



Journal of Religion and Moral Ethics (JRME)

VOLUME 1 ISSUE 1 (2026)

J R M E

PUBLISHED BY
E-PALLI PUBLISHERS, DELAWARE, USA

Vigilantism, Youth Unemployment, and Electoral Violence in Ghana

Charles Ohene-Amoh^{1*}, Prince Albert Koomson²

Article Information

Received: January 01, 2026

Accepted: February 12, 2026

Published: September 30, 2026

Keywords

Electoral Violence, Ghana, Political Vigilantism, Political Violence, Youth Unemployment

ABSTRACT

This study explores the interconnected issues of political vigilantism, youth unemployment, and their impact on electoral violence in Ghana. Grounded in the frustration-aggression theory, the research investigates how these factors contribute to electoral instability, focusing on the Central Region during the 2020 general elections. Primary data from 100 members of political vigilante groups and other relevant stakeholders, complemented by secondary sources and recent case studies, reveal that youth unemployment significantly fuels vigilantism and electoral violence. The findings suggest that socio-economic frustrations, coupled with weak institutional responses, exacerbate political violence. The study underscores the need for comprehensive policy interventions to promote youth empowerment, strengthen institutions, and strictly regulate vigilante activities.

INTRODUCTION

After decades of experimenting with various political systems, Ghana reverted to competitive politics in 1992 (Aning & Danso, 2012). The country is often celebrated as a beacon of democracy; however, recent episodes of electoral violence suggest that this reputation may be waning. An assessment of electoral violence from 1992

to 2016 was conducted by the Centre for Democratic Development (CDD). Incidents were categorized as follows: assault or violent intimidation, attacks on public property, demonstrations or public disorders, ballot box snatching, and party property attacks. A total of 5,707 cases of electoral violence were recorded and classified accordingly: While these figures highlight the prevalence

Table 1: Types of Electoral Violence in Ghana, 1992–2016

Type of Incident	Number of Incidents	Percentage (%)
Party Property attacks	88	1.5%
Ballot Box Snatching or Theft	142	2.5%
Demonstrations/Public Disorders	858	15.1%
Attack on Public Property	1,812	31.7%
Violent Intimidation or Assault	2,807	49.2%
Total	5,707	100

Source: Authors' Compilation from CDD Data (2016)

of electoral violence, recent incidents underscore the ongoing threat posed by vigilante groups, especially during highly contested elections. Understanding the socio-economic and political underpinnings of these acts is vital for designing effective prevention strategies.

Statement of the Problem

Political vigilantism, often termed “footsoldierism” has become a prominent feature of Ghana’s electoral landscape. These groups, frequently composed of unemployed or underemployed youth, are mobilized or

exploited by political parties to intimidate opponents, disrupt electoral processes, or influence outcomes. Such activities undermine democratic principles, threaten stability, and have been linked to outbreaks of violence, particularly in volatile regions like the Central Region. Despite legal frameworks such as the Vigilantism and Related Offences Act, 2019 (Act 999), vigilante activity persists, indicating deeper socio-economic drivers; primarily youth unemployment that need to be critically examined and addressed.

¹ Central Regional Peace Council, Cape Coast, Ghana

² Eastern Regional Peace Council, Koforidua, Ghana

* Corresponding author's e-mail: Charles.ohene-amoh@peacecouncil.gov.gh

Research Questions

Here are three research questions that guided the study:

1. What is the relationship between youth unemployment levels and the prevalence of vigilantism in Ghanaian regions?
2. How does the activity of vigilante groups influence the occurrence and severity of electoral violence in Ghana?
3. In what ways do socioeconomic factors, such as unemployment and political marginalization, contribute to the emergence of vigilantism and electoral violence in Ghana?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Vigilantism, characterized by individuals or groups taking law enforcement into their own hands, has become a significant concern in Ghana, particularly during election periods. Scholars argue that vigilantism often emerges in contexts where state institutions are perceived as weak or incapable of maintaining law and order (Amoako & Agyekum, 2019). In Ghana, the proliferation of vigilante groups has been linked to political violence, especially during competitive elections, where political actors sometimes foster such groups for electoral advantage (Akpala, 2020).

