

Police Brutality and Human Rights Violation of Suspects: Promoting or Undermining Justice and Acceptance of State Authority in Nigeria

Jonathan E. OMATA^{1*}, Prof. Patricia Awa TAIWO¹

^{1*}Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Abuja – Nigeria.

* **Correspondence:** Jonathan E. OMATA

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ABSTRACT: Escalating concerns over the erosion of justice and legitimacy in Nigeria’s criminal justice system have intensified scholarly and policy debates, culminating in this paper on Police Brutality and Human Rights Violation of Suspects: Promoting or Undermining Justice and Acceptance of State Authority in Nigeria. The paper interrogates the dynamics of police brutality and its implications for justice delivery and citizens’ acceptance of state authority, specifically examining how perceptions of fairness, accountability, and due process shape public trust in law enforcement. Anchored on Procedural Justice Theory, Social Contract Theory, and Conflict Theory, the study adopts a qualitative, theoretical methodology, relying on extensive literature synthesis and conceptual analysis to interrogate the phenomenon within Nigeria’s socio-political context. Findings reveal that persistent police misconduct—including unlawful arrests, torture, extortion, and extrajudicial killings—undermines justice delivery, weakens the rule of law, and erodes public confidence in state institutions, thereby diminishing the legitimacy and acceptance of state authority. The study further establishes that such violations are not merely behavioral deviations but systemic outcomes of structural inequalities, institutional weaknesses, and

entrenched cultures of impunity. It concluded that police brutality fundamentally disrupts the moral and legal foundations of governance in Nigeria. The paper recommended comprehensive reforms emphasizing accountability mechanisms, rights-based policing, institutional strengthening, and community engagement to restore public trust and reinforce state legitimacy.

Keywords: *Police brutality, human rights violation, justice, state legitimacy, Nigeria, procedural justice.*

Introduction

Globally, police brutality and human rights violations have emerged as persistent threats to justice systems, democratic governance, and public trust in state institutions. Across both developed and developing societies, law enforcement agencies have been implicated in excessive use of force, unlawful detention, torture, and extrajudicial actions, often justified under the pretext of maintaining law and order. These practices undermine the fundamental principles of justice, accountability, and the rule of law, thereby weakening citizens' confidence in state authority. The prevalence of such abuses has been widely documented, highlighting how systemic deficiencies such as weak oversight, poor training, and institutional impunity contribute to recurring violations (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Consequently, global discourses on policing increasingly emphasize the need for rights-based approaches and accountability mechanisms to enhance legitimacy and public cooperation.

At the regional level, particularly in Africa, police brutality reflects deeper structural and governance challenges, including fragile institutions, authoritarian legacies, and limited enforcement of human rights frameworks. In many African states, law enforcement agencies are often perceived as instruments of coercion rather than protectors of citizens, resulting in strained citizen–police relations and declining public trust. The persistence of excessive force, arbitrary arrests, and suppression of dissent across the region underscores the gap between constitutional guarantees and actual policing practices. These patterns reinforce a culture of impunity and weaken the effectiveness of justice systems, ultimately affecting the acceptance of state authority and democratic stability.

In Nigeria, police brutality and human rights violations of suspects have become a recurring challenge, undermining the country's justice system and eroding public trust in law enforcement agencies (Alemika, 2018). The Nigerian Police Force, as a critical institution responsible for maintaining law and order, has been plagued by allegations of excessive force, torture, harassment, and extrajudicial killings (Amnesty International, 2020). These actions not only violate the fundamental human rights of suspects but also compromise the principles of justice and fairness, ultimately affecting the acceptance of state authority in Nigeria.

The use of excessive force by police officers has been linked to various factors, including inadequate training, poor oversight, and a culture of impunity (Human Rights Watch, 2022). In Nigeria, the Police Act of 2020 and the Administration of Criminal Justice Act of 2015 provide frameworks for police conduct and the protection of human rights (Nigerian Police Force, 2020; Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2015). However, the implementation and enforcement of these laws remain a significant challenge (Shehu, 2023).

The consequences of police brutality and human rights violations are far-reaching and dire, leading to increased tensions between law enforcement and the communities they serve (Alemika, 2018). The lack of accountability for police misconduct has created a culture of impunity, where officers feel emboldened to act with disregard for the rights and dignity of suspects (Human Rights Watch, 2022). This has resulted in a breakdown of trust between the police and the public, making it challenging to achieve the goals of justice and public safety (Nigerian Police Force, 2020).

