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Police Favouritism and Crime Reporting in Wukari Local Government Area, Taraba State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study investigates the extent to which perceived partiality in policing influences crime reporting behavior among residents of Wukari. A descriptive, cross-sectional survey research design was adopted. From a population of 374,800, a sample size of 400 respondents was determined using the Taro Yamane formula. Questionnaires were distributed to the selected participants through random sampling, and 350 were successfully retrieved for analysis. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequency, percentages, means, and standard deviations). The findings revealed that the level of crime reporting in Wukari is low. The results also indicated that police favouritism, particularly in favoring wealthy, influential, or famous individuals, has a significant negative impact on crime reporting. Marginalized groups often refrain from reporting crimes due to fear of neglect or retaliation. Statistical analysis showed significant correlations between various dimensions of police favouritism and crime reporting, confirming that favouritism erodes public trust and weakens police-community cooperation. The study recommends that the Nigeria Police Force adopt community-oriented policing strategies to rebuild trust, institutionalize ethics and anti-bias training for officers, and implement transparent accountability mechanisms to ensure equitable treatment of all citizens.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, police impartiality has become a growing concern in criminal justice systems across the world. In both developed and developing nations, trust in the police is largely tied to perceptions of fairness, neutrality, and equal treatment in handling crime. However, research has shown that in many societies, citizens perceive the police as biased, favouring certain social, political, or ethnic groups over others, which in turn negatively impacts crime reporting (Tyler & Jackson, 2014). According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2022), public confidence in law enforcement is crucial for effective crime prevention and community safety. Where favouritism exists, particularly when it is based on political affiliations, ethnicity, or class, people are less likely to report crimes, thereby weakening the criminal justice system and increasing impunity.

In Africa, issues of police corruption, partiality, and selective justice have persisted for decades, with many citizens viewing the police as instruments of repression rather than protection. A study by Alemika (2021) revealed that police favouritism in African countries like Kenya, South Africa, and Nigeria tends to reduce public trust, discourage civic engagement, and increase the culture of silence around crime. In many instances, the perception that the police will only act when the offender or complainant is affiliated with the ruling elite has hindered cooperation between the police and the public (Hope, 2018). This challenge is further compounded by deep-seated ethnic divisions and political patronage systems that infiltrate police operations.

Nigeria, like many African states, has grappled with widespread public discontent over police conduct. Incidents of police brutality, extortion, and selective enforcement of the law have been frequently reported. Citizens have expressed frustrations over situations where the police ignore reports from "ordinary" citizens while acting swiftly when reports come from elites, politicians, or their affiliates (Amnesty International, 2021). The End SARS protest of 2020 underscored a nationwide frustration with not just brutality but also systemic partiality and the perceived inability or unwillingness of the police to treat all citizens equally before the law (Ajayi, 2021). The consequence of this is a breakdown in

police-community relations, erosion of public trust, and a significant decline in crime reporting.

Regionally, the Northern part of Nigeria has witnessed a unique interplay of ethnic, religious, and political dynamics that shape police operations. In states like Kaduna, Kano, Benue, and Taraba, citizens often report feeling marginalised or discriminated against by security agencies due to their ethnic identity or political leaning (Yusuf, 2020). For example, police officers are frequently accused of turning a blind eye to crimes committed by persons aligned with powerful groups while vigorously pursuing those without such backing. These practices have led to growing resentment among the populace, increased self-help measures, and an upsurge in retaliatory violence in communities where justice seems inaccessible.

In Taraba State, particularly in Wukari Local Government Area, there may be growing concerns about the presence of police favouritism in handling crime-related issues. Wukari, known for its ethnic and religious diversity, has historically experienced episodes of communal tension and conflict. In such a context, the role of the police in maintaining neutrality is critical. However, it is possible that perceptions of bias or selective justice have emerged, especially in the ways crimes are reported and responded to by law enforcement agents. Allegations of police officers being influenced by ethnic, religious, or political considerations when responding to complaints may be contributing to a decline in public confidence.

