

The Politics Of Policy Prioritization: The Unending Agenda Of State Police Creation In Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examines the persistent delays and contestations surrounding state police creation in Nigeria. The creation of state police in Nigeria has remained a recurring policy issue, resurfacing in political debates and legislative proposals over several decades without actual implementation. The study seeks to unpack the political, institutional, and governance factors that shape policy prioritization in Nigeria. Focusing on political dynamics, federal-state relations, institutional bottlenecks, and the interests of key stakeholders, the study interrogates why the agenda of state policing remains unresolved despite repeated advocacy and public support. Employing a qualitative research design, the study utilizes insights from multiple streams and punctuated equilibrium frameworks, and draws on document analysis of legislative bills, policy reports, and media coverage, complemented by key informant interviews with policymakers, security and policy experts. Findings reveal that policy inertia is driven by a combination of constitutional constraints, power struggles between federal and state actors, and competing political agendas. The paper concludes that stakeholder influence, particularly the divergent positions of governors, federal security agencies, and legislators, further complicates the implementation process. It proposes governance reforms, security sector restructuring and the integration of the interplay between political contestation and institutional constraints that shape policy outcomes. This measures, if effectively implemented, can contribute significantly to providing the policy convergence as well as structural harmonization needed to reconcile political interests with public demand for localized policing.

Keywords: Federalism, Governance, Policy Prioritization, State Police, Nigeria.

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I. Introduction

Policing in Nigeria has a long and complex history shaped by colonialism, post-independence politics, and ongoing governance challenges. The earliest formal policing structures in what is now Nigeria emerged in the early nineteenth century when colonial administrators established multiple constabularies to reinforce imperial rule. Among the first was the armed paramilitary Hausa Constabulary in 1820, followed by the Niger Coast Constabulary in Calabar in 1894 and the Lagos Police in 1896 (Igba, 2026; Nigeria Police Force [NPF], 2025). These early formations were primarily tools of colonial control rather than community-oriented public safety institutions, a legacy that has influenced subsequent policing systems in the country.

By 1914, colonial authorities merged the various regional forces into a single administrative structure headquartered in Lagos, and this centralization set a precedent that persisted into the post-colonial era (NPF, 2025). After independence, policing continued to be centralized under federal control, with the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) responsible for maintaining internal security across all regions. Despite reforms such as the 2020 Nigeria Police Act aimed at improving institutional effectiveness, the NPF remains a unitary police system in a federation composed of 36 states and a Federal Capital Territory (Suberu, 2021). This centralized model has faced persistent critique for its inability to effectively address diverse local security needs and its detachment from community contexts.

Against this historical backdrop, debates around the creation of state police have emerged recurrently in Nigeria's political discourse. Every major escalation of insecurity whether linked to terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, or communal violence often triggers renewed calls for policing reform, particularly toward decentralizing law enforcement authority. Political actors, security experts, and civil society groups argue that a one-size-fits-all federal police structure struggles to respond to localized threats and that empowering states to develop their own police forces could enhance responsiveness, accountability, and public trust (Ehirim et al., 2025; This Day, 2025; Sukare & Abdullahi, 2025).

Despite decades of advocacy, however, the creation of state police in Nigeria remains unrealized. Constitutional provisions currently enshrine a unified federal police system under Section 214 of the 1999 Constitution, and numerous proposals for amendment have stalled in both national and state assemblies for political and legal reasons. Scholars argue that the persistence of this unresolved policy debate reflects deeper governance dynamics, political contestations, and institutional constraints that shape the prioritization of public policy agendas in Nigeria (Awhefeada & Esavwede, 2022; Abraham & Odivwri, 2025).

The ongoing failure to establish state police in Nigeria, despite recurring proposals and shifting security dynamics, highlights a significant problem in the country's policy prioritization processes. On the surface, the argument for state police appears compelling: decentralization would theoretically bring law enforcement closer to local populations and allow tailor-made responses to specific security challenges. However, decades of political rhetoric have yielded little concrete reform, indicating that structural impediments, political interests, and governance pressures shape the prioritization or otherwise of this issue.

As Nigeria continues to grapple with high levels of insecurity, understanding why creation of state police remains on the agenda without fruition becomes crucial for both academic inquiry and policy action.

