

## **Unmasking the Identity and Characteristics of the Unknown Gunmen in Anambra State, Nigeria: A Survey Approach**

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### **Abstract**

The menace of the unknown gunmen is arguably a relatively recent phenomenon especially in south-eastern states of Nigeria. The ferocity of their mayhem on their targets is breathtaking and has instilled in the general populace the feeling of helplessness. It is really worrisome that the law enforcement agents appeared to have borne a significant impact of their destructive proclivity. This paper attempted to unmask the defining socio demographic characteristics of persons responsible for these destructive feats. Factors responsible for the emergence and spread of the unknown gunmen insurrection were also examined. The relative deprivation theory formed the theoretical thrust of the paper. The researcher adopted the mixed methods research design for the paper. A sample size of 400 hundred participants was drawn from the Awka Metropolis in Anambra state for the collection of quantitative data whereas 12 key informants were interviewed. The quantitative data collated from the field were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequency counts and percentages. It was found among others that unknown gunmen were mainly poor and aggrieved persons who have taken to criminality to make ends meet. Poverty, feeling of injustice and weak institutional framework were found to be responsible for the emergence and sustenance of the unknown gunmen insurrection in Awka metropolis. The paper recommended among others the necessity of empowering the youth through serious concerted efforts in job creation and acquisition of entrepreneurial skills. Intensifying efforts at educating the populace was also recommended to help in dispelling the untoward separatist propagandist claims of the unknown gunmen.

**Keywords:** Unknown Gunmen, Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), Boko Haram, Bandits, Sit at home order and Eastern Security Network (ESN)

### **Introduction**

In recent times, Nigeria is grappling with the multifaceted and unprecedented waves of security breaches. In the North-eastern region, the heinous and coordinated onslaught by the twin terrorist groups of Boko Haram and Islamic State in the West African Province (ISWAP) has continued in spite of the spirited efforts of the armed forces in the area. The country also witnessed the emergence of bandits/terrorists in the North-western region. The region is becoming as unsafe as its North-eastern counterpart. The North-central region is also having its fair share of insecurity allegedly perpetrated by the rampaging killer herdsmen. The Southern regions (South-west, South-east and South-south) of the country are also threatened by unprecedented security breaches. The activities of killer herdsmen and local militant groups could be partly responsible for the wanton destruction of lives and properties in the Southwest and the South-south regions. In the South-eastern region in particular, several separatist groups emerged with the intent of getting a new republic (Biafra). Most of them appeared to be nonviolent at inception. The most prominent of them in the recent time is the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) led by Mazi Nnamdi Kanu. IPOB was formed in 2012 by Mazi Nnamdi Kanu.

*IPOB is a separatist organization in Nigeria. Its main aim is to restore an independent state of Biafra in the Old Eastern Region of Nigeria, comprising mainly of today's South-East and South-South Regions of Nigeria; and also*

*parts of the Middle Belt states of Nigeria such as Benue State and Kogi State, through an independence referendum. The organization (IPOB) was deemed a terrorist organization in 2017 under Nigerian Terrorism Act (Wikipedia, nd:1).*

IPOB formed its militant wing; the Eastern Security Network (ESN) on the 12<sup>th</sup> of December, 2020. According to Kanu, “failure of Southeast governors to secure the lives and property of Igbo people led to the formation of the Eastern Security Network” (ESN) (Nzeagwu, 2020:1). With the formation of the ESN, IPOB which was relatively a nonviolent organization became militant and was alleged to have carried out several deadly operations involving death of many people including security and law enforcement agents.

What used to be a bad situation became worst with the re-arrest of IPOB leader Mazi Nnamdi Kanu, who was brought into the country from Kenya. Since then, a new phenomenon came to limelight in the entire south eastern states of Nigeria; that is the “sit at home” order from IPOB. It is no longer abnormal to see people observing the Monday weekly sit at home order even when IPOB reiterated that they have rescinded it. Most of the major markets, banks in the southeast always remain closed on Mondays in spite of IPOB reassurance that people should go about their normal businesses. Commercial vehicles also stay away on Mondays making vehicular movement scanty. This was as a result of fatal experiences recorded by people who dared to dishonour the earlier sit at home order by IPOB.

It could be argued however that the formation of ESN coincided roughly with the emergence of a new phenomenon in the region; “the unknown gunmen era”. In the past, unidentified persons had been committing different forms of crimes ranging from violent, property to organized crimes. However, this took a new dimension in recent time when groups of persons decided to kill, maim and destroy under the cover of the unknown gunmen. Several destructive activities have taken place in the region; some of these activities were believed to be carried out by the unknown gunmen. Several police stations were destroyed; many police, military and paramilitary personnel lost their lives to the destructive campaigns embarked by the unknown gunmen. Several governmental institutions like the offices of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Correctional centres and other public places were destroyed. Within the era, several successes were recorded by the security forces in decimating some of the unknown gunmen in the area. Prominent among them is the killing of Ikonso an ESN commander by the combined team of the Nigerian army, police and other allied forces on Saturday, 24<sup>th</sup> April, 2021.

