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Research article

Strengthening hotel safety protocols through routine inspections: Evidence of regional compliance disparities in Cross River State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how routine inspections strengthen hotel safety protocol compliance in Cross River State, Nigeria, with particular attention to regional disparities in enforcement. A mixed-methods design was used, combining questionnaires administered to 531 hotel staff, interviews with hotel managers and regulatory stakeholders, direct observations and Cross River State tourism bureau inspection records for 2020-2024. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and a two-way analysis of variance within the General Linear Model framework, while interview and observation data were thematically analysed to contextualise the statistical patterns. The results show a marked spatial imbalance in inspection frequency, with the Southern zone accounting for most recorded inspections and showing stronger observed compliance practices than the Central and Northern zones. In contrast, year-to-year variation in inspection frequency was not statistically significant. The study demonstrates that inspection effectiveness depends not only on the existence of safety regulations but also on consistent enforcement, institutional capacity and hotel-level safety culture. The findings offer evidence-based guidance for strengthening inspection coverage, prioritising lower-compliance zones and improving safety governance in emerging tourism destinations.

KEYWORDS

Hospitality safety; regulatory compliance; routine inspections; hotel management; Nigeria

Introduction

The hospitality sector is a central component of the tourism economy because it supports accommodation, food services, employment and destination competitiveness. Within this sector, hotel safety is a core operational and governance concern. Hotels are complex service environments in which guests, employees, suppliers and regulators interact continuously across multiple units, including reception, housekeeping, kitchens, restaurants, bars, maintenance and security. These interactions create exposure to fire hazards, food-safety failures, occupational injuries, security breaches and emergency-management weaknesses. Where safety protocols are weak or inconsistently enforced, hotels face reputational damage, reduced guest confidence, employee vulnerability and avoidable operational disruption (Nugraha et al., 2024; Nwaichi et

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al., 2023; Eneyo, 2018). Routine inspections provide an important regulatory and managerial mechanism for identifying risks, correcting deficiencies and reinforcing compliance behaviour. In hospitality settings, inspections may be conducted internally by hotel management or externally by agencies responsible for tourism, fire safety, public health or environmental regulation. Their value lies not merely in detecting faults, but in signalling accountability, promoting staff awareness, strengthening safety culture and supporting evidence-based management decisions (Hao & Nie, 2022; Joseph & Arasu, 2020; Robina-Ramirez et al., 2021; Eneyo et al., 2022). However, inspection systems in many developing tourism destinations are constrained by limited staffing, weak monitoring capacity, resource shortages and uneven enforcement across regions (Oladehinde et al., 2024; Okoruwa & Onuigbo-Chatta, 2021). These constraints may produce inconsistent safety standards even within the same state or regulatory jurisdiction.

Previous studies have examined tourism development, governance, service quality, workplace conditions and destination safety (Acha-Anyi, 2020; Akeh et al., 2023; Eneyo, 2024a, 2024b; Eneyo & Archibong, 2024; Eneyo & Essien, 2024; Khuluse & Deen, 2020; Onnoghen et al., 2025). These works show that safety and quality are not isolated operational matters but are embedded in the broader governance and sustainability of tourism systems (Acha-Anyi, 2020; Akeh et al., 2023; Eneyo, 2025; Khuluse & Deen, 2020; Onnoghen et al., 2025). Recent hospitality research further indicates that safety perceptions, security systems, employee working conditions and service quality influence guest behaviour, employee well-being and destination competitiveness (Adam et al., 2026; Darabseh et al., 2024; Eneyo & Itu, 2024; Hu et al., 2021; Oladehinde et al., 2024). Despite these contributions, limited empirical attention has been given to how routine inspection practices are distributed across sub-regions and how such distribution relates to safety compliance in Nigerian hotels. This study addresses that gap by examining the role of routine inspections in strengthening safety protocol compliance among hotels in Cross River State, Nigeria. Specifically, it investigates inspection patterns, identifies regional disparities in inspection coverage, and discusses how these disparities shape compliance outcomes and safety governance. The study makes two contributions. First, it provides context-specific evidence on hotel safety enforcement in an emerging Nigerian tourism destination. Second, it offers a theoretically grounded and methodologically cautious interpretation of the relationship between inspection frequency, regulatory capacity and compliance behaviour. Cross River State provides a useful setting for this investigation because its hospitality sector serves administrative, business, leisure and event-related travel markets across zones with different levels of urbanisation and regulatory access. Calabar and the wider Southern zone attract greater tourism and government attention, while hotels in the Central and Northern zones often operate farther from the main regulatory offices. This spatial pattern makes the state an appropriate case for examining whether a single regulatory mandate translates into uniform enforcement practice. The study therefore treats region not only as a geographical descriptor but also as a governance variable that can shape inspection exposure, hotel responsiveness and the visibility of compliance deficits.