This study, therefore, seeks to investigate why the creation of state police in Nigeria remains a recurring yet unimplemented policy agenda. Specifically, it explores the political dynamics, governance challenges, and institutional bottlenecks that influence the prioritization and implementation of this policy. The paper argues that state police creation is not merely a security policy issue; it is a lens through which broader questions about political will, institutional design, and the distribution of power in a federal system can be examined. For example, why has the creation of state police remained on Nigeria's policy agenda without fruition? How do political actors, institutions, and interest groups influence prioritization? These and many more constitute the central concern of this study.

To achieve this, the paper is organized into five parts. The first part captures the foregoing introduction and the second covers the literature review, including theoretical explications of major themes relevant to the study's objectives and purpose. The third part discusses the methodology adopted to examine the research problematique. Part four presents the study's findings and discusses their implications for governance and policy prioritisation while the fifth part concludes the paper with proposals for achieving policy convergence as well as the structural harmonization needed to reconcile political interests with public demand for localized policing.

II. Literature Review

Political rhetoric around state police often intensifies in response to security crises. Media coverage, public debates, and elite discourse frequently link the issue to broader discussions on restructuring and federalism reform. Despite the frequency of such debates, the policy has not moved beyond rhetoric and committee deliberations, illustrating an important case of policy stagnation within a governance context marked by elite negotiation, constitutional inertia, and fragmented political will. Scholars generally agree that while constitutional frameworks provide a clear-cut amendment route and powers, political realities often blur these boundaries, leading to confrontations, bargaining, and compromises that define governance outcomes (Awhefeada & Esavwede, 2022; Sukare & Abdullahi, 2025). This literature review examines the major themes of previous studies on the thorny issue of state creation in Nigeria, and identifies the gaps that this paper seeks to fill.

Agenda Setting and Policy Prioritization in Governance

Policy prioritization, a core concern in governance studies, refers to the processes that determine which issues capture political attention and advance toward formal policy action. Scholars emphasize that agenda-setting is neither automatic nor predictable; many issues compete for limited policy space, and only a few rise to prominence (Cairney & Zahariadis, 2025; Chukwunka, 2025). Agenda-setting theory posits that factors such as problem recognition, public sentiment, political leadership, and institutional incentives shape what becomes a priority for government actors (Akinola, 2025). Kingdon's Multiple Streams Framework is widely applied to understand these dynamics: the problem stream (public recognition of issues), the policy stream (availability of feasible solutions), and the politics stream (political climate and power configurations) must converge to open a "policy window" that enables agenda change (Kingdon, 1984; Zahariadis, 2025). When these streams fail to align, policy proposals, including those with strong public support remain stalled or marginalized.

Policy feasibility is another critical component of prioritization, referring to whether a policy is politically, legally, and technically attainable within a given context. Politically feasible policies often reflect elite interests and institutional constraints rather than purely public needs (Cairney & Zahariadis, 2025). A policy's feasibility is shaped not just by its attractiveness but by the distribution of power among actors, party interests, and administrative capacity. In many federal systems, including Nigeria's, competing interests at different levels of government complicate prioritization, particularly in contentious areas such as policing and security governance.

The literature on policy prioritization underscores that an issue can remain visible on public agendas without substantive movement toward policy adoption if structural constraints and entrenched interests inhibit decision-making. This dynamic is directly relevant to the Nigerian debate on state police creation, where recurrent calls for reform have yet to yield constitutional change or institutional restructuring.

Policing and Federalism in Nigeria: Centralized versus Decentralized Models

Nigeria's policing system reflects historical legacies, constitutional design, and post-independence governance choices. Policing authority in Nigeria is centralized under the Nigeria Police Force (NPF), a vestige of colonial governance and the unitary command structure consolidated at independence in 1960. This has persisted despite Nigeria's federal political structure, which formally allocates powers across federal and subnational governments (Igba, 2026). Scholars argue that this centralized policing model has weakened the capacity of state and local actors to respond effectively to localized security challenges (Igba, 2026). Moreover, critics point out that centralized control has contributed to insufficient coverage, delayed response times, and low community trust in law enforcement, particularly in areas experiencing insurgency, banditry, and communal violence (Sukare & Abdullahi, 2025).

Federalism theory suggests that decentralization can enhance governance effectiveness by bringing decision-making closer to affected populations. However, in Nigeria, constitutional arrangements particularly Section 214 of the 1999 Constitution grant exclusive responsibility for policing to the federal government, preventing the formal establishment of state-level police services (Anyo, 2023). This legal centralization has prompted scholars and policy analysts to question the compatibility of Nigeria's federal political system with an overly centralized security architecture. While some empirical research explores hybrid or community policing as alternatives to full decentralization, there remains a strong conviction among many scholars that structural reform or constitutional amendment is necessary to align policing with federal principles (Sukare & Abdullahi, 2025; Chukwuka, 2025).

