


# Pandemic Policing and Community Engagement: Preparedness, Legitimacy and Public Support During the COVID-19 Crisis in Nigeria

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Richard Abayomi Aborisade<sup>1</sup>   
and Oladele Adelere Adeleke<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This study brings to the fore, insights into three key factors that had been widely noted to play significant roles in driving effective pandemic policing. These are the preparedness of the police as first responders to a public health crisis, the level of public trust in the police as a legitimate power holder, and community engagement as a tool to drive public support and participation in fighting COVID-19. Using the Nigeria police as a case study, with the damning reports of abuse of power and other misconduct, this study examined how the police responded to COVID-19 mandates and community participation. Interviews with 40 police officers who enforced the COVID-19 lockdown, 16 senior police officers, and 18 community leaders within Lagos and Ogun states were conducted, and a thematic analysis of the narratives was carried out. Findings indicated that community engagement was not effectively deployed by the Nigerian police in the course of pandemic policing. This was due to a lack of police preparedness, over-reliance on the use of force for public control, public distrust in the police, and a lack of prior practice of community engagement by the police. Public distrust in the police was found to be central to peoples' disobedience to COVID-19 rules which worsened police-community relations, culminating in protests against the police and its formations. These findings have important policy and practical implications if police legitimacy and post-COVID police-community relations are to improve.

## Keywords

community engagement, COVID-19, legitimacy, pandemic policing, procedural justice

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<sup>1</sup>Department of Sociology, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Nigeria

## Corresponding Author:

Richard Abayomi Aborisade, Department of Sociology, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State PMB 2002, Nigeria.

Email: aborisade.richard@oouagoiwoye.edu.ng

## **Introduction**

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak a global pandemic on March 11, 2020 (WHO, 2020a). The highly contagious status of the virus culminated in an unprecedented global response with governments adopting measures to counter the pandemic and cope with the attendant increasing pressures on their public health systems. In the process, directives that have been criticised as a breach of the rule of law, and negating the role of parliament in adopting democratic decisions were taken to limit the mobility of people (Nivette et al., 2021; Stott et al., 2020). These directives widely referred to as 'lockdown' measures, largely bordered on the restriction of certain basic human rights, especially the rights to peaceful assembly and freedom of movement. The need to enforce the lockdown measures prompted governments across the world to engage law enforcement agents to monitor and enforce compliance. However, the processes of policing the pandemic have been trailed by widespread reports of police high-handedness, use of excessive force, and wanton abuse of human rights across the world (Aborisade & Gbahabo, 2021; Amnesty International, 2020a; Human Rights Watch, 2020). These have continued to draw concerns about the impact of the approaches adopted by the police while enforcing COVID-19 protocols on community relations and police legitimacy.

The Nigerian government announced a lockdown measure on 30th March 2020, a sequel to the first reported case of COVID-19 in the country on 27th February 2020 (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, 2020). In declaring the total lockdown, a 24-h notice was given by the government for the people to prepare and, thereafter, obey the stay-at-home order. However, within the first month of police enforcement of the shutdown mandates, the National Human Rights Commission (2020) reported 21 extra-judicial killings of those adjudged to have flouted the lockdown orders by police officers. In addition, the commission was reported to have received 105 complaints of human rights violations against law enforcement officials within the same period (AfricLaw, 2020). The spate of reported excessive use of force and extortion by the Nigeria police culminated in the country being listed by the United Nations Human Rights among the fifteen (15) countries with the 'most troubling' allegations of human rights abuse and flouting of the rule of law under the guise of fighting the novel coronavirus pandemic (Aljazeera, 2020).

Amnesty International (2020b) and Transparency International (2020) acknowledged the gross abuse of human rights that characterised police enforcement of COVID-19 restriction measures in Nigeria and expressed concern that the high-handed policing may have a long-lasting impact on legitimacy and police-community relationship far beyond the pandemic period. Meanwhile, in spite of the militarised approach deployed by the Nigeria police in enforcing the COVID-19 mandates, reports indicate a gross violation of the stay-at-home order across the country (Aborisade & Ariyo, 2022; The Africa Report, 2020; The Guardian, 2020). This invariably suggests the ineffectiveness of the militarised and control-dominated approaches adopted by the Nigerian police in response to the public health crisis.

