



Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation and National Security Outcomes in Rivers State: An Empirical Study of Oyigbo and Obio/Akpor LGAs

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Abstract

The proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) pose a significant threat to Nigeria's national security, particularly in resource-rich regions like Rivers State. Grounded in state fragility theory, this study investigates the dynamics, drivers, and consequences of SALW proliferation in Rivers State between 2015 and 2025. The research adopted a mixed-methods approach under a pragmatist philosophy, combining quantitative data from 400 structured questionnaires with qualitative insights from 25 in-depth interviews across Oyigbo and Obio/Akpor Local Government Areas. Findings reveal that the key drivers of arms proliferation include political instability, chronic youth unemployment, porous trans-border corridors, and violent non-state actor activities, all exacerbated by governance failures and elite rent-seeking behaviors. The consequences are far-reaching: rising urban criminality, cult violence, systemic economic disruption, and the degradation of state authority. Furthermore, the study underscores how regional oil wealth has fostered inequality and arms accumulation rather than sustainable development, a crisis compounded by the cultural normalization of armed self-defense in several communities. Respondents expressed profound distrust in current institutional interventions, highlighting severe enforcement deficits. Consequently, the study recommends strengthening border surveillance and weapon tracking systems, promoting grassroots community policing, and creating targeted economic opportunities for youth. Additionally, it emphasizes the need to reform resource governance, enhance institutional accountability, and align domestic arms control frameworks with international regulatory standards. By decisively addressing both the immediate symptoms and systemic root causes of SALW circulation, Nigeria can better safeguard its territory and foster durable peace in strategic corridors.

Keywords: Small Arms and Light Weapons, Proliferation, National Security, Rivers State



1.0 Introduction

The global proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) remains a critical security threat that intensifies armed conflict, escalates crime rates, and destabilizes vulnerable regions. Because these weapons are characteristically inexpensive, highly portable, and difficult to monitor, they serve as the primary tools for insurgent forces, criminal syndicates, and violent non-state combatants (Kaldor, 2022). Recognizing the severity of this issue, the United Nations implemented the 2001 Programme of Action to curb the illicit arms trade (United Nations, 2022). Yet, despite expansive international regulatory frameworks, over one billion small arms circulate globally, deeply hampering social and economic progress across fragile areas (Florquin & Holtom, 2022; Karp, 2023).

The African continent is disproportionately impacted by this illicit trade, as highly accessible firearms continually drive civil wars, terrorism, and organized crime networks. Protracted conflicts in fragile states like Somalia, South Sudan, and the Central African Republic are severely worsened by structural vulnerabilities, including deeply porous borders, corrupt institutional practices, and weak border enforcement (Adeoye, 2023; Aning & Abdallah, 2023). In response, the African Union enacted the Bamako Declaration and its overarching SALW control strategy (Williams, 2022). Nevertheless, sub-regions like West Africa face persistent threats, where networks of violent non-state actors, criminal gangs, and secessionist movements easily exploit regional arms trafficking corridors to bypass local laws (Agbo, 2022; Ebiede, 2023; Onuoha, 2023).

Within Nigeria, the mass accumulation of SALW has drastically worsened domestic security crises, fueling widespread banditry, communal clashes, and terror campaigns. Current estimates suggest that over six million illicit small arms are circulating throughout the country, mostly concentrated in unauthorized hands (Edeko, 2023). This immense volume of illegal weaponry acts as an accelerant for the Boko Haram insurgency in the North-East, separatist agitations in the South, and sophisticated banditry networks across the North-West and North-Central zones (Okoli & Orinya, 2022). Consequently, the widespread availability of these firearms facilitates an expanding criminal economy centered around kidnapping for ransom, highway robbery, and severe political violence (Oche, 2023).



To mitigate these expanding threats, the Federal Government of Nigeria has launched several key initiatives, including Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs and the establishment of the National Centre for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (NCCSALW) (Adebayo, 2022). However, these state-led counter-measures have achieved very limited operational success due to internal institutional corruption, poor law enforcement execution, and a constant market demand by local armed groups (Dambazau, 2023). This problem is heavily compounded by Nigeria's highly porous international borders with Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, which serve as highly active, unmonitored transit paths for arms smugglers moving weapon stockpiles into the domestic black market (Ogunmola, 2023).