Notably, Igba (2026) highlights the historical continuity of colonial policing practices as embedded within Nigeria's federal policing architecture, asserting that such colonial legacies have contributed to systemic challenges such as over-centralization, militarized options over community engagement, and political manipulation, which have undermined effective policing. These critiques lay the foundation for understanding why calls for decentralization, including state police creation, have intensified but rarely translated into institutional change.

Stakeholder Dynamics and the Political Negotiations around State Police Creation

Calls for the creation of a state police force in Nigeria are not new, but they have gained traction in recent years due to escalating insecurity and perceived inadequacies in the federal police structure. The literature documents numerous legislative efforts and policy proposals aimed at amending the constitution to allow states to form their law-enforcement agencies. These proposals have been characterized by periodic legislative introductions, especially after peaks in violent crime or public dissatisfaction with policing performance (Sukare & Abdullahi, 2025). However, constitutional debates have largely stalled due to disagreements among political elites, fears of political misuse, and concerns about institutional capacity.

Constitutional constraints remain the most significant barrier to state police creation. Section 214 of the 1999 Constitution expressly vests policing powers in a unified federal security agency, and any deviation requires constitutional amendment, which in turn demands high political consensus across federal and state actors. It has been noted that the constitutional debate often becomes a proxy for deeper political struggles over power allocation in Nigeria's federal system. While proponents emphasize the need for localized responsiveness and accountability, opponents warn that state police could become instruments of political repression, particularly in states with weak democratic checks and balances (Sukare & Abdullahi, 2025).

The literature underscores that stakeholder dynamics are central to understanding policy prioritization in the context of state police creation. Political elites including governors, members of the National Assembly, and federal executives often play pivotal roles in shaping the discourse (Akinola, 2020; Anyo, 2023; Sukare & Abdullahi, 2025). Governors' networks, particularly through platforms such as the Nigeria Governors' Forum, have at times expressed collective support for state policing as part of broader restructuring agendas. Yet, this support is often tempered by underlying political calculations, resource constraints, and considerations of partisan advantage.

Federal security agencies especially the Nigeria Police Force and the Ministry of Interior also influence the debate. These institutions have institutional incentives to defend existing centralized authority, citing concerns about national cohesion, command and control, and fiscal capacity (Sukare & Abdullahi, 2025). More importantly, these agencies often articulate the risks of politicization and fragmentation associated with state police.

Civil society and security sector reform advocates have also contributed to shaping the discourse. Academic scholars, think tanks, and community activists often highlight the chronic shortcomings in the current policing system and lobby for decentralization as part of democratic governance reforms. These stakeholders leverage public opinion, media platforms, and policy networks to maintain state police creation on the policy agenda. However, despite robust civil society engagement, their influence is constrained by political power asymmetries and the institutional dominance of federal actors in security governance.

Overall, the interplay of these aforementioned actors illustrates that policy prioritization is not simply a technical exercise but is deeply political, shaped by contestation over power, resources, and narratives about security and governance.

Nevertheless, while existing studies provide valuable insights into the theoretical underpinnings and normative arguments for and against state police in Nigeria, several gaps remain. First, much of the scholarship is doctrinal or descriptive, relying on legal analysis and argumentative rhetoric rather than systematic empirical inquiry into the political negotiation processes that shape policy outcomes. Few studies employ robust qualitative methods such as interviews with political actors, legislative process tracing, or stakeholder analysis to unpack how decisions are made, why consensus falters, and what political strategies are deployed by proponents and opponents of reform.

Similarly, there is limited comparative research examining how other federal systems with successful subnational policing structures overcame similar constitutional and political barriers. Comparative insights from countries like the United States, India, or Canada could elucidate pathways and pitfalls for Nigeria's state police debates, yet scholarship in this area remains sparse.

Such studies would enhance understanding of the dynamic nature of policy prioritization in contexts marked by insecurity and institutional fragmentation.

Theoretical Explications

The establishment and persistent re-emergence of the state police creation policy in Nigeria can be systematically understood through established public policy theories. Two primary frameworks; Kingdon's Multiple Streams Framework (MSF) and Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET) offer powerful lenses for explaining why policy proposals arise repeatedly yet fail to secure prioritization and implementation. By applying these theories to Nigeria's policing reform debates, the study situates structural dynamics, political relationships, and actor actions within explanatory models of policy evolution and inertia.