In recent years, there has been an exponential increase in calls for police reform and accountability in Nigeria (Amnesty International, 2020). The Nigerian government has taken several steps to address these issues, including the establishment of the Police Complaints Response Unit (PCRU) and the introduction of community policing initiatives (Nigerian Police Force, 2020). However, more needs to be done to address the systemic problems within the police force and ensure that officers are held accountable for their actions (Shehu, 2023).

This theoretical paper examines the complexity of police brutality and human rights violations of suspects in Nigeria, exploring how these actions promote or undermine justice and acceptance of state authority. Through a theoretical lens, this paper analyzes the abstract concepts and frameworks that underpin police conduct and human rights protection, shedding light on the intricacies of police brutality and its implications for justice and state legitimacy. By drawing insights from procedural, social contract, and conflict theories, the paper contributes to the ongoing discourse on police reform and human rights protection in Nigeria, highlighting the need for a multifaceted approach to address these issues and promote a culture of accountability and respect for human rights.

Police brutality and human rights violations in Nigeria require a sustained effort to promote a culture of accountability and respect for human rights (Shehu, 2023). This paper therefore explores the theoretical frameworks that underpin police conduct and human rights protection, and discusses the implications of police brutality and human rights violations for promoting or undermining justice and acceptance of state authority in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Despite growing global and regional concerns about police brutality and its implications for justice and human rights, the persistence of such violations continues to undermine public trust in law enforcement and weaken state legitimacy. While existing studies have highlighted the prevalence of excessive force, torture, and unlawful detention, much of the literature remains largely descriptive, focusing on incidents and institutional failures without sufficiently interrogating the deeper theoretical linkages between police misconduct, justice delivery, and citizens' acceptance of state authority.

In Nigeria, police brutality and human rights violations have been widely documented as major impediments to effective policing and justice administration (Alemika, 2018; Amnesty International, 2020). Although legal frameworks such as the Police Act (2020) and the Administration of Criminal Justice Act (2015) provide guidelines for professional conduct and human rights protection (Nigerian Police Force, 2020; Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2015), their implementation has been

significantly constrained by weak oversight, poor accountability mechanisms, and institutional inefficiencies (Shehu, 2023). The persistence of abuses, despite these legal provisions, reflects a systemic problem rooted in a culture of impunity and inadequate enforcement structures (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Furthermore, existing research has not sufficiently examined how perceptions of fairness, transparency, and due process influence citizens' trust in law enforcement and their willingness to accept state authority. This gap is particularly important, given that the legitimacy of the state is closely tied to the manner in which justice is administered and how citizens are treated by law enforcement agencies. The continued erosion of trust between the police and the public, as well as the increasing tensions arising from police misconduct, suggest that a deeper theoretical exploration is necessary to understand the underlying dynamics of this relationship (Alemika, 2018).

Therefore, the central problem addressed in this paper is the lack of an integrated theoretical analysis that explains how police brutality and human rights violations shape justice delivery and the acceptance of state authority in Nigeria. By synthesizing insights from Procedural Justice Theory, Social Contract Theory, and Conflict Theory, this study seeks to fill this gap and provide a comprehensive understanding of the structural, institutional, and perceptual factors driving police misconduct and its broader implications for justice and state legitimacy in Nigeria.

Aim and Objectives of the Paper

The aim of this paper was to examine police brutality and human rights violation of suspects: Promoting or undermining justice and acceptance of State Authority in Nigeria. The specific objectives includes;

- i. to identify the causes and patterns of police brutality and human rights violation in Nigeria
- ii. to examine impact and consequences of police brutality on justice delivery and state legitimacy in Nigeria
- iii. to assess policy and institutional approaches to combating police brutality and human rights violations in Nigeria.

Methodology

The paper adopted a theoretical research design grounded in extensive literature review and conceptual analysis. Given the paper's objective of interrogating the dynamics of police brutality and human rights violations through established sociological theories, reliance on secondary data sources such as academic journals, policy reports, legal documents, and publications from organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch is both suitable and sufficient. This approach allows for a systematic synthesis of existing knowledge on policing practices, institutional behavior, and human rights conditions in Nigeria, while also situating the discourse within broader global and regional contexts.

Furthermore, the study adopts an analytical framework that integrates Procedural Justice Theory, Social Contract Theory, and Conflict Theory to interpret and explain the phenomenon under investigation. Through this theoretical triangulation, the methodology enables a deeper understanding of how perceptions of fairness, structural inequalities, and state–citizen relations shape police conduct and its implications for justice delivery and state legitimacy. This method is appropriate because it not only provides explanatory depth but also bridges the gap between abstract theoretical constructs and real-world policing challenges, thereby offering a comprehensive foundation for policy recommendations and future empirical research.