There is a likelihood that some residents perceive the police as more responsive to individuals with political influence or ethnic affiliations aligned with the dominant power structures in the area. On the other hand, those from minority or marginalised communities may feel discouraged from reporting crimes due to the fear that their complaints will be ignored or inadequately addressed. This situation, if left unexamined, could result in a breakdown of police-community relations, an increase in unreported crimes, and a general erosion of trust in the criminal justice process in Wukari.

Given these speculative trends, it becomes imperative to investigate how perceived or actual police favouritism may be influencing crime reporting behaviours in the area. Understanding these dynamics will help to uncover potential barriers to justice and inform strategies to strengthen community trust and policing effectiveness. It is against this

background that this study seeks to explore the possible relationship between police favouritism and crime reporting in the Wukari Local Government Area of Taraba State.

Overview of Police Favouritism and Crime Reporting

Empirical studies conducted across various socio-political and cultural settings have shown that perceptions of police bias, favouritism, and discrimination significantly affect the public's willingness to report crime. The relationship between law enforcement practices and community trust has been the subject of growing academic attention, particularly in regions grappling with weak institutions, corruption, and ethnic diversity.

In a broad study of procedural justice and crime reporting across Western democracies, Goudriaan, Lynch, and Nieuwbeerta (2004) found that communities with higher levels of trust in the police were more likely to report crimes. Their findings suggest that perceptions of police fairness, responsiveness, and neutrality are essential for fostering public cooperation. Where the police are perceived to act selectively or based on personal bias, crime reporting rates decline. These observations are critical when considering the situation in Wukari, where ethnic and political divisions could influence the way police actions are perceived.

Similarly, Murphy and Cherney (2011) conducted a study in Australia to examine how negative experiences with the police affect future crime reporting. They found that individuals who perceived the police as disrespectful, biased, or unhelpful were significantly less likely to report crimes in the future. Although this study was situated in a developed context, the insights remain relevant to developing societies like Nigeria, where police credibility is often contested.

Focusing on Sub-Saharan Africa, Tankebe (2008) explored police legitimacy and public cooperation in Ghana. His research revealed that perceptions of police corruption and favouritism, such as giving preferential treatment to elites, ethnic majority groups, or those with political influence, undermined citizens' willingness to engage with law enforcement. Many respondents preferred to resolve issues informally, through family or community leaders, rather than approach the police. This dynamic is likely replicated in rural and ethnically diverse areas of Nigeria, like Wukari, where informal structures often substitute formal justice mechanisms due to perceived bias.

In Nigeria, several studies have empirically linked police favouritism to underreporting of crime. Okeshola and Mudiare (2013), in a study on the efficiency of the Nigerian Police, noted that respondents frequently complained about selective responses to complaints, with poorer or less connected individuals receiving little attention. They observed that political affiliation, socio-economic status, and ethnic identity were common determinants of whether a reported case would be pursued by the police. This situation creates a sense of helplessness and may discourage crime victims from approaching the police.

Boateng (2018) reported similar findings in his study on public cooperation with law enforcement in Ghana. He emphasized that beyond police actions, citizens' perceptions about the impartiality of officers influenced their likelihood of reporting crime. His findings indicated that marginalized populations were less inclined to seek police assistance due to prior experiences of neglect or discrimination. These results parallel anecdotal evidence from Wukari, where some communities may feel excluded from formal security networks due to ethnic or religious identity.

In South Africa, Faull (2010) conducted a study on community perceptions of policing in violent urban neighbourhoods and found that people often viewed the police as serving the interests of certain ethnic or economic groups. This perception discouraged community members from reporting crimes, especially in cases involving influential suspects. Instead, many opted to seek justice through vigilante groups or local traditional authorities.

