

Perusing Police Brutality and the Violation of The Rights of Victims in Lagos: An Invitation to Police Officers' Experiences and Investigative Techniques

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Abstract: Police brutality and human rights violations by law enforcement remain pervasive concerns in Lagos State, undermining public trust in the police and eroding the rule of law. Despite constitutional mandates that police maintain public order and protect citizens' rights, evidence from surveys, eyewitness accounts, and independent reports highlights recurrent abuses, including institutional and structural weaknesses such as poor accountability mechanisms, operational pressures and Reactionary force, training Gaps, and socio-cultural factors such as political and corruption-related issues. This study synthesises qualitative data to explore the lived experiences of police officers and victims in Lagos. The paper examines investigative practices in handling allegations of police misconduct and analyses structural failures that enable rights violations using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Drawing on human rights literature, policing theory, and field encounters, the paper underscores the urgent need for evidence-based reforms and professional training to align law enforcement practice with human rights standards.

Keywords: Police Brutality, Rights Violations, Lagos, Investigative Techniques, Policing.

Introduction

Police brutality and human rights violations remain pervasive concerns in criminal justice systems across the world, particularly within emerging democracies and developing urban centres. In Nigeria, and especially in Lagos State, Nigeria's

most populous city and economic hub, allegations of excessive use of force by law enforcement agencies have sparked deep public discourse, civil society mobilisation, and policy scrutiny (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2020).

Despite constitutional guarantees and international human rights commitments, reports indicate persistent incidents of physical abuse, unlawful detention, torture, and extrajudicial killings perpetrated by police officers (Omenka, 2021). These practices undermine public trust, erode democratic governance, and inflict profound psychological, economic, and social harm on victims and their families.

Empirical evidence suggests that police brutality in Lagos is not merely a matter of individual misconduct but reflects systemic challenges, including inadequate training, weak accountability mechanisms, cultural norms of impunity, and structural tensions between state authority and citizen expectations (Aduloju, 2022; Okunola & Agbaje, 2023).

Moreover, investigative techniques used by police often emphasise coercive compliance over community engagement, further heightening suspicions of abuse and human rights violations. This study, therefore, seeks to explore not only the prevalence and nature of police brutality in Lagos but also the lived experiences of police officers and the investigative practices they employ.

Internationally, police brutality has been studied across multiple jurisdictions, linking excessive force to weak accountability, inadequate training, and militarised policing approaches (Goldsmith, 2010; Walker, 2020). In the United States, high-profile incidents have triggered social movements like Black Lives Matter, prompting reforms in use-of-force policies (Goff *et al.*, 2016). Similarly, South African research highlights how legacy policing models rooted in coercion perpetuate rights violations (Morrell, 2021). These findings underscore the importance of contextual, cultural and institutional factors.

In Africa, police brutality occurs in contexts of resource scarcity, political instrumentalisation, and weak oversight mechanisms (Amnesty International, 2023). In Nigeria, various commissions and civil society organisations have documented torture, unlawful detention, and extrajudicial killings (Human Rights Watch, 2022). The disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) in 2020 following nationwide protests illustrates the depth of public frustration (Nwokedi, 2021). However, scholarly analysis reveals that reforms without structural change may be superficial (Okafor & Mbuba, 2023).

The Lagos State Specific Studies in its socio-economic complexity, registers frequent police-citizen encounters (Aduloju, 2022). Prior research indicates that victims often experience intimidation, lack of due process, and barriers to complaint mechanisms (Ibrahim & Akpan, 2023). Nevertheless, few studies have foregrounded police officers' own narratives, which this study aims to correct.

Investigative techniques such as interrogations, arrest procedures, search and seizure practices, and evidence gathering play a pivotal role in shaping justice outcomes. Coercive interrogation methods increase the risk of false confessions and physical harm (Kassin *et al.*, 2010). In Lagos, there was evidence that police often rely on physical pressure and threats to extract information, reflecting training deficits and performance pressures (Okunola & Agbaje, 2023). Furthermore, studies suggest that investigative practices are influenced by supervisory expectations, performance metrics, and informal norms that may conflict with legal standards (Brogden & Nijhar, 2020).

Accountability is crucial in curbing police brutality. Formal mechanisms include internal affairs units, civilian review boards, and judicial oversight (Walker & Archbold, 2014). However, in Nigeria, institutional fragmentation, corruption, and limited transparency weaken these mechanisms (Omenka, 2021). Lagos has experimented with community policing forums, yet their impact remains contested (Olaleye & Onifade, 2024).