A statement by the Nigerian Army, signed by the Army spokesman, Brigadier-General Mohammed Yerima, said the operation in Imo State was launched in the early hours of Saturday following an intelligence report on the location of IPOB’s operational headquarters and the movement of the overall commander, popularly known as Ikonso Commander. It said the Intelligence Response Team (IRT) of the Police and DSS team, along with troops of 82 Division of the Nigerian Army, had been on the trail of the group since the attacks on the Imo State Police Command headquarters and the Owerri Correctional Centre on April 5 2021. The Army said Ikonso Commander, who was said to be the commander of the IPOB military, was among the seven killed during an exchange of gunfire between government forces and ESN fighters. An army officer and three policemen also died in the operation (Soniya and Nwezeh, 2021:1)

The media and publicity secretary of IPOB, Emma Powerful debunked the above statement from the military and alleged that Ikonso was not killed in shootout with the military, but was murdered while he was asleep in his home town. The truth remains that the dreaded ESN commander was killed by the combined efforts of the armed forces operating in Imo state on that fateful day. Subsequent raids by the Nigerian security operatives led to killing, arrest and prosecution of captured ESN members. The combination of all these (sit at home order, unknown gunmen, extrajudicial killings of people suspected to be IPOB members) made the south-eastern region of Nigeria a very unsafe place for habitation, business and other meaningful engagements.

However, in recent happenings in the southeast region, there seems to be confusing signals emanating on the real identity of the unknown gunmen. This paper is therefore poised to unravel the demographic characteristics of the unknown gunmen in the southeast region. It is believed that the paper will prepare ground for further scholarly engagements on the unknown gunmen phenomenon. The paper is expected to provide answers to the following questions;

- i) What are the socio demographic characteristics of the unknown gunmen in Awka metropolis?
- ii) What led to the emergence of the unknown gunmen?
- iii) Finally, how can the unknown gunmen be stopped?

## **Review of Literature**

### **Who are the unknown gunmen?**

Unknown gunmen have committed grievous crimes against the state, against the people resident in the area of their influence and against property. According to Tappan (1947: 100) “Crime is an intentional act in violation of the criminal law, committed without defence or excuse, and penalized by the state as a felony or misdemeanour. The unknown gunmen could be seen to intentionally violate the criminal law and therefore could be punished or penalized by the state if they are found guilty. Who are the unknown gunmen? According to the incumbent governor of Ebonyi State, Engineer Dave Umahi, “the unknown gunmen are not really unknown gunmen, they are our young men and women who will defend our land tomorrow; they should stop being killed, they should stop giving themselves to be killed”(ChannelsTv, June 1, 2021). In a related development, the governor of Imo state hinted that “the Owerri prisons and police attacks were a collaboration between local politicians and hired militants” (Egbuji, 2021:1). The governor was not eager to implicate the IPOB. However, the police choose neither that prevarication nor the doublespeak of opposition politicians in the state. They jabbed accusing fingers at the IPOB (Egbuji, 2021:1). Conversely, the legal officer of IPOB, Barrister Uwazie stated that;

*the Unknown Gunmen are different. They are the ones that kicked against the Nigerian soldiers, the police killing innocent people, their loved ones, some years ago. So, they are on a revenge mission to get back at the soldiers, the police who were killing innocent people, putting them in prisons and detention. Then, we were crying and shouting that you don't treat people like that. If you say you want Nigeria, these people said they don't want Nigeria, they want to go and you are forcing them, killing them. Instead of you to pacify them, talk to them, you keep shooting them, killing them like animals, killing people anyhow, and wasting innocent souls. Now, their children have come to revenge and everybody is happy. That is just the truth, we speak the truth here. So, the Unknown Gunmen is an arm of the struggle to revenge for those who the soldiers and the police killed innocently (Uwazie, 2021:1).*

According to the incumbent governor of Anambra state, Professor Charles Chukwuma Soludo, *A majority of the unknown gunmen are Igbos. "Let us be very clear: These criminals causing mayhem in Anambra are Igbos (dominantly from other South East states) whose real objective is lucrative criminality and foisting their idolatrous religion on the region. Why is it that everywhere they gather and in every camp they operate, there is a deity/idol to which they routinely offer blood in sacrifice? Igbos are known for their enterprise but these criminals are bent on killing Ndigbo businesses (Ujumadu. 2022:1).*

The governor was able to make this categorical statement on the identity of the unknown gunmen following series of expeditions carried out to dislodge the criminals from their hideouts in several forests in the state. When Governor Chukwuma Soludo assumed office, he could not settle down properly to effectively begin to work immediately because no day passed without stories of gunmen burning police stations and attacking local government headquarters, or killing people. Many communities had to inform their relations residing outside the state not to come home until the situation improves. Realizing that no meaningful achievement could be recorded under such a situation, Soludo swore to recover the state first, before going into the execution of his promised programmes for the people. So, the battle began. First, he revived the Anambra Vigilante Group and empowered them to be able to face the usually heavily armed gunmen. From all indications, results of the governor's action are positively showing (Ujumadu, 2022).

