

A REVIEW ON THE CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF CITIZENS' DISTRUST IN THE POLICE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Police have been a subject of discourse among scholars and citizens. In the last three decades (1994–2024), Nigerians have expressed concerns about the conduct of some officers of the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) due to their involvement in unprofessional acts, resulting in negative attitudes and diminished confidence in the NPF. Thus, this paper reviews the causes and consequences of citizens' distrust in the police in Nigeria. The paper draws on a systematic desk review of secondary data from official reports, peer-reviewed journals, textbooks, and credible online resources, thereby synthesising patterns and insights across multiple perspectives. The objectives of the paper are to examine the factors responsible for citizens' distrust of the NPF and to investigate its consequences. The paper is anchored on the Social Constructivism Theory by Lev Vygotsky (1934), which provides a framework for understanding how citizens' past interactions with the police shape their attitudes and perceptions. The paper's findings indicate that unethical conduct by certain police officers, along with insufficient training and limited professional development opportunities within the NPF, significantly contributes to citizens' distrust. Furthermore, the paper reveals that the major consequence of citizens' distrust in the police is the creation of a negative image of the NPF. The paper recommends that the Federal Government of Nigeria and the NPF authorities provide regular, compulsory capacity-building programmes for all police officers, combat unethical practices within the NPF, and conduct enlightenment campaigns to improve citizens' trust in the NPF.

Key Words: Public, Trust, Police, Crime, Human Rights

Introduction

The increasing complexities in the forms and patterns of social interactions among individuals around the globe have, in the last three decades, specifically from 1994-2024, been facilitated by modernity, continuous advances and developments in Information and Communication Technology and globalisation. The rapidly occurring social changes being witnessed have continued to mount pressure on law enforcement agencies, such as the police and their officers, to do more in the fight against crime and criminality and in the

maintenance of law and order in countries (Schmallegger & Smykla, 2024). Similarly, citizens in Western and industrialised countries, including the United States, Canada, Mexico, and other North American nations, as well as European countries such as the United Kingdom, Germany, and France, have increasingly expressed concerns about the effectiveness and accountability of their law enforcement agencies in ensuring public safety. The concerns stem from the negative impact of contemporary security challenges on nations and the need for more dynamic strategies to maintain law and order and public safety (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2025).

In the developing world, concerns about policing are increasingly reflected in negative public attitudes toward law enforcement agencies. These concerns largely stem from citizens' expectations that the police should ensure public safety and uphold the rule of law, particularly amid rising and increasingly complex forms of crime (Braithwaite, 2014; Harrendorf & Smith, 2025). However, the inability of police institutions to meet these expectations effectively, coupled with instances of unprofessional conduct, has contributed to growing distrust among citizens (Aminu, 2024). Specifically, practices such as unlawful arrests, extortion, and illegal detention have eroded public confidence and weakened the relationship between the police and the communities they serve (Aminu & Mohammed, 2023).

In Nigeria, policy makers, scholars, civil society organisations and citizens have expressed worries about how some officers of the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) conduct themselves in grossly unprofessional and unethical manners of shooting unarmed protesters and detaining minors while claiming to enforce public safety (Olu, 2021; Amnesty International, 2024). Similarly, the increased participation of citizens in liberal democratic activities and processes, such as political rallies, elections, and protests against bad governance, including the #EndSARS protest in 2021 and the # ENDBADGOVERNANCE protest in 2024, has dealt a serious blow to the relationship between Nigerians and the NPF. This has further deepened citizens' distrust of the NPF in Nigeria (Olu, 2021; Philip & Emmanuel, 2025).

Considering the implications of persistent citizens' distrust of the police for effective crime prevention and control in Nigeria, the Federal Government and the authorities of the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) have introduced several reform measures to improve public confidence. These include training and retraining personnel on human rights standards, efforts to address corruption within the force, and the adoption of community policing strategies, including the establishment of the Police Community Relations Committee (PCRC) to strengthen police–citizen engagement. Despite these initiatives, public distrust has persisted, thereby undermining the effectiveness of policing and crime-combating efforts in the country (Osisio, 2011; Usman, 2019; Victor, 2021). Against this backdrop, this paper undertakes a sociological review of the drivers of citizens' distrust of the police and its implications for crime prevention and control in Nigeria, with a view to proposing strategies to strengthen trust between the police and the public.

Theoretical Framework: The Social Constructivism Theory

This paper is anchored in social constructivism, which is primarily associated with Lev Vygotsky. The theory emphasises that knowledge and meaning are socially constructed through interaction and shared experiences. Although Vygotsky's work initially received limited recognition, particularly in Western scholarship, it gained prominence after its

posthumous publication in 1934 (Aslem, Norman, & Alfred, 2012). The development and expansion of social constructivist ideas have also been influenced by classical sociologists such as George Herbert Mead and later scholars like Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, whose work further systematised the theory. Notably, Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* provides a comprehensive exposition of how social reality is created and sustained through everyday interactions (Aslem et al., 2012).

