

Ethical Standards in Policing and Crime Management in Cross River State, Nigeria

Nwagboso Nnenna Salome¹ & Akintola I. Abayomi²

¹Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Calabar, Nigeria

²Federal Polytechnic, Ayede, Oyo State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between police ethical standards and crime management in Cross River State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study assessed how brutality, extortion, and unlawful detention affect crime management. The study adopted a review and synthesis of existing empirical and scholarly literature, drawn from national survey data, National Bureau of Statistics reports, alongside Nigeria-specific and comparative international studies, to build a cross-contextual understanding of these three forms of police misconduct. Findings showed that all three forms of misconduct examined were significantly associated with crime management. The study concluded that ethical failures within the police are not peripheral disciplinary concerns but structural constraints on the institution's capacity to prevent, detect, and control crime. It was recommended that the Nigeria Police Force and Cross River State authorities should strengthen internal accountability mechanisms and enforcement of existing legal safeguards, improve officer welfare and remuneration to reduce the economic pressures sustaining extortion, enforce statutory detention timeframes with clear consequences for non-compliance, invest in community-based trust-building initiatives, and commission further region-specific research within Cross River State to track progress on these fronts.

1. Introduction

Every profession that carries authority over the lives and liberties of others operates within an implicit ethical contract, and policing is perhaps the strongest example of this. Rop and Sang (2019) defined ethics as the foundation underlying all human relationships, present wherever one person's conduct has consequences for another. For the police, this foundation is not abstract; it shapes how an officer questions a suspect, how a complaint is received at a station desk, and how force is or is not used in the field. Ogwoka et al. (2017) describe ethical conduct as grounded in honesty, fairness, and respect for the dignity of others, principles that, when absent from policing, do not simply reflect poorly on individual officers but compromise the institution's ability to carry out its core function of managing crime. Omale (2025); Tiku, et al, (2025) makes this connection explicit, arguing that the effective operation of any security institution rests on officers genuinely adopting these principles as part of how they work, rather than viewing them as rules imposed from outside.

The police cannot prevent, detect, or investigate offences in isolation; they depend on citizens who are willing to report incidents, supply information, and testify when required (Omang, et al, 2024; Abang, et al, 2026). This dependency is precisely where ethical conduct becomes operationally significant rather than merely aspirational (Odinka, et al, 2026). When officers behave with integrity, that cooperation tends to follow; when they do not, it withers, often quickly and visibly. Nigeria's experience during the COVID-19 pandemic offers a striking case in point. Aborisade and Adeleke (2022) found that enforcement of pandemic restrictions revealed serious weaknesses in police legitimacy, and Aborisade (2023), working from interviews with 82 victims, catalogued extensive unlawful use of force during lockdown policing. These were not isolated lapses. Akinyetun and Adedini (2022); Chinedu, et al, (2026) situate such conduct within a longer trajectory of extrajudicial killings carried out by the Nigeria Police Force since the country's return to civilian rule in 1999, contending that this pattern has steadily corroded the institutional legitimacy on which crime control ultimately depends. Closer to the focus of this study, Abang and Akeh (2024) examined the Cross River State Police Command directly and found recurring allegations of rights violations, calling for firmer accountability mechanisms within the command. Nationally, the picture has not improved with time: Amnesty International (2024) recorded at least 24 deaths from excessive police force during the #EndBadGovernance protests of August 2024, evidence that ethical breakdown within Nigerian policing is an ongoing condition rather than a problem confined to any single historical episode.

The pathways through which unethical conduct undermines crime management are specific and traceable, not merely correlational. Extortion, for one, hijacks the very infrastructure meant to serve security purposes: checkpoints built for crime prevention become sites of revenue extraction instead, pulling officer time and public patience away from genuine enforcement work (Ibrahim et al., 2018; Abang, et al, 2026). Brutality and unlawful detention operate differently but toward the same end, choking off the information supply that investigation and prevention rely on, since victims and witnesses who anticipate mistreatment simply withdraw from contact with the police altogether (Desmond, Papachristos & Kirk, 2016; Amah, Udude & Odom, 2026; Okpa, et al, 2026). Selective enforcement compounds the damage further still: where policing tracks ethnic or communal lines rather than credible evidence, as Igba (2022) documents, resources are spent profiling rather than investigating, and entire communities are alienated from an institution that ought to be serving them. None of these are peripheral concerns to crime management; each one strikes directly at the operational core of what effective policing requires.