While the existing literature addresses the prevalence and consequences of police brutality in Lagos, there is a noticeable gap concerning the following: the Police officers' perspectives on use-of-force decisions, the linkages between everyday investigative techniques and rights violations and the institutional narratives that officers use to justify or contest practices. This study, therefore, addresses these gaps by centring police voices, situating investigative methods within broader organisational and societal contexts, and examining how these dynamics affect victims' rights.

Imoudu (2022) surveyed 600 victims of police brutality in Lagos to assess public perception of police conduct before and after the 2020 #EndSARS protests. Using quantitative methods, the study found that a majority of victims still perceived police as only partially law-abiding. The demographic factors (age, income, gender) predicted victims' intentions to participate in protests against police misconduct. The findings highlight the persistence of negative experiences with policing even after public reform efforts.

Adisa *et al.* (2022) on violent victimisation in Lagos Metropolis highlighted how socio-demographic and community factors jointly shape residents' exposure to crime risk. The empirical studies illuminate the complex interplay between individual characteristics and environmental contexts in a major West African city, offering policy-relevant insights for strengthening public safety interventions.

Irene (2023) *From Peaceful Protest to Bloodbath: An Interrogation of the Link between the #EndSARS Protest and Policing Strategies in Nigeria* provides a significant empirical foundation for understanding how policing strategies are associated with protest outcomes. The study demonstrates a significant relationship between police approaches and the escalation of protests.

Iseolorunkanmi *et al.* (2023) investigated the relationship between human rights violations and the outbreak/transformation of the #EndSARS protest in Lagos. Using primary data (questionnaires and focus groups) with correlation and regression analyses, they found strong positive associations between repressive police behaviour and protest escalation.

Thompson *et al.* (2024) also investigated the EndSARS protest and police brutality in a topic, '*Blood on the Dance Floor: Police brutality, #EndSARS protest movement and responses in Lagos, Nigeria*'. This qualitative analysis identified structural issues in policing and poor protection of protesters' rights.

Statement of the Problem

While numerous reports document police violence against civilians in Lagos, there is a relative paucity of research that critically examines the subjective experiences of law enforcement officers and how these experiences shape investigative behaviours and decision-making that may lead to rights violations. Current literature tends to focus on victim narratives, policy analyses, or institutional reforms without sufficiently interrogating the perspectives of police practitioners themselves (Ibrahim & Akpan, 2023). Without this holistic view, policy prescriptions may risk being unidimensional and ineffective.

While existing literature robustly addresses the prevalence and consequences of police brutality, there were noticeable gaps in the literature concerning Police officers' perspectives on operational pressure decisions; linkages between everyday investigative techniques and rights violations; and institutional narratives that officers use to justify or contest practices. This study addresses these gaps by centring police voices, situating investigative methods within broader organisational and societal contexts, and examining how these dynamics affect victims' rights.

This gap is problematic because it limits understanding of internal organisational cultures, resource constraints, and procedural logics that influence frontline policing. Consequently, there is a disconnect between public expectations, legal standards, and policing realities in Lagos. The essential questions that arise include:

- How do police officers in Lagos perceive and describe their experiences with operational pressures?
- What investigative techniques do officers employ, and how might these contribute to rights violations?
- What structural, cultural, or operational factors influence investigative conduct and accountability?

Conceptual Literature on Police Brutality

Conceptual Framework

Police Brutality

Police brutality is rooted in the misuse of authority by law enforcement officers. According to Walker (2020), police brutality encompasses “any form of excessive or unnecessary force exercised by police officers beyond what is reasonably required to accomplish a lawful policing objective.” This definition highlights proportionality and necessity as key benchmarks for evaluating police conduct.

Similarly, Amnesty International (2022) conceptualises police brutality as the “deliberate or reckless use of force by law enforcement officials that violates national laws and international human rights standards.” From this perspective, brutality is not limited to physical violence but extends to psychological abuse, torture, harassment, and degrading treatment.

From a criminological standpoint, police brutality represents a form of state violence, where agents of the state inflict harm under the guise of law enforcement (Miller *et al.*, 2021). This framing underscores the power imbalance between police officers and civilians and situates brutality within broader discussions of authority, coercion, and social control.

