

# The State of Nigerian Roads in the Absence of Traffic Wardens: An Empirical Inquiry into Infrastructure Decay and User Behaviour

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## ABSTRACT

The background of this study is the critical role of traffic management in preserving road infrastructure, a function often overshadowed by concerns over construction and funding. In Nigeria, the traffic warden is a primary agent of order, yet their frequent absence from major roads and intersections has created a distinct operational environment. The problem addressed is the lack of scholarly attention on the direct correlation between the absence of these enforcement officers and the accelerated physical deterioration of road networks. The aim is to analyse how the withdrawal of traffic warden presence influences driver behaviour, congestion patterns, and ultimately, the structural integrity of Nigerian roads. The method employed is a qualitative review of secondary data, including transport sector reports, news media accounts from 2015 to 2025, and comparative case studies from Lagos and Abuja. The contemporary relevance lies in Nigeria's rapid urbanisation and the government's significant budget allocations for road rehabilitation, whose returns are compromised by uncontrolled traffic use. The conclusion finds that the absence of traffic wardens fosters a culture of impunity, characterised by route violations, overloading, and unregulated parking, which collectively accelerates surface wear, drainage blockage, and subgrade failure. The study argues that human enforcement is not merely a matter of traffic flow but a fundamental, cost-effective component of road asset preservation.

**Keywords:** Nigerian roads, traffic wardens, road infrastructure, driver behaviour, traffic enforcement, road decay.

## INTRODUCTION

The condition of a nation's road network is a direct indicator of its economic health and administrative capability. In Nigeria, roads carry over 90 per cent of the nation's freight and passenger traffic, making them the circulatory system of the national economy (Ogunleye, 2020). Despite recurrent budgetary provisions for construction and repair, a significant portion of federal and state roads remains in a state of disrepair, characterised by potholes, eroded shoulders, and collapsed drainage systems. Public discourse and policy debate have historically focused on two primary causes: poor construction materials and inadequate funding for maintenance. While these factors are undeniably important, they overlook a critical intermediary variable, namely the role of traffic enforcement in preserving road infrastructure.

Traffic wardens, whether employed by the Federal Road Safety Corps (FRSC) or state-level traffic management authorities such as the Lagos State Traffic Management Authority (LASTMA), are conventionally perceived as agents of order and safety. Their duties include directing vehicles, preventing illegal parking, enforcing weight restrictions on lorries, and ensuring that drivers adhere to lane discipline. However, this paper argues that their function extends beyond immediate safety to the long-term structural preservation of road surfaces. A traffic warden's presence modifies driver behaviour, reducing sudden braking, axle overloading, and the use of road shoulders as alternative lanes. In their absence, these destructive behaviours become normalised. This behavioural dynamic can be understood through the lens of the "tragedy of the commons," where shared resources, in the absence of regulation, are overused and degraded by rational individual actors (Hardin, 1968).

This article investigates the state of Nigerian roads in the specific context of the absence of traffic wardens. In this context, “absence” refers not merely to the physical nonappearance of traffic wardens but to the breakdown of visible enforcement as a behavioural constraint within a shared public system. It seeks to answer a central question: what is the relationship between the lack of visible traffic enforcement and the accelerated physical decay of road infrastructure? The study proceeds by first defining the institutional role of the traffic warden within Nigeria’s road governance framework. It then identifies the patterns and consequences of their absence, drawing on evidence from major urban centres. Subsequently, the article analyses how unchecked driver behaviours translate into specific forms of infrastructural damage, such as fatigue cracking, raveling, and pothole formation. Finally, it considers the economic implications and proposes a reconceptualisation of traffic wardens as essential actors in infrastructure asset management. The overarching aim is to broaden the scholarly and policy conversation beyond materials and finance to include the human element of road preservation. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative and comparative approach, drawing on observational patterns, policy reports, and documented enforcement variations across major Nigerian urban centres.

### **The Institutional Role of Traffic Wardens in Nigeria**

To appreciate the consequences of their absence, one must first understand the formal mandate of traffic wardens within Nigeria’s multi-layered road administration system. The primary federal agency is the FRSC, established by Decree No. 45 of 1988, which empowers its officers to enforce traffic regulations, clear obstructions, and educate road users (FRSC, 2019). Complementing the FRSC are state-level bodies, most notably LASTMA in Lagos, the Ogun State Traffic Compliance and Enforcement Corps (TRACE), and the Federal Capital Territory Traffic Management Department. These agencies employ traffic wardens whose daily functions include the manual control of traffic at signalised and unsignalised intersections, the removal of illegally parked vehicles, and the inspection of commercial vehicles for roadworthiness.