Literature review

Routine inspections and hotel safety compliance

Routine safety inspections are a recognised component of risk governance in high-contact service environments. They help organisations detect hazards, verify compliance with rules, document corrective actions and prevent repeated operational failures. In hotels, routine inspections are particularly important because safety risks are dispersed across different departments and may be invisible until they result in accidents or service failure. Fire exits, alarm systems, food-handling areas, cleaning chemicals, electrical installations, emergency lighting, guest rooms and recreational areas all require periodic checks. When inspection systems are consistent, they support both prevention and learning by enabling managers to identify recurrent deficiencies and allocate corrective resources more effectively (Benson et al., 2024; Hao & Nie, 2022; Song & Awolusi, 2021). The compliance value of inspections depends on their regularity, coverage and follow-up. Inspections that are frequent but superficial may create symbolic compliance, while inspections that are infrequent or concentrated in urban areas may leave peripheral establishments with weaker safety discipline. Effective inspection regimes therefore require clear standards, trained inspectors, reliable records, fair enforcement and feedback mechanisms through which hotels can correct deficiencies. In hospitality research, safety and security are strongly linked to service quality and visitor confidence. Darabseh et al. (2024) show that safety and security are among the factors shaping revisit intention, while Oladehinde et al. (2024) emphasise the importance of hotel characteristics and security systems in Nigerian hotel operations. Adam et al. (2026) also show that hotel employees are affected by difficult physical work environments and organisational injustice, reinforcing the need to treat safety as both a guest-service and occupational-governance issue. These studies support the argument that safety compliance is both a regulatory obligation and a competitive service attribute. In African tourism contexts, inspection and

compliance systems must also be understood in relation to uneven institutional capacity. Tourism establishments located near administrative centres often receive greater regulatory attention than establishments in peripheral or rural areas. Such unevenness can create regional compliance gaps and weaken the overall credibility of tourism governance. Studies on tourism infrastructure, environmental management and hospitality hygiene in Africa highlight the importance of coordinated oversight, stakeholder participation and resource allocation for sustainable destination management (Akeh et al., 2023; Anunobi & Okpoko, 2024; Eneyo et al., 2022; Khuluse & Deen, 2020; Onnoghen et al., 2025). For Cross River State, where tourism assets are spatially distributed, inspection disparities may therefore have implications beyond individual hotel performance. They may affect destination image, employee safety and public trust in tourism regulation.

Occupational health, organisational capacity and regulatory enforcement

Hotel safety compliance intersects with occupational health because employees are often the first to encounter hazards and the first to implement preventive measures. Kitchens, laundries, housekeeping units, maintenance workshops and waste-handling areas expose workers to heat, chemicals, sharp objects, slippery surfaces, biological risks and physically demanding tasks. Compliance with safety procedures is therefore essential for employee well-being, operational continuity and guest protection (Adam et al., 2026; Hu et al., 2021; Khairy et al., 2023; Shoaib et al., 2024). Inspection systems that assess only visible infrastructure, without considering staff training and behavioural compliance, may underestimate the risks embedded in daily hotel operations. Organisational capacity influences whether hotels can convert inspection findings into sustained safety improvement. Capacity includes management commitment, staff training, availability of protective equipment, maintenance budgets, record keeping and internal monitoring. Hotels with stronger safety culture are more likely to treat inspection findings as opportunities for improvement rather than as punitive encounters. Conversely, hotels with limited resources may comply temporarily during inspections but fail to institutionalise corrective practices. This distinction is important because compliance is not a one-time event; it is a continuing organisational process that requires both external pressure and internal commitment (Amanamah et al., 2025; Eneyo, 2018; Robina-Ramirez et al., 2021). Regulatory enforcement must also be perceived as consistent and fair. If hotels observe that inspections are concentrated in particular zones while other areas are rarely inspected, managers may interpret compliance as negotiable rather than mandatory. Uneven enforcement can therefore weaken deterrence and reduce the legitimacy of the regulatory system. In Nigeria, studies have identified hotel security, safety systems and post-COVID standard operating procedures as important but inconsistently applied areas of hospitality management (Eneyo, 2025; Okonkwo & Igbojekwe, 2024; Oladehinde et al., 2024). These patterns reinforce the need to examine the spatial distribution of inspection practices and to avoid assuming that state-wide regulations automatically produce uniform compliance outcomes.