Recently, eight persons suspected to be connected with the murder and beheading of the late Honourable member, Okechukwu Okoye, the lawmaker representing Governor Soludo's Aguata Constituency 11 and his aide, were arrested by security operatives. Few others have also been picked and they are assisting security operatives in locating the camps in the forests. In these forests, items including coffins, charms, dangerous drugs, women, cars of all makes and large sums of money were common features (Ujumadu, 2022).

According to Ujumadu (2022), following the routing and smoking out of these gunmen from their camps in the forests, normalcy is gradually returning to the various communities.

*The routing started with the destruction of one of the most dreaded camps located in the thick forest along the bank of Oseakwa River bordering Ihiala and Ogwuaniocha in Ogbaru local government area where the supposed king of the gunmen, popularly known as Double Lion, held sway. On the day he and four of his members were killed, Double Lion didn't see it coming as they were easily gunned down by their breakaway colleagues who have since repented and are now working for the state. It was gathered that they had to eliminate Double Lion and his gang because they jettisoned the original plan by extorting and harassing people during weddings, burials and other ceremonies. Double Lion, who hailed from Awoidemili in Orsu local government area of Imo State began his gun activities along the now abandoned Awka Etiti – Utuh- Ukpore- Orsumoghu- Lilu-Mbosi- Isekke axis, which used to be the connecting route between Anambra and other states of Imo, Abia, Akwa Ibom and Cross River states because of the traffic gridlock along the Onitsha-Owerri road (Ujumadu, 2022:1).*

It could be argued that most of these people tagged as unknown gunmen are of Igbo origin. Take the case of Chukwudi, alias 50, for example, he confessed that he has been part of the unknown gunmen in Anambra State for the past one year and had so far killed four persons, including two policemen and two civilians. '50' was caught inside a forest at Ukpore, his home town, in Nnewi South local government area of the state along with other members of his gang

by security operatives. He said that although many people had been killed inside the camp, including those whose relations already paid ransom, he had not killed more than four people, adding that the last person he killed before their camp was destroyed was at the instance of their leader who ordered him to kill the man because the man was a saboteur. He said that their leader, Ezemuo, (King of spirits) now at large, was doing most of the killings, along with the late Double Lion who was killed at Ihiala. Chukwudi continued;

*We killed some people because they were accused of monitoring us and acting as informants to the police and government. The two policemen I killed were at Ozubulu and I did it because the commander ordered me to do so. Our commander, Ezemuo, is from Imo State and he has run away, while Virus, who is the second in command, has also escaped to Lagos and his house at Ozubulu burnt down, (Ujumadu, 2022:1).*

In what appears to be a twist to the debacle of killings in the southeast, IPOB made emphatic statement through their media and publicity secretary, Emma Powerful that they are not behind the destructions and orgies of killings going on in the southeast region of the country. According to him, most of the killings were perpetrated by gunmen masquerading as members of its security outfit..... If the police force does not desist from alleged harassment of the youths from South east, the group will be left with no option but to unleash ESN on them. Nigerian Police should stop parading innocent people and tagging them ESN personnel because parading innocent people and tagging them ESN shows that Nigeria police and army have failed. Those people you are parading to the public are not ESN members. Nigeria must stop ridiculing themselves in the world because everyone is watching their activities. Nigeria Army, police and other security agencies cannot reach or enter ESN camp. We are bothered about the propaganda and fake information they are dishing out to the public. These people they are parading to the public are not ESN members.

If the people apprehended for their involvement in killing of security personnel are not members of IPOB, then who are they? This paper is an attempt to unravel this contradiction. According to Dave Umahi, the incumbent governor of Ebonyi state,

*The unknown gunmen are people who are brainwashed. They don't even know what they are agitating for. They go to talisman and get all kinds of juju that no guns can kill them and yet guns are killing them. Then you have the hard drugs, these are the three combinations that are destroying our land (ChannelsTV, June 1 2021).*

According to the incumbent governor of Anambra state, Professor Charles Chukwuma Soludo, *A majority of the unknown gunmen are Igbos. "Let us be very clear: These criminals causing mayhem in Anambra are Igbos (dominantly from other South East states) whose real objective is lucrative criminality and foisting their idolatrous religion on the region (Ujumadu. 2022:1).*

On several occasions, suspected members of the unknown gunmen were paraded by the Nigeria Police Force and they confessed to be members of IPOB. However, the spokesperson of the group is still denying that the people paraded by the police are not their members.