Youth unemployment is widely recognized as a key driver of social unrest and violence. High unemployment rates among Ghanaian youth have been associated with increased susceptibility to political manipulation and engagement in vigilantism (Oppong, 2018). The lack of economic opportunities creates fertile ground for the recruitment of young people into vigilante groups, which often justify their activities as protecting political interests or community security (Adjei et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the nexus between youth unemployment, vigilantism, and electoral violence is complex. Studies suggest that economic disenfranchisement can lead to frustration and marginalization, which in turn heighten the likelihood of violent confrontations during elections (Asare et al., 2022). Addressing youth unemployment and strengthening institutional capacities are thus seen as critical steps toward reducing electoral violence associated with vigilantism in Ghana.

Electoral Violence in Ghana: Recent Incidents

Ghana's elections have a history of violence tied to perceptions of electoral fraud, partisan rivalry, and vigilante activism. For example, the 2015 Talensi by-election saw violent clashes allegedly fueled by partisan vigilantes, and the 2024 elections experienced reports of intimidation and post-election violence involving vigilante groups. Data from the Electoral Commission and reports from civil society organizations indicate that electoral disputes and vigilante-linked violence remain prevalent concerns, especially in regions with high youth unemployment.

Vigilantism in Ghana

The deployment of vigilante groups like the Invincible Forces and Bamba Boys has become increasingly common in recent elections. These groups, often with alleged backing from political parties, serve as armed supporters, campaign enforcers, or intimidators. During the 2020 and 2024 campaigns, violent clashes involving such groups resulted in injuries, destruction of property, and disruption of electoral activities. Some vigilantes operate with tacit or explicit approval, thereby blurring legal and moral boundaries. Their organizational structures vary: some are hierarchical, others more decentralized, and their operational strategies include intimidation, voter suppression, and street violence. Recent incidents demonstrate the risks these groups pose to democratic stability and the importance of targeted regulation and community engagement.

Theoretical Framework

The study draws on the frustration-aggression theory, which posits that individuals experiencing frustration due to unmet expectations or blocked goals may resort to aggression. In the context of Ghana, unemployed youth experiencing economic hardship and social marginalization may channel their frustrations into political violence or vigilantism. Gurr's (1970) relative deprivation theory complements this perspective, suggesting that perceived injustice and social inequalities increase the likelihood of unrest. Recent scholarship also emphasizes the role of cultural identity, threat perceptions, and political patronage as factors influencing violent responses, suggesting that a multifaceted theoretical approach enhances understanding of electoral violence.

Conceptual Framework

This framework explores the relationships between youth unemployment, vigilantism, and electoral violence in Ghana. It posits that high youth unemployment rates may foster feelings of frustration and disenfranchisement among young people. Lacking legitimate economic opportunities, some youth may turn to vigilantism as an alternative means of gaining recognition or asserting power. This vigilantism can, in turn, escalate tensions during electoral periods, increasing the likelihood of electoral violence as shown in figure 1.

The framework suggests that addressing youth unemployment could mitigate the propensity for vigilantism and, consequently, reduce electoral violence. It emphasizes the importance of understanding socio-economic and political contexts that influence youth behavior and the cycle of violence during elections.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This mixed-methods study utilized both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issues. The research adopted a

