effective, it must be institutionalized beyond rhetoric. This includes proper training of officers, accountability

mechanisms to prevent abuse, formal recognition and regulation of the scrap sector, and sustained community engagement. Without addressing structural drivers such as unemployment, urban poverty, and weak waste management systems, enforcement efforts alone will remain insufficient.

Ultimately, the study concludes that community policing offers a multidimensional strategy capable of reducing crime opportunities, rebuilding public trust, and fostering shared responsibility for security. When properly implemented, it can transform ungoverned spaces into regulated community environments where both security and livelihoods are protected.

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