

Strengthening Police-Public Relations for Effective Security in Akwa Ibom State

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between police-public relations and security effectiveness in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. It highlights the critical role of effective communication, mutual trust, and community collaboration in enhancing public safety and law enforcement outcomes. Adopting a secondary research method and an opinion-based analytical approach, the study draws from scholarly articles, government reports, media sources, and civil society publications to explore the dynamics of police-community interactions within the region. The findings reveal that strained relationships, public distrust, and perceived police brutality significantly hinder security efforts. The study emphasizes the need for community policing, professional conduct, and public engagement strategies to foster trust and cooperation between the police and the public. Ultimately, it recommends proactive reforms and inclusive policing frameworks as vital tools for improving security and sustaining peace in Akwa Ibom State.

Keywords: Police-public relations, security, effective security, Akwa Ibom State.

Introduction

The term Public Relations imply different things to different people, depending on their areas of jurisdiction. Some think of it as relationship, others think of it as communication while some school of thought view it as tip or money given for a service rendered. But whatever the conception is, a common thread binding the aforementioned thoughts, is image making. When we relate with people and communicate or give tips, we give them an impression of ourselves which then forms in them an image of us, and so, public relations in whatever field of work are basically about image making.

Public relations (PR) is a critical function in fostering relationships between organisations and their publics. Public relations has been defined in various ways, depending on the context. Grunig and Hunt (1984) describe public relations as a strategic communication process aimed at building mutually beneficial relationships, and Okeke (2020) emphasises that public relations is instrumental in shaping institutional trust and public confidence.

Every entity needs public relations, which is why the office of the Public Relations Officer is found in many establishments. Everyone wants to be well perceived, esteemed and highly regarded whether or not they are doing well, and the Nigeria Police Force is not an exception. The police, as the major security apparatus in the State, wants the public to know how hard it is working to ensure the safety of the State as well as the security of lives and properties,

hence the reason it has an active public relations office with a very competent hand manning the affairs of the office.

The Nigeria Police Force (NPF), as the major security apparatus in Akwa Ibom State, recognises the importance of public relations in its efforts to maintain law and order. However, challenges such as public distrust, media misrepresentation, and lack of collaboration with stakeholders have hindered police-community relations. This paper discusses these challenges and explores strategies for strengthening police-public relations to enhance security.

Conceptual Clarifications

To provide a clear understanding of the key concepts in this study, this section examines the definitions and interpretations of police-public relations, security, and effective security.

Police-Public Relations

Police-public relations (PPR) refers to the strategies and practices employed by law enforcement agencies to foster positive engagement with the community (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). It involves proactive communication, transparency, and trust-building measures aimed at improving public perception of the police.

According to Alemika and Chukwuma (2004), police-public relations in Nigeria have been historically strained due to issues of corruption, human rights abuses, and lack of accountability. Similarly, Tankebe (2013) argues that public trust in law enforcement is a critical component of police legitimacy and effectiveness. Reiner (2010) adds that police-community relations are shaped by historical, social, and political factors. The role of the police in society extends beyond crime control to include community engagement and public service. When these roles are perceived positively, the police gain public support and legitimacy.

Key Elements of Police-Public Relations

Several scholars highlight the following as essential elements of effective police-public relations:

- (i) **Trust and Transparency** – Ensuring openness in police operations and accountability for misconduct (Goldsmith, 2005).
- (ii) **Community Engagement** – Organizing town hall meetings and collaborative security initiatives (Skogan, 2006).
- (iii) **Effective Communication** – Utilizing multiple media channels to enhance police visibility and credibility (Chermak & Weiss, 2005).
- (iv) **Accountability and Professionalism** – Establishing oversight mechanisms to address public complaints (Davis & Mateescu, 2019).

Security

Security is a broad concept that encompasses the protection of lives, property, and social stability. According to Buzan (1991), security involves the absence of threats to core societal values. Omede (2012) describes security as the ability of a state to protect its citizens from

internal and external threats. He argues that security is both a social and political necessity that requires active government intervention and community participation.