Investigative Techniques

Effective investigative techniques on allegations of abuse are essential to ensure accountability, protect victims, uphold due process, and prevent secondary

victimisation. Investigative techniques refer to the structured methods, tools, and procedures employed by investigators to collect, analyse, and evaluate information relevant to alleged misconduct or criminal behaviour.

In abuse cases, these techniques must address unique challenges such as delayed reporting, power imbalances, trauma-related memory issues, fear of retaliation, and social stigma (Lamb *et al.*, 2018). According to McMillan and Thomas (2021), the investigative process must be neutral, evidence-driven, and compliant with legal standards to ensure fairness and legitimacy.

Lagos State Specific Studies

Lagos, given its socio-economic complexity, registers frequent police-citizen encounters (Aduloju, 2022). Prior research indicates that victims often experience intimidation, lack of due process, and barriers to complaint mechanisms (Ibrahim & Akpan, 2023). Nevertheless, few studies have foregrounded police officers' own narratives, which this study aims to correct.

Theoretical Framework

Social Identity Theory (SIT)

Social Identity Theory provides a powerful lens for understanding police culture, solidarity, and use of discretion. It also focuses on the attitudes toward the public, inter-agency relations, and conflicts between the police and marginalised communities. The theory helps explain phenomena such as the in-group loyalty among officers, stereotyping of out-groups, and the persistence of mistrust between law enforcement agencies and certain social groups (Tajfel, 1978).

Social Identity Theory was developed primarily by Henri Tajfel in 1978 in his book titled '*Differentiation between Social groups*' and later expanded in collaboration with John C. Turner in 1979. Tajfel and Turner provided a comprehensive framework for understanding police intergroup relations, social cohesion, and conflict.

The primary aim of Social Identity Theory was to explain how group membership shapes individual behaviour and intergroup relations. Specifically, it seeks to explain the psychological foundations of prejudice and discrimination; account for group solidarity, loyalty, and conformity; understand conflict and cooperation between social groups, and link individual self-concept to broader social structures (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Social identification occurs when individuals internalise group membership as part of their self-concept. Police officers often strongly identify with their occupational group, adopting shared values such as loyalty, bravery, and authority. One of the most significant applications of SIT in policing is in the analysis of police–community relations. When police and community members perceive each other as belonging to opposing social groups, mistrust and conflict are more likely to arise. Marginalised communities may view the police as an out-group that represents oppression or injustice, while police may perceive certain communities as inherently suspicious or dangerous. These reciprocal perceptions reinforce negative stereotypes and escalate tensions (Turner *et al*, 1987).

Organisational Culture Theory

Organisational Culture Theory explains how shared values, beliefs, norms, symbols, and informal rules shape behaviour within organisations. In policing, this theory is particularly important because police work involves discretion, authority, risk, and close interaction with the public. The way police officers think, act, and interpret situations is not determined only by formal laws, policies, or training manuals.

It was also by the occupational culture of policing that developed over time. This culture influences decision-making, use of force, accountability, professionalism, community relations, and responses to reform. The primary aim of Organisational Culture Theory was to explain how shared meanings and values influence behaviour within organisations. It explains why members of an organisation behave in certain ways, even when such behaviour is not explicitly mandated by formal rules.

Organisational Culture Theory also aims to explain organisational resistance to change. Deeply embedded cultural assumptions often persist even when external conditions demand transformation. Understanding culture enables leaders and managers to diagnose sources of resistance and design change strategies that align with existing values or gradually reshape them.

Organisational Culture Theory did not emerge from a single scholar but developed through the cumulative contributions of several theorists. However, Edgar H. Schein was widely regarded as the principal developer and most influential figure in the formalisation of the theory.

Schein (2010, 2017) defined organisational culture as “A pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration.”

Edgar H. Schein was considered the foremost authority on organisational culture. His work provided the most systematic and enduring framework for understanding culture in organisations. Contributions from scholars such as Hofstede, Deal and Kennedy, and Peters and Waterman further expanded the theory's applicability and relevance.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological design to capture the lived experiences of police officers and victims regarding police brutality and investigative techniques. This design was ideal for exploring subjective experiences, perceptions, and meanings attached to complex social phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The target participants include Police officers in Lagos State and victims of police brutality who have experienced rights violations. The Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to recruit participants with direct experiences. Purposive sampling ensures participants with relevant knowledge are selected, and snowball sampling helps reach hard-to-identify victims (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015). Since the approach was Interpretivist, the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyse the data. Ethical compliance was critical due to the sensitive subject matter of the research to obtain informed consent from all participants, which maintained confidentiality and anonymity with the right to withdraw at any time (Israel & Hay, 2006).

