

POLICE-PUBLIC RELATIONS AND THE PROTECTION OF VULNERABLE POPULATIONS IN NIGERIA: A SOCIOECONOMIC AND CULTURAL APPROACH TO SUSTAINABLE SOCIAL WELFARE POLICY

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Abstract

This paper examines the crucial connection between police-public relations and the protection of vulnerable populations in Nigeria, highlighting a socioeconomic and cultural framework for developing sustainable social welfare policies. In a nation marked by persistent insecurity, poverty, and institutional mistrust and other critical and pervasive threats to human welfare, the role of the police extends beyond crime control; it encompasses the broader responsibility of safeguarding marginalized groups such as women, children, persons with disabilities, and the urban poor. However, pervasive issues such as reported police brutality, intimidation, perceived corruption, and discriminatory practices, which have cost the profession the approval, respect, and affection of the public, are a bugging issue. The public has accused the Nigerian police unit of committing acts of extortion, rape, torture, and murder. Even the scenario of police unbridled and total allegiance and loyalty to the constituted authority, like the government, has eroded public confidence and disproportionately exposed these populations to humiliation, violence, exploitation, and systemic neglect. In place of social services that should affect them. Drawing from sociological, economic, and cultural perspectives, this paper examines how poor police-community engagement perpetuates social exclusion and weakens the effectiveness of social welfare interventions. It argues that meaningful protection of vulnerable groups requires not only police reform but also the integration of culturally sensitive, community-based policing strategies aligned with local norms and economic realities. This discourse emphasizes the significance of inclusive governance, legal accountability, and public participation in transforming police institutions to align with democratic values and human rights. The theoretical framework for this discourse is Social Contract Theory, which uses secondary data. Employing a multidisciplinary approach and reviewing existing policy gaps, the paper advocates for a rights-based policing model that reinforces social welfare infrastructure and promotes social justice. This paper recommends that the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) should adopt a more committed, fair, and citizen-centered approach to policing to rebuild public confidence, particularly in addressing pervasive challenges such as insecurity, poverty, and social inequality.

Keywords: Nigeria, police-public relations, socioeconomic, sustainable social welfare policy, vulnerable populations

Introduction

Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa and one of its biggest economies, is still facing difficult security and development issues that jeopardize both national unity and the welfare of its people. The nation is beset by pervasive poverty, inequality, insecurity, institutional corruption, and weak governance systems, despite abundant natural and human resources (World Bank, 2020). Over 40% of Nigerians are impoverished, and the country's unemployment and underemployment rates are still high, especially for women and young people (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Persistent insecurity, which ranges from armed banditry and terrorism in the North to secessionist aspirations in the South-East and South-West and intercommunal conflicts in the Middle Belt, exacerbates these socioeconomic indicators (International Crisis Group, 2021).

Law enforcement, especially the Nigeria Police Force (NPF), is crucial in mediating state-citizen relations in this unstable environment. However, the Nigerian police force is frequently seen as a threat to public safety rather than as a symbol of it. According to Alemika & Chukwuma (2000), the NPF has long battled problems of brutality, corruption, and operational inefficiency because of its colonial roots, which gave state authority precedence above community service. Interactions with Nigeria's most vulnerable people, for whom the police are frequently a source of fear and oppression rather than protection, a broken, dysfunctional relationship, for that matter, are where these difficulties most glaringly show out. In actuality, the tense relationship between Nigerians and the police has developed into a persistent issue with wide-ranging effects. According to a 2020 CLEEN Foundation survey, a sizable majority of Nigerians believe that the police are the nation's most corrupt official agency. Lived experiences such as arbitrary arrests, extortion, gender-based assault, and overuse of force influence this impression. Decades of unresolved conflict between the police and the people

they are tasked with protecting were symbolized by the 2020 #EndSARS demonstrations, which were spurred by widespread youth complaints against police brutality (Amnesty International, 2020).