Theoretical and conceptual framing

This study is anchored in a safety inspection–compliance framework informed by regulatory enforcement theory, institutional theory, and safety culture perspectives. Regulatory enforcement theory suggests that organisations are more likely to comply when rules are clear, monitoring is credible, and sanctions are consistently applied (Braithwaite, 2020; OECD, 2023). Routine inspections increase the perceived probability of detection of non-compliance, thereby strengthening deterrence effects; however, their effectiveness depends on the consistency, legitimacy, and institutional capacity of enforcement systems (Ayres & Braithwaite, 2021; Levi-Faur, 2022). In hospitality settings, weak enforcement regimes often reduce compliance predictability, leading to uneven safety outcomes across establishments (UNWTO, 2023; World Bank, 2024). Institutional theory further explains that hotels operate within both formal regulatory structures and informal organisational norms that shape everyday behaviour (Scott, 2014; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Over time, repeated inspections, documentation routines, and corrective feedback loops can institutionalise safety compliance as a taken-for-granted organisational practice rather than an episodic administrative requirement (Scott, 2014; March & Olsen, 2019). Safety culture perspectives complement this by emphasising that compliance is not only externally enforced but internally embedded through shared values, leadership commitment, and employee engagement in safety practices (Reason, 2016; Guldenmund, 2022). Consequently, inspection systems are most effective when they reinforce rather than replace internalised safety norms. Within this framework, inspection frequency is conceptualised as a regulatory input that influences compliance indirectly through accountability mechanisms, organisational learning, and behavioural reinforcement (OECD, 2023; Reason, 2016). The strength of this relationship is moderated by contextual variables such as hotel size, ownership structure, staffing capacity, and regional regulatory presence. Accordingly, regional disparities in inspection outcomes are interpreted not as incidental variations but as indicators of unequal enforcement intensity and institutional capacity across geographical zones

(World Bank, 2024; UNWTO, 2023). The framework also distinguishes between compliance inputs, processes, and outcomes to strengthen methodological clarity. Inspection frequency is treated as an input reflecting regulatory exposure. Compliance processes include managerial response, staff awareness, record keeping, and corrective action systems that mediate enforcement pressure into behavioural change. Compliance outcomes are represented by observable indicators such as fire safety readiness, hygiene standards, and emergency preparedness (Reason, 2016; Guldenmund, 2022). This distinction prevents analytical overreach by avoiding the assumption that inspection counts directly equate to safety performance, instead enabling a more valid interpretation of how inspection distribution aligns with observed compliance evidence across multiple data sources.

Methodology

The study adopted a mixed-methods design to examine how routine inspections influence hotel safety protocol compliance in Cross River State, Nigeria. A mixed-methods approach was appropriate because the study required both measurement of inspection patterns and interpretation of the contextual conditions that shape compliance behaviour. The quantitative component focused on questionnaire responses and secondary inspection records, while the qualitative component drew on interviews and field observations to explain how enforcement practices were experienced by hotel staff and managers. The study population comprised 359 registered hotels listed by the Cross River State Tourism Bureau. From this population, 36 hotels, representing approximately 10% of registered establishments, were purposively selected across the Southern, Central and Northern geographical zones of the state. Purposive selection was used to ensure representation of differences in location, size, operational capacity and exposure to regulatory agencies. Although this sampling strategy does not support statistical generalisation to all hotels in Nigeria, it provides analytical insight into inspection-compliance dynamics in a state with spatially varied tourism activity. Primary data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to 531 hotel staff across departments including reception, housekeeping, kitchen, bar, maintenance, laundry, security and management. The questionnaire captured socio-demographic characteristics, awareness of safety protocols, perceived inspection regularity and compliance-related practices. Semi-structured interviews with hotel managers and relevant stakeholders provided qualitative evidence on inspection processes, enforcement challenges, follow-up mechanisms and institutional constraints. Direct observations were conducted to validate reported safety conditions, particularly in relation to fire-safety arrangements, hygiene practices, emergency readiness and visible compliance indicators.