### **What are the factors responsible for the existence/emergence of the unknown gunmen?**

The President General of Ogidi community, Idemili North local government area, Chief Chuka Onubogu traced the issue of gunmen to the increasing menace of cultism among the youths, saying;

*It is disturbing that about 70 percent of the youths aged between 18 and 35 years were neck deep into cultism which is a precursor to their participation in the activities of gunmen. Insecurity is taking its toll in Southeast and that is because we have failed in the upbringing of our children. Many parents concentrate more on acquiring wealth than on bringing up their children. If you train your children very well they will refrain from crime. All hands should be on desk towards curtailing the situation (Ujumadu, 2022:1).*

Furthermore, the presidential candidate of the Labour Party, and former governor of Anambra State, Mr. Peter Obi lamented that many Nigerian youths were taking drugs as escape route from the harsh economic and political realities in the nation. He lamented that;

*If adequate measures were not put in place to arrest the ugly trend and combat the menace, the leaders of tomorrow would remain chained to substance abuse while the future of the country continues to dim. Nigeria today has the highest drug abuse prevalence in the world. While the global average is 5.5%, Nigeria battles with 14.4% drug abuse prevalence. In 2021, the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) found out that 40 percent of our youths, aged between 18 and 35, were deeply involved in drug abuse. What is more painful is that substance abuse is higher among youths in their productive age. Accumulated leadership failure over the years in the country has continued to rob our youths of their bright future, thus deepening their addiction to substance abuse (Ujumadu, 2022:2).*

Poverty could also be fingered as one of the contributory factors to the emergence of the unknown gunmen in the southeast. World Bank (2021) reported that about 4 in every 10 Nigerians are living in poverty with millions more susceptible to falling below the poverty line. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2019) in its official survey data stated that 39.1 per cent of Nigerians live below the international poverty line of \$1.90 per person per day. In a related development, Achumba et al (2013) highlighted some of the causes of insecurity in Nigeria to include, the absence of institutional capacity which has resulted in government failure, the perception of marginalization by many Nigerians which is evident from the extravagance displayed by the political class and elite in the midst of suffering and grinding poverty to which citizens are subjected; disconnect between the people and government over the years. Achumba et al. (2013) further stressed that proximate factors that have contributed to the state of insecurity in Nigeria include rural-urban drift, porous borders, social irresponsibility of companies resulting in negative externalities which provoke social unrest within their host communities, unemployment and poverty and terrorism, among others.

### **Theoretical Thrust**

This paper is anchored the Relative Deprivation Theory. Some of the major proponents of the theory are- Aristotle, Karl Marx, Bertrand de' Toqueville; Samuel Stouffer, Simone Flynn, Quinn McMemar; Rensis Likert, Linda Brown and Townsend Patrick. While modern relative deprivation theory was developed in the 1940s, the concept of relative deprivation itself has a longer history in the social sciences. Relative Deprivation Theory predicts collective action by groups especially those members of the society who feel more frustrated and disgruntled by social and economic conditions. It is a conscious feeling of negative discrepancy between legitimate expectation and present actualities (Wilson, 1973). The theory states that the Potentials for collective violence vary strongly with the intensity and scope of relative deprivation among members of a collectivity. The theory maintains that men who feel that they have many ways to attain their goals are less likely to become angry when one way is blocked than those who have few alternatives. Relative deprivation theory argues that collective actions

have their foundations among people who feel relatively deprived of some goods or resources. It maintains that individuals and groups who lack some goods, services and comfort are more likely to organize themselves collectively to improve and defend their conditions (Morrison, 1978).

The theory also helps us to have a better understanding of why there are frequent problems associated with ethnic groups, regions or provinces that are fighting to address their relatively deprived situation especially in federations where resources and revenue are not well distributed. It could be argued that the security breaches orchestrated by the unknown gunmen in the south-eastern region of the country could be an avenue of expressing their pent-up anger of being deprived of the basic resources in the country. It is therefore necessary to recognize the need of instituting a conflict resolution mechanism which will take care of the grievances of the aggrieved parties. Relative deprivation could therefore partly explain why the unknown gunmen picked up arms against the Nigerian state with a view to making their demands known and probably attended to.

**Methodology**

The paper adopted the mixed methods research design. This involved the use of both the quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. The questionnaire constituted the quantitative instrument for data collection whereas the in depth interviews were used for collection of qualitative data for the study. A sample size of 400 study participants was chosen for the administration of the quantitative instrument through the application of the Yamane’s sample size determination formula. The multi stage sampling procedure was adopted in selecting the study participants in Awka Metropolis for the administration of questionnaire. Twelve key informants were purposively selected from the metropolis. They include four men opinion leaders, four female opinion leaders, and two male youths and two female youths. The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as the frequency counts, percentages and charts. The qualitative data were transcribed and analyzed thematically in accordance with the research questions.