Furthermore, systemic obstacles to justice and welfare frequently affect vulnerable populations in Nigeria, including women, children, internally displaced people (IDPs), people with disabilities (PWDs), and the urban poor. These populations are underrepresented in judicial proceedings and policy decisions that impact their life, despite being overrepresented among victims of crime, abuse, and neglect (UNICEF, 2021). For example, women frequently experience sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), including at the hands of law enforcement. However, a lot of incidents remain unreported because of mistrust of the police, lack of legal assistance, or fear of stigma (Ojigho, 2019). Children are frequently criminalized rather than protected, especially those living on the streets or in areas ravaged by war. While IDPs experience neglect, arbitrary imprisonment, and inadequate security in camps and host communities, people with disabilities encounter both physical and psychological obstacles when trying to obtain police services (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

According to Olonisakin (2008), the lack of community-oriented policing approaches that emphasize communication, collaboration, and cultural sensitivity is a major contributing factor to this antagonistic relationship. Rather, local people are alienated, and authoritarian authority is strengthened by the NPF's continued use of a centralized, militaristic, and command-based organization. This top-down strategy weakens the preventive and welfare-focused facets of policing and reduces accountability. There is a great deal of mistrust and social exclusion in many low-income or informal communities because the police are either nonexistent or use oppressive methods.

As the nation works to implement the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequality), there is a need for police-public relations reform that is not only a matter of law enforcement but also one of national development and human rights (UNDP, 2021). Good police-community interactions are essential to legitimacy, public collaboration, and the efficient administration of justice in democracies. The public is more inclined to report crimes, assist with investigations, and uphold the law when there is trust. Poor relations, on the other hand, cause resistance, anxiety, and the collapse of public order (ibid). Nigeria's social welfare system, which was created to deal with these problems, is still underfunded and disjointed. Despite having admirable objectives, policies like the National Social Protection Policy (NSPP) do not effectively coordinate with local governance institutions and the security sector (World Bank, 2020). Furthermore, a mismatch between policy design and community demands has arisen from the failure to incorporate cultural and economic realities into policy execution. In addition to failing to incorporate traditional authority or community-based groups that are essential for grassroots impact, welfare interventions frequently ignore informal communities and are insensitive to gender or disability (Ibeanu, 2006), and tribal manipulations also plague such endeavors.

Statement of the Problem

Nigeria's security and social welfare landscape is characterized by significant obstacles, such as pervasive poverty, political instability, and weak institutions. Evidence indicates that vulnerable people are disproportionately impacted by police misbehavior and neglect, despite the police's constitutional obligation to protect all citizens. These include people with disabilities who are frequently denied access to justice, women who are victims of gender-based violence, children who are abused and exploited, and urban poor populations that frequently endure harassment and extortion by security personnel (Alubo, 2011; Okafor, 2007).

The implementation gap persists despite the existence of many policy frameworks intended to advance security and social well-being. For example, there is no coordination between the National Social Protection Policy (NSPP) and law enforcement agencies, and its provisions seldom result in real protection for the most vulnerable (World Bank, 2020). Additionally, Nigeria's absence of a community-oriented policing strategy has alienated many communities, making public-police interaction challenging, particularly in low-income and marginalized areas (Alemika, 2003). The situation is made worse by the lack of a rights-based approach to police training, deployment, and evaluation. Many officers engage in discriminatory practices and maltreatment because they lack sufficient training on gender sensitivity, disability rights, or child safety (Ojo, 2014). These disparities underscore the necessity of a revolutionary framework for policy that incorporates human rights values, cultural contexts, and socioeconomic realities into the nation's social welfare and police institutions. The purpose of this article is to provide suggestions for improving a positive police-public interaction that takes vulnerable populations' needs into consideration.

Literature Review

The Police

According to Bittner (1970), the police are a body of persons authorized by the state to enforce the law, maintain public order, and protect life and property. Bayley (1994) asserts that the police are publicly funded and organized groups that are authorized to use force to maintain order and enforce laws within a society. Reiner (2010) added that another way to think of the police is as an institution whose primary function is crime control and the maintenance of social order through the application of legal authority. The police are agents of social regulation whose legitimacy depends on public trust, fairness, and accountability in the exercise of their authority, according to sociological and procedural justice perspectives (Tyler, 2003). This definition moves the emphasis from coercion to legitimacy and the significance of public opinion in efficient law enforcement. Akinlabi (2020) posits that the police are defined as state institutions responsible for ensuring internal security, crime prevention, and community safety through both enforcement and partnership with the public, in a more contemporary and context-sensitive perspective. This concept reflects the current focus on human rights-based methods, community policing, and teamwork.