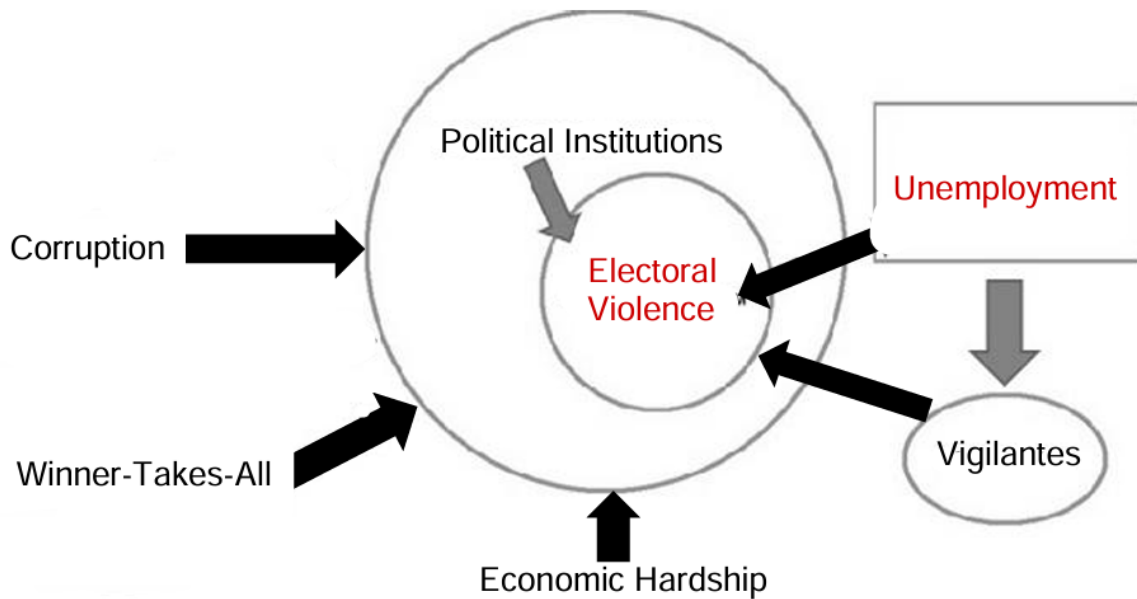


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

descriptive design to capture the nuances and scope of the phenomena. Data collection involved administering structured questionnaires to a sample of 100 respondents, selected using Slovin's formula from a population of 207. Additionally, focus group discussion, observations and semi-structured interviews were conducted with security officials, civil society actors, and members of vigilante groups. The qualitative data were analyzed thematically to identify key patterns and insights, while the quantitative data were summarized using descriptive statistics.

The study faced certain limitations, including potential respondent bias, which may have influenced the accuracy of the responses, and challenges in accessing clandestine vigilante groups, which restricted comprehensive data collection on their activities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The quantitative data collected from the survey respondents indicate a strong consensus regarding the role of vigilante groups in electoral violence. Specifically, 75.4% of respondents agree or strongly agree that vigilante groups significantly contribute to electoral violence in Ghana. 24.6%. Many respondents pointed out that these groups are frequently involved in acts of intimidation, voter suppression, disruptions during campaign periods, and sometimes outright violence. For instance, respondents recounted incidents where vigilante groups intimidated opponents or disrupted electoral activities, thereby undermining the democratic process.

In-Depth Interview Excerpt:

"Many young people feel marginalized and frustrated due to the lack of employment opportunities. This economic hardship often leads them to seek recognition and a sense of belonging through involvement in vigilante groups, especially during election periods when political tensions are high." — Interview with a

community leader in Kasoa.

Focus Group Discussion Summary

Participants expressed concern that political parties sometimes tacitly support vigilante groups to intimidate opponents, which fuels violence during elections. They emphasized that young voters are most vulnerable to recruitment because they are desperate for income and social acceptance. — Focus group with youth in Cape Coast.

Field Observation Note

During the 2024 general election campaign rally in Winneba, several young men were observed wearing paraphernalia associated with vigilante groups linked to major political parties. Community members reported that these groups often act as enforcers or intimidators, contributing to heightened tensions and occasional clashes, especially when grievances over election results arise. — Field observation in Winneba.

The focus group discussions further reinforced these findings by providing qualitative insights into the motivations and recruitment strategies of vigilante groups. Participants consistently emphasized that a significant proportion of the youth involved in vigilantism are unemployed or underemployed. They see involvement in these groups as an alternative avenue for gaining respect, influence, and material benefits that they lack through formal employment. One participant remarked:

"Young people see vigilantes as a way to earn respect and money when they cannot find jobs."

This statement underscores the socio-economic frustrations that drive youth into such groups, highlighting the intersection between unemployment and political violence.