Alemika and Chukwuma (2004), in their extensive work on policing and security in Nigeria, highlighted that favouritism within the Nigerian Police Force has historical and institutional roots. Their national survey found that a significant proportion of Nigerians believed the police were more responsive to influential individuals and groups. The consequences of this favouritism included increased underreporting of crime, reliance on self-help, and further erosion of the police-public relationship.

More specifically, Ede, Igbo, and Ugwuoke (2021) examined police-public relations in Southern Nigeria and found a direct relationship between police responsiveness and the likelihood of crime reporting. In areas where police officers were perceived as biased or corrupt, respondents were significantly less inclined to report incidents of crime. Factors such as tribalism, bribery, and selective enforcement were cited as reasons for disengagement. This phenomenon likely reflects the situation in Wukari, where complex inter-ethnic tensions could influence perceptions of police neutrality.

Onuigbo and Ude (2020) also found that the presence of police favouritism contributed to rising insecurity in various Nigerian communities. Their study revealed that residents often chose to remain silent on criminal incidents due to a lack of faith in the objectivity of law enforcement officers. Their findings stressed the need for institutional reform and community engagement to rebuild trust and improve reporting behaviors.

Although limited scholarly attention has been devoted specifically to Wukari LGA, reports by civil society and media suggest that similar patterns of police bias and crime underreporting exist in the area. Given Wukari's ethno-religious diversity and history of communal conflict, it is plausible that residents who perceive the police as being aligned with certain groups may withhold cooperation. In such environments, selective policing not only affects reporting but also escalates conflict and reduces the overall legitimacy of law enforcement institutions.

Collectively, the empirical literature demonstrates a strong and consistent link between police favouritism and crime reporting behavior. Across different geographical and cultural contexts, where the police are seen to act impartially and professionally, public trust increases and crime reporting improves. Conversely, where favouritism, corruption, or bias is perceived, people disengage from the formal justice system, resorting instead to informal mechanisms or choosing inaction altogether. These insights are particularly relevant for understanding and addressing challenges related to policing and crime reporting in the Wukari LGA of Taraba State.

Theoretical framework: Labeling Theory originated in the 1960s as part of the symbolic interactionist tradition in sociology. The theory was largely developed by sociologist Howard Becker, who published Outsiders in 1963, a seminal work that examined how society reacts to deviant behavior and how such reactions can shape identity. Earlier, Frank Tannenbaum introduced the idea of the "dramatisation of evil," which influenced Becker's work. Other notable contributors include Edwin Lemert, who distinguished between primary and secondary deviance, suggesting that deviant labels can push individuals into further deviance once society reacts negatively to their behaviour (Lemert, 1951; Becker, 1963).

Labeling Theory is grounded in the assumption that deviance is not inherent in any act, but rather is the result of the social response to that act. It argues that societal reaction, particularly by figures of authority like the police, determines who is labeled as deviant.

Once an individual or group is labelled, this label can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, leading to internalisation of deviant identities and further exclusion from societal participation. The theory also assumes that power dynamics influence which groups are more likely to be labeled negatively, often those who are socially or economically disadvantaged.

Labelling Theory is particularly useful in understanding how police favouritism may discourage crime reporting in the Wukari LGA. When law enforcement officers are perceived to treat certain ethnic, religious, or political groups more favourably than others, individuals from marginalised groups may begin to feel stigmatised or ignored. Over time, those who believe they will not be taken seriously or who have been previously dismissed may avoid reporting crimes altogether, fearing judgment, neglect, or even being wrongfully labelled as troublemakers themselves. This can foster distrust in the justice system, underreporting of crime, and the alienation of entire communities, deepening societal divisions, and weakening public safety efforts.

One of the key strengths of Labeling Theory is its focus on the role of societal reactions and power in defining deviance, rather than simply viewing deviance as a result of individual pathology. It highlights how stigmatisation and discrimination by authorities like the police can have real social consequences, such as isolation, secondary deviance, and lack of institutional trust. The theory also emphasises the importance of fairness, equality, and inclusive law enforcement practices, making it highly relevant to justice system disparities.