This study brings to the fore three key factors that had been widely noted to play significant roles in driving effective pandemic policing across the world. These are the preparedness of the police as first responders to the public health crisis (Stott et al., 2020), the level of public trust in the police as a legitimate power holder (Jones, 2020), and community engagement as a tool for driving public support and participation in fighting the virus (Cheng, 2020; Reicher & Stott, 2020). Gleaning from reports of unlawful use of force, extra-judicial killings, abuse of human rights, extortion, and other acts of misconduct against the officers enforcing the COVID-19 mandates, it is apparent that there is a need for a review of the approaches used by the Nigerian police while intervening in such health crisis. In doing so, this article presents an empirical review of police enforcement of the lockdown in Nigeria, drawing analysis from the accounts of police field officers, senior police officers, and community leaders in Lagos and Ogun states. Also, the study attempts to

contribute to the growing body of knowledge on pandemic policing and community engagement, especially in the global south where police-community relationships have often been reported to be problematic (Amnesty International, 2020b; Amusan & Saka, 2018).

### *Theoretical Explanations of the Imperatives of Procedurally Just Policing in a Pandemic*

Indeed, the global community found itself in a situation of uncertainty following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The emergence and rapid spread of the virus subjected the global police system to the pressure of responding to and assisting in a public health crisis while enforcing new laws and bylaws (Laufs & Waseem, 2020; Viedma & Abdalla, 2022). In developing countries such as Nigeria, the preparedness of the police in responding to the health crisis was a substantial challenge due to the overarching problems which confronted the police in such countries like inadequate personnel, equipment, lack of regular training, and communication gadgets (Aborisade, 2021; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020). In this study, procedural justice theory (PJT), that speaks to the idea of fair processes, and how people feel that they ought to defer to decisions and rules, following them voluntarily out of obligation rather than out of fear of punishment or anticipation of reward, is adopted (Tyler, 2001; 2006). The PTJ, a social psychological analysis of 'why people obey the law,' is built from the seminar work of Tyler (1990).

Procedural justice theorists have affirmed that the successful response of the police to the COVID-19 crisis is highly dependent on public trust and confidence, as well as the level at which the public perceives the police as a legitimate power holder (Jones, 2020; Stott et al., 2020). Police legitimacy, as a concept, implies that the police are seen as legitimate power holders who uphold the law and operate in the community in a procedurally just way, giving a voice to the people they serve (Tyler, 2003). Empirical studies have consistently asserted that peoples' obedience to the law has a strong connection with the level of public trust in the police and their perception of the police as being legitimate (Bolger & Walters, 2019; Radburn & Stott, 2019; Tankebe, 2013; Terrill et al., 2016). For example, in their study, using a random sample of 1,681 residents of a metropolitan city, Nix, et al. (2015) found that procedural justice evaluations are a primary source of trust in the police. Also, Boateng (2020) examined factors affecting citizens' perceptions of police procedural fairness. He found that citizens' assessments of police fairness are largely driven by their experiences with the police, views about police effectiveness, levels of trust in the police, and their own individual characteristics.

In apparent contrast to the principles of procedural justice, the Nigeria police have been widely perceived as a control-dominated system characterised by a centralised police structure (Alemika, 1988; Chinwokwu, 2017; Famosaya, 2020), with crime control as its main aim, and deriving legitimacy mainly from the state (Akinlabi, 2017). This may have impacted significantly on the approach deployed by the Nigerian police to enforce the COVID-19 mandates. According to Transparency International (2020), the approach adopted at supervising the stay-at-home order and social distancing by the Nigerian police was tantamount to criminalising the lockdown rules. This was said to have contributed to the high casualty rate that trailed the enforcement of the lockdown rules in the country (AfricLaw, 2020).

Research findings have shown that the Nigeria police, as an institution, is often perceived as unjust in its operations or lacks compassion in its interactions with the public, thus leading to a state of decline in legitimacy (Aborisade, 2019; Aborisade & Fayemi, 2015a; Aborisade & Oni, 2020a; 2020b; Akinlabi, 2017; Famosaya, 2020). This may be responsible for the constraints faced by the Nigerian police in receiving public support in the course of its COVID-19 duties. Inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations that observed compliance with the COVID-19 protocols in Nigeria remarked that police enforcement of the stay-at-home orders

suffered a setback due to the apparent mistrust and high-handed approach of the police in professionally engaging the public (The Africa Report, 2020; Transparency International, 2020).

In the same vein, while drawing from the PJT, it is pertinent to review the enforcement of the lockdown orders by the police as well as the level of community engagement and support in the quest to contain the spread of the virus. By so doing, the key factors that led to massive civil disobedience to the COVID-19 protocols as supervised by the police will be exposed. Eventually, the potentialities of the postulations of the PJT in enhancing positive police-community relations in Nigeria will be examined.