In 1930, the Nigerian Police Force was established. "Police is your friend" is its motto. As of 2021, there were 371,800 police officers in Nigeria. The Federal Capital Territory (FCT) and 36 State commands make up the massive Nigeria Police Force, which is divided into 17 zones and 8 administrative units. Since its founding, the Nigerian Police Force has undergone a number of reforms that have made it a powerful legal organization. The Police Service Commission, the Nigerian Police Council, and the Ministry of Police Affairs are the three main government agencies that are in charge of controlling and supervising the force (Odeyemi, Temitayo, Obiyan, 2017).

The Public

Dewey (1927) defined the public as a group of persons who are impacted by transactions' indirect effects to the point where it becomes important to systematically address such effects. Blumer (1946) defined the public as a collection of people who are faced with a problem, have differing opinions about how to solve it, and are debating it. According to Habermas (1989), the public is a part of the public sphere, which is a domain of social activity where citizens can develop public opinion through critical and logical discourse. Sociologically speaking, the public is defined as a diverse group of people whose contacts and common interests influence attitudes, actions, and reactions to institutions (Giddens, 1991). According to a more modern interpretation, the public is viewed as a dynamic, networked population of people and organizations whose opinions, engagement, and trust have a big impact on institutional legitimacy and governance (Akinlabi, 2020). According to the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, the public is made up of regular individuals who do not have particular positions in society or work for the government. It is defined as "about or devoted to the welfare or well-being of the community" in American English. The phrase refers to the entire population of a country or state. It refers to common folks in general. It refers to the community, a group of individuals who share traits or interests, particularly the group that a certain endeavor or activity is aimed at. (New World College Dictionary, Webster, 2025).

Sustainable Social Welfare

Sustainable social welfare, according to Midgley & Pawar (2010), is a system of social policies and initiatives that guarantees that future generations may meet their own needs without sacrificing resources, social justice, or environmental balance. It promotes long-term well-being for people and communities by fusing the ideas of social justice, economic efficiency, and environmental sustainability. Sustainability in social welfare, according to the United Nations (2013), means that services, including health care, education, housing, income support, and social services, are planned and provided in ways that are long-term financially feasible, socially inclusive, and environmentally responsible. Developing systems that are egalitarian, flexible, and resilient is the aim, particularly in the face of social, economic, and environmental difficulties.

Segal's (2020) claim that social welfare policy refers to the collection of government initiatives, laws, and rules intended to enhance the well-being of people and communities, especially those who are economically or socially disadvantaged, is a corollary to the aforementioned definitions. In addition to ensuring access to basic services like healthcare, housing, education, and income support, these programs seek to advance social justice and lessen poverty. Social welfare policy has its roots in past reactions to social inequity, conflict, and economic crises. Following the Great Depression and World War II, modern welfare programs greatly expanded in many nations, reflecting a rising confidence in the state's duty to shield its inhabitants from market failures (Midgley, 1997). Theoretically, opposing ideologies like liberalism, conservatism, and social democracy, each of which suggests varying degrees of government assistance and intervention, have an impact on social welfare policies (Dolgoft & Feldstein, 2013). A wide range of initiatives is included in social welfare policy. These include means-tested

programs that target certain populations, like food aid or income support, as well as universal programs like public health care and education. Social Security, Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) are a few examples in the United States (Poppo & Leighninger, 2019). Sound implementation is necessary for social welfare policies to be effective, and this frequently entails cooperation between governmental, nonprofit, and community organizations. To guarantee that programs are fair, effective, and sensitive to shifting social needs, policy evaluation is also essential (Jansson, 2019). Policy outcomes are significantly influenced by factors including administrative burden, eligibility requirements, and service accessibility (Herd & Moynihan, 2018). Rising income disparity, changing demographics, and political polarization are just a few of the many issues facing social welfare policy today. Furthermore, labor markets have changed as a result of globalization and economic restructuring, raising precarity and necessitating new social protection measures (Esping-Andersen, 1990). The need for policymakers to address structural injustices is growing, especially those that impact vulnerable groups, including immigrants, racial minorities, and persons with disabilities.