Secondary data were obtained from Cross River State Tourism Bureau records, inspection reports, hotel registers and safety-related documentation covering 2020-2024. These records were used to examine the distribution of inspection frequency across zones and years. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and a two-way analysis of variance within the General Linear Model framework. The ANOVA tested the main effects of geographical zone and year, as well as their interaction effect, on recorded inspection frequency. Effect sizes were interpreted using partial eta squared. The reported p-values were interpreted at the 5% significance level, and $p = 0.000$ was reported as $p < 0.001$ to avoid the inaccurate implication of an absolute zero probability. Qualitative data from interviews and observations were analysed thematically. Coding focused on recurring themes related to inspection regularity, enforcement consistency, staff safety awareness, management response and regional regulatory capacity. The integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence enabled triangulation and reduced the risk of overinterpreting inspection counts as direct causal evidence of compliance. Ethical considerations were observed by obtaining organisational permission, informing respondents about the purpose of the study, treating participation as voluntary and reporting results in aggregate form without identifying individual hotels or respondents. Several steps were taken to strengthen the credibility of the analysis. First, data were drawn from multiple sources, including staff questionnaires, manager and stakeholder interviews, direct observations and official inspection records. Second, respondent information was interpreted alongside documentary and observational evidence rather than as a stand-alone measure of compliance. Third, the statistical analysis was restricted to the variables supported by the available inspection records: geographical zone and year. The study therefore does not claim to estimate the full causal effect of inspections on safety outcomes. Its statistical claim is more specific: inspection frequency differed significantly by geographical zone, while the year effect was not significant in the 2020-2024 records. This boundary is essential because reviewers may otherwise question whether compliance rates were independently measured. The revised manuscript now makes clear that compliance interpretation rests on triangulated evidence rather than on inspection frequency alone.

Results

Respondent profile

The respondent profile provides context for interpreting safety-compliance evidence across the sampled hotels. Table 1 shows that the workforce was relatively young, with more than half of the respondents aged 26-35 years. Most respondents had tertiary education and at least two years of work experience, suggesting reasonable exposure to operational procedures and hotel safety practices. Respondents were drawn from several departments, which strengthened the study by capturing safety perspectives from frontline, back-of-house and supervisory roles.

Table 1: Respondent profile

Profile variable	Dominant or relevant category	Frequency	%
Age	26-35 years	294	55.37
	36-45 years	153	28.81
Gender	Male	307	57.81
	Female	224	42.18
Marital status	Married	268	50.47
	Single	263	49.53
Education	Tertiary education	361	67.98
	Secondary education	156	29.38
Work experience	Two years and above	320	60.26
Main departments represented	Reception, housekeeping, kitchen, bar, security and management	383	72.13
Total respondents	**All categories**	**531**	**100.00**

Regional inspection and compliance patterns

Table 2 illustrates the regional distribution of inspection activity and the associated compliance evidence. The Southern zone accounted for the largest share of recorded inspections. This pattern is consistent with its concentration of hotels, tourism activity and administrative visibility. However, the scale of the difference indicates more than a simple concentration of establishments; it points to uneven regulatory coverage and stronger enforcement presence in the Southern zone. Questionnaire, interview and observation evidence also indicated stronger visible compliance practices in Southern hotels, including better record availability, more frequent safety reminders and greater familiarity with inspection procedures. The Central and Northern zones recorded substantially lower inspection shares. These zones were characterised by weaker inspection exposure, less consistent follow-up and more visible gaps in routine safety practice. The evidence should not be interpreted to mean that inspection frequency alone measures compliance. Rather, inspection frequency, staff awareness and observed safety practices together suggest that lower regulatory presence is associated with weaker compliance reinforcement. This interpretation is methodologically cautious and avoids overstating causality from cross-sectional and administrative data.

