International Journal of Education, Culture, and Society

e-ISSN : 3024-8973
p-ISSN : 3024-8981

Index: Harvard, Boston, Sydney University, Dimensions, Lens, Scilit, Semantic, Google, etc

https://doi.org/10.58578/IJECS.v3i3.7373

Police Corruption and Crime Reporting: A Study of Bribery in Wukari Local Government Area, Taraba State, Nigeria

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Article Info:

Submitted:	Revised:	Accepted:	Published:
Aug 25, 2025	Sep 17, 2025	Sep 29, 2025	Oct 3, 2025

Abstract

Police bribery remains a pervasive issue in Nigeria, significantly undermining public trust in law enforcement, particularly in semi-urban areas such as Wukari Local Government Area of Taraba State. Many citizens perceive that police officers routinely demand bribes before acting on crime reports and that justice is more readily available to individuals with financial means. These perceptions contribute to widespread reluctance to report crimes, especially among the poor and marginalized, leading to a deterioration of police-community relations. This study investigates the extent to which police bribery influences crime reporting behavior in Wukari. A descriptive, cross-sectional survey design was adopted, with a sample size of 400 respondents selected from a population of 374,800 using the Taro Yamane formula. Data were collected via questionnaires distributed through random sampling, yielding 350 valid responses. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used for analysis. The findings indicate that crime reporting is generally low, with police bribery identified as a significant deterrent. Respondents frequently cited fear of being asked for

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bribes or being ignored due to inability to pay as reasons for non-engagement with law enforcement. The study concludes that police bribery not only discourages crime reporting but also erodes the legitimacy and credibility of the Nigeria Police Force. It recommends the strict enforcement of anti-corruption policies, the promotion of community-oriented policing strategies, and the establishment of independent and anonymous crime reporting mechanisms to restore public confidence in law enforcement institutions.

Keywords: Police; Bribery; Crime Reporting; Public Trust; Law Enforcement

INTRODUCTION

In both developed and developing countries, the legitimacy of the police is strongly tied to perceptions of fairness, accountability, and resistance to corruption. Where bribery is prevalent, public confidence in the police deteriorates, and individuals become less willing to report crimes or cooperate with investigations (Alemika, 2021). According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2022), police corruption, particularly in the form of bribery, undermines the criminal justice system, weakens the rule of law, and fosters impunity. In societies where police officers demand or accept bribes, justice becomes transactional and inaccessible to those unable or unwilling to pay.

In Africa, police bribery has become a systemic issue, often reflecting broader challenges of institutional corruption and economic instability. Studies show that in many African countries, police officers frequently solicit bribes during routine checks, arrests, and complaint handling, especially in contexts of low wages and weak oversight (Alemika, 2021; Hope, 2018). In countries like Kenya, South Africa, and Nigeria, citizens often avoid contacting the police unless necessary, fearing that doing so will involve paying a bribe or receiving no meaningful assistance without financial inducement. This environment fosters a culture of silence and self-help justice, both of which compromise public safety and trust in the state.

In Nigeria, police bribery remains a deeply entrenched issue that significantly undermines the effectiveness, credibility, and legitimacy of law enforcement agencies. The Nigeria Police Force (NPF), which is constitutionally mandated to protect lives and property and maintain public order, has frequently been criticised for engaging in extortionate practices, especially at checkpoints, during arrests, and in the process of filing

reports or investigating crimes (Ede, Igbo & Ugwuoke, 2021). Numerous studies and human rights reports have documented situations where police officers openly solicit bribes before performing basic duties such as responding to distress calls, registering cases, or conducting investigations (Amnesty International, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2022). In many parts of the country, it is commonly believed that police action is either delayed or denied unless some form of financial inducement is provided. This perception is not only widespread but deeply damaging to public trust (Okeshola & Mudiare, 2013).