**Results**

The researcher distributed 400 questionnaires to the study participants, however, 389(97.25 %) of the questionnaires were correctly filled and returned. Consequently, the quantitative analysis for this paper was carried out with the 389 correctly filled and returned questionnaires.

**Table 1: Personal Data of Respondents**

Response	Frequency	Percent
<b>Gender</b>		
<i>Male</i>	214	55.0
<i>Female</i>	175	45.0
<i>Total</i>	389	100.0
<b>Age</b>		
<i>20 - 29</i>	130	33.4
<i>30 - 39</i>	144	37.0
<i>40 - 49</i>	82	21.1
<i>50 and above</i>	33	8.5
<i>Total</i>	389	100.0
<b>Marital status</b>		
<i>Single</i>	157	40.4

<i>Married</i>	211	54.2
<i>Divorced</i>	11	2.8
<i>Separated</i>	3	.8
<i>Widowed</i>	7	1.8
<i>Total</i>	389	100.0
<b>Education</b>		
<i>No formal education</i>	3	.8
<i>First School Leaving Certificate</i>	23	5.9
<i>Senior Secondary School Certificate</i>	178	45.8
<i>Ordinary National Diploma</i>	101	26.0
<i>Bachelor Degree/HND</i>	68	17.5
<i>Master Degree</i>	16	4.1
<i>Total</i>	389	100.0
<b>Occupation</b>		
<i>Unemployed</i>	7	1.8
<i>Self employed</i>	188	48.3
<i>Civil Servant</i>	75	19.3
<i>Student</i>	119	30.6
<i>Total</i>	389	100.0
<b>Religion</b>		
<i>Christianity</i>	337	86.6
<i>Islam</i>	24	6.2
<i>African Traditional Religion</i>	28	7.2
<i>Total</i>	389	100.0
<b>Income</b>		
<i>Do not earn income</i>	126	32.4
<i>Low income earner</i>	195	50.1
<i>Average income earner</i>	68	17.5
<i>Total</i>	389	100.0

Field survey 2022

Table 1 shows that 55% of the respondents were males whereas 45% of them were females. It implies that there were more males than females in the distribution. Age distribution of the respondents has a mean age of 34.51 years, a standard error of mean of .517, a median age of 35 years and a modal age of 23 years. The distribution also has a standard deviation of 10.205, a minimum age of 20 years and a maximum age of 57 years. Furthermore, 37% of the respondents were between 30-39 years while respondents within the age bracket of 50 years and above constituted 8.5% of the total respondents. Marital status of the respondents showed that 54.2% of them were married whereas only .8% of them were widowed. The table also shows that a majority (45.8%) of the respondents were secondary school leavers while 4.1% of them have Master degree. Occupational status of the respondents showed that a majority (48.3%) of them were self-employed whereas the unemployed ones were 1.8% of the total respondents. The distribution of respondents according to their religious affiliation shows that more than three quarter (86.6%) of the respondents were Christians while 6.2% of them were Moslems. Lastly but not the least, income distribution of the respondents shows that half (50.1%) of them were low income earners while 17.5% of them are average income earners. Respondents were asked to state the frequency at which they experience the activities of the unknown gunmen in their communities and their responses as shown in Table 2.



**Table 2: Respondent’s views on the frequency of occurrence of the destructive activities of the unknown gunmen in their communities**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Very often	12	3.1	3.1	3.1
Often	141	36.2	36.2	39.3
Rarely	218	56.0	56.0	95.4
Never	18	4.6	4.6	100.0
Total	389	100.0	100.0	

**Field Survey, 2022**

Table 2 shows that a majority (56.0%) of the respondents rarely experience the destructive activities of the unknown gunmen in their communities while 3.1% of them said very often. This implies that the destructive activities of the unknown gunmen do not take place always as opined by the majority of the respondents.

The findings from the in depth interviews were not different from the ones from the questionnaire data. Most of the respondents maintained that they did not really experience the menace of the unknown gunmen. However, a 60 year old male trader from Ifite stated that;

The unknown gunmen are everywhere in the southeast region. They are here in Awka.

People have been complaining that the gunmen disturb them once in a while. It is not an everyday affair. They are very much around and can strike anytime.

He was supported by a 30 year female civil servant resident in Agu Awka who stressed that she had seen them attack their victims once. According to her;

These people are terrible; nobody is safe in this country. If you see how they operate, you cannot dare come out anyhow. I was almost shot. Immediately I saw the way the guys were shooting into the air I jumped into a nearby ditch and remained there for several hours, I thought I was already dead. It is not a good scene to behold. I am grateful I was not shot. It was really a horrible experience.

The researcher further inquired to identify members of the unknown gunmen. The findings were shown in Table 3.