Police-Public Relations

Tyler (2004) defines police-public relations as the dynamic relationships, attitudes, and degrees of trust that exist between law enforcement and the communities they serve. It describes the methods, procedures, and exchanges that law enforcement organizations use to interface with the public in order to increase community safety, promote cooperation, and develop trust. In order to foster mutual understanding and enhance the community's opinion of the police, it includes community outreach programs, communication efforts, and transparency initiatives (Miller & Hess, 2020). Politics, society, and culture have all influenced how the public and police have interacted throughout history. Policing was seen as an instrument of control rather than a service in many areas, especially those with a history of authoritarianism or social inequality (Goldsmith, 2005). Additionally, Tyler (2004) contends that unfavorable public opinions of the police are still common in some communities, especially those that have been subjected to abuse, discrimination, or marginalization by law enforcement. Therefore, he recommends that in democratic nations, where public trust in law enforcement directly affects legitimacy, legal compliance, and attempts to reduce crime, efficient police-public relations are crucial. Negative relationships can result from misbehavior, excessive force, or a lack of communication, whereas positive relationships are cultivated via regular, courteous encounters, accountability, and a cooperative approach to problem-solving (Goldsmith, 2005). The objective is to transition from reactive policing to a model that promotes collaboration and shared accountability for the welfare of the community (Cordner, 2014). Modern policing is recommended by Cordner (2014) as a means of enhancing police-public relations. He claims that community policing, a concept that promotes active public participation, decentralized authority, and cooperative problem-solving, is a key component of contemporary policing. It helps to foster trust and enhance views of police legitimacy by transforming officers' roles from those of mere law enforcement to those of community collaborators. Public support is more likely to be gained by police departments that listen to public concerns, have open conversations, and adopt reforms based on community input. On the other hand, inadequate communication, overuse of force, and a lack of accountability frequently result in public discontent and a decline in confidence (Tyler, 2004; Goldsmith, 2005).

Vulnerable Populations

A group of people who face an increased risk of negative physical, psychological, or social outcomes because of things like poverty, prejudice, disability, or restricted access to resources and services is referred to as a vulnerable population, according to Chambers & Wedel (2016). These groups frequently face structural obstacles that make it difficult for them to attain and preserve security, well-being, and full social involvement. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2010) highlights the connection between social deprivation and exposure to harm by defining vulnerability as the extent to which a population, individual, or organization is unable to foresee, cope with, resist, and recover from the impact of a hazard.

Schröder-Butterfill & Mariani (2006) define vulnerability as a multifaceted notion that includes risk and resilience at the individual, community, and systemic levels. Vulnerability at the individual level can be associated with social isolation, cognitive ability, or health. Policies, institutions, and cultural norms can either lessen or increase vulnerability at the social level. An intersectional approach, which acknowledges how several social identities, such as race, gender, age, and socioeconomic status, interact to shape experiences of disadvantage and exclusion, is necessary to comprehend vulnerable people (Crenshaw, 1991). Children, the elderly, people with disabilities, members of racial and ethnic minorities, refugees, the homeless, and those living in poverty are common examples of vulnerable groups. A variety of biological, social, economic, and environmental factors combine to form vulnerability, which is not a fixed trait (Mechanic & Tanner, 2007).

Crucially, designating certain populations as "vulnerable" can have both positive and negative effects. On the one hand, it aids in identifying individuals who require focused assistance and policy consideration. However, by perpetuating feelings of powerlessness, it may unintentionally stigmatize or disempower people (Brown, 2011). Vulnerability must therefore be viewed as a result of systemic injustices and external institutions rather than just an inherent trait. There are various dimensions into which vulnerability can be divided:

1. A lack of money, work, or access to essential services that results in dependency and social exclusion is referred to as economic vulnerability (Segal, 2020).
2. Physical or mental health issues that make a person more susceptible to illness, inadequate access to treatment, or chronic disease are examples of health vulnerability (Mechanic & Tanner, 2007).
3. Weak social networks, prejudice, or cultural marginalization that limit access to opportunities or support systems are examples of social vulnerability (Schröder-Butterfill & Marianti, 2006).
4. Exposure to hazardous living circumstances, pollution, or climate-related risks that disproportionately impact low-income or marginalized people is reflected in environmental vulnerability (WHO, 2010).