To begin with, Kingdon's Multiple Streams Framework offers a widely applied explanation of how and why certain issues gain prominence on the political agenda while others do not. According to Kingdon (1984), policymaking is shaped by three largely independent streams: problem, policy, and politics, which must converge to open a policy window and create a moment in which policy action is feasible (Cairney & Zahariads, 2025).

The problem stream refers to conditions perceived by policy actors as significant issues requiring governmental attention. These problems can be identified through indicators such as crime statistics, feedback from existing policy evaluations, or focusing events such as crises or publicized incidents that highlight systemic failures. Problems compete for attention, and only those that can be framed effectively as urgent and socially significant are likely to be acknowledged by policymakers (Anyo, 2023; Bamidele, 2024).

The policy stream represents a hotbed of ideas and solutions circulating among experts, bureaucrats, and advocacy communities. Policy alternatives are tested, debated, discarded, or refined based on technical feasibility, cost, and political acceptability. As Chukwuka (2025) has noted, only solutions that survive this filtering process remain viable options that could be adopted when opportunities arise. The politics stream, on the other hand, includes the broader political environment such as changes in government leadership, public opinion, interest group pressure, and partisan dynamics. Shifts in the political mood can dramatically influence which issues are considered significant and which solutions are acceptable to political leaders (Anyo, 2023).

Spano (2023) has argued that policy change, under multiple stream framework, occurs when these three streams are accompanied by policy entrepreneurs, that is, actors who actively advocate for particular issues and solutions. These entrepreneurs exploit a converging moment to propel an issue into the policy agenda through strategic framing, networking, and timing. Such moments of alignment constitute policy windows, which are temporary and must be seized or lost by advocates (Bamidele, 2024).

Applied to Nigeria's state police debate, this framework explains how insecurity, public dissatisfaction, and documented policing failures create the problem stream that highlights the need for reform. At the same time, policy proposals such as constitutional amendments and policing frameworks constitute the policy stream. However, the politics stream mostly marked by partisan calculations, executive-legislative rivalries, federal-state tensions, and political risk aversion often fails to align effectively with the other streams. In the absence of a sustained policy window, state police proposals thus remain at the agenda's margins rather than progressing to implementation.

In the alternative, the punctuated equilibrium theory offers insight into patterns of policy stability and change over time. Originating in agenda-setting research by Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones, this theory posits that public policymaking systems tend toward extended periods of stasis, interrupted by relatively brief periods of significant change when underlying conditions shift substantially (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Spano, 2023).

Under the theory, policies are subject to stable equilibriums because dominant interpretations such as policy images, institutional arrangements, and interest structures create policy monopolies that resist change. These monopolies neutralize threats to the status quo and limit the salience of alternative visions, leading to gradual incremental adjustments rather than substantive reform (Wiesner, 2022). Change becomes punctuated only when disruptive events such as crises, shifts in public media attention, or new political leadership erode the dominance of existing frameworks and open space for alternatives to gain traction.

In the context of state police creation in Nigeria, the punctuated equilibrium perspective espouses that the policy domain of policing has remained under the authority of entrenched federal institutions and political elites. These elites resist decentralization and defend centralized control for reasons that include political control, fear of electoral manipulation at the state level, and concerns about institutional capacity. As a result, the policing policy domain remains in equilibrium: debates and proposals persist, but substantive deviation from the federal monopoly rarely occurs.

The theory predicts that without significant external shocks or dramatic shifts in political priorities, policy discussions will oscillate within bounded parameters. A major security crisis or sustained civil society mobilization might disrupt this equilibrium and trigger a punctuated shift toward substantive state policing reform. However, in the absence of such a catalyst, the policy remains in extended stasis, reflecting the broader pattern of political function and institutional inertia described by punctuated equilibrium perspectives.

On the whole, both frameworks harbour innumerable insights for explaining why the creation of state police repeatedly emerges without fruition. For instance, under the multiple stream framework, Nigeria's fragmented political environment rarely presents an effective convergence of problem recognition, viable solutions, and political momentum. Proposals for state police may rise when attention to insecurity peaks, but this attention often dissipates before political alignment and decisive action occur. The punctuated equilibrium theory, on the other hand, underscores that policy debates tend toward equilibrium because institutions, dominant policy images, and stakeholders maintain a stable status quo unless faced with overwhelming disruption. Institutional resistance from federal security agencies and rival political interests often prevent radical departure from centralized policing norms.