This national security crisis exhibits distinct sub-national dynamics in Rivers State, a vital macroeconomic and oil-producing hub that experiences chronic structural violence. The ready availability of illicit maritime and coastal smuggling routes enables localized cult groups such as the Icelanders, Greenlanders, and Deybam to secure high-powered firearms for brutal territorial turf wars (Oruwari, 2023). Concurrently, well-armed militant factions in riverine areas like Bonny and Andoni continue to sabotage oil infrastructure, run illegal bunkering operations, and engage in coastal piracy (Chukwuma, 2023). This volatile climate is further aggravated during electoral cycles, where political actors routinely weaponize and bankroll these non-state armed groups to manipulate political outcomes through voter intimidation and targeted assassinations.

At the micro-level, this cycle of insecurity is deeply visible within the Oyigbo and Obio/Akpor Local Government Areas. Oyigbo's location on the border between Rivers and Abia States turns it into a high-risk transit corridor for arms traffickers and active separatist elements. Meanwhile, Obio/Akpor, as a core urban center within the Port Harcourt metropolis, suffers from chronic gang warfare and violent political thuggery. State disarmament campaigns in these jurisdictions remain largely ineffective because deep-seated issues like high youth unemployment and entrenched criminal networks preserve the structural demand for firearms. Ultimately, as these weapons saturate communities, they remain a lasting threat that destabilizes civil society long after active conflicts or election cycles conclude (Ball, 2023).



1.1 Statement of the Research Problem

An effective national security system requires a state monopoly over the legitimate use of force, maintained through robust arms control, secure borders, and responsive governance. In Nigeria, this ideal remains unfulfilled as the persistent proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) continuously undermines stability. Driven by structural gaps such as porous borders, institutional corruption, weak law enforcement, and high youth unemployment, illicit arms trafficking networks have expanded significantly. This systemic failure has enabled violent non-state actors including cult groups, criminal syndicates, and secessionist movements to accumulate weapons, directly diminishing the state's capacity to enforce law and order across the country.

At the sub-national level, this security crisis manifests with unique spatial dynamics in Rivers State, particularly within the Oyigbo and Obio/Akpor Local Government Areas. Oyigbo, situated strategically along the porous border with Abia State, has evolved into a key transit corridor for illicit armaments, with weapon availability spiking dramatically following structural disruptions like the 2020 EndSARS police lootings and active separatist agitations. Conversely, Obio/Akpor, a dense metropolitan and economic hub faces severe urban insecurity characterized by deeply entrenched cult warfare among factions like the Icelanders and Greenlanders, alongside sophisticated kidnapping syndicates and politically sponsored electoral thuggery. In both local government areas, the continuous flow of firearms has resulted in immense loss of life, mass displacement of residents, and severe disruptions to regional commercial activities.

Despite targeted state interventions, including specialized border surveillance, local disarmament programs, and the establishment of counter-proliferation frameworks, containment measures have yielded limited success due to critical gaps in execution, policy accountability, and localized intelligence gathering. While existing academic literature extensively explores SALW circulation through the macro-lenses of regional Niger Delta militancy or North-East insurgencies, a significant empirical gap remains regarding these distinct micro-level dynamics. Consequently, a comprehensive assessment integrating both quantitative and qualitative evidence is required to fully evaluate the distinct local drivers of



arms accumulation, their cumulative toll on national security, and the operational efficacy of institutional responses within these two highly strategic corridors.

1.2 Aim and Objective of the Study

The primary aim and objective of this study is to evaluate the factors contributing to proliferation of SALW on national security in rivers state specifically centering on the strategic corridors of Oyigbo and Obio/Akpor Local Government Areas and to analyze localized implications of SALW proliferation on internal security dynamics in these local government area

1.3 Methodology

This study adopts a pragmatic approach, combining quantitative and qualitative research methods to explore the complex dynamics of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) proliferation and its impact on national security in Nigeria, particularly Rivers State. This study employs a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore the impact of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) proliferation on national security in Nigeria, specifically in Rivers State. The quantitative method provides a broad, statistical analysis of SALW distribution, patterns, and correlation with security incidents, offering a generalisable view of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). The qualitative method, on the other hand, facilitates an in-depth exploration of the social, political, and cultural factors contributing to the proliferation of SALW, focusing on the experiences and perceptions of local stakeholders (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