The central assumptions of the theory are that all cognitive functions originate in social contexts and knowledge. The theory argues that what people refer to as social reality is the product of their minds, which select and make sense of past experiences. The theory then argued further that knowledge of social reality results from personal and environmental factors that must be explained and understood within the realm of past experience (Peter & Thomas, 1963).

According to social constructivism, individuals acquire an understanding of relationships and social interactions by reflecting on past experiences and applying this knowledge to current circumstances (Peter & Thomas, 1963). The theory posits that mental processes, including reasoning, trust, and self-protection, emerge from interactions within social groups, rather than in isolation. It further challenges the assumption of some social psychologists that learning can or should occur independently of social context, emphasising that cognition is inherently shaped by the social environment (Peter & Thomas, 1963).

Applying the Social Constructivism Theory to this paper means that citizens' reasoning behind their distrust of NPF is a function of their prior experiences with the agency and its officers, as well as the social contexts and knowledge they draw on. It further means that citizens' distrust of the police in Nigeria is the product of mind-selecting and making sense of past experiences, specifically due to personal and environmental factors. Applying the theory to this paper further suggests that individuals learn not to trust the NPF because of the nature, causes, and consequences of their past relationships with the police. And that individuals store different pieces of information about their previous experiences with the police. Furthermore, individuals begin to retrieve such information to really understand or have knowledge about the current prevailing circumstances of intimidation, corruption and widespread abuses of human rights by some officers of the NPF. Consequences, their interpretation of this information, and knowledge about the officers eventually lead them to distrust the NPF.

The Factors Responsible for Citizens' Distrust in the Nigerian Police Force

There are a multitude of factors responsible for the citizens' distrust of police officers in Nigeria, and some of the factors are:

i. Historical Factors

The historical antecedent surrounding the establishment of the NPF is a factor responsible for citizens' distrust in the police in Nigeria. According to Tamuno (1970) and Ahire (1991), like other institutions in modern Nigeria, the Nigerian Police is the creation of British Colonial Masters. They further argue that the Nigerian Police Force was established by the British colonial administration in 1861 primarily to serve colonial interests, employing coercive and violent methods to suppress resistance from local authorities and to enforce compliance with colonial laws, often at the expense of indigenous norms and practices. Alemika (1988) noted

that the British Colonial Masters relied heavily on the use of brute force and violence to subjugate and exploit the citizens in their quest to achieve total control of Nigeria. Those who wage any form of resistance against their wishes were suppressed and sometimes eliminated by using varying degrees of force through organised government violence, vandalism and plundering. Therefore, their allegiance was to the British Colonial Masters rather than to the communities where they served.

The police officers recruited were mere stooges, lacking traditional values, in areas where federalism existed. In fact, the relationship between the police and the citizens was something else because it was marred by intimidation, brutality, and extra-judicial acts (Tamuno, 1970; Dambazau, 1999). Unfortunately, the same relationship was transferred to the political class by the colonialists upon granting Nigeria and Nigerians independence in 1960 (Alemika, 1988; Ahire, 1991). It was the same pre-independence relationship that the political class continued to maintain. This partly explains why many citizens see the police as a creation of the political class, meant to serve only their interests. This also partly accounts for why the citizens have distrust in the NPF because the relationship between them and some officers of the NPF in modern Nigeria is also marred by intimidation and brutality of the poor (Tamuno, 1970; Alemika, 1988).

ii. Unethical Practices among Corrupt Police Officers

Unethical practices among some officers of the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) have been a major factor in citizens' distrust, as these behaviours undermine the Force's primary statutory responsibilities of protecting lives and property and maintaining law and order (Victor, 2021). Many Nigerians perceive the police as lacking integrity, with a mentality that prioritises human rights abuses and impunity over public service. The widespread corruption within the Force has also fostered a belief among citizens that government policies, programs, and legislation are ineffective at curbing misconduct, although such perceptions are often shaped by fear rather than objective assessment (Victor, 2021).

iii. Insufficient Training Opportunities for Personnel of the NPF

Inadequate training and limited professional development for officers of the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) have significantly affected the effectiveness of citizens-oriented policing and contributed to the deterioration of police–community relations (Nwabueze, Okolie-Osemene & Young, 2018). Officers who lack sufficient training are more likely to engage in unethical practices, including the use of excessive force, torture of suspects, extortion, and other forms of misconduct, which undermine public trust. The 2021 #EndSARS protest highlighted the consequences of these deficiencies, as citizens expressed widespread grievances against the NPF, citing incidents of brutality and abuse of power as stemming from poor capacity and insufficient personnel preparedness (Oghogho, Ikponmwosa & Osazuwa, 2024). These events illustrate that without continuous and comprehensive training, officers are ill-equipped to uphold professional standards and engage positively with the public, thereby perpetuating distrust and fueling societal tensions.