In other words, while the multi stream framework explicates the difficulties in coupling streams without strong policy entrepreneurs who are able to navigate these constraints, the punctuated equilibrium theory highlights the need for destabilizing events to disrupt incumbents' dominance and create space for change. Altogether, these two theories reveal that the recurring debate over state police is less a reflection of technical policy deficiency and more a manifestation of political opportunity structures, institutional friction, and the dynamics of issue attention. When streams fail to align or when no punctuating disruptions occur, policy inertia persists. The frameworks offer complementary and contextually robust explanations for the recurring but unrealized state police agenda in Nigeria by constructively advancing our understanding of the complex interplay between political opportunity and institutional constraints, and most importantly the stakeholder power that underlies governance and policy prioritization challenges.

III. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design with an interpretive case-study orientation, which is deemed appropriate for exploring complex political processes, institutional dynamics, and stakeholder behaviour related to policy prioritization in Nigeria. Qualitative approaches are particularly well-suited to examine complex social phenomena where researcher intent is to understand the meaning of lived experiences, perceptions, and context-dependent interactions rather than measure numerical trends (Lim, 2025). While an interpretive framework recognizes that meanings and policy processes are constructed through social interactions among actors and within institutional contexts, qualitative designs enable in-depth examination of decision-making processes, negotiation arenas, and discourse surrounding contentious reforms like the creation of state police (Wiesner, 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Primary data were obtained through semi-structured interview with 36 key informants, including past and current parliamentarians, executive aides, security experts, civil servants, and civil society leaders who possess first-hand knowledge of Nigeria's legislative and policing reform processes. Participants were selected purposively to ensure that their expertise directly relates to the state police agenda and policy negotiations (Okeke, 2023). Interviews, conducted both in-person and virtually, lasted between 20 and 25 minutes, and were captured in the first quarter of the year 2026. The interviews focused on participants' experiences with legislation, political

priorities, institutional constraints, and political pressures. The number of respondents per each of the category is indicated in table 1 as follows;

Table 1 showing the Categories of Respondents covered in the Interview Survey

Categories	Number
Past and Current Parliamentarians	12
Executive Aides (past and present)	10
Security Experts/Political Analysts	8
Civil Society Leaders	6
Total	36

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Secondary data were sourced from legislative proceedings, particularly constitutional amendment proposals, executive orders, official reports, reputable news media, and the extant literature. Document analysis complemented interview findings, enabling a triangulation strategy that enhanced data reliability (Bowen, 2009). The data were analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase framework: familiarization, coding, theme development, and interpretation, which helped to reveal key themes such as power struggles, party influences, and institutional resilience.

Ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were strictly adhered to in accordance with standard qualitative research protocols.

IV. Findings And Discussion

Unpacking the politics of state police creation in Nigeria reveals a complex interplay of historical patterns, institutional dynamics, and political calculations. Drawing from interviews, legislative records, media reports, and existing academic literature, several key findings emerge. These findings, as discussed one after the other, are structured into thematic areas that aligned with the objectives and purpose of this study.

Political Contestation

One of the most salient findings from the data gathered is that the debate over the creation of state police in Nigeria is deeply entangled in federal-state political contestation, especially over autonomy and control of security institutions. Nigeria's 1999 Constitution vests exclusive policing powers in the federal government, leaving state governments without constitutional authority to establish autonomous law-enforcement agencies (Okojie, 2025; Akeredolu, 2025). This constitutional allocation creates a clear power asymmetry between levels of government: while states grapple with severe insecurity, they lack legal jurisdiction to respond independently, thereby fostering tension between federal supremacy and subnational sovereignty.

State actors have framed the demand for state police as part of a broader struggle for true federalism and localized governance autonomy. Prominent political figures and governors have argued that local security challenges, ranging from banditry to kidnapping, cannot be effectively managed from Abuja by the centralized Nigeria Police Force (Okojie, 2025; Field Study, 2026). These arguments resonate especially in regions where insecurity is perceived as neglected by federal responses. Yet federal authorities and conservatives within the national legislature often counter that decentralizing policing could fragment national command structures and exacerbate governance challenges (Field Study, 2026). Such positions reflect a fundamental political contestation: states claim they are entitled to control their internal security under federal principles, while federal elites fear that decentralization will weaken centralized authority, risk political abuse of police power by governors, and undermine national cohesion.