1.4 Thematic Literature Review

Conceptualizing Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW)

Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) are portable, easily concealable firearms operated by individuals or small crews that serve as the primary instruments of violence in contemporary conflicts. Because these weapons are characteristically inexpensive, widely accessible, and difficult to regulate, they have become the foundational tools of insurgents, domestic militias, and organized criminal networks globally (Kaldor, 2022). Their destabilizing impact extends



far beyond active war zones into post-conflict landscapes, where failure to manage residual stockpiles allows weapons to leak permanently into civilian hands or criminal markets, systematically undermining fragile state sovereignty (Ball, 2023).

The proliferation of SALW functions as a core catalyst for transnational security crises and localized instability by empowering non-state actors to aggressively challenge territorial integrity. Due to their compact design, these armaments are seamlessly smuggled across international borders, enabling terrorist organizations, secessionist movements, and sophisticated smuggling syndicates to operate with relative impunity (Lind, 2021; Zohar, 2022). However, structural critiques indicate that macro-level security analyses frequently overemphasize international trafficking routes while overlooking the deep-seated domestic drivers—such as governance deficits, endemic poverty, and systemic institutional corruption—that continuously fuel black-market weapon demand in regions like Sub-Saharan Africa.

Beyond conventional ideological warfare, the widespread availability of SALW shapes the durability and economic foundations of modern insurgencies and civil conflicts. Access to these weapons allows structurally weaker non-state forces to wage protracted, asymmetric campaigns against heavily armed state military structures, particularly across volatile zones like the Sahel and Central Africa (Richards, 2023). This threat is deeply intertwined with a lucrative criminal nexus, where drug cartels, oil-bunkering syndicates, and human trafficking networks weaponize their operations to secure resource control, expand territorial dominance, and erode communal safety (Miller, 2024).

International regulatory mechanisms and multilateral disarmament initiatives, such as the Arms Trade Treaty, continue to face severe operational bottlenecks in their attempts to dismantle illicit distribution channels (Peterson, 2021). The containment of SALW is frequently bottlenecked by the fluid overlapping networks connecting legal arms manufacturers, state actors, and illicit criminal enterprises. Furthermore, global counter-proliferation frameworks are heavily undermined by weak domestic enforcement infrastructure and a lack of political will within sovereign states like Nigeria, where arms trafficking often persist because it serves as a covert source of political leverage and revenue for local elites and regional militias.



Concept of National Security

The concept of national security has evolved into a multifaceted paradigm that transcends traditional military defense to encapsulate a state's political, economic, technological, and social structures. Classic interpretations focused primarily on safeguarding state sovereignty and territorial integrity from external invasions through conventional military deterrence (Cohen, 2021). However, contemporary security frameworks have expanded to address non-traditional, borderless threats such as climate change, cyber warfare, pandemics, and economic instability, suggesting that a state's political integrity relies heavily on managing these complex, systemic vulnerabilities (Buzan, 2022; Taylor, 2021). Furthermore, the strategic utility of soft power leveraging diplomacy, economic policy, and cultural influence is increasingly recognized as vital to achieving long-term geopolitical stability and national deterrence without immediate reliance on kinetic force (Nye, 2023).

Conversely, modern security discourse also stresses that national stability is intrinsically tied to domestic governance, localized state capacity, and individual well-being. Proponents of the human security lens argue that true national security is measured by a state's ability to eradicate internal economic disparities and guarantee health, education, and social cohesion, thereby preventing the systemic grievances that fuel civil unrest and domestic conflict (Jackson, 2024; Kaplan, 2022). While this comprehensive approach successfully bridges the gap between domestic vulnerabilities and transnational threats (Gray, 2023), academic critics caution that an overemphasis on global or human security can underplay or neglect the foundational necessity of robust military preparedness, strict border surveillance, and law enforcement capabilities. These hard-power elements remain indispensable for countering violent non-state actors, managing localized insurgencies, and maintaining territory in fragile states where soft power or diplomatic influence yields limited structural reach.

Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) Proliferation and National Security in Rivers State



The unmitigated proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) in Rivers State has severely degraded national security by systematically amplifying urban criminality, intra-communal clashes, and sophisticated armed militancy. As a critical maritime and economic anchor within the Niger Delta, the state's extensive riverine networks, porous coastal geography, and vulnerable ports serve as highly active transit hubs for international trafficking rings and maritime weapon smugglers (Adamu, 2021; Adebayo, 2020; Bassey, 2021). This continuous illegal influx of hardware is heavily facilitated by profound structural deficits within state institutions, notably widespread corruption among border law enforcement agencies, ineffective maritime patrolling resources, and a complete absence of reliable early-warning tracking systems (Eze, 2019; Mohammed, 2022). Consequently, the fluid availability of these weapons has eroded the state's monopoly on violence, enabling heavily armed non-state factions to openly challenge sovereign authority and foster a culture of local lawlessness.

At the micro-level, the structural demand for these illicit armaments is driven by an intersection of socio-economic deprivation, elite manipulation, and resource-based criminal economies. Across strategic corridors like Oyigbo and Obio/Akpor Local Government Areas, systemic challenges such as chronic youth unemployment and political marginalization create a fertile recruiting environment where disenfranchised youth readily adopt armed violence for economic survival (Ibrahim, 2023). This vulnerability is routinely co-opted by political elites who distribute weapons to youth wings and political thugs to manufacture electoral advantages, effectively institutionalizing post-election conflict and destabilizing democratic structures (Chinedu, 2022; Uche, 2023). Simultaneously, this weaponization sustains the lucrative political economy of oil-theft operations, as militant groups and oil-bunkering syndicates leverage high-powered firearms to secure territorial dominance over oil infrastructure, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of economic criminality (Balogun, 2020).

Despite successive state operations and state-led amnesty frameworks designed to disarm these non-state combatants, counter-proliferation interventions have yielded minimal long-term success. A pervasive, deep-seated distrust in government reintegration initiatives has caused numerous ex-militants and cultists to retain hidden weapon stockpiles rather than surrendering them to law enforcement (Eze, 2019). Existing state disarmament policies consistently fall



short because they fail to address the root drivers of arms accumulation, execute deep security sector reforms, or establish cross-border accountability frameworks to deter elite sponsorship. To break this impasse, contemporary security discourse emphasizes that conventional, top-down disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) strategies must be restructured to integrate alternative community-driven policing models, comprehensive job creation, and robust regional maritime cooperation to block localized arms trafficking corridors effectively.

Implications of SALW Proliferation on National Security in Rivers State

The uncontrolled circulation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) fundamentally deconstructs Nigeria's national security architecture by eroding the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force and empowering violent non-state actors. In volatile and geostrategic corridors such as the Oyigbo and Obio/Akpor Local Government Areas of Rivers State, easily accessible firearms transform localized community disputes into protracted, highly lethal crises. This systemic weaponization fuels a complex array of threats, including militant factions demanding resource control, pro-Biafra separatist groups, and deeply entrenched cult gangs that openly confront state security forces and undermine sovereign territorial integrity (Ikelegbe, 2005). By continuously challenging government authority, the widespread availability of SALW entrenches an enduring culture of lawlessness that severely complicates state-led peacebuilding and conflict-resolution initiatives.

Beyond active insurgencies, the proliferation of SALW acts as an economic and political multiplier for organized crime and institutional decay. Highly armed syndicates leverage weapon accessibility to conduct sophisticated operations including kidnapping, armed robbery, oil pipeline vandalism, and illicit bunkering, which directly trigger severe environmental degradation and catastrophic losses in national oil revenues (Onuoha, 2011). This economic disruption is further compounded by the deliberate politicization of violence, a process wherein political elites arm youth wings and cult groups to violently manipulate electoral outcomes. Once election cycles conclude, these state-sponsored proxy groups fracture from their handlers and repurpose their arsenals for private criminal enterprises, fostering systemic impunity and shattering public trust in governance, the judiciary, and the rule of law (Ibeanu, 2006).



