Public Perception of the Police and Crime–Prevention in Nigeria

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between authors JOA and OL. Author JOA designed the study, wrote the protocol and supervised the work. Author OL carried out all field work and performed the statistical analysis. Author OL managed the data analyses of the study. Author JOA wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Both authors JOA and LO managed the literature searches, general discussion and correction edited the manuscript. The two authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Original Research Article

ABSTRACT

The image of the Nigerian Police as a corrupt and inefficient institution with penchant for human rights abuse has not yet been redressed. Thus, this study investigates the public perception of the police and crime prevention within the Nigerian society. The participants in the study were 1350 members of 15 professional groups in strategic partnership with the Police, selected through the use of both multi-stage and purposive sampling techniques. However, 1125 respondents fully participated in the study. Questionnaire was the major instrument used for data collection. Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The main hypothesis of the study was tested and the result of finding showed that public support and cooperation will significantly enhance police performance in crime management. Furthermore, findings revealed that the police insensitivity to the plight of the people they were statutorily assigned to police has not allowed for smooth relationship between them and the public at large. The police were unfriendly and always in perpetual collision with the members of the public. The study also found that to a very large

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extent, the police capacity in the discharge of their enormous responsibility of crime-prevention and control was sub-optimal. This deficiency has continued to engender a feeling of deficit, blotting the image of the police in the eyes of the public. The paper concludes that there is urgent need to re-brand the police image in ensuring possible strong collaboration between them and the civil society. This is necessary as a requirement to enhance the overall effectiveness of crime prevention and control in the country.

Keywords: Public safety; general security; police image; social control; law and order; crime prevention and control.

1. INTRODUCTION

The police institution is a generic human service establishment saddled principally with the task of safeguarding internal security and safety in almost civil societies. In Nigeria, the police are officials of government and society, responsible for the prevention and control of crimes and disorders as well as the detection, apprehension and prosecution of perpetrators of crimes and violence in the country [1]. As such, there is probably no other security control organization that has an intimate dealing with the large segment of the Nigerian populace as the police. Essentially therefore, law enforcement or social control is the generally agreed responsibility of the Nigeria police. They must be available in case of need of almost any kind and demonstrate absolute commitment at all times to render the best possible service to the public. Conversely however, the reverse is arguably the case in Nigeria.

The police and police work present an alternate image to the generality of the people in the country. This is because the police in Nigeria have always been viewed and characterized as brutal, corrupt and ineffective [2]. The ordinary man on the street greets them with fear and hatred, perceives them as inept and high-handed and never sees them as allies or friends of the people. The inappropriate policing styles and repressive possibilities often exhibited by them in the discharge of their great task of security management have also not helped the matter. Thus, the prevailing belief is that the police is not likely to be effective in crime abatement, prevention and control or at least reduce the incidence of crime in the community at large. On account of these, the Nigeria public is unwilling to cooperate with the police.

Defending the police performance in the country [3] stated that a combination of structural, political and socio-economic and cultural factors as well as institutional inadequacies prevented the Nigeria Police Force from adequately performing their duties satisfactorily and in compliance with the rule of law at all time. These deficiencies are in fact responsible for the deepening crime rate in the country. [4] reiterated that the Nigeria Police has a very serious image problem in the eyes of the public; it hopes to protect and serve. Throughout Nigeria history, the police had been a tool of the state, mistrusted and feared by the people instead of being friend to the general public. As such, the public at large still see the police as an instrument of the ruling class that are always ready to unleash terror at the slightest opportunity.

Presently, Nigeria is suffering from a growing crime-problem, which is progressively threatening its sovereignty, security and development [5]. Despite the constitutional powers granted the police to maintain general security, public safety and peace, the quality of security provided by them has nothing to be proud of. Their roles in many cases denigrate the law, endangering the citizens and blotting the institutional reputation of the police that they represent. Given the foregoing, this empirical study therefore aims to examine the public perception of the police and crime prevention in Nigeria. From this broad objective, the study seeks to explore the following specific objectives which are to:

(i) Determine the perception of public and police relationship in crime prevention
(ii) Identify the types of assaults suffered by the public from inappropriate policing styles and strategies and
(iii) Assess the public perception of the effectiveness of police performance in crime prevention and control

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 History of the Nigerian Police

The history of the Nigeria Police Force has been variously documented based on the need to fully understand the context of policing in the present

day Nigeria, [6,7,8]. The first police force in the country was established in 1861; and between 1861 and 1906, the British colonizers, through wars, treaties obtained by violence and foul means, subjected the estimated four hundred nationalities [9] that inhabited the territory of Nigeria. Alemika pointed out that these nationalities were amalgamated at various levels and times, which resulted into the creation of the colony and protectorates of Southern and Northern Nigeria, in 1900. These two protectorates were further amalgamated in 1914 to become a political entity-the colonial Nigeria state. According to Alemika, other police forces were created between 1867 and 1914 to maintain colonial definition of law and order within the different nationalities subjected to British colonial rule.