### *The Imperatives of Community Participation in Pandemic Policing*

Scholars and epidemiologists have pointed out the importance of community participation in the collective response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The imperative of community participation was particularly identified as being essential in ensuring compliance with lockdown measures, guidelines for easing restrictions, and community support through volunteering (Cheng, 2020; Reicher & Stott, 2020). In several countries where community participation was sought and achieved as a response to the pandemic, considerable success was realised in curtailing the spread of the virus. For example, in the United Kingdom, over one million people volunteered to help in responding to the pandemic in various capacities which included engaging in tasks as simple as checking on people's wellbeing during the lockdown, distributing palliatives, and educating community members on how to stay safe (Butler, 2020). Also, in a qualitative study examining police officers' use of social media in engaging the public during the COVID-19 lockdown, Ralph et al. (2022) reported how police in England utilised official, semi-official and unofficial police social media accounts to engage the public.

However, pandemic responses in Nigeria have largely involved the government giving directives and orders that must be obeyed by the people with little or no input from the community (Amnesty International, 2020b). In many instances, some of these orders kept changing as the government received information from epidemiologists and virologists on how to manage the virus. According to Marston et al. (2020), incorporating insights and ideas from diverse communities is central to the coproduction of health, which will see health professionals working together with community members in the planning, researching, delivering and evaluating the most appropriate health promotion and healthcare services. Similarly, community policing and participation in police enforcement of COVID-19 protocols have been identified as the most effective way of preventing and checking the spread of the virus (Jones, 2020; Stott et al., 2020).

Community policing has been described as capable of bringing community and police closer at the local level by encouraging police to work together with local leaders, youths and private security (Jones, 2020). It also brings to the fore inclusive problem-solving approaches wherein police and local leadership jointly identify and tackle community security challenges through existing neighbourhood councils (Anoko et al., 2020). Extant literature has posited that police-community engagement attains an additional level of importance during exceptional events or emergency situations because public outreach enables police officers to connect with those affected by dire situations (Cheng, 2020; Reicher & Stott, 2020). Such a relationship with the community helps police agencies to understand the risks that communities face, while communities are able to understand the public safety responses and how these responses can be accessed (Ejiogu, 2019; Kappeler & Gaines, 2014).

In Nigeria, the inability of the police to effectively ensure adequate security of lives and properties has particularly seen to a proliferation of vigilante organisations, ethno-militia groups and private security to fight crime and protect the public (Amusan & Saka, 2018; Ejiogu, 2019). For example, inadequate police response to armed robbery incidents in the south-eastern parts of Nigeria was attributed to the emergence and rise of the Bakassi Boys, a vigilante group (Harnischfeger, 2003).

Also, the O'dua People's Congress, a political ethno-militia group, became involved in vigilantism within the southwest as a response to the growing crime rates within the region (Abdulazeez, 2013). Notably, the adoption of indigenous knowledge of administration and security structure was believed to have largely accounted for the success of OPC and Bakassi Boys in attracting millions of members, garnering public support and reducing the level of crime rate in their regions (Abdulazeez, 2013; Harnischfeger, 2003). Their successes, which were largely attributed to their involvement of local political structures and figures, like the chiefs, youths and other local residents in their vigilant operations, have further led to the proliferation of more vigilante groups (Amusan & Saka, 2018; Ejiogu, 2019). Consequently, as postulated by extant community policing literature (Felix & Hilgers, 2020; Kappeler & Gaines, 2014), and supported by the growing literature on COVID-19 and community policing (Jones, 2020; Marston et al., 2020; Stott et al., 2020), this studies examines the potentials of community participation in pandemic policing in Nigeria.

### *The Nigerian Police and Pre-COVID Legitimacy Policing*

The establishment of police departments in Nigeria dates back to 1820 during the colonial era within the Lagos protectorate (Alemika, 1988). It was expanded in 1879 with the forming of a 1,200-member armed paramilitary Hausa Constabulary tagged the Royal Niger Company Constabulary. In 1894, a similar force, the Niger Coast Constabulary was established in Calabar under the newly proclaimed Niger Coast protectorate. More formations were subsequently established in different parts of the Northern Nigeria Protectorate, Lagos Colony and Protectorate of Southern Nigeria. Subsequently, in 1930, the British merged the northern and southern regional police forces to form the colony's first national police – the Nigeria Police Force.