**Table 3: Respondent’s views on the identity of members of the unknown gunmen**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Terrorists	19	4.9	4.9	4.9
Criminals	167	42.9	42.9	47.8
People who are not happy with the government	95	24.4	24.4	72.2
Hired persons to destabilize the southeast	70	18.0	18.0	90.2
I do not know	38	9.8	9.8	100.0
Total	389	100.0	100.0	

**Field Survey, 2022**

Table 3 shows that a majority of the respondents (42-9%) believed the unknown gunmen were criminals while 4.9% of them saw them as terrorists.

There are diversity of opinions by the participants in the in depth interviews on the identity of the unknown gunmen. Some of them believed the unknown gunmen are criminals. For instance, a 58 year old male civil servant from Umuzocha stated that;

Unknown gunmen are not only criminals but rather hardened ones. These people are merciless and deadly. If they kidnap you, the ransom they will demand will always be outrageous. Always pray that you do not become their victim because they will not show you mercy. It is unfortunate that the government is not doing enough to totally stop these criminals. It is most unfortunate.

Another participant in the in depth interview (IDI) a 57 year old female civil servant opined that;

The unknown gunmen are terrorists who have decided to terrorize the southeast and adjoining states. They claim to be separatists and are clamouring for a separate state while in essence, their philosophy is mainly that of terrorists. They made the region unsafe for business to thrive. They are really monsters in our region.

Conversely, a few of the participants in the interview argued that unknown gunmen are freedom fighters. For instance, a 25 year old male student resident in Ifite Awka stressed that;

The unknown gunmen are freedom fighters. They are fighting to restore the rights of the south-earners. They are people who sacrificed their comfort to protect the ordinary people in the southeast from external invasion especially from herders. They deserve to be respected, honoured and rewarded handsomely.

A similar view was maintained by a 55year old male farmer from Umuayom who averred that;

The unknown gunmen are fighting to safeguard the Igbos from existential threat. They are responsible for our safety, so they are heroes and should be seen and addressed as such. These are the people who stop foreigners from taking us and our lands, they are our warriors.

A totally different view was maintained by a 64 year old businesswoman who stressed that;

The unknown gunmen activity has now been hijacked by different people other than the initially pioneers of the sect. Several criminal groups are now masquerading under the toga of the unknown gunmen. These were criminals who had nothing to do with the sect but suddenly found it as a viable option to further threaten the peace of the society. That is why we receive conflicting signals on whether or not the Monday sit at home orders should be stopped or continued.

The researcher sought to ascertain the age distribution of the unknown gunmen and the details are as shown in Table 4.

**Table 4: Respondents’ views on the likely age of the members of the unknown gunmen**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Below 20 years old	55	14.1	14.1	14.1
21-30 years old	161	41.4	41.4	55.5
31- 40 years old	128	32.9	32.9	88.4
41 years old and above	45	11.6	11.6	100.0
Total	389	100.0	100.0	

Field Survey, 2022

It can be seen from table 4 that a majority (41.4%) of the respondents were of the views that the unknown gunmen were between the ages of 21-30 years 11.6% of them said the unknown gunmen were 41 years old and above.

Most of the participants in the IDI were of the opinion that the preponderance of the perpetrators of the unknown gunmen activities were mainly young persons. They argued that

their sponsors and leaders may be older persons but the foot soldiers were mainly young persons.

The educational background of members of the unknown gunmen was interrogated and the findings are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Respondents’ views on the educational qualification of members of the unknown gunmen

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No formal education	54	13.9	13.9	13.9
	First School Leaving Certificate	204	52.4	52.4	66.3
	Senior Secondary School Certificate	119	30.6	30.6	96.9
	Ordinary National Diploma	12	3.1	3.1	100.0
	Total	389	100.0	100.0	

Field Survey, 2022

It could be seen from table 5 that more than half (52.4%) of the respondents were of the view that members of the unknown gunmen did not go beyond primary education. However, 3.1% of the respondents stressed that members of the unknown gunmen possess ordinary national diploma. This implies that most of the people termed unknown gunmen were barely educated. This was corroborated by the participants in the IDI. They unanimously concurred that the foot soldiers carrying out the killings for the unknown gunmen were mainly lowly educated persons. One of the participants, a 63 year old male retiree stressed that;

The disadvantaged position of the persons known as the unknown gunmen was responsible for their participation in the criminal activities you see everywhere. They were not really informed and therefore can easily be manipulated. Many of them rely on unfounded and baseless propaganda. Their lack of basic education was their major undoing.

The researcher sought to ascertain the marital status of the respondents and the details are shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Respondents’ views on the marital status of members of the unknown gunmen

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Single	263	67.6	67.6	67.6
	Married	126	32.4	32.4	100.0
	Total	389	100.0	100.0	

Field Survey, 2022

Table 6 shows that 67.6% of the respondents were single while 32.4% of them were married. Participants in the IDI were of the views that most of the unknown gunmen foot soldiers were unmarried persons. They agreed that it is likely that some of them may be married. Further information was sought on the occupational status of the unknown gunmen and the findings are as shown in Table 7.

