

State Police in Nigeria: Lessons from Federal Systems for Effective Multi-Level Policing

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Fig. 1: Nigerian security officials (Copyright: Adekunle Ajayi/NurPhoto, Credit: NurPhoto via Getty Images)

KEY MESSAGES

- Nigeria's centralized policing system faces increasing pressure from terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, communal violence, and other security threats
- State policing could improve local intelligence gathering, community engagement and response to security threats, but decentralization alone will not guarantee effectiveness.
- Comparative federal systems show that effective multi-level policing depends on clear constitutional responsibilities, professional standards, and coordination between national and subnational agencies.
- Political interference, human rights violations, overlapping mandates and uneven policing standards are key risks that must be addressed through independent oversight and accountability mechanisms
- Successful state policing requires constitutional reform, sustainable funding, harmonized recruitment and training standards, integrated intelligence sharing and safeguards against political abuse.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Nigeria's rising insecurity, including terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, communal violence, and organized crime, has renewed debate on the need for state policing. The current centralized policing system has been criticized for slow response to local security threats, limited community engagement, inadequate intelligence gathering, and overstretched operational capacity. This policy brief draws lessons from the policing systems of the United States, India, Brazil, Germany, and South Africa to identify practical reforms that could strengthen Nigeria's security architecture.

The review shows that successful multi-level policing depends not simply on decentralization but on effective institutional design, clear constitutional responsibilities, professional standards, accountability, sustainable funding, and strong coordination between national and subnational law enforcement agencies. Countries such as Germany and India show that state or provincial police can effectively address local security challenges while specialized federal agencies manage national security concerns. Conversely, Brazil and the United States illustrate how weak coordination and overlapping

mandates can lead to fragmented policing and operational inefficiencies.

The policy brief recommends:

1. The 1999 Constitution should be amended to allow each level of government power to establish its policing system and to determine its operational modalities such as funding, recruitment of personnel, etc.
2. There is a need for an independent National Police Standards and Oversight Commission saddled with the responsibility of regulating recruitment, training, discipline, operational standards, and human rights compliance across all police services.
3. Robust safeguards such as judicial oversight, independent state police service commissions, legislative scrutiny, and transparent complaint mechanisms should be institutionalized to prevent political interference, abuse of power, and violations of citizens' rights while enhancing

public trust and accountability in Nigeria.

4. Federal and state governments should establish a transparent and sustainable financing framework for multi-level policing that defines funding responsibilities, provides for predictable budgetary allocations, and requires independent auditing and public reporting of expenditure. Implementation should take account of differences in state fiscal capacity and operational readiness.

1.0 Introduction



Fig. 2: Map depicting Nigeria's diverse security threats
(Source: Africa Center for Strategic Studies)

The long standing debate over State Police in Nigeria has evolved into a defining question of how best to protect lives and property in an increasingly complex security environment. At its heart is not simply whether States should have their own police forces, but whether Nigeria's policing architecture remains fit for purpose in a federal system facing rapidly changing security threats. The reform has moved beyond general debate into a critical phase of constitutional and institutional design. As at October 2026, the proposed constitutional amendment has been transmitted to the State Houses of Assembly for consideration, while a National Policing Bill is also being developed. The proposal seeks to establish a dual policing structure by allowing States to create their own police services while retaining the Nigeria Police Force for national responsibilities. This flows from the February 2024 consensus between President Bola Ahmed Tinubu and the 36 State governors that Nigeria's security architecture requires urgent reform (Okediran, 2026).

The need to reassess Nigeria's security architecture has become increasingly urgent given the country's current security challenges. The current policing system has come under severe strain, with significant challenges relating to capacity, professionalism, public trust, and security outcomes. The 2023 World Internal Security and Police Index ranked Nigeria among the world's poorest performing policing systems, highlighting institutional weaknesses that have limited the effectiveness of the

existing centralized policing model (International Police Science Association, 2023). Nigeria's police-to-citizen ratio is 1:650, above the 1:220 recommended by the United Nations (Okediran, 2026).

Members of the public hold divergent views on the issue of State Policing. Some analysts believe that security threats differ from one State to another in Nigeria; as such, officers recruited from local communities are more likely to understand local languages, cultures, social dynamics, and geographical conditions, improving intelligence gathering, crime prevention, and emergency response. Regional security initiatives such as Amotekun have shown that domesticated security systems can improve community engagement, but they face the limitations of a constitutional arrangement that assigns States significant security responsibilities without granting them direct policing authority. This means that decentralization alone does not automatically guarantee effective policing.

Objections to State Policing are not rooted in the principle of decentralization itself but in concerns about implementation. Those who oppose the proposal fear that governors could misuse State police institutions to intimidate political opponents, suppress dissent, manipulate elections, or marginalize minority groups. These concerns cannot be ignored, particularly in a democratic and socio-culturally sensitive State like Nigeria where institutions have periodically faced allegations of political interference, as well as the reality of socio-cultural disparity. The central challenge, therefore, is not simply whether State Governments should have greater policing authority, but how to structure that authority to promote both security and democratic accountability. The policy challenge is therefore to design a decentralized policing framework that improves local responsiveness while establishing enforceable safeguards against political interference, abuse of power, unequal protection, and fragmentation of national security operations.