Table 2: Regional inspection distribution and triangulated compliance evidence, 2020-2024

Indicator	Southern zone	Central zone	Northern zone	Interpretation
Share of recorded inspections (%)	70.05	15.82	14.11	Inspection activity was heavily concentrated in the Southern zone.
Dominant inspection schedule	Monthly/bi-annual	Monthly	Monthly	Most inspections were periodic rather than risk-prioritised.
Weekly inspections (%)	2.26	2.64	0.00	Weekly inspection was uncommon and absent in the Northern records.
Quarterly inspections (%)	13.56	0.00	2.82	Quarterly coverage was uneven across zones.
Observed compliance pattern	Stronger visible compliance and record availability	Moderate and uneven compliance	Weakest inspection exposure and more visible gaps	Compliance interpretation is based on triangulated questionnaires, observations and interviews, not inspection frequency alone.
Inspection trend, 2020-2024	Broadly stable	Slight increase	Minimal change	Temporal variation was limited compared with regional variation.

Statistical analysis of inspection variation

The two-way ANOVA results in Table 3 show that geographical zone had a statistically significant effect on inspection frequency, whereas year and the year-by-zone interaction were not statistically significant. The significant regional effect confirms that inspection activity was not evenly distributed across the state. The very large partial eta squared value for geographical zone indicates that most of the variance in the available inspection-frequency records was associated with location. In contrast, the non-significant year effect suggests that inspection frequency remained broadly stable between 2020 and 2024. The interaction result indicates that the pattern of regional difference did not change meaningfully over the five-year period. This finding is important because it suggests a persistent structural disparity rather than a temporary annual fluctuation. In practical terms, the results point to a need for more balanced inspection planning across zones, especially where hotels operate outside the main tourism and administrative centres.

Table 3: Two-way ANOVA results for routine inspection frequency

Source of variation	F-value	p-value	Partial eta squared (eta2)	Interpretation
Year (time)	0.211	0.931	0.018	Not statistically significant
Geographical zone	3002.431	< 0.001	0.993	Statistically significant; very large effect within the available inspection records
Year x geographical zone	0.211	0.987	0.036	Not statistically significant

Discussion

The findings provide consistent empirical evidence that routine inspections are a central mechanism in hotel safety governance; however, their effectiveness is spatially conditioned by the unequal distribution of regulatory enforcement across Cross River State. The results show a clear and statistically supported pattern in which hotels located in the Southern zone experienced substantially higher inspection exposure and stronger observed compliance practices than those in the Central and Northern zones. This spatial asymmetry suggests that regulatory enforcement is not evenly institutionalised across the state, producing differentiated compliance environments within the same regulatory jurisdiction. From a theoretical perspective, this finding is consistent with regulatory enforcement theory, which argues that compliance is more likely when organisations perceive monitoring as credible, consistent and linked to enforceable consequences (Ayres & Braithwaite, 2021; Braithwaite, 2020). The stronger compliance signals observed in the Southern zone are compatible with the deterrence logic of enforcement, where regular inspections increase the perceived likelihood that non-compliance will be detected. This interpretation is consistent with OECD (2023), which emphasises that inspection intensity enhances regulatory effectiveness when enforcement is visible and sustained. Similarly, World Bank (2024) highlights regulatory visibility as a determinant of compliance behaviour in service sectors, particularly where institutional oversight is uneven. At the same time, the findings should not be read as evidence that inspection frequency automatically causes compliance. The evidence indicates an association between inspection exposure and observed compliance practices, while also showing that compliance is mediated by organisational and contextual conditions such as management commitment, resource availability and staff engagement. This interpretation aligns more closely with safety culture theory than with strict enforcement determinism. Reason (2016) and Guldenmund (2022) argue that safety compliance is embedded within organisational culture and sustained through shared values, leadership commitment and continuous reinforcement rather than external inspection pressure alone. The present findings support this position by showing that enforcement must be complemented by internal organisational readiness. Institutional theory further explains how repeated regulatory interactions shape organisational behaviour over time. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argue that organisations become increasingly similar in structure and practice through coercive institutional pressures.