Table 7: Respondents’ views on the occupational status of members of the unknown gunmen

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Unemployed	121	31.1	31.1	31.1
	Self employed	268	68.9	68.9	100.0
	Total	389	100.0	100.0	

Field Survey, 2022

Table 7 shows that over a two third (68.9%) of the respondents maintained that unknown gunmen were self employed persons whereas 31.1% of them stressed that the unknown gunmen were unemployed persons. Most of the participants in the IDI stressed that most of the foot soldiers of the unknown gunmen do not have very viable sources of livelihood. They argued that this was partly responsible for their involvement in criminal activities.

Further inquiry was made on the income level of members of the unknown gunmen and the details are shown in table 8.

Table 8: Respondents’ views on the income levels of members of the unknown gunmen

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Low income earner	189	48.6	48.6	48.6
	Average income earner	116	29.8	29.8	78.4
	High income earner	84	21.6	21.6	100.0
	Total	389	100.0	100.0	

Field Survey, 2022

In Table 8, almost half (48.6%) of the respondents were of the views that the unknown gunmen were people with low income earnings while 21.6% of them stressed that members of the unknown gunmen earn high income. Most of the IDI participants were of the belief that the unknown gunmen were persons who earn low income before they became members of the unknown gunmen. Some of them can make more money now from the series of nefarious activities they are always carrying out.

Factors responsible for the emergence of the unknown gunmen were investigated and the findings are as shown in Table 9.

Table 9: Respondents’ views on the factors responsible for the emergence of the unknown gunmen in southeast Nigeria

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Perceived injustice by south easterners	94	24.2	24.2	24.2
	Frustration and hopelessness	56	14.4	14.4	38.6
	A promise of a better country	39	10.0	10.0	48.6
	To halt the advancement of killer herdsmen	28	7.2	7.2	55.8
	Weak institutional framework	49	12.6	12.6	68.4

Poverty due to bad governance	123	31.6	31.6	100.0
Total	389	100.0	100.0	

Field Survey, 2022

Respondents maintained in Table 9 that poverty due to bad governance (31.6%) was responsible for emergence of unknown gunmen in the southeast of Nigeria whereas 7.2% of them argued that the unknown gunmen emerged to halt the advancement of killer herdsmen. Findings from the qualitative data did not differ significantly from the quantitative ones. Most of the participants accused the government for not doing enough to safeguard the welfare of the citizens. For instance, a 57 year old female civil servant lamented that;

The divide and rule policy of government is partly responsible for fuelling these unrest everywhere in the region. When a people feel they are not treated well, they can react in so many ways one of wish is involvement in the activities of the unknown gunmen. People resort to self help when it appears that the help they seek from the government can no longer be guaranteed.

Furthermore, the 63 year old male retiree argued that poverty is responsible for the unrest in the region. He stressed that;

A hungry man is an angry man, when people cannot get the basic necessity of life; they are bound to be frustrated. This frustration goes with feeling of helplessness and desire to take the law into their hands. Most of the young men involved in the unknown soldiers' activities are mainly poor people. A wealthy person may not want to be actively involved in the unnecessary destructive feats of the sect.

Suggestions on how to stem the activities of the unknown gunmen in the southeast was sought and the details are as shown in Table 10.

Table 10: Respondents' views on how the destructive activities of the unknown gunmen in southeast Nigeria can be stemmed

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Creating employment opportunities and empowerment programmes for the youth	149	38.3	38.3	38.3
Addressing the perceived injustice in the region	79	20.3	20.3	58.6
Restructuring of the country by entrenching true federalism	42	10.8	10.8	69.4
Sensitization of the people on the need to maintain peace and report suspicious people to the authorities	54	13.9	13.9	83.3
Strengthening of the existing institutions	65	16.7	16.7	100.0
Total	389	100.0	100.0	

Field Survey, 2022

As could be seen from Table 10, a majority (38.3%) of the respondents suggested that creating employment opportunities and empowerment programmes for the youth in the region as a way of curbing the onslaught of the unknown gunmen while 10.8% of them suggested restructuring of the country by entrenching true federalism. Most of the participants in the IDI agreed that poverty alleviation through job creation and skill acquisition could reduce the activities of the unknown gunmen in the region. One of the participants; the 55year old male farmer from

Umuayom stated that equity, fairness, justice and patriotism could stem the activities of the unknown gunmen in the southeast.