In policing Nigeria, the Nigeria Police have been widely reported to rely heavily on instrumental compliance in performing its enforcement duties on crimes (Alemika, 1988; Chinwokwu, 2017). Some scholars traced the orientation of the Nigeria Police regarding its cultural reliance on instrumental compliance and use of lethal force to the British colonial rule (Agbiboa, 2015; Alemika, 2003). Meanwhile, other scholars linked the culture of police violence to the country's prolonged rule under military juntas, who used the military forces as a tool to ensure and mandate cooperation from citizens (Aborisade & Obileye, 2017; Akinlabi, 2017). Irrespectively of the source of orientation, there are considerable reports of systemic violence by officers of the Nigerian police meted out to citizens in the performance of their duties. These reports indicate that excessive and unwarranted force is often applied by officers while apprehending crime suspects (Alemika, 2003), controlling crowds and riots (Iwuoha & Anichie, 2021), enforcing movement restrictions (Famosaya, 2020), and executing stop-and-search (Adisa et al., 2018). Others include resorting to torture during investigations (Aborisade & Obileye, 2017), and committing extrajudicial killings (Amnesty International, 2020b; Babatunde, 2017). There have also been reports of officers engaging in gender-based violence against women in custody (Aborisade & Oni, 2021; Salihu & Fawole, 2021), and engaging in sundry corrupt practices (Aborisade & Fayemi, 2015b; Agbiboa, 2015).

Public encounters with the police and reports of police abuse of human rights appear to have considerably shaped public perception of the police and negatively impacted the legitimacy of policing in Nigeria (Adisa et al., 2018; Akinlabi, 2020; Famosaya, 2020). The Nigerian police have been widely perceived as a control-dominated system characterised by a centralised police structure, with crime control as the main aim, and deriving legitimacy mainly from the state (Akinlabi, 2017; Alemika, 1988). A tipping point of police illegitimacy in Nigeria was the viral video of police extrajudicial killing of a man by officers of the now disbanded Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) (Etim et al., 2022). This culminated in a nationwide protest against police brutality that defied movement restrictions occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic (Iwuoha & Anichie, 2021) and further demonstrated deep distrust between the community and the police. Prior to the

#EndSARS protests, low public compliance with police directives on COVID-19 rules has been widely reported, with the public appearing to challenge police legitimacy in restricting movement (The Africa Report, 2020; The Guardian, 2020). Therefore, the pre-COVID legitimacy challenge of the Nigerian police and low public trust may not only inhibit effective pandemic policing but also stand to deepen the divides between police and the Nigerian community.

### *The Present Study*

There is no gainsaying the fact that public health and safety emergencies have a lasting impact on the police and the communities they serve. On-going research and position papers on the COVID-19 pandemic have attested to the fact that it will have a great impact on post-COVID policing, policy-making and academic research. This study is guided by three salient questions: what was the level of preparedness of the Nigerian police as a first responder to the COVID-19 pandemic and enforcing new laws and by-laws? In addressing this question, the study aims to explore pre-COVID training, education and practice that can impact public health crisis intervention. Second, what was the level of public trust in the police as a legitimate power holder supervising the COVID-19 rules? The second question attempts to discuss the pre-COVID level of police legitimacy, and probe the willingness of the public to obey lockdown measures as enforced by the police, and their cooperativeness in complying with social distancing and safety measures after the lockdown. Finally, what was the level of police use of community engagement as a tool to driving public support and participation in fighting COVID-19? This third question aims to explore the nature of police-community relationships prior to the pandemic, during, and after the lockdown, in engendering public support and participation in COVID-19 safety measures. Considering that Nigeria was listed among fifteen countries with the 'most troubling' allegations of human rights abuses by law enforcement officers during the crisis lockdown, studies reflecting on police approach in engaging the public are imperative. This empirical study will serve to inform police departments and policymakers in the face of other public health emergencies.

### **Method**

This study adopted a qualitative approach due to the unexplored nature of the topic and in order to gather detailed information from those that could positively inform this research. In addition, the aim of the research is to capture the breadth of the COVID-19 duty experiences and viewpoints of police officers and community leaders rather than the dominant discourses and commonality on police operations and conducts.

### *Study Locations*

Lagos state, which used to be the political capital of Nigeria, is still widely described as the commercial capital of the country. According to the official website of the Lagos State Government, the state has a population of about 24.6 million and is one of the biggest cities in Africa. Ogun state is a southwestern state that borders Lagos state to the south and also shares a border with Oyo and Ondo states. According to the official website of the state, it has an estimated population of 6.1 million. It is the state with the highest number of manufacturing industries, although this has been largely attributed to its proximity to Lagos state.