At the humanitarian and institutional levels, the crisis inflicts severe structural damage that weakens long-term national stability. The persistent deployment of small arms in communal clashes and banditry results in mass civilian casualties and a ballooning population of internally displaced persons (IDPs) who face acute deprivation conditions that heavily spark subsequent radicalization and insurgent recruitment loops (Aghedo & Osumah, 2012). To contain these domestic crises, the state is forced to continuously overextend its military apparatus into domestic policing operations, dangerously diverting critical resources away from its primary external defense obligations. Despite being a signatory to multilateral non-proliferation frameworks, Nigeria's counter-arms initiatives remain largely paralyzed by deep inter-agency coordination deficits, corruption, and a lack of political will, which allow the illicit black market to thrive unchecked (Edeko, 2011).

1.5 Discussion of Findings

Table 1.1: The Factors Contributing to Proliferation of SALW on National Security in Rivers State

Parameters	SA (n/%)	A (n/%)	U (n/%)	D (n/%)	SD (n/%)	Total (n/%)
Political instability contributes to SALW	182 (52.8%)	113 (32.8%)	18 (5.2%)	20 (5.8%)	12 (3.4%)	345 (100%)
Economic hardship increases SALW	190 (55.1%)	102 (29.6%)	20 (5.8%)	18 (5.2%)	15 (4.3%)	345 (100%)
Weak border control facilitates SALW	201 (58.3%)	96 (27.8%)	17 (4.9%)	19 (5.5%)	12 (3.5%)	345 (100%)
Armed groups drive SALW spread	187 (54.2%)	105 (30.4%)	22 (6.4%)	16 (4.6%)	15 (4.4%)	345 (100%)

Source: Researcher's Fieldwork: 2025



The findings indicate that political instability was identified as an important factor contributing to the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW), with 182 respondents (52.8%) strongly agreeing and 113 (32.8%) agreeing, giving a combined agreement of 85.6%. Only 32 respondents (9.2%) disagreed, while 18 (5.2%) were undecided. This suggests a strong perceived relationship between political instability and SALW proliferation. The result is consistent with recent studies which argue that political violence, electoral competition, and weak governance increase opportunities for illicit arms circulation, although they are not the sole causes of arms proliferation (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020; United Nations Development Programme, 2023). The relationship is therefore correlational rather than strictly causal because political instability interacts with other structural conditions such as weak institutions, corruption, and poverty. Comparative evidence from the field indicates that Obio Akpor experiences greater politically motivated violence because of its strategic position within the Port Harcourt metropolis and its history of electoral competition, whereas Oyiibo is more affected by cross border security challenges arising from its proximity to Abia State. This difference explains why political instability manifests differently across the two LGAs. State Fragility Theory supports this finding by arguing that weak institutions reduce the state's ability to regulate violence and maintain public order (Rotberg, 2004; Fukuyama, 2004). Sergeant Peter Anene, Police Officer deployed to Oyiibo, interviewed explained that:

"Look, in this region, political instability isn't just about a change of government; it is an economic and security cycle. The main issue is that politics has become highly militarized. During election seasons, there is intense competition between rival political elites. Because state institutions are weak and the stakes are incredibly high, some politicians actively recruit, fund, and arm local youth groups and cult factions to serve as enforcement wings, what we call 'political thugs.' They buy these weapons, exploit our porous maritime and land borders with neighboring states like Abia, and distribute them to these boys to secure electoral victories by force

Economic hardship emerged as another significant factor, with 190 respondents (55.1%) strongly agreeing and 102 (29.6%) agreeing, representing 84.7% overall agreement. Only 33 respondents (9.5%) disagreed, while 20 (5.8%) remained neutral. The finding suggests that unemployment and declining economic opportunities increase vulnerability to recruitment into armed groups. However, economic hardship alone does not automatically produce SALW