iv. The Attitude of Some Police Officers in Nigeria

Many Nigerians see the officers and agencies of the NPF as unnecessarily antagonistic toward them, especially those who at one time or another have had contact with them (Victor, 2021). Citizens believe this stems from the excessive power legally granted to police officers

in the country, particularly their discretion, which they use to intimidate and deprive citizens of their rights. Several citizens in the country believe that due to the attitude of Nigerian police officers, the officers are somehow disconnected from society and that the only time police interact with members of society is when they have something personal to gain (Odekunle, 2004; Victor, 2021). This in turn has made members of the public not want to interact with the police except when they have personal things to gain, but for the society as a whole. This has continued to deepen the distrust between citizens and the NPF in the country (Aniche, 2011).

The Consequences of Citizens' Distrust in Police Officers in Nigeria

Citizens' distrust of the police has serious consequences on the effectiveness of the NPF to prevent and control crimes and criminalities in the society, and some of the consequences are:

i. Creation of a Negative Image of the Police in Nigeria

One significant consequence of citizens' distrust in the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) is the erosion of public confidence in both the institution and its personnel. Distrust leads to uncooperative attitudes among citizens, who may be reluctant to assist the police with timely information or support investigations, thereby hampering crime prevention and law enforcement. This perception also fosters the belief that the police are ineffective or self-serving, contributing to a negative public image of the agency. In some cases, the lack of trust compels individuals to seek alternative security arrangements, including private security firms or vigilante groups, further undermining the authority and legitimacy of the NPF (Victor, 2021).

ii. Reduced Citizen Cooperation with the Police

Distrust in the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) has led many citizens, particularly the youth, to limit their interactions and cooperation with the police, engaging with them only when there is personal gain rather than for the broader public good (Aniche, 2011; Victor, 2021). This reluctance to cooperate undermines the effectiveness of crime prevention and contributes to the rise of violent, organised, and property crimes across the country (Victor, 2021; Aminu & Mohammed, 2023). Consequently, such perceptions reinforce the belief that the NPF is incapable of effectively managing crime, perpetuating a negative image of the police until meaningful reforms and genuine efforts to rebuild public trust are undertaken by the Federal Government and NPF authorities (Aniche, 2011).

Conclusion

Citizens' distrust of the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) poses a serious challenge to effective policing and crime prevention in the country. The review highlights that unethical conduct, inadequate training, and poor professional development among officers have eroded public confidence, leading to limited citizen cooperation, increased reliance on alternative security arrangements, and a negative perception of the police. This lack of trust undermines the NPF's capacity to uphold its statutory responsibilities, including protecting lives and properties and maintaining law and order. Strengthening public trust is therefore essential, not only for improving operational efficiency and proactive crime prevention but also for fostering a collaborative relationship between the police and the community. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive reforms, including continuous capacity building,

ethical enforcement of laws, and sustained engagement with citizens to rebuild confidence. Ultimately, restoring trust in the NPF is central to enhancing public safety, reinforcing the rule of law, and ensuring that the police are perceived as a legitimate and effective institution by all Nigerians.

Recommendations

Based on the findings from the paper, the recommendations are proffered:

1. The Federal Government of Nigeria and the authorities of the NPF should ensure that police officers undergo regular and rigorous training and retraining. These programs should focus not only on combating contemporary crimes effectively but also on promoting citizen-oriented policing, respect for human rights, and ethical conduct. Well-trained officers are better equipped to serve the public professionally, which can gradually improve citizens' perception of the NPF.
2. Efforts should be made to enhance the working environment, provide modern logistics, and ensure adequate funding for the NPF. A well-resourced and efficient police force can respond promptly to public distress calls, protect lives and property, and demonstrate reliability, thereby strengthening citizens' trust in the police.
3. The NPF should adopt digital policing, reward officers who display exemplary professionalism, and sanction erring personnel. Publicising these measures will show that the police are accountable and committed to ethical standards, helping to change negative public perceptions.
4. Authorities should engage the public through awareness campaigns, town hall meetings, and social media programs to explain police duties, successes, and accountability mechanisms. Civic education programs can also encourage citizens to cooperate with the police, report crimes, and participate constructively in crime prevention efforts, thereby addressing distrust and negative attitudes toward the NPF.
5. Laws should be enacted to protect the NPF from political interference, ensuring that policing decisions are impartial. Demonstrating operational independence reassures citizens that the police serve the community's interests, which is vital to restoring trust.

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