Conceptual Review

In understanding the nexus between police brutality, human rights violations, and the legitimacy of state authority in Nigeria, it is imperative to clarify the key concepts that constitute the framework of this discourse. Concepts such as police brutality, human rights violation, suspects' rights, justice, acceptance of state authority, impunity, rule of law, and citizen–police relations are central to the analytical thrust of this paper. Clear conceptual delineation provides the intellectual foundation for theoretical analysis and easy comprehension

Police Brutality

Police brutality refers to the excessive, unwarranted, or unlawful use of physical force or coercive means by law enforcement officers in the discharge of their duties.

It encompasses acts of torture, intimidation, extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, and degrading treatment of citizens, particularly suspects. In democratic societies, the police are vested with the monopoly of legitimate force; however, such force must be exercised within the boundaries of legality, necessity, and proportionality (Alemika, 2018). In Nigeria, recurring incidents of police brutality have been linked to structural weaknesses, weak accountability mechanisms, and a prevailing culture of impunity that allows erring officers to evade sanctions. Police brutality, therefore, constitutes both a deviation from professional policing ethics and a serious threat to human dignity and public trust in law enforcement institutions. It undermines the social contract between the state and its citizens and erodes the moral legitimacy of the government.

Human Rights Violation

Human rights violation refers to any act or omission that infringes upon the fundamental rights and freedoms guaranteed to individuals under national and international human rights instruments, such as the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Violations occur when state actors or institutions act contrary to the principles of respect for life, liberty, equality, and due process. Within the context of policing, human rights violations often manifest in illegal detention, denial of legal representation, torture, and extrajudicial killings (Nwosu, 2024; Anaekwe & Oli, 2025). These abuses are symptomatic of institutional decay and reveals the weakness of the rule of law. They not only undermine the moral authority of the state but also erode citizens' confidence in the justice system and democratic governance. As Alemika (2018) and Edun, Akoji, and Jimoh (2025) argue, the persistence of such violations reflects a deep structural disjuncture between law enforcement practice and constitutional ideals.

Suspects' Rights

Suspects' rights refer to the set of legal protections accorded to individuals who are accused, suspected or under investigation for alleged crimes. These rights are grounded in the presumption of innocence and are safeguarded by constitutional and statutory provisions. In Nigeria, the rights of suspects include the right to remain

silent, the right to counsel, protection from torture or coercion, and the right to be arraigned within a reasonable time (Sections 35 and 36 of the 1999 Constitution). These provisions are further reinforced by international human rights instruments, such as the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. Imoni-Ogbe (2024) observes that despite these guarantees, Nigerian law enforcement agencies often disregard these rights through arbitrary detentions and coercive interrogations. Upholding suspects' rights is a test of a nation's commitment to due process and upholding the rule of law. When such rights are violated, it not only signifies a collapse of constitutionalism but also deepens citizens' alienation from the justice system and state authority.

Justice

Justice is a multidimensional concept embodying fairness, equality, and the impartial application of law. It connotes the rightful balance between individual rights and societal interests, ensuring that each person receives what is due to them under the law. Theoretically, justice can be viewed in two dimensions: substantive justice, which concerns the fairness of outcomes, and procedural justice, which focuses on the fairness of processes and treatment (Tyler, 2004). In the context of policing, justice demands that enforcement actions conform to moral, legal, and institutional standards that promote both accountability and respect for human dignity. Ozuru and Onyenajua (2023) posit that justice is compromised when the police, as agents of the state, act outside constitutional boundaries or adopt repressive methods in enforcing law and order. Justice, therefore, is not limited to punishment or deterrence but extends to fairness in treatment, equity in law enforcement, and transparency in state institutions. When justice is absent, legitimacy diminishes, and societal order becomes fragile.

Acceptance of State Authority

Acceptance of state authority refers to the degree to which citizens perceive the state and its institutions as legitimate, just, and deserving of obedience. This concept derives from the social contract theory, which posits that governmental authority rests upon the consent of the governed. According to procedural justice theorists, such acceptance is fostered when authorities treat individuals with fairness, dignity,

and transparency (Tyler, 2004). Conversely, when police brutality and rights violations dominate state–citizen interactions, citizens begin to perceive the state as an oppressor rather than a protector. Yahaya (2023) notes that colonial policing structures, sustained authoritarian practices, and recurring abuses have eroded public confidence in Nigerian policing. Events such as the #End SARS protests of 2020, and the #End Bad Governance protests of 2024, illustrate a broad-based rejection of perceived illegitimate authority. Therefore, acceptance of state authority is not merely obedience to law but a reflection of moral legitimacy, procedural fairness, and the perceived alignment of state power with the collective good.