Both Lagos and Ogun states are predominantly Yoruba, with the Yoruba language serving as the lingua franca of the two states. The index case of COVID-19 was discovered on February 27 2020. During the first 30 days of COVID-19 in Nigeria, Lagos state accounted for 50% of the 232 positive cases in the country (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, 2020). Consequently, on March 30 2020, a lockdown was declared in two states, Lagos and Ogun states, as well as the Federal Capital Territory,

Abuja. The inclusion of Ogun state in the lockdown was premised on its proximity to Lagos state and the risk of the disease spreading from Lagos through Ogun to other states (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, 2020). Therefore, Lagos and Ogun states were included as study locations due to the lockdown and the full weight of other COVID-19 measures extended by the Federal Government to the two states.

### *Procedure*

Interviews were conducted with three categories of people: the police officers that enforced lockdown and other COVID-19 protocols, senior officers that supervised police personnel on COVID-19 duties, and leaders of communities within Lagos and Ogun states. This research was approached with an interest in the type of relationship that existed between communities and police personnel during the lockdown, and the level of support that communities rendered to officers on COVID-19 duties within the two states. The Lagos and Ogun states' police command is the Lagos and Ogun states' arm of the Nigeria Police Force under the headship of state commissioners often appointed by the Inspector-General of the Police. The headquarters of the Lagos state police command is located at Ikeja Lagos, while that of Ogun State is located at Eleweeran, Abeokuta.

Requests and permissions were obtained to conduct the study from the Lagos and Ogun states police commands. However, in spite of the approval granted to the research team, prospective participants were approached individually and informed about the purpose of the study. This is in order to reduce officers' likelihood of giving official responses rather than personal opinions, as well as to ensure anonymity and confidentiality assurances given to the officials at the point of their recruitment. Thirty-six police officers that enforced lockdown and other COVID-19 protocols were reached at the recruitment stage, and 16 officers that spent a minimum of four weeks on COVID-19 enforcement duties were purposively selected. Although 63 officers met this selection criterion, only 40 of them agreed to be part of the study. Senior officers that directly supervised field police officers in the enforcement of COVID-19 protocols during the lockdown period were purposively selected for the study. Out of 21 senior officers that were contacted, 16 agreed to be part of the study.

On the other hand, community leaders were approached in the two states and invited to be part of the study. In an attempt to cover three main socio-economic divides in each of the two states, categorizations were done according to low-, middle- and upper-class neighbourhoods – and participation was sought with the use of clustered sampling. This was done in order to select communities that depict these three social class categories. Attention was then placed on residential areas within the selected areas and information about the local political structures was sought from local government agencies. In order to achieve sample diversity, a variety of community leadership consisting of landlords, local security heads, coordinators of vigilantes, local chiefs, and religious leaders was purposively selected for the study.

The confidentiality of participants was strictly safeguarded in addition to adhering to other rules and standards guiding research with human subjects. All names used in this paper to refer to participants are pseudonyms selected by the participants themselves. Interview timing ranged from 35 min to one hour and thirty minutes. While interviews were audio recorded for all community leaders, police officers declined the use of audio recording devices. Therefore, the use of two note-takers among the interviewers was adopted. In all, 74 interviews were conducted.

### *Participants*

Forty officers that actively enforced lockdown rules and COVID-19 protocols in Lagos and Ogun states (20 from each state), 16 senior police officers that supervised lockdown operations of police

officers, and 18 community leaders from the two states were interviewed in this study. The interviews were conducted between August 2020 and April 2021. The COVID-19 enforcement officers were ranked from Police Constable (PS) to Inspector of Police (IP). Only two females were part of the study out of the five approached, as an overwhelming majority of field officers for the pandemic duty were males. Their years of experience in policing ranged from three to fifteen years. The majority of them (31) had served in other states before they were transferred to Lagos and Ogun states' police commands. Aside from specialised police courses and training, 23 of them had received post-secondary education in formal institutions, with 12 having university degrees. They formed an ethnically diverse group with all three major ethnic groups represented in the sample: Yoruba (14), Igbo (12) Hausa (8). The remaining eight identified with six minority groups in Nigeria.

The senior officers' ranked from Assistant Superintendent of Police (ASP) to Chief Superintendent of Police (CSP), while they were between the ages of 35 to 52, and have worked in at least three police commands before their transfer to the Lagos and Ogun states commands. Only one of the participants in this category was a female, although four female officers were approached to partake in the study. All the officers in this category had post-secondary education with eight being university graduates and three having post-graduate qualifications. All three major ethnic groups were however not represented in the sample with nine Yoruba, five Igbo and the remaining two from minority ethnic groups (Ikwere and Benin).