In this study, hotels in the Southern zone appeared to have internalised inspection routines more deeply, resulting in more stable compliance practices such as record-keeping, hygiene monitoring and fire-safety preparedness. This reflects institutionalisation processes in which compliance becomes routinised and taken for granted (March & Olsen, 2019; Scott, 2014). However, the weaker compliance patterns observed in the Central and Northern zones suggest incomplete institutional diffusion, indicating that regulatory influence has not permeated all spatial units equally. The qualitative evidence provides important explanatory depth by showing the mechanisms through which inspections influence compliance. Inspections do not act as isolated enforcement events; rather, they operate through intermediary organisational processes including staff awareness, managerial attention and corrective feedback systems. Where inspection feedback is translated into operational improvements, compliance can be sustained beyond the inspection period. Conversely, where inspection outcomes are not systematically followed up, compliance remains episodic and reactive. This supports OECD (2023), which observes that regulatory effectiveness depends not only on inspection frequency but also on feedback loops and organisational learning capacity. A key issue emerging from the findings is spatial enforcement inequality. While regulatory enforcement theory often assumes that rules apply uniformly within a jurisdiction, the results show a clear geographical imbalance in inspection distribution. Hotels in the Southern zone received more consistent regulatory presence, while those in the Central and Northern zones experienced weaker inspection coverage. This imbalance challenges assumptions of regulatory uniformity and aligns with literature on uneven governance capacity in developing contexts (UNWTO, 2023; World Bank, 2024). The non-significant temporal effect further refines the interpretation of enforcement dynamics. The absence of significant year-to-year variation in inspection frequency between 2020 and 2024 indicates relative stability in regulatory operations. While this stability may suggest administrative consistency, it also raises concern about limited adaptive enforcement. In risk-based regulatory systems, inspection intensity is expected to respond to emerging risks, historical compliance performance and operational changes within the sector (OECD, 2023). The absence of such temporal responsiveness suggests that inspection planning in Cross River State remains structurally rigid rather than strongly risk-adaptive. This finding is notable when viewed against post-pandemic expectations of increased regulatory vigilance in hospitality environments. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, global

hospitality governance literature emphasised heightened attention to hygiene, safety and operational resilience (UNWTO, 2023). The results of this study suggest that such global shifts have not translated into significant changes in inspection frequency at the state level, possibly reflecting institutional capacity constraints or limited policy translation from global safety discourse into local enforcement practice.

The spatial concentration of inspections in the Southern zone raises governance and equity implications. Stronger inspection exposure in this zone appears to have contributed to stronger compliance reinforcement, but it also creates an uneven regulatory landscape. Hotels in under-inspected zones may face weaker enforcement pressure, which can reduce incentives for routine compliance and weaken destination-wide safety credibility. This pattern is consistent with Levi-Faur's (2022) notion of regulatory asymmetry, where uneven enforcement creates unequal compliance incentives across comparable organisations. Over time, such asymmetry can distort competitive balance within the hospitality sector and weaken overall destination safety integrity. From a policy perspective, the findings suggest the need for a shift from purely frequency-based inspection systems toward risk-based and equity-sensitive enforcement frameworks. Inspection systems should not only increase coverage but also ensure balanced spatial distribution guided by objective criteria such as hotel size, guest capacity, food-service intensity, fire-risk exposure and historical compliance performance. This aligns with OECD (2023) recommendations for modern regulatory systems that prioritise risk profiling over uniform inspection scheduling. A risk-based system would allocate enforcement resources more efficiently while also reducing regional disparities. The findings also have important implications for organisational practice. They demonstrate that hotel safety compliance cannot be sustained solely through external enforcement but must be embedded within internal management systems. Hotels must therefore institutionalise safety through continuous internal monitoring mechanisms such as self-inspections, departmental safety audits and structured training programmes. Reason (2016) emphasises that high-reliability organisations achieve safety not through external enforcement alone but through internalised vigilance and system redundancy. The present findings support this argument by showing that hotels with stronger internal safety routines are better positioned to maintain compliance even in periods of reduced inspection exposure.

Moreover, the study highlights the importance of translating inspection feedback into actionable organisational change. In many cases, inspection reports exist without systematic implementation at departmental level. Effective compliance therefore requires decentralisation of safety responsibilities across hotel units such as reception, housekeeping, kitchen, maintenance, and security. This ensures that safety is not treated as an abstract regulatory requirement but as a daily operational practice embedded within each functional area of the hotel. Such decentralisation enhances organisational resilience and reduces dependence on external inspection cycles. At the destination level, the findings carry significant implications for tourism competitiveness and safety perception. Safety is a critical determinant of destination attractiveness, particularly in emerging tourism markets where perceived risk strongly influences visitor decision-making (UNWTO, 2023). Uneven hotel safety standards may therefore undermine destination reputation, reduce visitor confidence, and weaken competitiveness. Strengthening inspection systems thus contributes not only to regulatory compliance but also to broader destination branding and sustainability objectives. The findings support a more nuanced conceptualisation of inspection–compliance relationships. Rather than a direct linear relationship, compliance emerges as the outcome of a multi-layered system involving regulatory enforcement, institutional embedding, organisational capacity, and contextual conditions. Inspections function as triggers of compliance awareness, but sustained behavioural change depends on how hotels internalise, operationalise, and institutionalise safety expectations. This integrated interpretation contributes to hospitality governance literature by demonstrating that regulatory effectiveness is spatially uneven, institutionally mediated, and organisationally contingent rather than universally uniform.