Impunity

Impunity refers to the failure or unwillingness of state institutions to hold perpetrators of wrongdoing accountable for their actions. It creates a culture where abuses by state agents, including the police, go unpunished, thereby normalizing illegality and encouraging further violations. In Nigeria, impunity manifests in weak disciplinary systems, political interference, corruption, and the absence of effective oversight mechanisms (Aja-Nwachukwu et al., 2024). Moeltzam et al. (2024) describe impunity as the structural incapacity of a justice system to investigate, prosecute, and sanction offenders, regardless of status or office. Within the policing context, impunity not only perpetuates brutality and corruption but also undermines citizens' belief in the rule of law. The persistence of impunity fosters cynicism toward legal institutions, weakens governance, and entrenches cycles of abuse that ultimately erode the legitimacy of the state.

Rule of Law

The rule of law is the principle that all persons and institutions, including the state itself, are subject to and accountable under the law. It embodies the supremacy of law, equality before it, and the protection of fundamental rights. The United Nations (UN, 2020) describes the rule of law as a cornerstone of peace, justice, and stability. In practice, the rule of law requires that the police and other enforcement agencies act within the limits prescribed by law, respect judicial authority, and uphold due process in all actions. In Nigeria, however, selective enforcement of laws, prolonged detentions, and disregard for court orders reveal the fragility of this principle

(Nwosu, 2024). Where the rule of law is weak, arbitrary exercise of power thrives, and justice becomes compromised. Thus, the integrity of a nation's policing system is both a reflection and a test of its commitment to the rule of law.

Citizen–Police Relations

Citizen–police relations describe the nature of interaction, trust, and cooperation between the police and the communities they serve. Effective policing requires mutual respect, transparency, and partnership between citizens and law enforcement. When relations are cooperative, policing becomes community-oriented and intelligence-driven, enhancing both public safety and legitimacy (Egbo et al., 2024). However, when the police are perceived as agents of oppression rather than service, fear, hostility, and non-cooperation dominate public attitudes, undermining security and institutional effectiveness. In Nigeria, poor citizen–police relations stem from a historical legacy of colonial policing, low accountability, and routine human rights abuses. Strengthening these relations demands a rights-based approach to policing, anchored in professionalism, openness, and respect for human dignity. Such efforts are essential to rebuilding public trust and consolidating democratic legitimacy.

Causes and Patterns of Police Brutality and Human Rights Violation in Nigeria

Police brutality and human rights violations in Nigeria are manifestations of deeper structural and ideological distortions within the state apparatus and the theory of policing itself. They are not episodic occurrences but systemic outcomes of a historically conditioned, institutionally flawed, and normatively authoritarian model of law enforcement that prioritizes regime stability over citizen welfare (Alemika, 2024; Edun & Akoji, 2025). This section examines the causes and patterns of these violations within Nigeria's socio-political and theoretical context, emphasizing institutional, structural, and normative continuities that have rendered the police both agents and victims of state dysfunction.

Structural and Organizational Deficiencies

The persistence of brutality in Nigeria is equally a function of the country's institutional fragility. The police as an organization are undermined by chronic underfunding, inadequate training, poor remuneration, and a lack of

professionalization (Edun et al., 2025). These deficiencies engender a bureaucratic culture in which extortion, arbitrary detention, and violence become normalized survival mechanisms rather than deviations. From a theoretical standpoint, this reflects what Lipsky (1980) conceptualizes as street-level bureaucracy, where officers adapt informal practices to cope with systemic inefficiencies.

The lack of effective oversight mechanisms also perpetuates abuse. Bodies such as the Police Service Commission (PSC), the Police Complaints Response Unit (CRU), and even the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) have limited authority and resources to impose accountability (Ibrahim, 2023). The weakness of these institutions is compounded by judicial inefficiency, where delayed trials and corruption obstruct justice for victims of police misconduct. Thus, institutional weakness becomes both a cause and a consequence of police impunity—a vicious circle where state structures reproduce the very dysfunctions they are meant to correct.

Furthermore, the recruitment and promotion processes are often politicized and ethnically influenced, eroding meritocracy and professional ethics (Ojo, 2021). The resulting organizational environment fosters loyalty to superior officers and political patrons above adherence to the law and human rights principles. Consequently, the police institution becomes a reflection of Nigeria's larger governance crisis—one characterized by weak institutions, entrenched patronage, and a fragile rule of law (Alemika, 2024).