Two types of police system were maintained by the colonialist. These were forces and constabulary established and controlled by colonial officials and the local forces established around local or native authorities controlled by local surrogates – indigenous traditional rulers. In between 1900 and 1905, [10] stated that the various police forces and constabulary created by the colonialist were amalgamated into two major forces – Northern Nigeria Police Force and Southern Nigeria Police Force. The two forces co-existed with the local/native authority police forces between 1917 and 1930, especially in the Northern and Western areas of the country. The Northern and Southern police forces in 1930 were later brought together to be what we called today the Nigeria Police Force. Also, the forces co-existed with the local police forces, until 1966 when they were abolished due to their usage as tool for political oppression, extortion and annihilation.

At inception, the force was saddled with 'normal police duties' as well as 'extra police' functions [11]. The 'normal police duties' and para-military roles, which the colonial authorities assigned the Nigeria Police have remained largely unchanged for the past seventy-three years [12]. All over the world, the baseline function of the police is the maintenance of law and order. This central objective entails such duties as prevention, control and combating of criminality; maintenance of public order and peace; rendering assistance and services to members of the community who require them and upholding the rule of law. In the same perspective, [13] viewed the idealistic vision of the police roles as explained by John Alderson's advocacy that the police should:

"contribute towards liberty, equality and fraternity … help reconcile freedom with security and to uphold the rule of law…facilitate human dignity though upholding and protecting human rights and pursuit of happiness…provide leadership and participation in dispelling crimogenic social conditions… contribute towards the creation and reinforcement of trust in communities, strengthen the security of persons and property and the feeling of security of persons, investigate, detect and activate the prosecution of offences, within the rule of law, curb public disorder, deal with major and minor cases and to help and advice those in distress where necessary [13]

In this context, [13] opined that Alderson's advocacy served as one of the major reasons why critics of the Nigeria police have labeled the establishment as over centralized, pro-state and belligerent not to serve the society or the people but to serve some parts of society and some particular people at the expense of others. This view justifies the critics' notion that the Nigerian Police are pro-government while the public see them as unfriendly with penchant to unleash terror.

2.2 Police Public Image and Crime Prevention

According to [14] the Nigeria Police Force falls short of optimum performance. Consequently, in the course of performing its statutory functions to the larger community, the Nigeria police have often been indicted in several ways. This is manifest in the widespread inefficiency, corruption, unfairness in dealing with suspects, occasional over-use of legitimate force, bad temper, bullying and other abuses of citizen's rights with impurity. Till date, despite the constitutional powers granted the police to maintain public tranquility, safety and general security in Nigeria, the quality of crime prevention and control is nothing to write home about. Police officers are accused of brutality, abuse of human rights, aiding and abetting of criminal activities and engaging in bribery and corruption [15].

[16] Opined that the police institution in Nigeria still have a long way to go in meeting its expectations especially in the areas of crime prevention and detection. The police are often not polite to victims of crime, because they are treated as mere sources of crime evidence and not as human beings. Most violent conflicts had occurred due to the ineptitude and inefficiency in the performance of police statutory duties.

[16,15] Stressed that the capacity of Nigeria police in monitoring and managing the social space in the nation are disappointingly sub-optimal and will continue to remain unless a new relationship of honest and genuine interdependence is built between the government and the governed and between the police as an institution of government and civil society as those from whom government derives its legitimacy. Thus, the thrust of the study is that, despite repositioning of the Nigeria Police Force to ensure safety and security of the people and individual property, their level of efficiency seems to be at a pitiful level. The need therefore arises to explore the public perception of the police and crime – prevention in Nigeria.

2.3 Research Hypothesis

Based on the broad objective of the study and comprehensive review of the literature, the main hypothesis generated and tested for the purpose of the study is stated here-under:

Ho: Public support and cooperation are not likely to enhance police performance in crime management.
H_1: Public support and cooperation are likely to enhance police performance in crime-management.