Crucially, the warden’s role involves the prevention of three specific behaviours that are directly damaging to road infrastructure. First, they prevent the use of unpaved shoulders by impatient drivers during peak hours. Shoulders are not designed to bear repetitive heavy loads; their use leads to edge cracking and shoulder deterioration, which then exposes the main carriageway to water ingress. Second, wardens enforce axle load limits on heavy goods vehicles. Overloaded axles exert stress on pavement layers that is exponentially higher than that of legal loads, causing permanent deformation and fatigue cracking. Third, they prevent the conversion of drainage channels and setbacks into informal parking zones. Blocked drains cause water to pool on and beneath the road surface, leading to stripping of asphalt and the formation of potholes.

In a well-functioning system, the traffic warden acts as a visible deterrent. This aligns with deterrence theory, which posits that the probability of detection has a stronger behavioural effect than the severity of punishment (Becker, 1968). This implies that the certainty of being apprehended, rather than the severity of the penalty, is what modifies driver behaviour. When wardens are present, drivers are more likely to remain within marked lanes, obey traffic signals, and refrain from sudden manoeuvres. When wardens are absent, the perceived risk of punishment approaches zero, and opportunistic, infrastructure-damaging behaviours proliferate. Therefore, the traffic warden should be understood not merely as a safety official but as a guardian of the physical asset itself.

### **Patterns and Causes of Traffic Warden Absence**

The absence of traffic wardens from Nigerian roads is not a random or uniform phenomenon; it follows identifiable spatial and temporal patterns. Empirical observations and media reports from the past decade indicate three primary forms of absence. The first is permanent absence, which characterises many rural and suburban roads where traffic warden posts have never been established. On these roads, there is effectively no traffic enforcement whatsoever. The second is periodic absence, which occurs when wardens are withdrawn from their posts due to industrial action, salary disputes, or administrative redeployment. The third and most common form is selective absence, where wardens concentrate their presence on major highways and affluent neighbourhoods, leaving secondary roads, market areas, and bridge approaches unmonitored. From an

institutional perspective, such enforcement gaps reflect deeper structural weaknesses in governance systems that shape economic and infrastructural outcomes (North, 1990).

Several structural causes underpin these absences. A primary cause is severe understaffing. The FRSC, despite its national mandate, operates with a ratio of officers to road length that is far below international standards. Furthermore, poor remuneration and harsh working conditions lead to high rates of attrition and low morale. Many wardens supplement their income through unofficial means, which distracts them from their enforcement duties. Another cause is the politicisation of traffic management. In some states, wardens are instructed to avoid enforcing regulations against vehicles belonging to political elites, commercial transport unions, or security agencies. These exempted groups then become vectors of impunity, and their behaviour is copied by other road users.

Perhaps the most significant cause of absence is the widespread reliance on automated traffic systems, such as traffic cameras and electronic ticketing, without adequate maintenance or public trust. Policy makers in Lagos and Abuja have invested in these technologies as a modern alternative to human wardens. However, frequent breakdowns, power outages, and corruption in the ticketing process have rendered these systems largely ineffective. When cameras are not working, and wardens are not present, a complete enforcement vacuum emerges. This vacuum is the central condition under which Nigerian roads are observed to decay most rapidly.

### **Consequences of Absence: Driver Behaviour and Traffic Disorder**

In the absence of traffic wardens, driver behaviour undergoes a marked transformation. The most immediate change is the widespread violation of lane discipline. On multi lane roads, drivers frequently straddle two lanes, weave erratically, or drive against the flow of traffic (commonly known as ‘one way’ driving) to bypass congestion. This behaviour is not merely an annoyance; it distributes vehicular loads unevenly across the road surface. Pavement design assumes that traffic will be confined to designated lanes. When vehicles constantly shift across the full width of the carriageway, the distribution of stress changes, leading to accelerated fatigue cracking and shoving, particularly at the edges of the road.

A second consequence is the rampant use of road shoulders and pedestrian walkways as alternative routes. During peak hours in cities like Onitsha, Kano, and Port Harcourt, the shoulders become de facto traffic lanes. Shoulders are typically constructed with a thinner pavement structure and poorer drainage than the main carriageway. Repeated heavy loading causes them to rut, crack, and erode rapidly. Once the shoulder fails, water penetrates the base course of the main road from the side, a process known as edge failure. This is a leading cause of pothole formation along the edges of Nigerian highways.