Socio-Political and Economic Contexts

The socio-political terrain of Nigeria provides a breeding ground for the entrenchment of police violence. The police function as an arm of state power in a polity marked by authoritarian tendencies, elite domination, and pervasive inequality. Theoretical models of state legitimacy (Weber, 1947; Beetham, 2013) suggested that where legitimacy is weak, coercion becomes the principal mechanism of governance. In Nigeria, this dynamic manifests through the deployment of the police to enforce compliance, suppress dissent, and protect the interest of the elites. (Agbiboa, 2021; Alemika, 2024).

Economic precarity further aggravates the problem. Officers' poor living conditions and inadequate welfare create material incentives for corruption, extortion, and coercive behavior (Edun & Akoji, 2025). The police thereby embody what Bayart (1993) describes as the "politics of the belly"—a mode of governance in which survivalist practices blur the line between state service and personal enrichment. In such a context, brutality is not merely an expression of individual pathology but a symptom of systemic dysfunction, reflecting broader structural violence within the society.

The use of the police for political ends has remained a consistent feature. During election cycles and protest movements—such as those in 2023 and 2024—the police were frequently deployed as instruments of political intimidation rather than impartial enforcers of law (Amnesty International, 2024). The politicization of policing compromises neutrality, undermines public trust, and normalizes coercive control as a tool of governance.

Cultural and Normative Factors

Cultural and normative dimensions also underpin the persistence of police brutality. The dominant policing ideology in Nigeria valorizes authority and compliance, viewing the citizen not as a rights-bearing individual but as a potential threat to order (Ibeanu, 2019; Ojo, 2021). Within this worldview, violence becomes a legitimate instrument of control. Police training curricula still emphasize obedience and physical dominance rather than negotiation, empathy, or human rights principles (Alemika, 2024).

From a sociological perspective, this reflects what Bourdieu (1990) calls *habitus*—an internalized disposition shaped by institutional practice. The culture of violence, once embedded, reproduces itself across generations of officers. The absence of psychosocial support mechanisms for personnel further exacerbates aggression and emotional desensitization, leading to cycles of abuse that appear almost normalized (Aremu & Adebani, 2023).

Moreover, the hierarchical structure of the police discourages moral autonomy. Subordinates are socialized to obey orders rather than to exercise ethical judgment, fostering a collective abdication of responsibility. The lack of horizontal

accountability between officers allows violations to persist unchecked. This mirrors Foucault's (1977) theory of disciplinary power, where surveillance and command replace moral conscience as the basis of institutional order.

Patterns of Violation and Continuities

The patterns of police brutality in Nigeria exhibit both continuity and transformation. The violence is systematic manifesting in unlawful arrests, torture, harassment, extrajudicial killings, and the parading of suspects in violation of the presumption of innocence (NHRC, 2025). These patterns reflect not simply deviant conduct but an institutional logic of domination. The police routinely deploy force disproportionately against marginalized groups, especially young men in urban areas, which reveals a socio-economic bias in the administration of coercion (Mohammed et al., 2024).

Recent incidents, such as the violent suppression of the End Bad Governance protests of 2024 and the continued reports of torture and unlawful detention in 2025, demonstrate the persistence of authoritarian policing despite public outrage and reform promises (Amnesty International, 2025; Guardian Nigeria, 2025). The recurrence of these abuses underscores the theoretical argument that brutality in Nigeria is not a deviation from policing norms but rather a constitutive element of the state's mode of governance, a mode that relies on coercion as a substitute for legitimacy (Alemika, 2024).

Impact and Consequences of Police Brutality on Justice Delivery and State Legitimacy

Police brutality in Nigeria has far-reaching consequences that affect not only individual victims but also disrupts the broader functioning of the justice system and the legitimacy of the state. Such systemic abuse corrodes public confidence in law enforcement, diminishes cooperation with judicial processes, and fosters a perception that the state is indifferent to human rights violations (Alemika, 2024).

Undermining Justice Delivery

Police brutality in Nigeria significantly undermines the delivery of justice. The justice system's efficacy relies heavily on public confidence and cooperation;

however, when citizens perceive law enforcement as perpetrators rather than protectors, their willingness to engage with the system diminishes (Alemika, 2024). Persistent police violence reduces crime reporting, discourages citizens from serving as witnesses, and fosters disengagement from legal processes, thereby hindering the efficacy of the justice system. (Osuala & Yahaya, 2003).