2.4 Methods

The study was carried out in the South West of Nigeria, out of the six geo-political zones in the country. This choice was influenced by the strategic position which the zone occupied in Nigeria. Apart from being the economic and industrial nerve center and hub of social activities over the years in the country, the six states (Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo and Ekiti) are contiguous to each other. The state capitals, Lagos, Abeokuta, Ibadan, Osogbo, Akure and Ado – Ekiti were purposively selected as study sites as a result of their relatively well established tradition of urban life and heterogeneity of the populace. The population of the study included 15 professional groups in the study areas. A multi – stage random-sampling technique was employed in selection of participants in the 180 political wards of the six (6) cities, which constituted the study sites. Using simple random sampling method, 90 political wards were finally selected from which fifteen (15) respondents each across the different professional groups were also chosen using purposive sampling. In each of the selected wards, availability and

willingness to respond were the overriding factors used in selecting the respondents. A sample of 1,350 respondents was finally selected in the selected wards comprising both male and female as participants.

Two major research instruments were employed (questionnaire and document) as data gathering techniques. Out of the 1350 copies of questionnaires self-administered by the researchers, 1125 were retrieved and found usable for analysis with a response rate of 83.3%. The questionnaire was used to determine the perception of the participants on public police relationship and crime prevention. The questionnaire consisted of two sections A and B. Section A dealt with the biographical details of the respondents. Section B contained 25 items on measures of perception of public/police relationship and crime prevention. A set of Likert Scale was used to measure these pertinent constructs of the questionnaire. The survey followed all the required ethical procedures on the gathering of data with an information covering page, describing the motivation for the study as well as assuring respondents of the confidentiality of their responses.

The primary data gathering method (questionnaire) was however complemented with secondary data sources from police crime diary and statistical records documents. The primary data were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequency distribution and percentage counts. Secondary data especially the Police crime diary extracts were reviewed and analyzed using content analysis format. The main hypothesis of the study was subjected to non-parametric chi-square statistical analysis.

3. RESULTS OF FINDINGS

Findings on the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents show that their mean age is 36.5 with a standard deviation of 11.3. This implies that majority of the respondents are middle-aged adults, who must have one time or the other probably have dealings with the police. The gender of participants reveals a disproportionate representation, where male accounted for 66.7% of the respondents and female respondents constituted 33.3% of the respondents. This presents a ratio of 2:1 across the gender group skewed in favor of male. This finding is not unconnected with the gender disparity in the labor employment structure of the country [17].

On marital status, more than seven (7) out of ten respondents, that is (78.2%) were married while the remaining (21.8%) were either single, separated from their spouses, divorced or widowed. This finding is somehow significant, given the perception of the society on divorce and separation and the implication on basic responsibilities. A significant proportion 85.6% of the respondents had at least first university Degree or Higher National Diploma, while the rest (14.4%) of the respondents possessed at least secondary education certificate. This finding attested to the literacy level of the respondents.

The professional career group distribution of the respondents show that 10% of the respondents are academics followed by civil defense security professional (8.4%), teachers (8.4%), nurses (8%), medical doctor (7.3%), while six professional groups had equal representations, social workers (6.0%), business / commercial people (6.0%), civil servants (6.0%), entertainment group (6.0%), and Engineer (6.0%). The rest professional groups, almost had equal representation; student (5.8%), police (5.3%) and driver (5.2%). Data on respondent's religious affiliation depict that majority (63.3%) were Christians, 33.9% were Muslims while the rest (2.8%) belong to other religion. A significant finding is that Christianity and Islam still remain the two popular religions among the respondents. Information on religious attribute is also deemed important to this study because religious values could influence opinion about the public perception of the police image and crime–prevention in the country.

Questions were asked seeking information on the perception of the public-police relationship in crime management. Such questions include how you would describe the relationship between the public and police. Respondents were also asked to give reasons for their answers. Data presented in Table 1 indicates that an overwhelming majority (81.0%) of the respondents saw the public and police relationship as antagonistic in both strong and mild terms, while (12%) of the sampled population described the relationship as cordial. The remaining (7.0%) of the respondents simply agreed it was cordial. Various reasons were adduced for this poor perception of the police image in the face of the public. While 32% of the respondents said police corruption would not augur for smooth relationship between the police and public, 30% saw the police as generally unfriendly and always in perpetual collision with members of the public, 16%

described the police as high-handed and trigger happy which often results into extra judicial killings of defenseless citizens. Nine percent (9.0%) believed the police as crime-collaborators and law violators while 7.6% said there is constant mistrust between the police and the public. Only a negligible (5.0%) of the sampled population were of the view that the relationship between the two groups is cordial because of the belief that the police is the keeper of public peace.