proliferation; rather, it becomes influential where governance failures limit access to livelihoods and social protection (World Bank, 2022; International Labour Organization, 2023). Oyigbo appears more vulnerable because of limited formal employment opportunities and its location along major trafficking corridors, while Obio Akpor combines unemployment with organized cult activities and political patronage, producing more complex security threats. State Fragility Theory explains that fragile states fail to provide economic opportunities and effective public institutions, thereby increasing incentives for armed violence. Weak border control recorded the highest level of agreement, with 201 respondents (58.3%) strongly agreeing and 96 (27.8%) agreeing, producing an overall agreement of 86.1%. Armed group activities also attracted high support, with 187 respondents (54.2%) strongly agreeing and 105 (30.4%) agreeing, representing 84.6%. These high levels of agreement indicate statistically consistent perceptions across respondents, with fewer than 10% expressing disagreement on either variable. The findings correspond with evidence that porous borders, inadequate surveillance, and weak institutional coordination facilitate illicit arms trafficking and strengthen organized criminal networks (Small Arms Survey, 2023; UNODC, 2020). Oyigbo is comparatively more affected by weak border control because its boundary location facilitates the movement of illicit firearms, whereas Obio Akpor is more affected by armed groups due to entrenched cult networks operating within densely populated urban communities. Overall, the consistency of agreement above 84% across all variables demonstrates a strong pattern of association, although the findings establish correlation rather than direct causation. Collectively, the evidence supports State Fragility Theory, which posits that weak governance, ineffective border management, poor institutional capacity, and limited state control create conditions that enable the proliferation of SALW and undermine national security (Rotberg, 2004; OECD, 2022).

Table 1.2: Implications of proliferation of SALW on national security in Oyigbo and Obiakpor LGAs, Rivers State.

Parameters	SA (n/%)	A (n/%)	U (n/%)	D (n/%)	SD (n/%)	Total (n/%)



Increased crime and violence	205 (59.4%)	93 (26.9%)	17 (4.9%)	16 (4.6%)	14 (4.1%)	345 (100%)
Negative impact on economic activities	192 (55.7%)	98 (28.4%)	20 (5.8%)	19 (5.5%)	16 (4.6%)	345 (100%)
Rise of youth militancy and gang violence	210 (60.9%)	88 (25.5%)	18 (5.2%)	17 (4.9%)	12 (3.5%)	345 (100%)
Displacement of communities	180 (52.2%)	108 (31.3%)	22 (6.4%)	20 (5.8%)	15 (4.3%)	345 (100%)

Source: Researcher's Fieldwork:2025

Table 1.2 shows that respondents perceived the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) as having severe implications for national security in Oyigbo and Obio Akpor LGAs. The strongest perception relates to the rise of youth militancy and gang violence, where 210 respondents (60.9%) strongly agreed and 88 (25.5%) agreed, giving a combined agreement of 86.4%. Increased crime and violence followed closely, with 205 respondents (59.4%) strongly agreeing and 93 (26.9%) agreeing, representing 86.3% combined agreement. Similarly, 192 respondents (55.7%) strongly agreed and 98 (28.4%) agreed that SALW negatively affects economic activities, producing an overall agreement of 84.1%. Regarding displacement of communities, 180 respondents (52.2%) strongly agreed while 108 (31.3%) agreed, representing 83.5% combined agreement. Across all four variables, disagreement remained below 11%, indicating a high degree of consistency in respondents' perceptions regarding the security implications of SALW proliferation.

The findings indicate a strong association between SALW proliferation and worsening insecurity, although the questionnaire establishes correlation rather than direct causation. While respondents overwhelmingly associated illicit arms with crime, militancy, economic disruption, and displacement, these outcomes are also shaped by political instability, weak governance, unemployment, and ineffective law enforcement. Consequently, SALW should be



understood as an enabling factor that intensifies existing security challenges rather than their sole cause. This interpretation is consistent with recent studies which argue that the availability of illicit firearms increases the lethality and frequency of violence but interacts with broader structural and institutional conditions (UNODC, 2020; Small Arms Survey, 2022; Okoli & Ugwu, 2023). Ms. Anita Wokocha, a resident interviewed in Oyigbo revealed that:

"The most dangerous implication is that the state has completely lost its monopoly on the legitimate use of violence in these communities. When AK-47s and pump-action shotguns become everyday tools, the local balance of power shifts away from formal law enforcement and into the hands of non-state actors. In areas like Oyigbo, which acts as a border transit point, we have seen localized disputes, whether they are land tussles, leadership crises, or ethnic friction that escalate into full-blown military engagements within minutes because the weapons are already there.