Extrajudicial killings, unlawful detentions, and coerced confessions, particularly by the disbanded Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) unit, now rebranded as Special Weapon and Tactics (SWAT), exacerbate judicial backlogs. Victims often face prolonged pretrial detention and limited access to legal representation, further delaying justice and perpetuating cycles of impunity (Onwunyerimadu, 2022).

Erosion of State Legitimacy

The legitimacy of a state is rooted in its capacity to uphold the rule of law and protect human rights. Police brutality reflects a failure of the state to fulfill these obligations, producing a crisis of legitimacy (Madubuike-Ekwe, 2019). The End SARS protests illustrate how widespread allegations of police misconduct can erode public trust in state institutions and trigger nationwide civil unrest (Tiwa, 2024).

This crisis is deepened by inadequate state responses. When perpetrators are not held accountable and reforms remain insufficient, citizens perceive the government as indifferent to their rights, undermining both the moral authority and political credibility of the state (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Socio-political Consequences

Police brutality extends beyond the immediate victims, affecting the broader social and political landscape. Communities subjected to systemic abuse experience heightened fear, anxiety, and pervasive feelings of injustice. Such conditions can foster radicalization, as individuals or groups may resort to alternative means of expressing dissent or seeking justice (Oriloye, 2022).

Internationally, persistent human rights violations damage Nigeria's reputation, affecting diplomatic relations and foreign investments (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Domestically, recurring brutality fuels protests, civil unrest, and diminished civic engagement, weakening the state's governance capacity (Alemika, 2024).

Deepening Social Inequality and Marginalization

Police brutality disproportionately affects marginalized and vulnerable populations in the society, reinforcing existing social inequalities. Poor communities, ethnic minorities, and youth are particularly exposed to harassment, unlawful detention, and extrajudicial punishment (Alemika, 2024; Osuala & Yahaya, 2003).

Such selective enforcement undermines equality before the law and corrodes public confidence in justice institutions, thereby negatively impacting citizen-police relationship. (Madubuike-Ekwe, 2019). Communities facing systemic abuse often feel alienated, reducing cooperation with law enforcement and civic participation, which further weakens state legitimacy and acceptance of state authority. (Onwunyirimadu, 2022). Ultimately, these dynamics worsen structural inequalities, compromise impartial justice, and diminish the moral and legal authority of the state, as opined by Oriloye, 2022).

Policy and Institutional Approaches to Combating Police Brutality and Human Rights Violations in Nigeria

Police brutality in Nigeria has long undermined public trust in law enforcement and the justice system. In response, the government, civil society, and international partners have advocated for a range of policy and institutional reforms aimed at promoting accountability and protecting human rights. Despite these efforts, gaps in implementation, enforcement challenges, and political interference continue to limit their effectiveness. This section examines five key approaches implemented between 2020 and 2025, highlighting both achievements and ongoing challenges.

The Nigeria Police Act 2020: Legislative Framework for Reform

The Nigeria Police Act of 2020 represents a significant legislative milestone in regulating police conduct and enhancing accountability. It mandates adherence to human rights standards, establishes mechanisms for complaint resolution, and institutionalizes community policing structures (Uwujaren, 2025). Scholars note that while the Act provides a robust legal framework for curbing misconduct, inadequate enforcement, limited political commitment, and resource constraints have hindered its practical impact. Without rigorous monitoring and effective oversight, systemic

issues such as unlawful arrests, harassment, excessive use of force, and extrajudicial killings remain persistent challenges.

Institutional Reforms and Oversight Mechanisms

Institutional reforms have sought to strengthen oversight through bodies such as the Police Service Commission (PSC) and the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), tasked with investigating allegations of misconduct and ensuring accountability (Covenant, 2025). Research indicates that these bodies improve formal oversight structures but face limitations due to political interference, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and inadequate resources. Scholars emphasize that genuine institutional autonomy, consistent funding, and transparency are critical to enhancing public confidence and ensuring that disciplinary measures are effectively enforced.

Community Policing Initiatives

Community policing has been promoted to improve relations between law enforcement and local communities, reduce brutality, and foster cooperative crime prevention (Uwujaren, 2025). Evidence suggests that in areas where community policing is implemented effectively, public complaints against police decline, and mutual trust increases. However, inconsistent implementation, insufficient training, and poor engagement strategies in certain regions have led to skepticism, with some citizens perceiving the initiative as largely symbolic. Experts argue that sustainable success requires continuous capacity building, operational clarity, and integration of community feedback into policing practices.