Table 1. Perception of public and police relationship in crime management

How would you describe the relationship between the public and police in crime management	N = 1125	
	Frequency	%
Very cordial	79	7.0
Cordial	135	12
Indifferent	0.0	0.0
Antagonist	349	31.0
Very antagonistic	562	50.0
Reasons adduced		
The police are corrupt	360	32.0
The police are high-handed and trigger happy	180	16.0
Police are generally unfriendly	338	30.0
Police are friendly and always ready to help	56	5.0
The public see the police as crime collaborator and law violators	101	9.0
There is mutual mistrust between the public and police	86	7.6
Indifferent	4	0.4

Source: Field survey, 2014

Exploring the types of assaults and repressive actions the public suffered from the police, data presented in Table 2 indicates that verbal vituperation and assault has the highest mean score value of 4.36 (sd=1.28) and killing having the least score value of 1.3 (sd=.865). From the analysis, slapping has mean score value of 4.25 (sd=1.30), kicking and beating 3.70 (sd=1.36), injuring 3.1 (sd=1.32), torturing 1.8 (sd=.732). The picture which emerges from these findings is that verbal assault, slapping and kicking and beating are the most rampant assaults that suspects suffered from police brutality and repressive actions. These types of assaults constitute a sort of violence against the public, creating serious image problems for the police and inhibiting the police/public partnership and

community relations in crime prevention and control.

Table 2. Mean and standard deviations of types of assaults suffered by the public from police inappropriate policing styles and strategies

Police assaults and repressive actions witnessed by respondents	Min.	Max.	N	Mean	Sd
Verbal assault and vituperations	1	5	1125	4.36	1.28
Slapping	1	5	1125	4.25	1.30
Kicking and beating	1	5	1125	3.7	1.36
Injuring	1	5	1125	3.1	1.32
Torturing and threat to kill	1	5	1125	1.8	.732
Killing	1	5	1125	1.3	.865

Source: Field survey, 2014

On the public perception of the effectiveness of police performance in crime-prevention, questions were asked on the capacity and effectiveness of the police to detect, prevent and control crime. Data presented in Table 3 show that a significant majority (65.5%) of the sampled population affirmed that the police are very ineffective in the provision of public safety while (25.5%) of the respondents adjudged the police performance as ineffective. Only a negligible (9.0%) of the respondents adjudged their performance as very effective in crime-prevention.

Further elaboration on the public perception of police performance in crime-prevention, as presented in Table 4, surprisingly showed that more than three quarters (77.6%) of the respondents agreed to the incompatibility of the police and self-help civil defense group in community policing to detect and prevent crime. This finding is an indication that a systematic partnership between the community and the police has not been effectively worked in crime-prevention in the country.

Test of Hypothesis

The main hypothesis for the study was subjected to non-parametric chi-square statistical test analysis. Data presented in Table 5 shows that X^2 calculated value of 65.68 is greater than X^2 critical value at 38.0 at 0.05 level of significance. This result rejects the null hypothesis (Ho) and

accepts the alternative hypothesis. Thus, public support and cooperation will significantly enhance police performance in crime-management.

Table 3. Public perception of the effectiveness of police performance in crime prevention

N = 1125		
Public views about the police performance in crime prevention	Frequency	%
Very effective	34	3.0%
Effective	68	6.0%
Ineffective	293	25.5%
Very ineffective	730	65.5%

Source: Field survey, 2014

Table 4. Public community/police joint action for crime prevention

N = 1125		
Do you think public community and police can work together to prevent crime	Frequency	%
Yes	218	19.4%
No	873	77.6%
Don't know	34	3.0%

Source: field survey, 2014

Table 5. Summary of table of chi-square showing whether public support and cooperation are likely to enhance police-performance in crime-management

N	X^2 critical value	X^2 calculated value	Df	P
1125	38.0	65.68	12	<.000

X^2 = 65.68, Df=12 p(0.000) < 0.05

4. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Findings are discussed in relation to the public perception of the police image and crime prevention in the country. In the study, a significant majority described the perceived relationship between the public and police as very antagonistic. This finding mirrored the view of [14] that the police image in Nigeria requires to be rebranded and this can only be ensured when police officers as individuals have a new orientation about the function of the police in the society. The police insensitivity to the plight of the public community they are policing has not allowed for smooth relationship between them and the public at large. Study findings also

revealed that the police are unfriendly and always in perpetual collision with the members of the public. Our analysis shows that, to a very large extent, police cannot effectively discharge their enormous responsibility of crime prevention and control without adequate cooperation and good relationship with the public. The confirmation of our hypothesis that public support and cooperation are likely to enhance police performance in crime management tends to affirm this.