Interviews with security officials and law enforcement officers shed light on the operational dynamics of vigilante groups. They noted that these groups are often used

strategically by political parties to intimidate opponents, secure electoral victories, or influence voter behavior. This politicization complicates law enforcement efforts because vigilantes are sometimes implicitly protected or tacitly supported by party loyalists, making prosecution more challenging. A security officer explained:

“Vigilantes are sometimes seen as the muscle of a political party. They operate with impunity, which makes it difficult for us to enforce the law effectively.” Such complicity hampers efforts to curb vigilantism and enforce existing legal frameworks.

Recent incidents vividly illustrate the dangerous consequences of politicized vigilantism. For example, during the 2020 campaign period in the Central Region, violent clashes between rival vigilante groups resulted in injuries, property destruction, and heightened tensions among communities. These clashes not only disrupted the electoral process but also threatened peace and stability in the region. These events exemplify how the involvement of vigilantes in election-related activities can escalate into widespread violence, undermining democratic institutions and social cohesion.

Furthermore, some respondents expressed skepticism about the effectiveness of current legal responses to vigilantism. They pointed out gaps in enforcement, such as limited resources, political interference, and lack of community engagement, which hinder the full implementation of laws like the Vigilantism and Related Offences Act, 2019 (Act 999). Many emphasized the need for a more holistic approach that involves community-based conflict resolution mechanisms, civic education, and stricter law enforcement to deter vigilante activities effectively.

Both quantitative and qualitative data highlight a concerning link between vigilantism, unemployment, and electoral violence. The findings underscore the importance of addressing socio-economic grievances and strengthening legal and community-based interventions to mitigate the dangerous consequences of politicized vigilantism in Ghana's electoral processes

Summary of Findings

- **Higher Incidence of Vigilantism Correlates with Elevated Youth Unemployment Rates:** The survey finds that regions with higher youth unemployment levels experience increased instances of vigilantism, as unemployed youth are more likely to engage in or support extra-legal groups during electoral periods.

- **Vigilantism Contributes to Increased Electoral Violence:** The findings indicate that the presence and activities of vigilante groups are significantly associated with a rise in electoral violence, undermining the peaceful conduct of elections.

- **Socioeconomic Factors Influence Vigilantism and Electoral Violence:** The survey revealed that socioeconomic factors such as lack of economic opportunities, political marginalization, and weak law enforcement are key drivers linking youth unemployment, vigilantism, and violence during elections in Ghana.

CONCLUSION

Unemployment among Ghanaian youth fosters frustration, social marginalization, and a sense of hopelessness, which significantly increases their vulnerability to recruitment into vigilante groups. These groups often exploit young people's discontent by offering a sense of purpose, identity, and economic benefits, especially during politically charged periods such as elections. This dynamic contributes to heightened tensions and participation in electoral violence, undermining peace and stability.

Weak institutional responses and inadequate regulation of vigilante activities further exacerbate these issues, as law enforcement agencies often lack the capacity or political will to effectively monitor, investigate, and prosecute such groups. This gap allows vigilante violence to persist and even flourish, creating an environment where peace is fragile.

Addressing youth unemployment through targeted economic empowerment programs, expanded access to quality education, and initiatives promoting social inclusion is vital. Such measures can provide young people with viable alternatives to violence and vigilante involvement, fostering a more stable and inclusive political landscape.

Additionally, implementing comprehensive legal frameworks, ensuring strict enforcement of laws against vigilante groups, and engaging communities in dialogue are critical strategies for curbing vigilante-related violence. When communities are actively involved in peacebuilding and law enforcement is empowered and accountable, sustainable peace and democratic growth become more attainable.

Recommendation

1. Political parties should be strictly prohibited from organizing or supporting vigilante groups through legislative enforcement and internal discipline. Enforcing strict laws against political parties supporting vigilantes helps prevent the formation and operation of such groups. Internal discipline within parties ensures that party members adhere to ethical standards, reducing inducements or tacit approval of vigilantism during elections.

2. Governments and development agencies should implement youth employment programs, vocational training, and entrepreneurship support to reduce economic hardship. Providing job opportunities and skills training addresses the root causes of youth frustration and discontent, decreasing the likelihood of youth turning to vigilantism as a means of gaining status or income.