### **Discussion of findings**

It was found that a majority of the respondents rarely experience the destructive activities of the unknown gunmen in their communities. This implies that the destructive activities of the unknown gunmen do not take place always but can take place anytime. It is a once in a while phenomenon. The paper also found that the unknown gunmen were seen as criminals by the people. Some other people described them as terrorists while a few persons considered them as freedom fighters that were fighting to keep the Igbo people safe; quite a few persons argued that the unknown gunmen activities were hijacked by other miscreants who pursue their selfish criminal interest. This paper is of the view that the destructive proclivity of the sect is criminal and should be condemned by all and sundry.

The paper found that most of the persons termed as unknown gunmen were between the ages of 21-30 years. A good number of them were between 31-40 years old. These are people whose youthful energy could be harnessed into useful and productive ventures. It could be stated emphatically that getting these segment of the population meaningfully engaged will go a long way to reducing the criminality in the region.

It was found that most of the persons termed as unknown gunmen were primary school leavers and people who barely finished their secondary education. This tends to limit their chances of progressing effectively in the twenty first century where most nations of the world are embracing scientific and technological advances. The world is already digitalized and is gradually moving towards the commercial use of Artificial Intelligence (AI). People with limited or no educational attainment may be having serious difficulties in competing with their counterparts in this modern age. This could partly influence their involvement in criminality. Most of the unknown gunmen were found to be unmarried persons. The implication is that they are free to move anywhere and live anywhere easily. This could explain why they could easily live in the forests and be operating from there. A majority of the unknown gunmen were self-employed whereas some others were not really employed. The self-employed ones among them could barely subsist. This has the potential of making them engage in criminal activities in other to make both ends meet. It was also found that most of the unknown gunmen were low income earners. Their precarious economic position made them worthy targets of being recruited into the unknown gunmen sect. They found their involvement in criminality as a better rewarding enterprise.

This paper found that poverty occasioned by bad governance was responsible for the emergence of the unknown gunmen in south-eastern region of Nigeria. However, perceived injustice mated to south easterners was found to also influence the commencement of the unknown gunmen debacle. Belief in spiritual immunity from gunshots and weak institutional framework were also responsible for the formation of the unknown gunmen menace in the region. When people could not afford the basic necessities of life and also believed that they were not properly treated, the chances that they can become involved in criminality of any kind could not be ruled out. Some of these people became fetish and believed that they could not be gunned down because of the talisman and charms they were wearing. They freely elated to unleash mayhem on the people because of the assurances that their talisman will keep them safe. Weak institutional framework also contributes to the formation and spread of the unknown gunmen saga in the region. When agencies of government saddled with the

responsibility of maintaining law and order are ineffective, inefficient and terribly corrupt, it becomes impossible to control crime and punish offenders accordingly.

Finally, the paper found that creating employment opportunities and empowerment programmes for youths in the region could go a long way in ameliorating the unknown gunmen disaster in the region. The paper also found that addressing the perceived injustice in the region and strengthening of existing institutions could also contribute in quelling the menace of unknown gunmen in the region. Having observed that most of the persons responsible for the unknown gunmen criminality were unemployed and less educated, it is necessary that these disadvantaged persons are empowered to have legitimate source of income and subsistence in the region. The injustices mated to the region should be addressed.

### **Conclusion**

The security breaches occurring in the south eastern states of Nigeria, with particular emphasis on the ones happening in Awka, the state capital of Anambra state have become very serious issues which must be stemmed. Most people were of the view that the unknown gunmen were responsible for the wanton destruction of lives and property in the state. They were termed unknown gunmen because of the secrecy involved in their operations, existence and identity. This paper tried to identify via public perception, the socio demographic characteristics of these people who have denied the state capital the required peace and decorum since they started their operations. In the opinion of this paper, unknown gunmen were found to be people who have taken to criminality mainly due to widespread poverty in the country. Though, at the onset of the phenomenon, they were seen as people who were fighting the injustices mated to people of the south eastern region, it did not take long for their true identity to manifest. Most people see them as mere criminals who commit all kinds of atrocities while hiding under the guise of separatist agitation.

### **Recommendations**

Going by the findings made in the paper, the following recommendations were proffered; Having observed that poverty was at the root of the factors responsible for the emergence of the unknown gunmen, the paper recommends that deliberate policies geared towards poverty eradication should be intensified by the federal, state and local governments. Well to do individuals in the state should partner with the government and community based organizations to reduce poverty. This could be through human capital development, job creation and empowerment schemes.

Since most of the people caught for involvement in the unknown gunmen saga were youths with little education and minimal means of subsistence, sincere efforts must be put in place by all stakeholders whether in government or the organized private sector, to intensify efforts in getting the populace properly educated. An educated populace may not be carried away by the propagandist posture of the unknown gunmen. Entrepreneurial skills should be taught to the teaming unemployed or underemployed persons in the state to mitigate their involvement in criminal activities. Lastly but not the least, social and economic injustices which were also observed to contribute to the emergence of the sect should be addressed. This is to assuage any feeling of injustice from the populace especially from the south eastern region.

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