In the same vein, Tankebe (2008) was of the view that the impact of police bribery on crime reporting is particularly alarming. When citizens believe that the police will only act when paid or that the justice system is for sale, they become reluctant to report crimes, especially if they lack the resources to navigate a corrupt system. This discouragement disproportionately affects the poor and marginalised, who are more likely to suffer from crime but less likely to afford bribes or exert influence. As a result, many crimes go unreported or are resolved through informal or extrajudicial means, thereby bypassing formal justice structures and weakening the rule of law. The implication is that victims may remain unheard, offenders may go unpunished, and the cycle of impunity continues unchecked.

The 2020 #EndSARS protests brought the issue of police corruption, including bribery, to the national and international spotlight. Sparked by years of abuse and extortion by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) and other units, the protests highlighted the deep public frustration with a system perceived to be exploitative rather than protective (Ajayi, 2021). Protesters across the country cited daily experiences of bribery, unlawful arrests, and intimidation as evidence of a broken policing system. Although the government promised reforms, subsequent reports indicate that many of the problems persist, especially in rural and semi-urban areas where oversight is minimal, and citizens have little recourse to hold officers accountable.

Similarly, Geoffrey, Nyikyaa, and Okono (2025) highlight police favoritism as a form of corruption that not only discourages crime reporting but also fuels community divisions, breeds mistrust, and undermines the legitimacy of law enforcement. When residents perceive that certain individuals are above the law, coupled with fears of retaliation or neglect, their willingness to cooperate with the police is significantly diminished.

Moreover, surveys by organisations such as CLEEN Foundation and Transparency International have consistently ranked the police among the most corrupt institutions in Nigeria, with bribery being the most frequently reported form of misconduct (Transparency International, 2021). These realities contribute to a crisis of confidence in law enforcement and have profound implications for the administration of justice and internal security. Without urgent and sustained reforms to address the systemic nature of police bribery, efforts to improve public safety, reduce crime, and foster collaboration between the police and communities are likely to be ineffective (Yusuf, 2020).

Goudriaan, Lynch, and Nieuwbeerta (2004), in a cross-national study, found that countries with high perceived corruption in law enforcement had significantly lower levels of crime reporting. Citizens who anticipate extortion or unfair treatment by the police often prefer informal mechanisms of justice or remain silent, thereby undermining criminal justice processes. Thus, it could be that police bribery may be influencing the way crimes are reported and handled in Wukari LGA. Wukari's diverse ethnic and religious composition, coupled with its history of communal conflict, calls for impartial and efficient policing. Yet, it is commonly believed that some police officers may prioritise cases based on bribe payments, making it harder for the poor and marginalised to access justice. Many residents reportedly fear that without offering bribes, their complaints might be ignored or mishandled, potentially discouraging crime reporting and undermining law enforcement effectiveness. These perceptions, if widespread, could contribute to a decline in public trust, reinforce inequality, and promote impunity. This study, therefore, aims to investigate how police bribery may be shaping patterns of crime reporting in Wukari, with a view to supporting reforms that foster transparency and equitable policing.

An Overview of Police Bribery and Crime Reporting

Onuigbo and Ude (2020) were of the view that Police bribery is one of the most persistent forms of institutional corruption affecting public safety and justice delivery globally. It involves the solicitation or acceptance of illicit payments by police officers in exchange for favourable treatment, leniency, or the neglect of official duties. Across various societies, the prevalence of bribery within law enforcement institutions has been found to significantly impair public trust, undermine the legitimacy of the police, and discourage citizens from reporting crimes. As noted by Transparency International (2021), police corruption, especially bribery, is one of the most visible and damaging forms of

misconduct within the public sector, particularly in countries with weak accountability systems.

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2022), police integrity is foundational to crime prevention and effective law enforcement. When bribery becomes normalized, the police are no longer seen as impartial enforcers of the law but as gatekeepers to justice who serve only those who can afford it. This perception erodes the willingness of victims and witnesses to come forward, resulting in widespread underreporting of crimes.