Synopsis of the Police Officers' Experiences and Investigative Techniques

Investigative Techniques Identified in the Study

The investigation of police brutality and victims' rights violations in Lagos requires a multi-layered and methodologically rigorous approach. The consideration was based on the sensitivity of the subject, institutional power asymmetries, and the frequent absence of transparent accountability mechanisms.

It therefore identifies four core investigative techniques that collectively enhance objectivity, credibility, and justice-oriented outcomes. Collectively, these investigative techniques reflect a hybrid investigative framework that balances empirical evidence, human experience, medical science, and institutional accountability. In Lagos, police brutality intersects with urban insecurity, public distrust, and human rights activism. The integration of these techniques is essential for credible investigations and sustainable reform.

Technique 1: Scene Documentation and Evidence Preservation

Scene documentation and evidence preservation constitute the foundational stage of any credible investigation into allegations of police brutality. This technique involves the systematic recording, collection, and safeguarding of physical and environmental evidence at locations where alleged violations occurred—such as police stations, checkpoints, detention facilities, or public spaces.

In the Lagos context, where incidents often occur during stop-and-search operations, protests, or custodial detention, meticulous scene documentation helps to counteract attempts at evidence suppression or narrative distortion. Proper documentation includes photographic and video recordings, sketches of the scene, timestamps, body-camera footage (where available), and the cataloguing of physical items such as weapons, restraints, bloodstains, damaged personal property, or detention logs.

Technique 2: Victim and Witness Interviews

Victim and witness interviews serve as the human-centred core of investigations into police brutality. This technique prioritises firsthand accounts of victims, eyewitnesses, family members, medical personnel, and even fellow officers who may have observed or participated in the incident.

In Lagos, victims of police abuse often experience fear of retaliation, social stigma, or distrust of law enforcement institutions. Therefore, interviews are conducted using rights-based, trauma-informed, and culturally sensitive approaches. Investigators ensured confidentiality, informed consent, and psychological safety, and allowed victims to recount experiences without intimidation or coercion.

This technique also acknowledges police officers' experiences by allowing ethical officers to provide insider perspectives. The perspectives were operational pressures, command structures, and informal practices that may contribute to rights violations. Such balanced engagement enhances the credibility of the investigation and supports institutional reform.

Technique 3: Internal Review Boards

Internal Review Boards represent an institutional accountability mechanism. It was designed to examine allegations of misconduct, brutality, and rights violations. These boards typically consist of senior officers and legal advisers. They are professional standards units tasked with reviewing complaints, evidence, and officer conduct.

In theory, internal review boards offer a structured avenue for discipline, reform, and organisational learning. They assess whether officers adhered to operational guidelines, use-of-force protocols, and human rights standards. In Lagos, such boards are often the first formal response to allegations of police abuse.

However, the effectiveness of this technique depends on transparency, independence, and the willingness to impose sanctions. Without external oversight, internal boards risk becoming symbolic or protective of institutional interests. Therefore, the study views internal review boards as most effective when complemented by civilian oversight bodies, judicial review, and human rights organisations.

Lived Experiences with police officers

Police are institutionally mandated to uphold the law, maintain public order, and protect citizens' rights. However, in many contexts, police brutality and violations of fundamental human rights represent persistent challenges in Nigeria's largest urban centre, Lagos.

Lived experiences of victims reflect patterns of operational pressures and excessive force, accountability mechanisms, institutional training, and impunity on the part of law enforcement. These experiences have precipitated widespread societal trauma, erosion of trust in the police, and mass mobilisations such as the #EndSARS protests. These contradictions give rise to ethical, legal, and sociopolitical crises, particularly when law enforcement agencies deploy excessive force or operate with impunity.

This section explores findings on lived experiences of police brutality in Lagos, articulating how these experiences constitute violations of victims' rights, the broader socio-historical context, and the implications for justice and reform. These lived experiences are not isolated; victims often emerged from various demographics.