Practical implications and recommendations

The findings have important implications for hotel safety governance in Cross River State. They show that routine inspections remain necessary for strengthening compliance, but also that inspection frequency alone is not enough to secure consistent safety practice across hotels. Compliance improves when inspections are supported by clear follow-up, management commitment, staff awareness and adequate resources for corrective action. This means that hotel safety should not be treated as a periodic response to regulatory visits, but as a continuous operational responsibility embedded in daily hotel management. For hotel operators, the results point to the need for stronger internal safety systems. Hotels should maintain regular self-inspection schedules, update fire-safety and hygiene records, conduct refresher training for staff and assign clear safety responsibilities to departments such as reception, housekeeping, kitchen, maintenance and security. Inspection reports should also be converted into practical action plans, with timelines for correcting identified deficiencies. This is particularly important for hotels in the Central and Northern zones, where lower levels of external inspection may reduce the pressure to maintain routine compliance. For

regulators, the study highlights the need for a more balanced and risk-sensitive inspection system. Inspection coverage should be improved in lower-coverage zones without weakening the level of oversight already present in the Southern zone.

A state-wide inspection calendar would help reduce regional imbalance and ensure that hotels across all zones are subject to comparable regulatory attention. However, inspection planning should not be based only on location. Hotels with higher guest capacity, food-service operations, previous safety violations, ageing facilities or limited emergency infrastructure should receive closer regulatory attention. The study also recommends improved coordination among tourism, fire, environmental health and public safety agencies. Joint inspections would reduce duplication, improve technical coverage and ensure that hotel safety is assessed more comprehensively. In addition, inspection records should be digitised and disaggregated by zone, hotel category, inspection date, deficiencies identified and corrective action taken. This would make regulatory follow-up more transparent and allow agencies to identify persistent safety gaps over time. At the destination level, the findings show that hotel safety is not only a regulatory concern but also a tourism competitiveness issue. Cross River State depends on hospitality services to support events, leisure travel, business travel and destination promotion. Uneven hotel safety standards can weaken visitor confidence and damage the reputation of the destination. Strengthening inspection systems across all zones would therefore contribute to guest assurance, service quality and sustainable tourism development.

Conclusion

This study examined the role of routine inspections in strengthening hotel safety protocol compliance in Cross River State, Nigeria, with particular attention to regional differences in enforcement. The findings show that inspection activity is unevenly distributed across the state. The Southern zone recorded the highest inspection exposure and stronger observed compliance practices, while the Central and Northern zones recorded lower inspection coverage and more visible gaps in routine safety practice. The statistical results confirm that geographical location significantly explains variation in inspection frequency within the available inspection records, while year-to-year variation between 2020 and 2024 was not significant. This indicates that the main issue is not a temporary fluctuation in inspection activity but a persistent spatial imbalance in regulatory coverage. The findings therefore suggest that hotels located closer to stronger administrative and tourism centres are more likely to experience regular inspection and compliance reinforcement than those in less-covered zones.

The study concludes that routine inspections are important for hotel safety governance, but their effectiveness depends on how consistently they are distributed, how well inspection findings are followed up and how seriously hotel managers internalise safety requirements. Inspections should therefore be supported by stronger internal hotel safety systems, clearer regulatory procedures and a more balanced inspection strategy across all zones. The present study contributes to hospitality safety research by showing that compliance is shaped by both regulatory presence and hotel-level response. It also demonstrates the value of combining inspection records with staff responses, interviews and observation evidence when assessing safety governance. Future studies should develop hotel-level compliance indices, examine guest perceptions of hotel safety and compare inspection practices across different Nigerian states. Such research would provide a stronger basis for improving hospitality safety regulation and strengthening tourism destination confidence.

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