Despite its strengths, Labelling Theory has some limitations. Critics argue that it tends to overemphasise societal reaction and underestimate personal responsibility in deviant behaviour. It also lacks a clear explanation of why individuals commit deviant acts in the first place, focusing more on the aftermath of labeling than its origins. Additionally, the theory may not adequately address structural and systemic issues such as poverty or institutional corruption that influence both deviance and police behaviour. Nonetheless, in the context of police favouritism and crime reporting, the theory remains valuable for highlighting the consequences of biased enforcement and social exclusion.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive, cross-sectional survey research design to examine the impact of police favouritism on crime reporting in the Wukari Local Government Area (LGA) of Taraba State. A sample size of 400 respondents was determined using the Taro Yamane formula from a total population of 374,800. The respondents were selected through a random sampling technique to ensure fairness and representation across the LGA.

Questionnaires were distributed to all 400 selected participants; however, 350 questionnaires were successfully retrieved and analyzed, resulting in an 87.5% response rate. The instrument used for data collection consisted of items measured on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The midpoint of the scale, 2.5, served as the benchmark for interpreting responses: mean scores above 2.5 were considered to indicate a significant perceived impact of police favouritism on crime reporting, while mean scores below 2.5 suggested minimal or negligible impact.

In addition to mean scores, standard deviation values were assessed to evaluate the level of agreement among respondents. Lower standard deviation values indicated greater consensus, while higher values reflected more variability in responses. This combination of descriptive statistics provided insights into both the central tendencies and the dispersion of perceptions across the sampled population.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Respondent Rating of Crime Reporting in Wukari LGA, N=400

Level	Frequency	Percentage
Low	173	49.4 %
Average	155	44.3%
High	22	6.3%
Total	**350**	**100%**

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 1 shows the distribution of respondents' perceptions regarding the level of crime reporting in Wukari Local Government Area. Out of 350 respondents, the majority (49.4%) rated crime reporting as low, while 44.3% described it as average. Only a small fraction (6.3%) perceived the level as high.

These findings indicate that crime reporting in Wukari LGA is generally inadequate, with most residents expressing concern over limited engagement with law enforcement. The high percentage of respondents who rated crime reporting as low suggests a prevailing reluctance among citizens to report crimes, possibly due to distrust in the police, fear of bias or retaliation, and lack of confidence in the justice system. The low percentage of high ratings reinforces the perception that formal crime reporting mechanisms are underutilized, pointing to the need for interventions aimed at improving police-community relations and encouraging proactive crime reporting behaviours.

Table 2: Respondents' Rating of Impact of Police Favouritism on Crime Reporting in Wukari LGA, N=350

Impact	SA	A	U	D	SD	Mean	Std. Deviation
Police favoritism often results in inconsistent enforcement of laws, eroding public trust.	64	162	22	40	62	3.3600	1.37585
Victims from marginalized communities may avoid reporting crimes, fearing dismissal or retaliation.	174	117	0	27	32	4.0686	1.27614
Favouritism can lead to the concentration of police resources in affluent or influential areas, leaving other regions underserved.	108	183	0	22	37	3.8657	1.22380
Favouritism in law enforcement perpetuates a culture of impunity for certain individuals or groups, undermining the rule of law.	155	136	0	25	34	4.0086	1.26782
Favouritism fosters divisions within communities, as some groups receive preferential treatment while others feel alienated.	138	165	0	33	14	4.0857	1.06175
Police fair treatment of cases fairly for the high-income class for gain.	165	138	0	13	34	4.1057	1.21957
Fair cases and favorable treatment for famous people in society.	185	118	0	18	29	4.1771	1.20531
Individuals with crime labels or low status are not given favorable treatment	153	138	12	25	22	4.0714	1.14958

Table 2 presents the respondents' perceptions of how police favouritism affects crime reporting in Wukari LGA. The data, collected using a 5-point Likert scale, indicate that all the listed items had mean scores above the midpoint of 2.5, suggesting that police favouritism significantly influences crime reporting in the area.