Civil Society and Digital Activism

Civil society organizations and digital activism have become pivotal in exposing police misconduct and demanding reforms (Etim, 2025). Initiatives such as End SARS mobilized citizens, amplified public grievances, and pressured policymakers to undertake reforms. Studies highlight that such activism not only increases awareness of systemic abuse but also strengthens citizen participation in governance. Nevertheless, state responses have at times been repressive, including the use of brutal force against protesters and intimidation of activists, demonstrating the tension

between civic advocacy and institutional resistance. Scholars argue that protecting civil society engagement is crucial for sustained accountability and reform.

6. Theoretical Perspectives: Insights from Procedural Justice, Social Contract, and Conflict Theories

Understanding police brutality and human rights violations in Nigeria requires a theoretical lens that captures both the behavioral and structural dynamics shaping law enforcement and state legitimacy. This study adopts Procedural Justice Theory, Social Contract Theory, and Conflict Theory as complementary frameworks. Procedural Justice Theory, developed through the works of Tom R. Tyler (1988; 2003; 2020), emphasizes how fairness in law enforcement influences public trust, compliance, and legitimacy. Social Contract Theory, rooted in the philosophies of Thomas Hobbes (1651), John Locke (1689), and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762), conceptualizes governance as a mutual agreement where citizens surrender certain freedoms in exchange for protection and justice. Conflict Theory, articulated by Karl Marx (1848) and later expanded by C. Wright Mills (1956) and Ralf Dahrendorf (1959), explains how inequality and power asymmetry shape institutional behavior. Together, these theories provide a multidimensional framework for analyzing both the moral and structural foundations of police misconduct in Nigeria.

Procedural Justice Theory posits that the legitimacy of state authority depends on the fairness of its procedures (Tyler, 2020). Citizens are more likely to cooperate when policing practices are transparent, impartial, and respectful of human rights. In Nigeria, arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial killings, and torture undermine this legitimacy, leading to declining trust, public disengagement, and moral disillusionment with state institutions (Alemika, 2024). The theory underscores that legitimacy is not sustained through coercion but through fairness, accountability, and inclusiveness in governance and law enforcement.

Social Contract Theory complements this by grounding legitimacy in the moral and political obligations between the state and its citizens. Locke (1689) and Rousseau (1762) argue that the authority of the state is derived from the consent of the governed, and when that authority is exercised unjustly, it breaches the social contract. In the Nigerian context, widespread police abuse and disregard for human

rights represent a fundamental violation of this social covenant, eroding citizens' confidence in the state's commitment to their protection (Okorie, 2023). The persistent brutality and impunity of law enforcement agents suggest a collapse of the reciprocal trust that should bind citizens and the state, thereby fostering resistance, civic unrest, and alienation from state authority.

Conflict Theory further deepens this understanding by interpreting police brutality as a structural and systemic outcome rather than merely individual deviance. Marx (1848) viewed law and policing as mechanisms for maintaining class dominance, while Mills (1956) and Dahrendorf (1959) highlighted the role of political and bureaucratic elites in sustaining social control. In Nigeria, police institutions often reflect elite interests over public welfare, reinforcing patterns of inequality and state repression (Onwunyirimadu, 2022). The theory situates police violence within enduring socioeconomic disparities, institutional dependency, and political patronage systems that perpetuate cycles of coercion and subordination.

Collectively, Procedural Justice, Social Contract, and Conflict Theories provide a robust explanatory framework for understanding the persistence and implications of police brutality in Nigeria. While Procedural Justice explains how perceptions of fairness shape legitimacy and compliance, Social Contract Theory exposes the moral rupture between citizens and the state, and Conflict Theory reveals the structural inequalities that sustain such misconduct. Applying these perspectives allows for a holistic analysis of both individual experiences and institutional realities, emphasizing that fairness, accountability, and social equity are indispensable to restoring justice delivery and rebuilding state legitimacy in Nigeria.

Discussions

This paper revealed that police brutality and human rights violations in Nigeria are not isolated incidents but systemic manifestations of institutional deficiencies, as consistently highlighted by existing literature. The findings align with the position of Alemika (2018), who argues that the Nigerian policing system is historically characterized by coercion and repression rather than service-oriented engagement. Similarly, Amnesty International (2020) documents widespread patterns of torture, unlawful detention, and extrajudicial killings, reinforcing the study's finding that

such practices undermine justice delivery. Human Rights Watch (2022) further attributes these abuses to weak accountability structures and entrenched impunity, which corroborates the paper's conclusion that the persistence of police misconduct is structurally embedded rather than merely behavioral. These perspectives collectively affirm that the erosion of justice in Nigeria is closely tied to the nature and operation of its law enforcement institutions.