Empirical evidence from the study did confirm the police as generally unfriendly, brutal, high-handed, and usually in mutual mistrust with the public. Thus, our findings, corroborate the assertion of [18] and [11] that the police has not been useful nor helpful in promoting its image before the general public as there are many cases of murder, assassination and robbery which took place in the society that have lasted for two years or more without the police identification of the culprits. This is further buttressed by the view of [16] that the capacity of Nigeria Police in monitoring and managing the social space in the nation are disappointingly sub-optimal in crime management.

Another salient finding of the study is the police modes of operation which are often detrimental to the citizen whom they have been employed to protect. Study findings from our analysis revealed that the types of assault, the public experienced from police brutality and repressive behavior ranged from verbal vituperations, slapping, kicking, injuring to torturing and threat to kill. These acts constituted degrading treatment prohibited by the constitution of Nigeria.

The constitution provides that:

"every individual is entitled to respect for dignity of his person and accordingly no person shall be subjected to torture or inhuman or degrading treatment (chapter 4, section 34 of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 and section 31 of the 1979 constitution".

Thus, it must be emphasized that police acts of descending on suspects and citizens with horse whips, gun and violently seizing or abducting suspects or people arbitrarily is contrary to the law and offends section 34 (11) (a) of the 1999 constitution as being inhuman and abuse of human rights. The implication of this is that the Nigeria police will continue to have a very

serious image problem in the eyes of the public it hopes to protect and serve.

This observation accords with our finding on the public perception of police performance in crime prevention which was adjudged to be very ineffective and also bears semblance, to the postulation of [12] that Nigeria Police Force falls short of optimum performance. This deficiency has continued to engender feeling of helplessness among the generality of the public citizenries that the police in the country have not developed an effective framework for crime-detection, prevention and control.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The Nigeria police are granted enormous powers by law and the constitution to take preventive measures against the commission of all crimes in Nigeria. In this sense, the law allows them to use such reasonable force as may be necessary for the prevention of crimes. In the exercise of this authority, they have in various ways malevolently violated the rights of members of the public with impunity. This practice has earned the Nigeria police different derogatory names, hatred and constant collision with the members of the public to whom they sworn an oath to protect. So far, it can be inferred from the data gathered in this study that the relationship between the police and the public in Nigeria is not cordial. The police are more accountable to the government rather than to the members of the public whose interest they were statutorily established to protect. In Nigeria, the public perception of the police is warped based on the misuse of powers vested in them. This misuse of powers which creates negative police image and police-public relations is manifested in police corruption and brutality which had been their regular hallmark.

From the foregoing, the findings of this study have led to the following recommendations: The public image of the police can be changed if and only if the police are reoriented towards adequate care and respect for human dignity, citizen's fundamental human rights and privileges. The police should work relentlessly towards redeeming their public image of underperforming, immodest brutality and use of predatory force and ineffective policing strategies. Nigeria as a nation cannot hope to become one of the best leading economies in the world in year 2020, if it cannot develop and implement policies and programmes that will

abate both the causes and effects of crime and general insecurity in the country. There is already a big gap between public expectation and police actual performance in crime prevention and control. The public view shows nothing but a loss of confidence in police ability to prevent crime in the country.

The government should be more prominent in the formal crime prevention activities. The underfunding of the Nigeria Police has reduced their state of preparedness and level of performance to prevent crime. The acute shortage of accommodation and welfare of the policemen made the coordination of their activities difficult and these have adversely affected their performance. The end-result is that the Nigeria Police Force is not adequately equipped for the statutory function of crime prevention. As a structured security institution, the police should be adequately equipped to enable them be combat ready to prevent and control crime.

The preservation of the safety of the citizenries and security of their properties are the primary reason for the existence of the police. There is thus, the utmost need for continuous and impactful training especially in the areas of security, intelligence and human relations for the policemen especially at the middle and lower echelon to be able to effectively discharge their onerous responsibility of crime prevention. Also, efforts are needed on the part of police management to be more proactive in developing, just and moral consensus to partner with the community at large in order to build an efficient and effective crime detection and prevention system in the country and thus change the negative image of the force in public mind.

However, as with all research studies, this study is not without its limitation. Data were collected on perceptual scale from participants. Future research should look at more objective data collecting techniques to ensure precision and avoidance of bias. Despite this limitation, the study has not only offered a good insight into the understanding of public perception of the police and crime prevention in Nigeria, it has also provided very much penetration into the issue of public/police partnership and crime reduction in a reforming and developing nation like Nigeria.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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