The community leaders were between the ages of 41 and 66 with their length of leadership within their communities ranging from 5 to 14 years. Their leadership positions in their various communities ranged from the chairman – landlords and tenants association, head of community security units, head of community vigilantes, neighbourhood watch coordinator, local chiefs, opinion leaders, and spiritual/religious leaders. Twelve of them had post-secondary education, while the remaining had primary education (4) and, no formal education (2). Interviews were conducted in the English language except for the six participants with primary or no formal education, which were conducted in Pidgin English and local languages, and then translated (Table 1).

### *Interview Protocols*

Semi-structured protocol designs were followed for the interviews in order to explore the relationship that existed between the police and the communities before, during, and after the lockdown measures occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviewers asked participants to describe the preparations for addressing the COVID-19 pandemic and the level of support given to law enforcement agencies in carrying out the government mandates of ensuring social distancing and other preventive measures. Examples of these exploratory questions included: 'How will you describe and evaluate the response of your community members to the health crisis occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic?' 'Were communities invited and carried along by the police in their COVID-19 lockdown operations?' 'How will you describe the preparation of police officers for intervening in the health emergency brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic?' 'How will you describe the response of the people/citizens to the authority of the police in restricting movement during the lockdown and enforcement of the curfew?'

### *Analysis Strategy*

In this present study, the nature and level of, or lack of, community engagement in police efforts at intervening in the health crisis occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic was the key focus. Factors that could have impeded effective police-community engagement such as police preparedness and legitimacy were particularly explored. In analysing the data collected, an inductive thematic analysis approach was adopted (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The author started the analyses by selecting 20



transcripts at random and reading through them, taking note of apparently common and contrasting thematic elements among the samples, after which a preliminary coding scheme was drafted. This initial codebook tracked participants' description of pandemic policing and the role of community members in ensuring safety during the health emergency, their use of problematising and/or normalising themes in these accounts, and information they shared about public support to the police during the lockdown, and in adhering to COVID-19 protocols. Thereafter, two scholars in the social sciences were engaged to conduct an intercoder reliability check, in order to enhance the validity of the data. Using the codebook, they both checked the same 20 transcripts that were initially checked by the author. All three coders then discussed discrepancies in their conceptualizations and made corrections to the coding schemes. Thereafter, all coders separately coded the remaining 48 transcripts. At the conclusion of this exercise, the coders met to resolve any discrepancies in order for all coders to mutually agree on all applied codes.

## Results

### *Police Pre-COVID Preparedness for Public Health Crisis*

Senior police participants of the study were requested to express their opinions on the preparedness of the Nigerian police in handling assignments related to intervening in a public health crisis before the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Ten of the 16 senior officers accepted that there was no prior training for police officers engaged in COVID-19 shutdown enforcement duties and other assignments related to pandemic policing. Participants that accepted the ill-preparedness of the police premised their submission on the novel nature of the pandemic and the limited education that officers had about the disease before the lockdown duties. Also, they remarked that there had been no serious and widespread public health crisis that required police intervention in the recent past. 'For example, even though Ebola virus disease was quite serious, it didn't take police involvement for it to be curtailed' Salisu (Not real name) of the Ogun State police Command expressed. ASP Jegede of the Lagos State Police Command submitted that apart from officers not being trained in enforcing COVID-19 measures, they were not also trained on how to protect themselves considering that they were equally vulnerable. In the words of ASP Kazeem who also shared ASP Jegede's opinion:

... we have not had this kind of crisis before, especially in my 30 years in the Nigeria police. The usual training and interventions that officers are used to are public disturbances, riots, election violence and related public disorders. But this has to do with health, especially a highly contagious and deadly disease. Several pieces of training would have been needed to get the officers prepared for this. Also, this current assignment involved the restriction of the movement of people for several weeks. How do we do that without trampling on the rights of the people, cooperating with other first responders, supporting people with health needs, and other related assignments? These are training needs that were never met before the pandemic.

(ASP Kazeem, LSPC, Lagos)

The responses of others in this category supported the comment of ASP Kazeem and they premised the ill-preparedness of the police for public health intervention on lack of specialised training, low knowledge level on the risks posed by the virus, and inadequate equipment and logistics, especially, personal protective equipment (PPE). According to CPS Layemi of the Ogun State Police Command, 'this impacted negatively on the flow of communication from commands to field officers, other frontline workers and communities during the enforcement of the lockdown.'