Empirical studies in developed contexts have documented the relationship between police behavior and citizen engagement with the justice system. In the United States and several European countries, although levels of police bribery are lower than in the developing world, even minimal instances of corruption significantly affect citizen-police relations. Tyler and Jackson (2014) argue that procedural justice, the perception that authorities are fair, unbiased, and respectful, is a key determinant of public willingness to report crimes and assist investigations. When officers are believed to demand bribes or show preferential treatment, cooperation declines sharply.

Morris and Klesner (2010) found that bribery is a major barrier to public engagement with law enforcement. Citizens often choose not to report crimes out of fear that they will be asked for money, ignored, or further victimised by the system. These trends illustrate the universal consequences of bribery on crime reporting and public trust, regardless of context.

In sub-Saharan Africa, police bribery is more pervasive, driven by low salaries, poor working conditions, weak institutions, and high levels of poverty and inequality (Alemika, 2021). The author further notes that in many African countries, including Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, and Nigeria, bribery has become institutionalised within the police force. Tankebe (2008), studying Ghana's police system, found that citizens who had previously paid bribes or observed officers collecting them were significantly less likely to report crimes. He noted that many preferred to approach local chiefs or religious leaders for justice due to lack of faith in the police.

In South Africa, Faull (2010) found similar patterns. In urban communities, residents reported that police often demanded money before attending to complaints or during arrests, leading to widespread cynicism and disengagement. This prompted the

emergence of vigilante groups in some neighbourhoods, as people took justice into their own hands due to the failure of formal structures.

Such findings underscore a broader African crisis of law enforcement legitimacy, where police are perceived not as protectors but as predators. The normalisation of bribery affects not only the underreporting of crime but also the quality of policing, investigation, and prosecution, thereby weakening the entire criminal justice chain.

In Nigeria, the problem of police bribery is widespread and deeply rooted. Several national and international reports have ranked the Nigerian Police Force (NPF) among the most corrupt institutions in the country (Transparency International, 2021). According to the 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index by Transparency International, over 50% of Nigerians surveyed believed that police officers were involved in bribery. The most common encounters included bribes demanded at checkpoints, during arrests, and when filing crime reports or seeking bail (Transparency International, 2021).

Amnesty International (2021) reported that citizens often face demands for money before their complaints are recorded, cases are investigated, or suspects are detained. Human Rights Watch (2022) also highlighted cases where crime victims were denied justice unless bribes were paid. These practices are not only illegal but deeply demoralising for ordinary Nigerians who seek protection from the state.

Ajayi (2021) observed that the 2020 End SARS protests were a national outcry against systemic police abuse, including bribery. Young people across the country recounted stories of extortion, threats, and arbitrary arrests linked to officers' demands for money. This nationwide protest underscored the damaging effects of police corruption on public safety and trust.

Academic studies also support these findings. Okeshola and Mudiare (2013), in a study on the effectiveness of the Nigerian Police, found that bribery significantly discourages crime reporting. Respondents indicated that unless they could offer a financial inducement, their complaints were ignored or improperly handled. The study concluded that low income, lack of oversight, and political interference were key drivers of this behaviour.

Ede et al. (2021) further explored the relationship between police-public interaction and crime reporting in Southern Nigeria. They noted that bribery, tribalism, and partiality were major reasons why people avoided reporting crimes. Their research found that

communities often resorted to vigilante groups, traditional authorities, or self-help, especially in areas where the police were seen as extortionists rather than protectors.

Theoretical Framework: Rotten Apple Theory

The Rotten Apple Theory gained prominence in the early 1970s, particularly following the investigations of the Knapp Commission into corruption within the New York City Police Department. The theory was frequently invoked by police administrators and public officials to explain instances of corruption as the result of a few morally defective individuals, rotten apples, rather than a systemic failure of the institution. While not formally developed by any single scholar, it has been widely discussed in criminology and law enforcement discourse. The theory offered a convenient narrative that isolated corruption to a small group of officers who deviated from the ethical standards of their profession, thereby allowing the broader institution to maintain its legitimacy (Kruth, 2021).