2.0 Comparative Analysis of the Policing System in Related Federal States

Policing arrangements in federal states differ in how



Fig. 3: Ogun State Amotekun, an example of State Police

(Source: *OgunStateAmotekun.com*)

national and subnational governments distribute authority, operational responsibilities, and accountability. The United States, India, Brazil, Germany, and South Africa provide useful comparative perspectives, but they do not operate identical systems of decentralized policing. Their experiences should therefore be assessed in terms of the institutional practices that may be relevant to Nigeria, rather than treated as interchangeable models.

The United States operates a highly decentralised policing system involving federal, state, county, municipal and other law-enforcement agencies. Federal agencies, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation, investigate offences within federal jurisdiction, while state and local agencies exercise responsibilities established by their respective laws. This arrangement highlights the importance of defining jurisdiction, coordinating investigations, and sharing information across agencies. For Nigeria, the relevant lesson is that decentralised policing requires clear operational boundaries and effective cooperation, particularly where offences cross state boundaries.

India provides an example in which police and public order are principally state responsibilities under the Constitution, while the Union Government retains important responsibilities for national security, central law-enforcement institutions, and support to states. State governments maintain their own police forces. This arrangement illustrates how state-level policing can coexist with national coordination. For Nigeria, the relevant lesson is to define federal and state responsibilities clearly while providing for intelligence sharing, interstate investigations and coordinated responses to security threats.

Brazil has a distinct constitutional arrangement that separates important policing functions among federal and state institutions. State Civil Police are principally

responsible for criminal investigations, while State Military Police perform uniformed policing and public-order functions. The Federal Police exercise responsibilities assigned under the Constitution and federal law, including specified offences with federal, interstate, or international dimensions. Municipal guards have separate statutory functions and should not be treated as equivalent to state police institutions. Brazil illustrates the importance of distinguishing investigative, public-order and federal responsibilities to reduce duplication and jurisdictional gaps.

Germany relies substantially on police forces organised by its constituent states, known as the *Länder*, alongside federal institutions with defined responsibilities. The Federal Criminal Police Office performs national and coordinating functions, while the Federal Police has responsibilities established by law. Cooperation between federal and state institutions is important where criminal activity crosses state boundaries or engages federal jurisdiction. For Nigeria, Germany offers lessons on cooperative federalism, defined institutional mandates and mechanisms for coordinating investigations and intelligence without assuming that all policing responsibilities should be centralised.

South Africa differs from the other examples because its Constitution provides for a single national police service structured to function at national, provincial and, where appropriate, local levels. Provincial governments have roles in monitoring police conduct, assessing effectiveness and promoting police–community relations, while national legislation provides a framework for municipal police services. South Africa is therefore particularly relevant to Nigeria's consideration of provincial or state-level oversight, locally informed policing priorities and municipal security functions. It should not, however, be presented as a direct equivalent of a system of independent state police forces

(Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, ss. 205–207).

Taken together, these experiences show that effective multi-level policing depends on clear legal mandates, professional standards, accountability, sustainable financing, and cooperation between institutions. The models also demonstrate that decentralisation takes different forms and does not, by itself, guarantee improved security or public confidence. For Nigeria, the policy priority should be to develop an arrangement suited to its constitutional framework, security challenges and differences in state capacity. This requires clearly defined federal and state responsibilities, minimum professional standards, independent accountability mechanisms, agreed procedures for joint operations and intelligence sharing, and sustainable funding arrangements.

3.0 Comparative Analysis of the Policing System in Related Federal States

Despite Nigeria's multilevel system of government, the policing system remains largely centralized. In reality, this means that while State Governors are in charge of administration of their States, they lack the power to control the police architecture as instructions are only made and enforced from the Nigerian Police Force headquarters. On this note, the issue of State police raises broader questions about the coordination of multilevel policing within a Federal State like Nigeria.

Operating a Federal System like Nigeria requires a careful balance between local autonomy and national coordination. While decentralisation can improve responsiveness and community engagement, effective security governance depends on cooperation between different levels of government with clearly defined responsibilities and mechanisms for information sharing. This kind of arrangement requires that federal authorities should retain responsibility for national security matters, interstate crimes and broader coordination, while state police would focus on community-level security challenges. However, achieving effective coordination between these institutions will require clear constitutional boundaries, operational cooperation, and mechanisms for resolving jurisdictional conflicts. Issues around fiscal framework, infrastructural capacity, human capital and intelligence as well as legal and regulatory framework must be prioritized as seen in other Federal States so as to prevent conflict of interest and lack of independence. A clear division of responsibilities should distinguish crimes and security threats primarily handled by state police from offences requiring federal jurisdiction or coordinated inter-state action. The framework should also establish

protocols for joint operations, intelligence sharing, referral of cases and resolution of jurisdictional disputes. Without these arrangements, decentralisation could produce overlapping mandates, operational rivalry, and gaps in law enforcement.