Dimensions of Security

Scholars identify different dimensions of security, including:

- (i) **National Security** – Protection of a country's sovereignty and territorial integrity (Baldwin, 1997).
- (ii) **Human Security** – Focuses on individual safety, including economic, food, health, and environmental security (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 1994).
- (iii) **Community Security** – Ensures local safety through grassroots policing and neighborhood watch programmes (Onyeonoru, 2016).

Bayley (2017) argues that security is not solely the responsibility of the police but a collaborative effort between law enforcement agencies, the government, and the public.

Effective Security

Effective security refers to the ability of a security system to prevent, control, and respond to threats efficiently. Reisig (2015) defines effective security as a state in which law enforcement strategies successfully deter crime, maintain public order, and enhance societal well-being.

Akinwale (2020) notes that effective security is achieved when law enforcement agencies collaborate with the public, adopt modern policing technologies, and uphold professional ethics. He emphasizes that security must be proactive rather than reactive.

Indicators of Effective Security

Scholars propose several indicators of an effective security system, including:

- (i) **Crime Prevention and Reduction** – Measured by a decline in crime rates and successful law enforcement interventions (Skogan, 2006).
- (ii) **Public Trust and Cooperation** – A high level of public trust in the police enhances information sharing and crime reporting (Tankebe, 2013).
- (iii) **Crisis Resilience and Response** – The ability of security agencies to respond promptly to emergencies (Bayley, 2017).
- (iv) **Transparency and Accountability** – Ensuring police officers adhere to ethical standards and community policing principles (Goldsmith, 2005).

According to Nwankwo (2019), countries that prioritise community policing and intelligence-led security strategies tend to achieve higher levels of public safety.

Akwa Ibom State

This work focuses on Akwa Ibom State in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The state has experienced security challenges such as cult-related violence, kidnapping, armed robbery, and communal conflicts (Ekpenyong, 2021). Given its socio-political dynamics and the role of law enforcement agencies in maintaining order, Akwa Ibom occupies a total land mass of 8,412sq/kms, of Nigeria's coastal basin. The state falls within the tropical belt with

a dominant vegetation of green foliage, shrubs and oil-palm trees. The State is one of the largest oil-producing states in Nigeria, with rich deposits of limestone, gravel, salt, silver nitrate, silica sand and kaolin (Eshett and Umoren, 2024). Given these premises, the state provides a relevant setting for studying police-public relations and their implications for security.

Review of Related Literature

Eneh, M. I. (2022). Interrogating public relations on the performance of the Nigerian police force: A study of force headquarters Enugu.

This study examines the effect of public relations on the performance of the Nigerian Police Force, focusing on the Force Headquarters in Enugu. It aimed to identify how public relations practices influenced the relationship between the police and the public and to suggest ways to enhance this relationship for improved performance. Utilising Institutional Theory, the research employed a descriptive survey method, collecting data from a population of 262, with a sample size of 158 determined using Taro Yamane's formula. Findings revealed that current public relations practices negatively impact police-public relations, leading to a tarnished image of the police and diminished public trust. The study recommended that the Nigerian Police Force implemented concerted efforts to boost public confidence and trust.

Ikea, T. J., Singh, D., Jidong, D. E., Ike, L. M., & Ayobi, E. E. (2022). Public perspectives of interventions aimed at building confidence in the Nigerian police: A systematic review.

Police-public relations in Nigeria have been marred by issues of distrust, torture, and violence. This study adopts a systematic review to fill a gap on the interventions relied on to improve public trust in the police in Nigeria and public perspectives of these interventions. Eleven studies met the inclusion criteria. Informed by the principles of thematic analysis, it was found that there was skepticism, lack of trust, and perceived ineffectiveness of community policing interventions. The review recommends community-informed randomized controlled trial interventions in tandem with the police to foster public trust and legitimacy.

Umana, E. A. (2020). The impediments to effective community policing in Nigeria: A case study of Akwa Ibom State.

Community policing is a philosophy of full-service personalized policing where the same officer patrols and works in the same area permanently from a decentralised place, working in a proactive partnership with citizens to identify and solve problems. It is established on the bedrock of police-community partnership and communication to secure a safe environment for all and develop longer-term solutions to resolving criminal issues.