Without doubt, political contestations continue to provide the context under which both federal and state actors often differ on the desirability and implications of decentralizing policing authority. While some governors and legislators advocate for localized policing to improve security outcomes, others resist perceived threats to federal authority or fear politicization of state police forces. Constitutional barriers further complicate the situation. The Constitution's exclusive vesting of policing powers at the federal level limits state autonomy and requires comprehensive amendment for any formal decentralization to occur (Awhefeada & Esavwede, 2022). Governance challenges such as unequal state capacities, fiscal constraints, and fears of partisan misuse also deter serious commitment to implementing state policing frameworks (Sukare & Abdullahi, 2025).

This combination of political, constitutional, and governance factors contributes to policy inertia, where an issue remains persistently visible in debates but fails to achieve decisive implementation thereby leading perennial tension and unease between federal and state actors.

This tension is not merely rhetorical. It plays out in legislative debates and constitutional review processes, such as dialogues organized by the House of Representatives to explore possible amendments to Nigeria's 1999 Constitution to permit state policing (Field Study, 2026). However, despite formal discussions, political agreements remain elusive, as political elites, party interests, and intergovernmental rivalries continue to

shape outcomes. The repeated re-emergence of the state police debate without actual legal reform underscores how political contestation, vested interests, and power struggles shape Nigeria's policy prioritization dynamics.

Institutional and Constitutional Constraints

Institutional and constitutional factors pose significant hurdles to the creation of state police. As indicated earlier, Section 214 of the 1999 Constitution clearly states that there shall be "a police force for Nigeria," and no other police force shall be established by any other government or authority" (Nigerian Constitution, 1999). This exclusivity clause serves as a legal barrier to decentralized policing. The constitutional mandate effectively prohibits states from independently creating police institutions, placing all law-enforcement authority and control under the federal executive, primarily through the Inspector-General of Police.

These constitutional restrictions are fortified by bureaucratic structures. The NPF operates under national command, and its strategic planning, human resources, and budgetary allocations are controlled federally, leaving states with minimal influence over policing priorities or personnel deployment (Okojie, 2025). Attempts to harmonize state security outfits with federal authority, such as the creation of regional security outfits such as Amotekun in the Southwest, illustrate the constraints and complexities of operating local security mechanisms in a centralized legal framework. These outfits often lack full arrest powers and must defer to federal law enforcement when constitutional jurisdiction is contested.

In addition to constitutional barriers, bureaucratic inertia and institutional resistance shape policy outcomes. Federal security agencies and ministries responsible for internal security typically resist structural changes that would dilute their authority or influence. The institutional dominance of the NPF and related agencies is bolstered by vested interests, entrenched norms, and organizational culture that privilege centralized command over decentralized responsiveness. While states have experimented with community-based security initiatives, such mechanisms have not fundamentally altered Nigeria's policing architecture, largely because they operate without constitutional backing (Field Study, 2026).

These constraints; both legal and bureaucratic, help to explain why policy proposals for state police repeatedly emerge in public debate yet fail to translate into constitutional reform or institutional transformation. Policy momentum often dissipates when confronted with the structural realities of Nigeria's political and legal architecture, preserving centralized control despite evident challenges.

Policy Inertia and Agenda-Setting Dynamics

The recurring nature of the state police debate, without decisive policy implementation, reflects classic characteristics of policy inertia. The policy remains visible on public and political agendas but lacks the requisite convergence of institutional feasibility and political will for enactment. This pattern mirrors findings in public policy research showing that issues may persist in public discourse but fail to become actionable due to competing priorities, institutional gridlock, and elite bargaining (Kingdon, 1984; Spano, 2023).

In the Nigerian case, heightened public attention to security issues often triggered by major crises or spikes in violent incidents such as intense debates following major attacks or surges in crime temporarily elevates the salience of state policing as a possible solution. However, once political attention shifts or federal-state negotiations stall, the issue loses traction. Policy initiatives within the National Assembly often stall at committee stages or are deferred to ongoing constitutional review processes without reaching substantive adoption (Field Study, 2026). This dynamic exemplifies agenda-setting challenges, where problem recognition does not systematically translate into policy change.

Part of this inertia reflects political feasibility constraints. Many national legislators, especially those aligned with the executive branch, prioritize maintaining federal control over security as part of broader strategies to manage internal stability and political competition (Field Study, 2026). Their reluctance to cede power to states helps to limit or contain potential regional contention but simultaneously blocks decentralization reforms. This configuration where problem recognition is high but political feasibility is low accounts for the repeated yet inconclusive state police discourse.

Stakeholder Influence

Multiple stakeholder groups exert influence over how the state police agenda is framed, debated, and prioritized. These include governors, national legislators, civil society actors, and federal security agencies, each with distinct interests and strategies.