These factors frequently interact to create intricate patterns of disadvantage. As an example of how vulnerabilities can worsen over time, a person who is homeless may also experience poor health outcomes, unemployment, and social stigma. Developing inclusive healthcare systems, targeted interventions, and equitable social welfare programs all depend on an understanding of vulnerable people. The underlying reasons of vulnerability are not addressed by policies that ignore structural factors like racism, poverty, or institutional bias. In order to empower vulnerable populations and advance social justice, human rights, and dignity, social workers, public health professionals, and legislators must embrace comprehensive frameworks (Chambers & Wedel, 2016; Segal, 2020). The objective of contemporary welfare systems is to foster circumstances that foster resilience and lessen dependency in addition to offering assistance. These covers include access to healthcare, work, education, and legal protection. Participating meaningfully in decision-making processes and customizing treatments to the unique cultural, economic, and social circumstances of impacted people are key components of empowering vulnerable groups (WHO, 2010).

Overview of Vulnerable Populations in Nigeria

Due to overlapping institutional, cultural, and economic disadvantages, many groups in Nigeria stand out as being especially vulnerable. These include the elderly, urban poor, women (especially females), children, and people with disabilities (PWDs). According to WHO (2022), these populations frequently face several axes of marginalization due to factors such as gender, age, poverty, handicap status, and cultural norms, and their interactions with the judicial and law enforcement systems often mirror and exacerbate these vulnerabilities. Gender differences in access to school, land, employment, and economic empowerment continue to exist throughout Nigeria, restricting women's agency and putting them at greater risk of violence and marginalization. Women and girls continue to be a major disenfranchised group. Danjuma, Onimode, and Onche (2015) claim that the gender digital divide and more general structural injustices limit women's involvement in important governance and developmental activities. Women may also be more vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and have less access to gender-sensitive justice and policing services. Although the establishment of national laws like the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015 (VAPP Act) is a step in the right direction, state-by-state enforcement is still unequal. Women's marginalization in law enforcement environments is exacerbated culturally by the stigma attached to victimhood and the belief that police and justice institutions are unresponsive or hostile.

Another unique susceptible group is children. Children are particularly vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, neglect, and unfair interactions with the criminal justice system due to their vulnerable position, lack of autonomy, and frequent residence in low-income households or environments influenced by conflict. According to a recent analysis, 133,906 children and young adults in Nigeria were deprived of their freedom between 2018 and 2022, with 92% of them detained in adult detention facilities (UNICEF, 2025). In addition, many children experience protracted pre-trial detention, inadequate safeguards against abuse in detention, and a dearth of child-friendly legal procedures. Children's ability to reintegrate and be included in society is compromised by the justice gaps in their policing and incarceration, which also expose them to grave rights violations (ibid).

People with disabilities (PWDs) are another significant marginalized population, according to reports from Inclusive News Network (2025). Approximately 35.1 million Nigerians are living with disabilities (NCPWDs), according to the latest statistics. Among this group, women and girls are especially disadvantaged; according to one study, 64% of Nigerian women with impairments had been sexually abused. People with disabilities frequently encounter widespread obstacles such as a lack of public transportation, accessible infrastructure, communication assistance (like sign language interpreters), and exclusion from formal employment. For instance, fundamental accessibility measures are absent from 28% of Nigerian health facilities. These sociodemographic

facts result in increased susceptibility to contact with the justice and law enforcement systems. For example, physical or verbal difficulties may prevent PWDs from reporting crimes, accessing police stations, or obtaining legal counsel, making them invisible in protective frameworks.

Owoaje & Akinyemi (2015) and Folorunsho (2025) assert that although they are not as commonly mentioned, the elderly people are also marginalized groups in Nigeria. Elderly people often live in poverty, have no access to social security or pensions, have health and mobility issues, and rely mostly on unofficial support systems. They are vulnerable to abuse, neglect, and institutional invisibility in policing settings due to their social and economic vulnerability. There is little research that directly connects policing problems to a large number of elderly Nigerians. However, larger poverty and justice disparities imply that older people are at risk in the legal system because of their structural exclusion and diminished sociopolitical voice.