Third, the absence of wardens leads to the proliferation of unregulated parking on major thoroughfares. Parked vehicles reduce the effective width of the road, forcing moving traffic into the centre of the carriageway. This concentrates heavy loads along a narrow strip, causing longitudinal cracking and rutting. Moreover, stationary vehicles often leak engine oil, diesel, and hydraulic fluids onto the asphalt surface. These petrochemicals act as solvents, breaking down the bitumen binder that holds the asphalt together. The result is a softened, raveled surface that disintegrates under the next heavy rain. In the absence of wardens to enforce no parking regulations, this form of chemical damage is common in commercial districts.

Finally, the absence of enforcement leads to a breakdown of order at intersections. Without wardens to direct traffic when traffic lights fail (a frequent occurrence in Nigeria), intersections become sites of chaotic competition. Drivers force their way through, resulting in gridlock where vehicles remain stationary for extended periods. Idling heavy vehicles, particularly lorries and buses, exert static loads on specific points of the pavement for long durations. This static loading causes permanent deformation, or rutting, at the exact spots where vehicles queue. Over time, these ruts fill with water, which is then sprayed onto passing vehicles, further eroding the road surface through hydraulic action. These conditions approximate what Thomas Hobbes described as a state in which unregulated individual action produces collective disorder and systemic inefficiency (Hobbes, 1651/1996).

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## Impact on Road Infrastructure: Mechanisms of Decay

While road deterioration is influenced by multiple factors including material quality, design, and climate, the absence of traffic wardens acts as a significant behavioural accelerator of known engineering failure mechanisms. These mechanisms are often overlooked in conventional road condition assessments, which tend to prioritise age, traffic volume, and climate. This study identifies three primary mechanisms accelerated by the lack of enforcement: accelerated fatigue cracking, drainage system failure, and subgrade contamination.

**Accelerated Fatigue Cracking:** Fatigue cracking, also known as alligator cracking, is caused by repetitive heavy loading that exceeds the pavement's structural capacity. In normal conditions, traffic wardens reduce fatigue cracking by enforcing lane discipline and preventing overloading. In their absence, the number of heavy axle load applications on any given point of the road increases unpredictably. Drivers of heavy goods vehicles, knowing they will not be stopped at weigh bridges, routinely overload their axles by 50 to 100 per cent (Adepoju & Bamidele, 2018). An overloaded axle can cause the same damage as thousands of standard axles. The result is that roads designed for a 20-year service life begin to show severe fatigue cracking within two to three years. Each crack then provides an entry point for water, initiating a cycle of rapid deterioration.

**Drainage System Failure:** Nigerian roads are equipped with side drains and culverts to channel rainwater away from the pavement structure. The absence of traffic wardens allows commercial drivers, street traders, and residents to deposit solid waste, including plastic bottles, market waste, and construction debris, directly into these drains. Without wardens to enforce anti-dumping laws, the drains quickly become blocked. When the next rain arrives, water cannot escape and instead ponds on the road surface. Pondered water seeps through fatigue cracks into the pavement's base and subgrade layers. For roads built with lateritic subgrades, which are common in Nigeria, water ingress causes the subgrade soil to swell and lose strength. The pavement then fails from below, creating deep, structural potholes that patching cannot repair.

**Subgrade Contamination:** A less obvious but equally destructive mechanism is the contamination of the subgrade by spilled cargo and human waste. In the absence of traffic wardens to enforce regulations on the secure loading of vehicles, trucks frequently spill their contents. Spills of cement, sand, and laterite are common on major highways. These materials are often alkaline and can chemically alter the pH of the subgrade soil, affecting its compaction and stability. More critically, the absence of wardens at bus stops and markets has led to open defecation on road verges and drainage channels. Human waste introduces moisture and chemicals into the soil beneath the road, accelerating the decomposition of organic materials in the subgrade and leading to uneven settlement and collapse. This form of damage is entirely preventable through consistent foot patrols by traffic wardens.

## Case Studies: Lagos and Abuja

A comparative examination of Nigeria's two largest cities, Lagos and Abuja, illustrates the differential impact of traffic warden presence. Lagos, with its notoriously congested roads, maintains a relatively high density of traffic wardens through LASTMA. On major routes such as the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway and the Third Mainland Bridge, LASTMA officers are visible at most junctions and incident points. Their presence, while often resented by drivers for its perceived harshness, has a measurable effect on road condition. Controlled studies have shown that sections of Lagos roads with regular LASTMA presence exhibit significantly lower levels of edge cracking and fewer potholes per kilometre compared to unmonitored sections, controlling for traffic volume. The primary reason is the prevention of shoulder driving and illegal parking.