3. Promote civic education focusing on tolerance, peaceful conflict resolution, and the legal consequences of vigilantism, utilizing media, religious leaders, and civil society organizations. Civic education raises awareness about the importance of peaceful coexistence, legal frameworks, and the negative impacts of vigilantism, fostering a culture of peace through trusted community voices and media platforms.

4. Strengthen law enforcement agencies' capacity to monitor and prosecute vigilante activities, ensuring accountability and deterrence. Enhancing law enforcement capabilities ensures vigilantism is promptly identified and penalized, serving as a deterrent to future acts and reinforcing the rule of law.

5. Establish community-based dispute resolution mechanisms to address grievances early and prevent escalation during elections. Community-led conflict resolution provides a platform for addressing disputes amicably before they escalate, fostering trust and reducing the impulse for vigilante actions during politically sensitive periods.

6. Enhance institutional frameworks, including the implementation of the Vigilantism and Related Offences Act, 2019, with robust awareness campaigns and stakeholder engagement. Strengthening legal and institutional frameworks ensures clear guidelines and enforcement against vigilantism, while awareness campaigns and stakeholder involvement build community support and understanding of legal measures

REFERENCES

- Adjei, N., Mensah, K., & Owusu-Afriyie, P. (2021). Youth unemployment and political violence in Ghana: Causes and solutions. *African Journal of Political Science*, 15(2), 45-60.
- Akpalu, W. (2020). Vigilantism and political violence in Ghana: An analysis of the 2016 elections. *Ghana Journal of Political Studies*, 8(1), 112-130.
- Amoako, N. K., & Agyekum, K. (2019). Vigilantism and state fragility in Ghana: Implications for peace and security. *African Security Review*, 28(3), 239-254.
- Aning, K., & Danso, E. (2012). *Democratization in Ghana: The Journey So Far*. Accra: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.
- Asare, D., Boateng, F., & Mensah, E. (2022). Socioeconomic drivers of electoral violence in Ghana: The role of youth unemployment. *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, 16(1), 75-89.
- Atuobi, S. (2008). *Electoral Violence in Ghana: Causes and Prevention*. Accra: Ghana Centre for Democratic Development.
- Berkowitz, L. (1989). Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Aggression: Theoretical and Empirical Reviews*. New York: Academic Press.
- Bonsoh, F. (2016). *Map of Political Vigilante Groups in Ghana*. Accra: Bonsoh Publications.
- CADA (2012). *Election Security and Vigilantism in Ghana*. Accra: Civil and Democracy Association.
- Collier, P. (2000). *Economic Causes of Civil War and Violence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Daddieh, C. K. (2001). *Political Patronage and Vigilantism in Ghana*. Accra: Ghana University Press.
- Diego, R. (2002). Theories of Aggression and Violence. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 142(3), 245-262.
- Frempong, A. (2016). *Ghana's Electoral History*. Accra: Ghana Publishing House.
- Gurr, T. R. (1970). *Why Men Rebel*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Gyampo, R. E. V. (2012). Electoral Violence and Political Stability in Ghana. *Journal of African Elections*, 11(2), 105-122.
- IPI (2012). Youth Unemployment and Political Violence. *International Peace Institute, New York*.
- Jeffries, R., & Thomas, J. (1993). *Ghana's 1992 Elections: A Political Analysis*. Accra: Ghana Political Review.
- Laakso, L. (2007). *Youth Unemployment and Social Stability*. Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs.
- Lijphart, A. (2012). *Patterns of Democracy*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Nnamdi Okafor. (2015). Vigilantism and Electoral Security in Africa. *African Journal of Political Science*, 20(4), 301-319.
- NPC (2019). *Vigilantism and Electoral Violence in Ghana*. National Peace Council Report.
- Oppong, R. (2018). Youth unemployment and political participation in Ghana. *African Development Review*, 30(4), 447-460.
- Urdal, H. (2004). Youth Violence and Demographic Trends. *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, 18(2), 147-170.
- Word Web Dictionary. (2016). *Youth*. Retrieved from <https://www.wordwebonline.com>.