The item with the highest mean score was the perception that famous people receive favorable treatment from the police (Mean = 4.18, Std = 1.205), indicating a strong consensus that prominence in society affects how police handle cases. This was closely followed by the statement that the police fairly treat high-income individuals for personal gain (Mean = 4.11, Std = 1.220), underscoring socioeconomic bias in law enforcement practices.

Similarly, a large number of respondents agreed that police favouritism fosters divisions within communities, as some groups enjoy preferential treatment while others feel alienated (Mean = 4.09, Std = 1.062). This item also recorded the lowest standard deviation, indicating a relatively high level of agreement among respondents. The belief that individuals with criminal labels or low social status are denied fair treatment also received high agreement (Mean = 4.07, Std = 1.150), suggesting that stigma and class stratification influence police response.

Respondents further agreed that victims from marginalised communities avoid reporting crimes due to fear of retaliation or being ignored (Mean = 4.07, Std = 1.276), highlighting trust issues between vulnerable groups and the police. The idea that favouritism perpetuates impunity and undermines the rule of law also received strong endorsement (Mean = 4.01, Std = 1.268), reinforcing concerns about systemic bias.

The belief that police resources are disproportionately concentrated in affluent areas (Mean = 3.87, Std = 1.224) also scored high, indicating that spatial inequalities are perceived in service delivery. The lowest-rated item, though still above the midpoint, was the idea that inconsistent enforcement of laws due to favouritism erodes public trust (Mean = 3.36, Std = 1.376), suggesting some variation in opinion on this issue, as indicated by its relatively high standard deviation.

Overall, the findings underscore a strong public perception that police favouritism significantly hampers fair crime reporting in Wukari LGA. The relatively high mean scores across all items highlight systemic concerns regarding inequality in law enforcement, while

the standard deviation values show moderate to high levels of agreement among respondents.

CONCLUSION

Findings from the study reveal that crime reporting in Wukari Local Government Area remains generally low, with a significant portion of respondents rating it as either low or average. This trend suggests that a large number of crimes may go unreported due to systemic issues within the policing framework. Police favouritism emerged as a central factor influencing this underreporting. Respondents consistently highlighted preferential treatment of the wealthy, politically connected, and prominent individuals in society, while marginalized groups, including the poor and those with criminal labels, often face neglect or discriminatory responses.

The data further indicate that police favouritism not only discourages crime reporting but also fosters division within the community, breeds mistrust, and erodes the legitimacy of law enforcement. The perception that some individuals are above the law, combined with the fear of retaliation or being ignored, reduces the willingness of residents to cooperate with the police. These findings underscore the urgent need for reforms that prioritise fairness, equal treatment, and community engagement in policing practices in Wukari.

In conclusion, police favouritism significantly undermines public trust and hampers effective crime reporting in Wukari LGA. The study shows that perceptions of bias in law enforcement practices contribute to a sense of alienation among residents, particularly among marginalized communities. This lack of trust discourages individuals from reporting crimes, thereby weakening the capacity of the police to prevent and respond to criminal activities. Additionally, favouritism reinforces social inequality and perpetuates a culture of impunity, where justice is perceived as accessible only to the privileged.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following key recommendations are proposed to address police favouritism and improve crime reporting in Wukari LGA: The Nigeria Police Force should prioritise regular engagement with community members through town hall meetings, neighborhood patrols, and collaboration with local leaders. These measures

will help bridge the trust gap between the police and residents, encourage information sharing, and improve the willingness of citizens to report crimes.

i. Training programs focused on ethics, anti-bias practices, and professional conduct should be institutionalized for all officers. Emphasising equal treatment for all individuals regardless of status, ethnicity, or background will promote justice and reduce the perception of partiality.

ii. Mechanisms such as independent oversight bodies, improved record-keeping, and public reporting of police activities should be established. These measures will enhance transparency, discourage misconduct, and strengthen public confidence in the police.

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