At the core of the Rotten Apple Theory is the belief that corruption within the police force stems from the individual moral failings of certain officers, rather than flaws inherent in the structure, culture, or leadership of the organisation. The theory assumes that these individuals entered the police service with pre-existing ethical weaknesses that eventually manifested in acts such as bribery and abuse of power. Misconduct is viewed as sporadic and unrepresentative, and once the offending individuals are removed from the system, the integrity of the institution is presumed to be restored. It also presumes that ethical breaches can be contained without addressing broader institutional dynamics (White, 2008).

The Rotten Apple Theory can be applied to the issue of police bribery and crime reporting in Wukari LGA by framing bribery as the result of a few deviant officers operating outside the norms of the Nigeria Police Force. From this perspective, when residents are asked for bribes before their complaints are processed or investigated, such experiences are attributed to individual corruption rather than institutional policy or culture. The theory provides a lens through which such misconduct can be understood as isolated incidents, rather than systemic or widespread failures. This framing may appeal to police leadership as it focuses on disciplinary action against specific officers rather than calling for comprehensive reforms.

The Rotten Apple Theory is valued for its simplicity and focus on individual accountability, suggesting that corruption stems from a few morally flawed officers whose actions can be corrected through discipline or removal. This approach allows institutions to respond quickly to misconduct without blaming the entire organisation. However, the theory is limited in that it ignores the broader institutional and cultural factors, such as inadequate pay, poor oversight, and a permissive environment, that often enable corruption. By focusing solely on individuals, it downplays the need for systemic reform and may perpetuate a culture of denial within law enforcement agencies (Kruth, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive, cross-sectional survey research design to examine the impact of police bribery 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 analysed, 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 bribery 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=350

Level	Frequency	Percentage
Low	181	51.7 %
Average	150	42.9%
High	19	5.4%
Total	**350**	**100%**

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 1 presents respondents' perceptions of the level of crime reporting in Wukari Local Government Area. Out of 350 participants surveyed, a majority of 181 respondents (51.7%) rated crime reporting as low in the area. This suggests that over half of the population perceives a poor level of engagement with law enforcement regarding crime incidents. Furthermore, 150 respondents (42.9%) indicated that the level of crime reporting is average, reflecting moderate reporting behaviour, which may be influenced by limited trust, accessibility, or awareness. Only 19 respondents (5.4%) rated crime reporting as high, suggesting that very few residents actively and confidently engage in reporting crimes to the police. The distribution reveals a significant concern: with more than 94% of respondents rating crime reporting as either low or average, there is a clear indication of low public participation in criminal justice processes in Wukari. This could be attributed to various factors such as police corruption, fear of retaliation, lack of trust in law enforcement, or systemic inefficiencies.

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

Impact	SA	A	U	D	SD	Mean	Std. Dev
I believe that police officers in Wukari often demand bribes before acting on crime reports.	180	112	30	15	13	4.23	0.99
I am less likely to report a crime to the police because I fear being asked for a bribe.	150	118	40	25	17	4.01	1.08
Only those who can afford to pay bribes get prompt responses from the police in Wukari.	170	115	28	20	17	4.15	1.03
The demand for bribes by police officers discourages victims from seeking justice.	160	120	35	20	15	4.10	1.01
Police bribery has contributed to increased crime in my community because criminals feel protected.	145	126	40	25	14	4.00	1.04
I would feel more confident reporting a crime if police officers did not request bribes.	165	122	30	18	15	4.10	0.99
Bribery in the police force makes it difficult for ordinary citizens to access justice in Wukari.	170	110	33	22	15	4.10	1.02

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 2 presents the responses of 350 participants regarding how police bribery influences crime reporting in Wukari Local Government Area. Using a 5-point Likert scale, the data revealed that all items had mean scores well above the midpoint of 2.5, indicating that police bribery is widely perceived as a significant impediment to effective crime reporting in the area.