It highlights systemic issues within policing culture. The lived experiences of police brutality in Lagos illustrate an urgent human rights concern that transcends isolated incidents to embody structural failures in policing, accountability, and justice.

Major Findings and Discussions

The study's findings reveal that police brutality in Lagos is not random but reflects systemic issues in training, accountability, and procedural rigour. Officers often resort

to force due to operational insecurity, inadequate tactical options, and perceived backing by command structures. These findings resonate with extant literature on policing in high-crime urban contexts (Brown & Ojo, 2021).

The findings from the experiences of operational pressures and reactionary force stated that officers reported high-stress engagements that led to decisions to use force without full procedural backing. Police officers in Lagos operate within an exceptionally high-pressure urban security environment. It was characterised by population density, economic inequality, violent crime, traffic congestion, and persistent public distrust of law enforcement.

These pressures significantly shape officers' day-to-day conduct and their reliance on reactionary force. The officers described such Chronic Stress Conditions of their work as a constant emergency response role, rather than preventive or intelligence-led policing. These factors contributed to the high incidence of armed robbery, cult-related violence, and street crime.

Others include long working hours with inadequate rest or welfare support, and exposure to hostile crowds and frequent verbal or physical resistance. Under such conditions, officers tend to adopt a defensive and survival-oriented policing mindset, where force is perceived as a necessary tool for control rather than a last resort.

In operational encounters such as stop-and-search operations, traffic stops, or suspect arrests are often said to be unpredictable. They expressed fear and uncertainty in decision-making. Officers reported that they fear suspects being armed. They acknowledged the previous experiences of colleagues being injured or killed, and the lack of reliable backup during confrontations.

These factors heightened hypervigilance, which led to excessive use of force. In many cases, brutality is not premeditated but emerges as a reactionary response to perceived threats, especially where officers believe delay may result in fatal consequences.

Within many police formations, the use of force is culturally framed. The use of force was seen as a sign of authority and effectiveness. It was also a deterrent strategy against crime and as a legitimate means of extracting compliance. Young or newly recruited officers quickly learn that restraint may be interpreted as weakness, while aggression earns respect among peers. This aligns with global research showing that

organisational culture deeply influences use-of-force decisions (Kraska & Kappeler, 2018).

The operational pressures also affected rights violations, especially denial of counsel and delayed medical attention. The effect contravenes both the Nigerian constitutional protections and international human rights instruments like the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (Article 7) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (UN, 2019).

On poor accountability mechanisms, the findings observed that the limited use of modern evidence-gathering tools, such as body cameras and forensic laboratories, reduced transparency and weakened accountability mechanisms. There were acknowledged gaps by many officers in forensic investigation techniques, evidence preservation and crime scene management.

Due to these deficiencies, coercive methods such as torture, intimidation, and unlawful detention were often used as substitutes for professional investigation. Confessions obtained through force are perceived as quicker and more effective than evidence-based policing, despite their illegality. Internal disciplinary mechanisms are often perceived as being selective or influenced by rank and connections.

They are more punitive toward whistleblowers than offenders. Consequently, officers internalise the belief that brutality carries low institutional risk, reinforcing its continued use. This fits with research advocating technological integration for improved police legitimacy (Maguire *et al.*, 2020).

Many officers reported training gaps and professional deficiencies in human rights and modern investigative methods. This was the central factor that contributed to police brutality as the major disconnect between formal police training and real-world operational demands in Lagos.

Human rights principles are a major part of police training curricula. Officers often report that training was largely theoretical and examination-focused. There are limited practical simulations on de-escalation techniques, and minimal instruction on proportional use of force and suspect psychology.

As a result, officers lack the skills to manage confrontations without resorting to coercion or violence. Particularly when the officers are dealing with vulnerable groups such as youths, informal workers, or suspected offenders without legal representation.

Conclusion

The paper underscored the pervasive nature of police brutality and victims' rights violations in Lagos and highlighted deficiencies in current investigative practices. The findings illustrate that while individual officers often act under complex operational pressures, systemic gaps in training, accountability, and rights awareness perpetuate harmful practices.

Recommendations

- Mandatory Human Rights Training for all officers, focused on rights-based approaches and de-escalation techniques.
- Specialised Forensic & Investigative Training to enhance evidence collection and documentation.
- There should be reforms on both structural and procedural rights violations.
- Reforms are needed in the cycle of force misuse and investigative inadequacy.

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