Funding remains one of the fundamental operational issues that must be resolved for the intended multilevel policing system in Nigeria to work. Funding arrangements vary across federal systems, with responsibilities distributed differently between national, state and local governments. Nigeria should establish a transparent financing framework that specifies the funding obligations of each level of government and provides for predictable allocations, financial reporting and independent auditing. Other resources such as infrastructure and vehicles are provided through a blend of multilevel support. This makes it easy for the different levels of government to be responsible for the activities of the system and demand accountability when the need arises. This implies that the implementation of a multilevel policing system can only be successful to the extent to which each levels of government enjoys some level of independence in terms of revenue generation and decision making.

Experiences from other Federal States demonstrate that effective policing is not determined solely by whether a country adopts a centralised or decentralised model, but by the quality of institutional design, accountability mechanisms, professional standards, and intergovernmental coordination. Nigeria can emulate Germany's cooperative federal policing model, where state police operate independently while adhering to nationally established standards for recruitment, training, intelligence sharing, and professional ethics. This will enable different policing layers to respond swiftly to local security challenges without compromising national security coordination (Alemika, 2013). The community-oriented policing approaches in the United States and South Africa also offer important lessons for improving public trust, intelligence gathering, and crime prevention through closer collaboration between law enforcement and local communities (Walker & Katz, 2022). However, Nigeria should avoid pitfalls such as duplicated responsibilities, inconsistent policing standards, and coordination difficulties during major security operations (Bayley, 2006), which are likely to emerge. Clearly defined constitutional mandates, operational boundaries, and inter-agency coordination mechanisms will go a long way toward preventing institutional conflicts. These mechanisms should be supported by joint operational protocols, interoperable intelligence systems, regular intergovernmental security meetings, and clearly defined procedures for investigating misconduct involving officers from different police services.

4.0 Conclusion

The proposed State Police system in Nigeria could provide relief from Nigeria's decade-long security challenges. However, pragmatic steps must ensure each level of government is well resourced and has the independence to run this new model with responsibility and accountability for national security. The reform's success will ultimately depend on whether constitutional decentralization is matched by adequate financing, professional policing standards, effective coordination, independent oversight, and safeguards that protect citizens from political abuse. The success of State Police should therefore be measured not by the number of states that establish services, but by whether the reform delivers more responsive, effective, and accountable policing; improves public safety and confidence; strengthens coordination across security institutions; and protects the constitutional rights of all citizens.

5.0 Policy Recommendations for State Policing in Nigeria

Successfully operationalizing state policing in Nigeria requires a carefully designed legal and institutional framework that balances local responsiveness with national security coordination. This will require that: To implement these recommendations, translate them into an agreed roadmap that identifies the responsible institution, required action, timeframe, funding implications, and measures of progress. The priorities are legal clarity; independent accountability; minimum professional standards; sustainable financing; community safety and prevention; and readiness-based implementation with periodic independent evaluation.

1. The 1999 Constitution should be amended to allow each level of government power to establish its policing system and determine its operational modalities such as funding, recruitment of personnel, etc. The amendments should clearly define the respective jurisdictions and powers of federal and state police services, establish procedures for joint operations and dispute resolution, and protect operational decisions from unlawful political interference.

2. There is a need for an independent National Police Standards and Oversight Commission saddled with the responsibility of regulating recruitment, training, discipline, operational standards, and human rights compliance across all police services. The proposed body should operate under a clear legal mandate, with transparent appointment procedures, adequate institutional independence, and regular public reporting on compliance with national policing standards.

3. Robust safeguards such as judicial oversight, independent state police service commissions, legislative scrutiny, and transparent complaint mechanisms should be institutionalized to prevent political interference, abuse of power, and violations of citizens' rights while enhancing public trust and accountability in Nigeria. The accountability framework should include accessible complaint procedures, independent investigation of alleged misconduct, protection for complainants, and effective sanctions.

4. Federal and state governments should establish a transparent and sustainable financing framework for multi-level policing that defines funding responsibilities, provides for predictable budgetary allocations, and requires independent auditing and public reporting of expenditure. Implementation should take account of differences in state fiscal capacity and operational readiness.

5. A formal coordination framework should be established to facilitate intelligence sharing, joint operations, and information exchange between federal and state police services. The framework should include clear jurisdictional protocols, interoperable information systems and procedures for resolving operational disputes, while protecting sensitive information and citizens' rights.

6. A common monitoring and evaluation framework should be adopted across federal and state services, with baseline data, measurable targets and periodic public reporting on responsiveness, public trust, complaints resolution, rights compliance, coordination and financial accountability.

7. A transparent readiness assessment should precede full operational deployment in each state. Report assessment findings, agreed improvement actions, and progress against milestones periodically, while protecting sensitive operational information.

8. State governments should prepare State Policing and Community Safety Plans based on periodic security assessments and community consultation, with explicit priorities for prevention, deployment, early warning and referrals to federal or specialized agencies.

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