The item with the highest mean score was the belief that police officers in Wukari often demand bribes before acting on crime reports (Mean = 4.23, Std. Dev = 0.99), reflecting a strong consensus that bribery is a common and expected practice in local law enforcement. This was closely followed by the perception that only those who can afford to pay bribes receive prompt police responses (Mean = 4.15, Std. Dev = 1.03), further suggesting that access to justice is financially skewed in favour of those with means.

Another highly rated item was the idea that bribery discourages victims from seeking justice (Mean = 4.10, Std. Dev = 1.01), demonstrating the emotional and psychological toll bribery imposes on crime victims. Similarly, the feeling of increased confidence in crime reporting in the absence of bribe requests (Mean = 4.10, Std. Dev = 0.99) and the belief that bribery makes it difficult for ordinary citizens to access justice

(Mean = 4.10, Std. Dev = 1.02) both underscore widespread dissatisfaction with current policing practices.

The view that police bribery contributes to rising crime because criminals feel protected also received high agreement (Mean = 4.00, Std. Dev = 1.04), indicating a perception that corrupt practices foster impunity. The item with the lowest mean, although still high, was the statement that individuals are less likely to report crimes due to fear of bribe requests (Mean = 4.01, Std. Dev = 1.08). This item also recorded the highest standard deviation, suggesting slightly more variability in responses compared to other items.

Overall, the findings point to a strong perception among residents that police bribery significantly hinders crime reporting in Wukari LGA. All items received mean scores above 4.00, indicating broad agreement that bribery not only discourages citizens from reporting crimes but also undermines justice delivery and public trust. While standard deviation values indicate moderate to strong consensus, the general trend underscores the urgent need for police reform aimed at eliminating corruption and restoring public confidence in law enforcement.

CONCLUSION

Based on the overall findings of the study, it was observed that crime reporting in Wukari Local Government Area is generally low, with most respondents expressing limited engagement with law enforcement. This poor level of crime reporting may be attributed to a range of structural and systemic factors that undermine public trust in the police. Respondents reported that bribery is a common practice among police officers, with citizens often required to offer bribes before their cases are addressed. Such corrupt practices create a perception that justice is only accessible to those who can afford it, while the poor and marginalised are left without adequate protection or recourse. This perception discourages individuals from reporting crimes and contributes to a widespread sense of helplessness and dissatisfaction with the justice system.

Additionally, findings revealed that police bribery not only hinders access to justice but also fosters a culture of impunity. Respondents indicated that criminals are often emboldened by the knowledge that they can buy their way out of accountability, which in turn contributes to rising crime rates in the area. Victims of crime, particularly those

without financial means, are further discouraged from seeking justice due to the fear of being asked for bribes or being ignored. The study also showed that the public would feel more confident in reporting crimes if police officers were not involved in corrupt practices.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

i. **Strengthen Anti-Corruption Measures in Policing**: The government should establish and enforce strict anti-corruption protocols within the police force, including regular audits, independent oversight bodies, and swift disciplinary actions against officers found guilty of soliciting or accepting bribes.

ii. **Enhance Public Trust Through Community Policing**: Law enforcement agencies should adopt community policing strategies to foster collaboration and rebuild trust between the police and the public. This includes regular engagement with community members, transparency in handling crime reports, and the assurance of fair treatment regardless of socio-economic status.

iii. **Establish Anonymous and Accessible Reporting Channels**: To encourage crime reporting, authorities should create and publicize anonymous, toll-free, and easily accessible channels where citizens can report crimes without fear of intimidation or bribery demands. These platforms should be monitored independently to ensure accountability and follow-up.

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