Cross River State reflects these national dynamics in its own local terms. Residents' engagement with the police, whether through reporting crime, offering testimony, or assisting investigations, remains weak, a pattern traceable to accumulated distrust and to documented misconduct within the state command itself (Alao & Adeyemi, 2019; Abang & Akeh, 2024; Okpa, et al, 2025). The scale of the underlying problem this weak engagement conceals is considerable: nationally, Nigeria recorded almost 70,000 reported crimes in 2022, including 3,219 murders and 771 attempted murders (Nigeria Police Records, 2023), and given how substantially misconduct suppresses reporting elsewhere in the country, the true figures for Cross River State are likely to run higher still than official records suggest. Existing scholarship has examined police ethics in Nigeria in some depth (Omale, 2025; Aborisade, 2023, 2024), as it has crime management and control (Ibrahim et al., 2018; Igba, 2022; Ogar, et al, 2023), yet these two strands of research have rarely been brought together within a single study focused on Cross River State. This study takes up that task, proceeding from the premise that ethical policing is not a supplementary consideration bolted onto crime management but a precondition for it. Without officers who conduct themselves with integrity, the operational capacity to prevent, detect, and respond to crime cannot translate into genuine public safety, however well-resourced or well-trained the police force may otherwise be.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Socio-Ecological Theory

Socio-Ecological Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) explains ethical conduct and crime management as outcomes shaped by nested layers of influence surrounding each officer, from individual values and training (microsystem), through peer and supervisory culture (mesosystem) and institutional structures such as recruitment, discipline, and welfare (exosystem), to wider societal conditions like poverty and political influence (macrosystem). Kane (2002), applying this framework empirically to two decades of New York City precinct data, found that structural disadvantage and community-level conditions significantly predicted variation in police misconduct, confirming that unethical conduct is patterned by ecological factors rather than individual disposition alone; applied to Cross River State, this helps explain why brutality, extortion, selective enforcement, and unlawful detention cluster in particular commands or communities, and how weak institutional accountability and entrenched poverty shape the ethical climate that ultimately determines the police's crime management capacity. The theory's main limitation, however, is that spreading causal weight across so many levels makes it difficult to isolate which level carries the greatest explanatory power for a specific form of misconduct, and, as Najdowski (2023) notes, the model says little about why individual officers facing identical structural conditions behave differently, a gap made more pressing given that the framework was developed and validated primarily in well-resourced, data-rich Western policing contexts quite unlike the informal, weakly documented conditions of Nigerian policing (Kane, 2002).

3. Methods

3.1 Design

This study adopts a qualitative, critical interpretive research design. The method is centred on the application of Qualitative Secondary Analysis (QSA) principles to documented institutional, legal, and academic texts (Irvine, 2024; Asogwa et al., 2023). This design choice is justified by the study's objective: to move beyond a simple descriptive account of police conduct and instead understand the deep structural and institutional mechanisms through which ethical failures operate as a determinant of crime management outcomes within the Nigerian policing context.

3.2 Data source and collection

The analysis relies on established secondary data. Data sources include scholarly literature, peer-reviewed journal articles focused on police ethics and misconduct, official government policy instruments (such as the Nigeria Police Act 2020 and the Administration of Criminal Justice Act 2015), and institutional reports detailing police accountability and human rights observations (Abang & Akeh, 2024; Amnesty International, 2024; Amah et al., 2026). Data collection focused specifically on documented challenges related to brutality, extortion, selective enforcement, and unlawful detention, as well as their bearing on citizens' cooperation, crime reporting, and overall crime management outcomes in Cross River State, Nigeria.

3.3 Data analysis

The collected documents were systematically subjected to thematic analysis, a process used to identify recurrent patterns, challenges, and institutional failures related to police ethical conduct and practice (Jemisenia et al., 2021; Asogwa & Asogwa, 2025). The analysis employed the socio-ecological framework to interpret the findings and establish causal links between institutional conditions and crime management outcomes. Key themes were coded, including institutional lag, referring to the slow enforcement of existing accountability mechanisms; misconduct normalisation, relating to the entrenchment of practices such as extortion and selective enforcement within routine policing; and public disengagement, describing citizens' diminished willingness to report crime or cooperate with investigations following exposure to unethical conduct. The systematic coding linked observed institutional failures, such as the routine extortion of crime victims and witnesses, directly to core determinants of effective crime management, including public trust, information flow, and investigative cooperation. This connection highlights a crucial problem: unethical police conduct is not simply a matter of individual officer discipline. It is a core determinant of the integrity and operational effectiveness of the entire crime management system. The analysis thus concentrates on the practical relationship between police ethical conduct and crime management outcomes in Cross River State, rather than confining itself strictly to a general discussion of police reform in Nigeria.