Governors and state political elites often advocate for state policing as part of broader demands for enhanced autonomy and responsiveness to local security needs. The Governors' public statements and intergovernmental forums sometimes emphasize inefficiencies in the federal police and argue that devolved enforcement powers would enable quicker response times and closer community engagement (Field Study, 2026). This position often aligns with demands for constitutional restructuring and deeper federalism, which constitutes a central theme in recent governance debates.

In contrast, federal security agencies and some national leaders view state policing through a lens of risk management and political control. They raise concerns that decentralized units could be exploited for partisan purposes, abused by governors to suppress opposition, or create coordination challenges across borders (Field Study, 2026). These arguments reflect institutional interests in preserving unified command and coherence in national security operations.

Civil society and academic stakeholders contribute analytical perspectives and public discourse that sustain policy debate. Many scholars have highlighted the limitations of centralized policing in addressing localized insecurity and urge policy reforms grounded in federalist principles (Awhefeada & Esavwede, 2022; Ehirim et.al, 2025; Okojie, 2025). Civil society groups, including human rights organizations and community advocates, often emphasize accountability, responsiveness, and localized intelligence as benefits of state police, framing decentralization as compatible with democratic governance (Field Study, 2026).

These stakeholder dynamics illustrate a complex policy network, where competing interests, narratives, and power relations shape how the state police proposition is understood and contested. The interplay among these actors rather than a consensus on reform often produces a situation where the policy periodically resurfaces but lacks unified backing to move forward decisively.

Comparative Insights

Situating Nigeria's case within broader federal policing models reveals valuable contrasts and comparable challenges. In federations like the United States and Canada, decentralized policing structures coexist with federal law enforcement agencies, allowing states or provinces to exercise independent authority over local policing while reserving national coordination for cross-border and specialized crimes (Sukare & Abdullahi, 2025). In the U.S., state police and numerous municipal agencies operate alongside federal agencies such as the FBI, with legal frameworks clarifying jurisdictional boundaries and mechanisms for coordination (Field Study, 2026).

Comparative analysis shows that decentralized policing can function effectively in federations where robust institutional safeguards, legal frameworks, and financial capacity are present (Sukare & Abdullahi, 2025). Such safeguards include oversight bodies, standardized training protocols, and intergovernmental coordination mechanisms that mitigate risks of political abuse and fragmentation. These comparative insights underscore that successful decentralized policing systems require not only legal authority but also institutional capacity, oversight regimes, and fiscal support to ensure consistent performance across subnational units.

Nigeria's structural limitations, including uneven state fiscal capacity, weak oversight mechanisms, and political competition strongly contrast sharply with these models, elucidating why the state police agenda remains aspirational rather than realized. Comparative federations illustrate both the potential benefits and prerequisites for successful decentralization, offering empirical benchmarks against which Nigeria's debates can be contextualized.

V. Conclusion

This study has examined the persistent and unresolved debate surrounding the creation of state police in Nigeria, with a focus on understanding the political, institutional, and stakeholder dynamics that shape policy prioritization. The findings reveal a multifaceted and interrelated set of factors that collectively explain why the state police agenda repeatedly resurfaces but fails to achieve implementation. First on the list is political dynamics that emerged as a central determinant of policy stagnation. Conflicts between federal and state governments over control of security institutions, partisan calculations, and elite negotiations were identified as persistent barriers to progress. Governors and state political elites consistently advocate for decentralized policing as a mechanism for enhanced local autonomy and responsiveness to security threats, whereas federal actors and national security agencies resist such reforms due to concerns over fragmentation, politicization, and national cohesion. These competing political interests, amplified by intergovernmental rivalries, result in a cyclical pattern of policy debate without substantive reform. The interaction of these political factors, as findings have shown, shapes the framing, salience, and prioritization of the state police agenda in Nigeria.

Another salient factor hovers around the institutional and constitutional bottlenecks, which play a critical role in sustaining policy inertia. The 1999 Constitution vests exclusive policing powers in the federal government, leaving states legally incapacitated to establish independent security agencies. Bureaucratic structures within the Nigeria Police Force and related ministries further reinforce centralized authority, creating entrenched institutional resistance to decentralization. These structural constraints limit both the technical feasibility and the political acceptability of proposals for state police, thereby perpetuating delays and reinforcing a pattern of incremental or stalled policymaking. In addition, historical precedents, such as regional policing experiments, demonstrate the difficulty of instituting meaningful change within the existing centralized framework, highlighting the structural rigidity that governs Nigeria's security sector.