Theoretical Framework

The appropriate theory for this study is the "Legitimacy Theory". This theory provides a solid foundation for understanding the critical role of public perception and trust in enhancing the effectiveness of policing and promoting societal security.

Legitimacy Theory

Legitimacy Theory, as articulated by Tyler (1990) and further developed by Beetham (1991), posits that people are more likely to obey the law and cooperate with law enforcement when they perceive authorities as legitimate. Legitimacy, in this context, refers to the public's belief that the police act within the boundaries of fairness, transparency, accountability, and justice. It is not only about legal authority but also about moral rightness in the eyes of the governed.

According to Tyler (1990), police legitimacy is rooted in procedural justice, which includes how respectfully and fairly individuals are treated during encounters with law enforcement. When police officers engage with the public respectfully, enforce laws impartially, and communicate transparently, they earn legitimacy. Conversely, negative experiences—such as abuse of power, corruption, and lack of accountability—undermine public confidence and reduce cooperation with law enforcement agencies.

This theory is particularly relevant to the Nigerian context, where past incidents of police brutality, bribery, and political interference have weakened public trust. In Akwa Ibom State, as in many parts of Nigeria, efforts to reform policing must be centered on restoring legitimacy by improving police-community relations, ensuring accountability, and enhancing citizen engagement.

The Legitimacy Theory explains why police-public relations are central to effective security. When citizens trust the police, they are more likely to report crimes, provide information, and support law enforcement initiatives. This trust and cooperation are essential for crime prevention, community safety, and conflict resolution. The study, therefore, draws on this theory to argue that strengthening legitimacy through community engagement, transparency, and professionalism is key to improving security outcomes in Akwa Ibom State.

This theory offers a strong framework for analyzing the challenges and solutions related to police-community relations and supports the study's call for reforms that build trust, accountability, and collaboration between the police and the public.

Methodology

This study adopted the secondary research method and an opinion-based analytical approach to investigate police-public relations and their implications for effective security in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Rather than generating new data through fieldwork, the study relied on existing literature, official reports, media content, government documents, academic journals, and civil society publications that discuss policing practices, public trust, and security management in the state. Through this method, the study explored the historical and contemporary dynamics of police-community interactions in Akwa Ibom and identified the prevailing narratives and challenges affecting security outcomes.

The study used insights from policy analysts, scholars, and social commentators to reflect on the state of policing in Akwa Ibom. It also examined comparative cases from other

Nigerian states and international contexts where applicable, to highlight best practices and propose workable reforms. This methodology was appropriate for understanding complex socio-political issues such as trust, legitimacy, and public engagement in law enforcement, especially within the peculiar security context of Akwa Ibom State.

Challenges Faced by the Police in the Effective Security of Akwa Ibom State

To say that the Public Relations Department of the Akwa Ibom State Police Command is doing its best would probably seem like the police fanning their embers so it is better to leave that to public assessment. However, it is pertinent to admit that there is more work to be done; not because the police are short of strategies and ideas on how to better their operations, but due to the fact that the external challenges limiting our victories are almost overwhelming. The challenges include:

- (i) **Distrust in the Police:** One cardinal drawback of our PR activities over the years has been the issue of distrust. Not even the regular slogan "Police is your friend" has helped to erase perceptions of police corruption, bribery, and human rights abuses by some policemen, has significantly damaged public trust and created a hostile environment for police-community relations. But the bad eggs notwithstanding, a lot of conscientious men whom many can attest have given the Force a good name. However, there remains a widespread perception of police corruption, bribery, and human rights abuses (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2004). Studies have shown that historical experiences of police misconduct contribute to public scepticism (Reiner, 2010). However, it is important to recognise that while some officers engage in unethical behaviour, many others remain committed to upholding justice.
- (ii) **Public Perceptions:** The public often views the Police as a tool of the government, ready to unleash terror, rather than as protectors of the community. The Police exist primarily to maintain law and order, and protect lives. This is what the police represent and stand for. In Nigeria, negative experiences with law enforcement officers have reinforced this perception. The police must work to change this narrative by engaging with the community in a transparent and professional manner (Ojo, 2018).
- (iii) **Meddling by Public Influences:** Public interference in police operations is real. A breaker of the law is apprehended and the next thing, the police receive calls pestering for their release; including calls from those in the media. "He's my brother", "she's my sister" and all of that can undermine the credibility and effectiveness of the Police, further damaging public trust. Media and public influencers significantly shape how the police are perceived. Research suggests that sensationalised media reports focusing on police misconduct contribute to negative stereotypes (Chermak & Weiss, 2005). Political and societal elites sometimes interfere in police operations, undermining their authority and credibility (Ajibola, 2017).
- (iv) **Lack of Collaboration:** Times innumerable, stakeholders, such as community leaders, civil society organisations, and the media often fail to collaborate effectively with the Police thus, hindering their ability to address crime. This happens especially when police activities are misrepresented or when the police are perceived as secretive and uncooperative with the media.