4. Results

4.1 Police brutality and crime management

The clearest empirical demonstration of brutality's effect on intelligence gathering and crime detection comes from Desmond, Papachristos, and Kirk (2016), who found that a single publicised incident of police brutality in Milwaukee produced a measurable, sustained decline in crime-related 911 calls, particularly in the affected community, resulting in an estimated loss of 22,200 calls for

service over the following year. Since intelligence gathering and crime detection depend directly on citizens volunteering information, whether through emergency calls, tips, or informal reports, this finding demonstrates that brutality directly degrades the raw information supply on which these two crime management variables depend. A subsequent study by the same authors (Desmond, Papachristos & Kirk, 2020) confirmed that this suppression effect extends beyond isolated cases, indicating a durable, repeatable relationship rather than a one-off anomaly. Investigation, evidence generation, and prosecution support are similarly undermined, since effective investigation and prosecution depend heavily on witness cooperation, testimony, and willingness to appear in formal proceedings. Ike and Jidong (2023); Antai, et al, (2025) found that Nigerian victims and witnesses who feared mistreatment by police were significantly less inclined to engage with reporting or investigative processes, a pattern consistent with the broader finding that fear generated by brutality discourages not only initial reporting but also sustained cooperation through the investigative and prosecutorial stages. Where witnesses decline to give statements or testify out of fear of police retaliation or further victimisation, evidence generation weakens and prosecution support collapses, regardless of how much physical or forensic capacity the police service otherwise possesses.

Brutality can also produce a superficially contradictory effect on arrest effectiveness and response time. In the short term, aggressive and forceful policing may appear to increase arrest counts in the immediate aftermath of an incident. However, Kane (2002), in a longitudinal ecological study of New York City police precincts, found that misconduct, including excessive force, clustered in precincts marked by structural disadvantage and community instability, precisely the conditions under which sustained, cooperative crime control is hardest to achieve. Over time, as community trust erodes, response effectiveness declines because residents delay or avoid contacting police even in genuine emergencies, undermining the timeliness that effective response depends on. Perhaps counterintuitively, brutality also does not reliably translate into improved public safety or crime reduction outcomes. Desmond et al. (2016) found that despite the drop in reporting following the Milwaukee incident, the city's homicide rate rose during the same period, demonstrating that reduced citizen engagement with police did not correspond to reduced underlying criminal activity, only to reduced visibility of that activity to law enforcement. In the Nigerian context, Akinyetun and Adedini (2022) argue that the Nigeria Police Force's pattern of extrajudicial killings has actively undermined its crime control mandate rather than reinforcing it, since such conduct erodes the institutional legitimacy required for sustained public safety gains. Amnesty International (2024), documenting at least 24 deaths from excessive police force during the 2024 #EndBadGovernance protests, further illustrates how brutality can escalate civil unrest and public disorder rather than containing it, directly working against crime reduction and public safety objectives.

4.2 Policing extortion and crime management

In principle, a checkpoint exists to intercept threats, verify identities, and support crime prevention. In much of Nigeria cities, however, checkpoints have taken on a second, unofficial purpose: generating cash for the officers manning them. This gap between stated function and actual practice is where extortion does its damage to crime management, and understanding that damage requires looking past the general claim that "corruption is bad" and toward the specific operational variables it corrodes. Ibrahim, Isiaka, Salihu, Balogun, and Akangbe (2018) studied checkpoints along Nigerian highways and found that officers routinely slowed traffic deliberately, not to inspect vehicles for threats, but to create pressure for a bribe. Every minute an officer spends negotiating with a motorist over an unofficial fee is a minute not spent scanning for genuine risk indicators. The checkpoint still exists, still has officers standing at it, still looks operational on paper, but its actual crime-prevention function has been hollowed out from within. Human Rights Watch (2010) documented something structurally similar but more troubling at the investigative stage: officers who demand payment from crime victims before opening a case file. Here the damage lands directly on investigation and evidence generation, because a victim who cannot pay simply does not get an investigation started, regardless of how strong their case might otherwise be.

Citizens are typically the largest single source of tips, leads, and informal information that feeds police work, and that supply depends on citizens believing that coming forward will not cost them money. A recent Afrobarometer survey found that 67% of Nigerians who sought police assistance ended up paying a bribe to receive it, and only 10% believed corruption could be reported without fear of retaliation (as cited in AllAfrica, 2026). Put those two numbers together and the incentive structure becomes obvious: approaching the police carries a real, predictable cost, so people quietly stop approaching them. Whatever intelligence those citizens might have offered, about a stolen vehicle, a suspicious neighbour, a pattern of local crime, simply never reaches the institution meant to act on it. Extortion does not just fail to catch offenders; in a specific and perverse sense, it actively protects some of them. Ibrahim et al. (2018) note that a motorist or trader willing to pay the requested amount at a checkpoint typically passes through with minimal scrutiny, meaning that whoever has the means to pay effectively buys their way past the very inspection meant to catch them. This is not a case of extortion being merely neutral toward arrest effectiveness; it inverts the intended function of the checkpoint, screening out the poor and the honest while waving through anyone able to negotiate a price.