In contrast, Abuja, the federal capital, has a lower ratio of traffic wardens to road length, despite its wider roads and lower traffic density. The Federal Capital Territory Administration has relied more heavily on automated traffic systems. However, frequent system failures have created long periods without any enforcement. During these periods, drivers in Abuja have adopted behaviours typical of unenforced roads, including high-speed shoulder driving and blocking intersections. Consequently, many of Abuja's newer roads have developed edge failures and intersection rutting within five years of construction, a rate of decay comparable to much older roads in Lagos. The contrast suggests that the presence of human wardens, even in a chaotic environment, provides a more reliable deterrent than intermittent technology.

It is also instructive to examine periods of total warden absence, such as during the major strikes by LASTMA officers in 2017 and 2022. Media reports and photographic evidence from these periods show a rapid degradation of road discipline. Within days, drivers occupied all available road space, including shoulders, medians, and footpaths. Gridlock became permanent in many districts. After the strikes ended, road condition assessments revealed a spike in new potholes and edge failures, directly attributable to the concentrated loading and blocked drainage that occurred during the absence. These episodic events provide natural experiments that confirm the causal link between warden presence and road preservation.

### **Economic and Social Costs**

The economic cost of road decay accelerated by the absence of traffic wardens is substantial and largely invisible in official budget documents. When a road fails prematurely due to uncontrolled driver behaviour, the cost of rehabilitation or reconstruction is borne entirely by the public treasury. However, this direct cost is only a fraction of the total economic burden. As transport economics literature highlights, road condition directly influences user costs and overall system efficiency (Small & Verhoef, 2007). Additional costs include vehicle operating costs, travel time delays, and accident externalities.

For road users, poor surface conditions increase fuel consumption, tyre wear, and suspension damage. A study by the Nigerian Institute of Transport Technology (2021) estimated that driving on a poorly enforced road adds between 30 and 50 per cent to the operating cost of a commercial vehicle compared to a well enforced road. These costs are passed on to consumers in the form of higher prices for goods. Furthermore, the absence of wardens leads to congestion that wastes millions of person hours annually. In Lagos alone, traffic delays are estimated to cost the economy N4 trillion per year in lost productivity (Ogunleye, 2020). A portion of these delays is directly attributable to the absence of wardens at critical intersections.

The social costs are equally severe. The chaotic driving environment that emerges in the absence of wardens is associated with a higher rate of fatal accidents. While the FRSC records accident statistics, it does not routinely isolate the variable of warden presence. However, a correlation is observable: road segments with high accident rates are consistently those with low enforcement visibility. Moreover, the absence of wardens exacerbates social inequality. Wealthier citizens in armoured vehicles are immune to enforcement, while poorer commercial drivers and pedestrians bear the brunt of disorder. The road becomes a space where might, not rules, determines right, and the physical infrastructure suffers accordingly. It must be noted, however, that the effectiveness of traffic wardens is contingent upon institutional integrity. Where enforcement agents engage in rent-seeking or selective application of rules, their presence may distort rather than stabilise road use patterns.

### **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

This study has argued that the absence of traffic wardens from Nigerian roads is not a trivial administrative gap but a direct cause of accelerated infrastructure decay. The mechanisms identified, fatigue cracking, drainage blockage, and subgrade contamination, are all exacerbated by driver behaviours that only visible enforcement can deter. Effective management of shared infrastructure requires consistent monitoring and locally enforced rules, as demonstrated in studies of common-pool resource governance (Ostrom, 1990). Therefore, any serious strategy for road preservation must include the strategic deployment and empowerment of traffic wardens.

Several policy recommendations follow. First, the FRSC and state traffic agencies should adopt a 'presence based' deployment model. Rather than concentrating wardens at a few major intersections, agencies should deploy officers on foot patrols along high risk segments, particularly near markets, bridges, and drainage channels. Second, axle load enforcement must be depoliticized and made consistent. Mobile weigh-bridges should be operated by wardens at unpredictable times and locations, with penalties that are both severe and certain. Third, the use of automated systems should be supplementary to, not a replacement for, human wardens. Technology should support wardens by providing evidence for prosecution, not by substituting for their physical presence.



Finally, there is a need for a public information campaign that reframes the role of the traffic warden. Road users should understand that wardens protect not only their safety but also the very road surface on which they drive. This reframing could build public support for enforcement, reducing the hostility that currently makes warden work difficult and dangerous. In conclusion, the state of Nigerian roads in the absence of traffic wardens is a state of accelerated decay. Restoring the warden is not a step backwards to an outdated model; it is a necessary complement to engineering and funding, and a cost effective investment in the nation's most vital transport asset.

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