The list of important marginalized groups concludes with urban impoverished communities. In Nigeria, peri-urban shanty towns, slums, and informal settlements with poor infrastructure, high crime rates, and unstable livelihoods are the main locations for urban poverty. According to research on the legal empowerment of urban poor in Nigeria, people living in informal settlements are subject to discrimination, forceful evictions, low tenure security, and restricted access to basic police protection and justice. These populations are marginalized by official policing and justice outreach due to their socioeconomic background, which limits their access to protective institutions and increases their vulnerability to victimization and criminal justice disadvantage (IDRC, 2025).

Challenges Faced by Marginalized Groups / Vulnerable Populations in Relation to Law Enforcement and Justice

Alabi-Akande (2025) claims that the way these vulnerable groups interact with Nigeria's police and legal systems exposes significant structural, cultural, and socioeconomic issues that compromise their safety and confidence. Hence, he made these assertions: Inadequate gender-sensitive policing procedures, victim-blaming attitudes, demands for bribery or extortion, and the lack of dedicated investigative units are some of the challenges faced by women and girls, especially those who are victims of SGBV. Researchers discovered, for example, that certain police investigations into sexual abuse of women and children in Lagos required families to pay or provide specific discharge procedures before the investigations could move forward. These lower reporting rates among vulnerable women and girls perpetuate the idea that the police are unreliable.

Children experience similar shortcomings in the legal system. Only around two-thirds of Nigeria's states have domesticated legislative frameworks like the Child Rights Act 2003, and children often endure protracted pre-trial detention while being imprisoned alongside adults without access to legal counsel. In fact, according to one survey, 74% of youngsters in borstal institutions were awaiting trial, illustrating the systemic injustice and delay. Police public relations suffer as a result of these shortcomings because families of children from underprivileged backgrounds sometimes perceive the police as antagonistic, unresponsive, or combative.

Individuals with disabilities have an additional set of difficulties. Many police stations, courts, and other justice system buildings are still inaccessible and lack accommodations, such as physical infrastructure or sign language interpreters, notwithstanding regulations. According to one investigative article, police stations lack communication support, so women and girls with disabilities are unable to report sexual assault. They are frequently turned away or required to pay for translators. The historical charity model of disability, data gaps, and structural discrimination all contribute to the exclusion of people with disabilities from policing institutions, which compromises justice and safety.

Elderly people encounter similar obstacles, mobility problems, diminished social networks, a lack of awareness of their rights, and a diminished ability to interact with law enforcement or courts, despite being underrepresented in studies on the judicial system. Elder abuse, neglect, or property conflicts may exacerbate their experiences, yet institutional responses frequently fail to distinguish their age-specific vulnerabilities or offer elderly-sensitive policing or social assistance measures.

Urban impoverished areas face unique issues related to justice relations and enforcement. According to research, people living in informal settlements frequently view law enforcement as extractive rather than protective. For instance, police in underfunded stations may utilize extortion due to operational shortcomings, which undermines their legitimacy. According to studies on legal empowerment conducted in Nigeria, people living in informal settlements are subject to forceful evictions, informal policing, inadequate tenure security, and a restricted ability to seek rights from law enforcement. The poorest people are less likely to interact with law enforcement and the court system due to their inability to pay for legal aid, fear of police retaliation, lack of knowledge, and cultural marginalization.

All of these oppressed populations are also impacted by problems with the systemic justice system. For instance, the wrongful incarceration of impoverished residents results from the judiciary's refusal to enforce mandatory inspections of police detention facilities. Vulnerable communities' trust in police is being undermined by several factors, including a lack of legal knowledge, corruption, poor institutional implementation, and cultural norms that inhibit reporting abuse. The goal of long-term police public relations and the defense of vulnerable groups is generally undermined by these processes.

Socioeconomic and Cultural Approach

A multidisciplinary framework called the socioeconomic and cultural approach is used to comprehend how social, economic, and cultural elements interact to influence human behavior, chances in life, and resource availability. It highlights how broader structural factors, such as income distribution, educational systems, social norms, and cultural values, have an impact on individual and community outcomes, including health, education, employment, and social mobility, in addition to individual choices (Anderson & Taylor, 2012; Marmot, 2005). This method acknowledges the close relationship between cultural influences (such as customs, beliefs, and social practices) and economic circumstances (like wealth or poverty). In order to evaluate the various causes of inequality and create inclusive solutions that respect cultural diversity while tackling economic disparities, the framework is widely used in fields like social work, public health, sociology, and education (UNESCO, 2010).