Effective crime prevention requires collaboration between the police, community leaders, civil society organisations, and the media. However, when the police are perceived as secretive or uncooperative, stakeholders become reluctant to engage in partnerships (Akinwale, 2020). Strengthening these relationships is essential for effective security management.

Summary and Conclusion

Improving relationships between police and communities is essential for fostering trust, cooperation, and public safety. This is why strong police-community relationships matter. The police in Akwa Ibom State are grateful to stakeholders for the support accorded them in the successes recorded so far in their drive against insecurity but are appealing for more, believing that together, more will be achieved.

This paper critically examines the nature of police-public relations and their impact on security effectiveness in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Employing a secondary research method and opinion-based approach, the research draws insights from existing literature, media reports, and government documents to explore how interactions between the police and the public influence trust, cooperation, and overall security outcomes. The paper highlights the challenges confronting law enforcement in Akwa Ibom, including public mistrust, inadequate community engagement, and perceptions of police misconduct.

The study further analyses the implications of poor police-community relations on crime prevention and peacekeeping in the state. Drawing on both local and international sources, it emphasizes the importance of transparency, accountability, and community policing in building public confidence and ensuring security.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made to overcome the challenges faced by the police in Akwa Ibom State in the area of relationship with the public and strengthen police-public relations for effective security:

- (i) **Building Trust and Transparency:** This is to be done by ensuring that the public understands police operations, policies, and procedures. This can be achieved through regular information sharing, open forums, and accessible online resources. The police in Akwa Ibom have been doing this from time to time and need to do more.
- (ii) **Accountability:** Establishing clear mechanisms for addressing citizen complaints and holding officers accountable for misconduct. This builds confidence in the police force. The Akwa Ibom State Command have not slacked on this but will step up efforts in this regard.
- (iii) **Community Engagement:** Organising community meetings, forums, and events to foster dialogue and build relationships between police and residents. The media and public relations community can attest to this regarding the efforts of the State Command.
- (iv) **Improving Communication:** This is achieved through the use of clear and consistent messaging; ensuring that all communication with the public is clear, concise, and consistent; using multiple channels to reach diverse audiences, including social

media, local media, and community newsletters as well as establishing mechanisms for the public to provide feedback and suggestions to the police. The Police Public Relations Officer in Akwa Ibom State has done justice to this.

- (v) **Addressing Public Concerns:** Every image-conscious organisation, places premium on feedback. And so, by actively listening to and addressing public concerns and complaints, it has been shown that the police is responsive to the needs of the community.
- (vi) **Training and Development:** Overtime, the Police in Akwa Ibom State embarked on training and development opportunities for police officers to enhance their skills and knowledge. This includes training on communication, conflict resolution, and de-escalation techniques.
- (vii) **Collaboration:** The subject of collaboration with the Police cannot be overemphasized. But the police need more, especially from the media and other agencies, such as community organisations, social workers, and local leaders. This can help to address complex problems and improve overall community safety.
- (viii) With these clear-cut strategies, the Police in Akwa Ibom State will be able to achieve crime prevention and reduction, enhanced public safety, resilience in crisis, reduced tension and conflict as well as better outcomes in policing.

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