The remaining six participants believed that there were routine pieces of training which police officers can extrapolate from to maintain the public order that comes with public health crises. One of the participants that are of this opinion is CSP Ogar:

First of all, COVID-19 is a deadly disease and the police aim to protect life and property of the people, so the police have been more than prepared for any upcoming emergencies. Even though there were lots of challenges, officers have been trained to enforce the law fairly. This can be applied to ensure compliance with the lockdown. The police are not limited to enforcing traffic regulations and municipal by-laws.

(CSP Ogar/LSPC, Lagos)

The opinion of CSP Ogar is shared by the other five participants in this category. They mainly stated that the operational training of police officers in maintaining law and order can be extended to intervening in the prevailing health crisis. However, the comments of CPS Layemi of the Ogun State Police Command appear to contradict the submission of CSP Ogar:

... it is undeniable that the COVID-19 pandemic took the world by surprise and brought with it a lot of unprecedented events. For example, police officers have never had to collaborate with health workers in the way we were forced to; this led to considerable friction between the two sectors. Also, officers had to be supportive in conveying sick people to isolation centres, stop people's movement and relate with communities in ways they were not used to successfully contain the spread of the disease. The officers were not trained for all these, and this led to the huge problems that emanated from the operations of the enforcement officers.

(CSP Layemi/OSPC, Lagos)

Despite the apparent disagreement of the participants on the level of preparedness of the police in enforcing the lockdown and COVID-19 protocols, they all agreed that the pandemic presented peculiar challenges to the police which were beyond the usual police duties, and which appeared to have strained police-community relations. These challenges included enforcing total clampdown on freedom of movement running into weeks, restrictions and regulation of freedom of association, compulsory wearing of face mask, stay-at-home and ordinance compliance enforcement Others include enlightenment of the public on COVID-19 protocols by police officers, inter-sectorial collaboration with health workers for public safety, officers' safety from infection, handling stress and burnout occasioned by enforcement duties, unclear and conflicting rules and directives from police authorities.

### *Pre-COVID Public Perception of Police Legitimacy*

All participants, senior police officers, COVID-19 enforcement officers and community leaders were requested to express their opinions on the public perception of police as a legitimate power holder before the emergence of the pandemic. This is to examine the role that police legitimacy may play in engendering public support for the police in the process of enforcing COVID-19 mandates given by the government. Sixteen senior police officers that participated acknowledged that the public perception of police legitimacy has been negative, but 12 of them argued that the police are not solely responsible for the low perception of the police by the citizens in the country. SP Adewale offered his opinion on this:

... most of the people that negatively perceive the police have not personally had troubling experiences with men of the Force. Rather, their perception is hinged on hearsay, sensational media coverage of police misconduct, Nollywood (Nigeria film industry) exaggeration of police misconduct, and other negative

utterances often by those that have not had a personal encounter with the police or had no such negative encounter.

(SP Adewale/LSPC, Lagos)

Other senior police officers supported the position of SP Adewale by stating that stories on police misconduct, brutality, and abuse of human rights are often exaggerated by the press, human rights activists, and other influencers of public opinion. On the part of the enforcement officers, although they acknowledged the low legitimate perception of the police by the public, the majority of them did not believe this was responsible for the low level of public support for police in the enforcement of COVID-19 rules. Inspector Ahmed of the OSPC posited:

... the conditions of the lockdown are such that cannot be accepted by the citizens generally across the world because they were too stringent and at variance with what people were used to. So whether Nigerians have confidence in the police or not, the rules of no movement, no association, no this-no that cannot be convenient for any people to cope with irrespective of their disposition towards the police...

However, contrary to the opinions held by enforcement officers that stringent lockdown conditions, rather than negative police legitimacy, were responsible for the uncooperative attitude of the public, community leaders that participated in the study pointed at low public trust in the police as an important factor. Adamson, a Lagos-based head of a vigilante group offered details:

... the police and the government at large are largely not trusted by the people and the problem of trust accounted for the large disobedience of the rules of the government as enforced by the police. If the police had been a trusted organisation devoid of large-scale corruption, as reported and witnessed by the people, it might have been easier for the people to conform to the directives of the officers.

Other community leaders engaged in the study opined that the lack of police legitimacy, before the emergence of COVID-19, created an atmosphere of conflict between the people and the police in the efforts directed at controlling the spread of the disease.