A comparative assessment suggests that Obio Akpor is more severely affected by increased crime, gang violence, and economic disruption because of its urban character, concentration of commercial activities, and long history of organized cult rivalry involving groups such as the Icelanders and Greenlanders. The dense population and strategic economic importance of the area create greater opportunities for criminal organizations to exploit illicit firearms. Mr. Chidi Wokoma, a youth leader in Obio Akpor, stated that:

"You have to understand that the urban density of Obio/Akpor turns the weapon problem into an everyday terror. Unlike the rural areas, everything is concentrated here, the markets, the universities, the banks, and the sheer volume of people. This concentration of wealth, combined with our massive youth population, makes it ground zero for turf wars. The weapons have completely weaponized our long-standing cult rivalries. The Icelanders and Greenlanders aren't just fighting with machetes anymore; they have access to sophisticated AK-series rifles, beretta pistols, and pump-action guns.



Conversely, Oyigbo experiences relatively greater community displacement and violent confrontations due to its proximity to the Rivers and Abia State boundary, which facilitates cross border criminal movements and the circulation of illicit weapons. The experiences of the two LGAs therefore demonstrate different manifestations of the same security problem.

These findings are supported by recent empirical studies which show that illicit arms proliferation contributes to organized crime, cult violence, kidnapping, displacement, and declining economic productivity in Nigeria's oil producing communities (CLEEN Foundation, 2022; Olonisakin & Adebayo, 2022; Ezirim, 2023; Okoli & Ugwu, 2023). They also align with State Fragility Theory, which argues that weak institutions, ineffective policing, limited territorial control, and declining state legitimacy enable armed groups to challenge state authority and sustain violent activities (Rotberg, 2004; Fukuyama, 2004). The consistently high combined agreement levels of between 83.5% and 86.4% provide statistical validation that respondents share a common perception regarding the security implications of SALW proliferation. The findings therefore suggest that strengthening institutional capacity, improving intelligence led policing, and enhancing governance are likely to reduce the security risks associated with illicit arms in both LGAs.

1.6 Conclusion

This study examined the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) and its implications for Nigeria's national security, focusing on the Oyigbo and Obio/Akpor Local Government Areas of Rivers State between 2015 and 2023. Grounded in state fragility theory, the study concludes that weak state institutions, structural governance failures, porous border management, chronic economic hardship, and the unchecked activities of localized armed groups interact to drive illicit arms circulation. This systemic proliferation has severely undermined public safety by escalating violent crime, devastating cult rivalries, and economic disruptions, while institutional responses remain paralyzed by corruption, poor inter-agency coordination, and political interference. Ultimately, the findings demonstrate that effective arms control requires a multidimensional approach extending beyond kinetic law enforcement to encompass comprehensive resource governance reforms, modern border surveillance, and robust intelligence sharing.



At the structural and academic levels, this research enriches the security discourse by integrating mixed-methods empirical data to illustrate how state fragility directly manifests as localized insecurity within resource-producing communities. While the study's focus on two specific local government areas limits its broader geographic generalization, it provides a critical framework for understanding how the normalization of armed self-defense and elite rent-seeking undermine the state's monopoly on violence. Moving forward, the study emphasizes that establishing sustainable national security requires deep institutional accountability and genuine community-driven policing partnerships to rebuild public trust and strengthen early-warning tracking systems. Future research must expand on these insights by conducting comparative analyses across the wider Niger Delta and assessing the long-term efficacy of intelligence-led policing initiatives on sub-national stability.

1.7 Recommendations

These are the recommendations based on findings:

1. The Federal Government should establish permanent integrated border security units in Oyigbo, equipped with modern surveillance technology, electronic arms tracking systems, and trained personnel to monitor and prevent the movement of illicit firearms across interstate routes.
2. The Rivers State Government should introduce sustainable youth employment, vocational training, business support, and skills acquisition programmes in Oyigbo and Obio Akpor to reduce the recruitment of unemployed youths into cult groups, armed gangs, and other criminal networks.
3. Security agencies should establish a joint intelligence and coordination centre in Rivers State to improve information sharing, strengthen operational collaboration among relevant agencies, and enhance rapid response to arms trafficking and organized criminal activities.
4. The Federal and Rivers State Governments should strengthen the implementation of arms control policies by introducing regular independent audits of security operations, digital weapons inventory systems, and stronger accountability mechanisms to reduce corruption and diversion of firearms.



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