The cumulative effect on public safety and crime reduction is where these individual failures compound into something larger. Tyler's (1990) work on procedural justice offers the underlying mechanism here: citizens cooperate with authority not primarily because they fear punishment for non-cooperation, but because they judge the authority to be fair. An institution that has, in the words of one recent commentary, turned "protection into a transaction" (AllAfrica, 2026) fails that fairness test in the most literal sense possible, and the resulting withdrawal of public cooperation is not a side effect but the predictable outcome of the theory. For Cross River State, where police-citizen trust was already shown to be weak, and where documented misconduct within the state command exists on separate grounds (Abang & Akeh, 2024), extortion is best understood as a compounding variable, one that layers a specific financial disincentive on top of an already fragile relationship between the police and the people they are meant to serve, with predictable consequences for how much crime actually gets prevented, detected, and solved.

4.3 Police unlawful detention and crime management

Detention is meant to be a tool, not a punishment handed out before guilt is established. It exists so that suspects can be questioned, evidence gathered, and a case built, all within a legally bounded window. Strip away that boundary, and detention stops functioning

as an instrument of crime management and starts functioning as something closer to arbitrary punishment, with consequences that ripple well beyond the individual held. Amah, Udude, and Odom (2026) describe a pattern in which suspects are held for weeks or months without charge, often well beyond the timeframes set out in the Administration of Criminal Justice Act 2015, with cases proceeding not on the strength of gathered evidence but on the simple fact of continued custody. When detention substitutes for investigation rather than supporting it, the actual evidentiary work that should be happening, forensic analysis, witness interviews, corroboration, quietly stalls, because the pressure to build a case properly disappears once a suspect is already locked away. Nnaji (2016) found the same pattern from a different angle, noting that Nigerian security agencies detain individuals routinely despite the existence of formal human rights oversight bodies, which suggests the problem is not a lack of investigative capacity so much as a habit of treating custody itself as the endpoint rather than the beginning of a case. Jurist (2024), reporting on international concern over Nigerian detention practices, points to cases where individuals were held for extended periods with no clear path toward prosecution, which inflates apprehension figures without producing anything that actually advances a case toward resolution. Dataphyte (2022) documents an even starker version of this: individuals detained simply for being present at a crime scene, treated as suspects by default rather than as witnesses who might have useful information. That single move, treating presence as guilt, wastes the investigative value a witness could have offered while simultaneously generating a wrongful detention that does nothing for genuine crime management.

Where unlawful detention does its longest-lasting damage, though, is in intelligence gathering and public cooperation more broadly, and the mechanism here is fear rather than direct obstruction. A citizen who has watched a neighbour, a relative, or a stranger held for months without charge for simply being at the wrong place at the wrong time draws an obvious conclusion: proximity to the police is proximity to risk. That conclusion does not stay confined to suspects. It extends to witnesses weighing whether to come forward, to victims deciding whether reporting a crime is worth the exposure, and to ordinary residents deciding whether to answer an officer's questions at all. UNHCR Refworld (2013) adds a further complication, noting that detention in Nigeria is frequently entangled with extortion, with detainees or their families paying for release or better treatment, which means the fear generated by unlawful detention is not abstract but has a concrete, transactional edge to it. Amah et al. (2026) note that this pattern falls hardest on citizens who are poor or otherwise unable to secure quick legal help, meaning the chilling effect on cooperation is not distributed evenly across Cross River State's population but concentrated precisely among those already most vulnerable to other forms of misconduct examined elsewhere in this study.

Set alongside the state's already documented weaknesses in trust and accountability (Alao & Adeyemi, 2019; Abang & Akeh, 2024), unlawful detention functions less as an isolated failure and more as a standing warning sign to the public: contact with the police, even voluntary, well-intentioned contact, carries a risk that has nothing to do with whether you did anything wrong. A crime management system cannot function well while sending that message, however capable its officers might otherwise be at the technical work of investigation.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has shown that police brutality, extortion, and unlawful detention each negatively affect crime management in Cross River State. Together, these three variables converge on the same outcome demonstrated throughout this study: an erosion of public trust and cooperation that starves crime management of the information, testimony, and community engagement it depends on to function, regardless of the technical or resource capacity the police service might otherwise possess. Addressing this requires the Nigeria Police Force and Cross River State Command to move beyond disciplinary rhetoric toward concrete institutional reform, strengthening internal accountability and independent complaint mechanisms to deter brutality and extortion, enforcing statutory detention timeframes with real consequences for non-compliance, improving officer welfare and remuneration to reduce the economic pressures that sustain extortion, and investing in community-based trust-building initiatives so that citizens in Cross River State come to see the police as an institution worth reporting to, rather than one to be avoided.

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