The third factor explicates the influence of stakeholder power in shaping policy trajectories. Beyond federal and state actors, civil society organizations, academic experts, and media institutions play critical roles in framing debates, advocating reforms, and sustaining public awareness. However, while these actors contribute to agenda visibility, their influence is constrained by the dominance of federal institutions and elite negotiation networks. The interplay of stakeholders generates a complex policy ecosystem where competing interests, strategic framing, and institutional authority intersect to determine whether the state police issue is elevated or side-lined. This finding underscores that policy outcomes in Nigeria's security sector are not simply a function of technical considerations or public need but are fundamentally shaped by power relations and negotiation dynamics among multiple actors.

Altogether, the implications of these findings extend beyond the specific case of state police creation. They provide valuable insights into the broader patterns of agenda-setting, policy prioritization, and federal-state relations in Nigeria. Overall, the recurrent state police debate in Nigeria illustrates a complex convergence of political contestation, institutional rigidity, and stakeholder influence. While solutions are continually proposed, structural and political realities sustain inertia, making the case a compelling illustration of how policy prioritization operates in a federated and politically contested environment. The study's findings underscore the importance of integrating theoretical insights, empirical analysis, and stakeholder engagement to understand and navigate entrenched policy challenges.

VI. Recommendations

Based on the findings and the theoretical insights from multiple streams and punctuated equilibrium frameworks, it is evident that the creation of state police in Nigeria is constrained by constitutional, political, and institutional factors. Addressing these challenges requires both structural reforms and sustained dialogue among stakeholders.

The best modest way to begin should be the development of a clear constitutional framework for state policing that is compatible with Nigeria's federal system. The current 1999 Constitution centralizes policing authority exclusively under the federal government, creating legal and operational bottlenecks that inhibit subnational security initiatives. Drawing on Kingdon's multiple streams models, the creation of such a framework would align the problem stream, such as acknowledgment of widespread insecurity with the policy stream, which consists of feasible institutional solutions, and facilitate convergence with the politics stream when political actors are receptive. A constitutional amendment or clearly articulated legal provision would formalize state policing within a coherent federal framework, specifying the roles, powers, and limitations of state forces while preserving national oversight mechanisms to prevent fragmentation or abuse. Such a reform would reduce the recurrent policy ambiguity and allow for coordinated responses to localized security challenges without undermining national cohesion.

Similarly, there is the need of promoting structured stakeholder dialogue between federal and state actors to build consensus on state policing. The findings reveal that political contestation between governors, federal authorities, legislators, and security agencies is a primary barrier to policy advancement. Drawing on insights from the punctuated equilibrium theory, periods of policy inertia can be disrupted by well-timed interventions that alter the policy image and create windows for reform. Structured dialogue platforms such as intergovernmental forums, security summits, or legislative committees can serve as institutionalized spaces where competing interests are negotiated transparently, evidence-based solutions are discussed, and trust among actors is cultivated. These forums should include representatives from federal ministries, state governments, law enforcement agencies, civil society, and community stakeholders, ensuring that deliberations are inclusive and informed by empirical evidence on security challenges. Effective dialogue can reduce zero-sum perceptions of state policing and foster a collaborative approach that aligns national and subnational interests, thereby increasing political feasibility.

Another critical factor is the implementation of institutional reforms to enhance transparency and depoliticize policing policy. The study's findings indicate that one of the recurrent impediments to state policing is the perception that security institutions can be manipulated for partisan purposes. Federal and state actors often frame the debate in political terms, which undermines trust and delays policy adoption. To mitigate these risks, it is essential to establish institutional mechanisms that safeguard neutrality and professional standards in policing policy. This could include creating oversight bodies at both federal and state levels, implementing clear guidelines for recruitment and deployment of personnel, and establishing independent auditing mechanisms to ensure accountability. Institutional reforms should also prioritize capacity building, emphasizing training in ethics, human rights, and community engagement. Depoliticizing the discourse around state policing and embedding accountability mechanisms can potentially equip policymakers with functional measures to reduce resistance from federal authorities, reassure the public, and increase the likelihood of sustainable reform.

On addressing the persistent challenges of state police creation in Nigeria requires a multi-pronged approach that combines legal reforms, stakeholder engagement, institutional restructuring, and empirical research.

Constitutional clarity, inclusive dialogues, and depoliticized institutions can create the conditions necessary for feasible and sustainable policy adoption.

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