Adler & Ostrove (1999) assert that access to resources like healthcare, decent housing, and educational opportunities is significantly impacted by socioeconomic status (SES), which includes income, education level, and occupational status. Chronic stress, limited upward mobility, and health inequities are more common among people from lower SES origins. Particularly for vulnerable populations, this discrepancy perpetuates cycles of poverty and social marginalization. Belief systems, family structures, communication techniques, and values are all influenced by culture. A cultural perspective recognizes how deeply ingrained cultural norms and collective histories are in people's behavior (Geertz, 1973). Ignoring cultural factors while developing policies or providing services might lead to initiatives that are harmful or ineffectual. For example, certain people may not participate in health initiatives if cultural views toward medicine are not taken into account (Kleinman & Benson, 2006).

A more comprehensive framework for comprehending inequality and creating equitable actions is provided by combining socioeconomic and cultural viewpoints. For instance, overcoming achievement gaps in school necessitates recognizing both material disparities and culturally appropriate teaching methods (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The social determinants of health framework in public health incorporates these aspects to advance health equity (World Health Organization, 2008). In general, the socioeconomic and cultural approach emphasizes the necessity of both individual-level assistance and structural change, encouraging interventions that are both justice-focused and context-sensitive. Therefore, when it comes to police-public relations, the police should consider and incorporate cultural demands as long as they are in compliance with national legislation.

Theoretical Frameworks: Social Contract Theory

A fundamental framework for comprehending the connection between the state, its security apparatus (especially the police), and the populace is provided by the Social Contract Theory, especially when it comes to safeguarding vulnerable groups. The theory, which has its roots in the philosophical writings of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, asserts that people give their explicit or implicit consent to give up some liberties to the state in return for security and the preservation of social order (Rousseau, 1762/2002; Locke, 1689/1980). This theoretical framework aids in examining the police's legitimacy, responsibility, and effectiveness in carrying out their duty as public defenders in Nigeria, particularly concerning vulnerable populations, including women, children, people with disabilities, and the underprivileged. Social Contract Theory holds that the state (via its institutions) has a moral and political duty to protect everyone's welfare. The relationship is broken, and the legitimacy of state power is compromised when state agents, including the police, actively mistreat or fail to protect these groups (Rawls, 1971).

Additionally, the Social Contract Theory emphasizes the importance of reciprocal duty and mutual trust. The public must have faith in law enforcement agencies for police to be both successful and socially just. However, this confidence has been damaged in Nigeria due to numerous reports of police violence, corruption, and discrimination, particularly among socioeconomically disadvantaged communities (Amnesty International, 2020; Adebayo, 2021). These failures in public security and protection disproportionately harm vulnerable people, who are already marginalized by poverty and cultural marginalization. The examination goes beyond legal requirements to consider the structural and cultural elements that influence police action and public perceptions by utilizing a socioeconomic and cultural approach within the framework of Social Contract Theory. Gender, ethnic, and class-related cultural norms frequently affect who is protected and who is abused or neglected. In this

sense, Social Contract Theory calls for a fair reorganization of public institutions to rebalance the contract and advance long-term social welfare (Olowu, 2018). All things considered, this approach to police-public relations emphasizes the necessity of both systemic change and individual-level support, encouraging actions that are both justice-oriented and context-sensitive. The police must be aware of the cultural contexts in which they operate to maintain peace and order among vulnerable communities. Both the institutional changes required to restore public trust and the structural injustices that create vulnerability must be addressed by a long-term social welfare program based on Social Contract Theory. Promoting community policing models, raising police accountability, incorporating cultural competence into law enforcement training, and making sure welfare policies are inclusive and sensitive to the needs of marginalized communities are all examples of this (Dominelli, 2013; UNDP, 2019). In Nigeria, redefining security, justice, and welfare as shared social goods necessitates a participatory process involving the state and its population.