The paper also established that police brutality significantly weakens public trust and acceptance of state authority, a finding strongly supported by existing scholarly arguments. Alemika (2018) emphasizes that negative police–citizen encounters foster distrust and reduce public willingness to cooperate with law enforcement, while the Nigerian Police Force (2020) acknowledges that strained community relations hinder effective policing. The observed breakdown of trust is further explained by the lack of enforcement of legal frameworks such as the Police Act (2020) and the Administration of Criminal Justice Act (2015), despite their provisions for accountability and human rights protection (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2015; Nigerian Police Force, 2020). Shehu (2023) reinforces this view by highlighting implementation gaps and institutional weaknesses as critical barriers to reform. Thus, the findings demonstrate that the legitimacy of the state is fundamentally contingent upon the perceived fairness and integrity of its policing institutions.

Importantly, the theoretical frameworks adopted in this paper provide strong explanatory support for these findings. Procedural Justice Theory elucidates how perceptions of fairness, transparency, and respect for rights influence citizens' trust and compliance with authority, thereby explaining why police brutality erodes legitimacy. Social Contract Theory further reinforces this argument by positing that the state derives its authority from its obligation to protect citizens' rights; when this obligation is violated through abusive policing, the social contract is weakened, leading to resistance and distrust. Conflict Theory, on the other hand, provides a structural explanation by highlighting how power imbalances and socio-economic inequalities shape coercive policing practices, particularly against vulnerable populations. Together, these theories offer a multidimensional understanding of police brutality as both a governance failure and a reflection of broader societal inequalities.

The practical implications of these findings are significant for policy and institutional reform. The paper underscores the urgent need for strengthening accountability mechanisms, improving police training, and ensuring the effective implementation of existing legal frameworks to curb abuses and restore public confidence. It also highlights the importance of adopting community-oriented policing strategies that prioritize citizen engagement and trust-building. By demonstrating how police misconduct undermines justice and state legitimacy, the paper provides a compelling case for comprehensive reforms that address both the structural and behavioral dimensions of policing in Nigeria. Ultimately, aligning policing practices with principles of fairness, accountability, and human rights is essential for promoting sustainable justice and reinforcing the legitimacy of state authority.

Conclusions

This paper has examined police brutality and human rights violations in Nigeria through the triple theoretical lenses of Procedural Justice, Social Contract, and Conflict Theories. The analysis demonstrates that police misconduct not only undermines justice delivery but also corrodes public trust, weakens state legitimacy, and exacerbates social inequalities. Procedural Justice Theory highlights the centrality of fairness, transparency, and accountability in fostering compliance and enhancing the legitimacy of state authority, whereas, Social Contract Theory Conflict views police brutality and human rights violation as a breach of the social contract between citizens and the state, where individuals surrender some of their natural rights to the government in exchange for protection and social order. It implies that police brutality and human rights violation happen due to lack of accountability mechanisms, allowing perpetrators to act with impunity, while, Conflict Theory situates these violations within structural inequalities, power asymmetries, and institutional dependencies that perpetuate systemic injustice. Together, these frameworks offer a broad and comprehensive understanding of the causes, consequences, and persistence of police brutality in the Nigerian context.

In conclusion, police brutality in Nigeria represents both a procedural and structural challenge. By applying Procedural Justice, Social Contract, and Conflict Theories, this study underscores the necessity of comprehensive approaches that balance

procedural reforms with systemic interventions. The insights derived have implications not only for the theoretical understanding of state legitimacy and justice delivery but also for practical strategies aimed at promoting accountable policing, safeguarding human rights, and fostering public trust in state institutions.

Recommendations

Arising from the above conclusions, the paper suggested the following recommendations:

- i. There is a compelling need for the institutionalization of a robust accountability framework within the Nigerian Police Force through strengthened oversight bodies, independent complaint mechanisms, and strict enforcement of existing legal provisions such as the Police Act 2020, in order to curb impunity, ensure adherence to human rights standards, and restore public confidence in justice delivery.
- ii. Government and relevant stakeholders should prioritize the entrenchment of procedural justice principles in policing by enhancing officers' training on human rights, rule of law, and ethical conduct, while promoting transparency, fairness, and professionalism in police–citizen interactions to improve public trust and foster greater acceptance of state authority.
- iii. Addressing the structural and systemic drivers of police brutality requires comprehensive reforms, including improved welfare, adequate funding, depoliticization of the police institution, and the adoption of community-oriented policing strategies that encourage citizen participation, reduce hostility, and strengthen the legitimacy of the state.

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