Discussion of Findings

The findings reveal that police-public relations in Nigeria are shaped by entrenched structural and institutional legacies. The Nigeria Police Force (NPF) continues to reflect a centralized and coercive model rooted in its colonial origins, resulting in weak accountability and a persistent legitimacy deficit. Consistent with procedural justice theory (Tyler, 2004), public trust is undermined by experiences of extortion, arbitrary detention, and excessive force, with events such as #EndSARS illustrating widespread and accumulated distrust.

A key finding is the disproportionate impact of policing on vulnerable populations. Drawing on intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), the study shows that women, children, persons with disabilities (PWDs), the elderly, and the urban poor experience compounded disadvantage. Practices such as victim-blaming in sexual violence cases, prolonged detention of children, and the inaccessibility of justice systems for PWDs highlight a gap between formal protections and lived realities, reinforcing perceptions of the police as punitive rather than protective.

The study further indicates that vulnerability is structurally produced through systemic exclusion, particularly for marginalized groups in informal settlements and low-income contexts. Here, policing is often perceived as extractive, discouraging engagement and weakening community trust. These patterns are reinforced by broader institutional deficiencies, including corruption, weak oversight, and poor policy implementation, as well as a disconnect between policing and social welfare systems.

Theoretically, the findings support Social Contract Theory, demonstrating that the failure of the police to protect vulnerable groups represents a breach of state responsibility, thereby eroding legitimacy and public trust. A socioeconomic and cultural lens further highlights how inequality and social norms shape both police conduct and public perceptions. In practice, policing remains largely reactive and enforcement-driven, with limited adoption of community-oriented approaches. This sustains adversarial police-public relations and limits effective crime prevention.

Policy implications point to the need for a shift toward rights-based and community-oriented policing, emphasizing accountability, inclusivity, and cultural competence. Strengthening coordination between law enforcement and social welfare institutions, alongside participatory community engagement, is essential for rebuilding trust. Overall, the findings demonstrate that improving police-public relations in Nigeria requires comprehensive reforms addressing both institutional practices and broader structural inequalities.

Conclusion

To achieve inclusive development, citizen trust, and lasting peace, police-public relations must be improved. Diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural origins define Nigeria. The context shows that the Nigerian police's legitimacy and efficacy in carrying out their social duty have been compromised by long-standing socioeconomic disparities, cultural mismatches, and institutional shortcomings. The main issue, as civil unrest and crime increase, is that Nigeria has not been able to provide safety, dignity, and access to basic amenities for all citizens, particularly the disenfranchised.

Additionally, the ongoing mistrust between the police and the communities they serve has not only exacerbated social exclusion but also sustained the marginalization of those most in need of state protection, such as women, children, people with disabilities, and those from low-income backgrounds. Furthermore, police brutality, intimidation, arbitrary arrests, extortion, excessive force, lack of communication, excessive use of force, etc. have damaged the public's trust in the police, whose occupational hazard is greater than that of any other career path. As frontline actors in identifying, assisting, and safeguarding at-risk communities, the police must carry out the objectives for which they were established.

This will translate into helping the general public, maintaining public order, preventing, detecting, and reporting crime, as well as providing security and apprehending offenders. However, improving the public-police interaction is essential to achieving sustained social welfare and protecting vulnerable communities in Nigeria. The purpose of this article is to analyze the current condition of poor police-public relations and offer ideas that will have a significant impact.

Recommendations

- The Nigeria Police Force (NPF) should adopt a more committed, fair, and citizen-centered approach to policing to rebuild public confidence, particularly in addressing pervasive challenges such as insecurity, poverty, and social inequality.
- The Nigerian government should prioritize comprehensive institutional and policy reforms that enhance transparency, accountability, and professionalism within the police force.
- These reforms should be grounded in the principles of Social Contract Theory, ensuring that policing serves the collective welfare of citizens rather than narrow political or elite interests.
- Community-based and culturally sensitive policing strategies should be implemented to rebuild trust and improve protection for vulnerable populations.
- Policing should adopt a participatory, community-oriented model that actively engages local leaders, civil society organizations, religious institutions, and traditional authorities in decision-making processes.
- Stronger inter-agency collaboration should be institutionalized between the police, social workers, healthcare providers, and welfare agencies to ensure coordinated responses to social and security challenges.
- The government should invest in continuous in-service training for police personnel, focusing on human rights, gender sensitivity, disability inclusion, and social protection, to enhance professionalism and improve police–public relations

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