### *Pandemic Policing, Community Engagement and Public Support*

The three categories of participants of the study, senior police officers, enforcement officers, and community leaders, were asked to describe the level of cooperation that existed between the police and community members in the fight against the spread of the COVID-19 disease. The majority of the police executives and enforcement officers stated that the public was generally uncooperative and hostile to the police and this created a great challenge that impeded efforts at maintaining social distancing and movement restrictions. ASP Nwaifor believed that officers were generally unappreciated: 'none at all, rather, it was insult left, right, and centre; the bad news circulating about some officers abusing and extorting people even made the disrespect worse.' DSP Ogunnusi commented that people showed gross disobedience to the restriction orders and failed to cooperate with the police:

In terms of the curfew, public support was good to an extent, but it also made me realize that human beings are the worst of animals. I say this because when the curfew time was 7pm, you would see some people outside after 7pm. It was later shifted to 8pm, the same thing; you will still see people outside after 8pm giving different excuses. Now the worst was when it was shifted to 10pm, you will still see people outside around that time.

(DSP Ogunnusi, Ogun SPC, Abeokuta)

The enforcement officers agreed that the lack of public support was evident in the high level of public disobedience to the curfew and other COVID-19 protocols as well as the protests and riots against police institutions during the period of the lockdown and after. Corporal Kasali opined:

... the combination of mistrust that many people have for police officers and the government played out in the manner in which they reacted to the lockdown as well as the coronavirus prevention and management guidelines. Although the enlightenment was effective in raising peoples' awareness about the virus, people's negative perception of the police and the government made adherence very difficult to enforce. Even the danger posed by the deadly virus meant nothing to them just because of their desperate intention to disobey the police and government.

(Corporal Kasali, Ogun SPC, Abeokuta)

The senior officers were asked to describe the methods and strategies deployed to ensure a harmonious working relationship with the community leaders and members in their various states in a bid to combat the spread of the coronavirus. The participants stated that there were no conscious community engagement strategies that involved dedicated enlightenment and involvement of community leaders and members in the fight against COVID-19 or enforcing the lockdown and other protocols. Some of them noted that only healthcare workers and institutions approached communities to seek their partnership in fighting against the virus. According to the participants, the police relied on reports from news channels, massive public enlightenment programmes, government bulletins, and health officials' interactions with community members to create awareness of the virus and garner support from the public.

The community leaders also reiterated the opinions of the senior police officers that no concrete efforts were made to engage communities in the operations of the police in combating the pandemic. Alagba John, a chairman of landlords and tenants association within a Lagos community volunteered:

... we were not contacted by the police in whatever form. It was only when troubles already started that officers came to see the local chiefs to solve the problem of insecurity that emerged with the Covid-19 lockdown.

(Alagba John/Chairman Landlord-Tenant Association, Lagos)

### *Consequences of Low Public Support*

Senior and COVID-19 enforcement officers in the study offered various effects of low public support witnessed in the process of policing the pandemic. The participants listed physical violence and threats of violence from the citizens, verbal abuse, chronic stress, and burn-out, as some of the major consequences of negative public reactions to their COVID-19 duties. According to ASP Saheed:

... hitherto, we had always grappled with inadequate personnel problems, insufficient equipment, logistics and other resources needed for our police duties. However, COVID-19 created additional strain on these insufficient resources, especially on manpower. Our field officers experienced a variety of adverse effects of the burden of enforcing COVID-19 rules and assisting the health sector workers in their duties. The non-cooperative attitude of the public made the experience more traumatic for our officers, and some of them developed negative coping behaviours. Some of them became suicidal. There was an instant when one of our officers used a strong alcoholic beverage to take drugs for his sickness while on COVID-19 duty. You can imagine, taking *paracetamol* with vodka!

(ASP Saheed/OSPC, Abeokuta)

Participants, senior police personnel, and other enforcement officers alike, also identified crowd control, and negative attitudes of the community members as the most significant challenges they

were confronted with in their enforcement duties. 'I have been stoned in the nights while patrolling neighbourhoods on a few occasions,' according to Sergeant Bako.

### *Community Engagement as a Response to Pandemic*

All the participants acknowledged the importance of community engagement in fighting the spread of the disease. However, police officers, both senior and those on enforcement duties, remarked that the public made community engagement impossible to achieve. They also identified a shortage of time due to the suddenness of the emergence of the virus, non-cordial police-community relationship before the emergence of the disease, insufficient logistics that can facilitate community engagement, and poor structure of community associations that can be used to engage the community, and limitations of the police in respect of knowledge about the virus:

... many factors that hindered police partnership with communities in the policing efforts to stop the spread of the disease. There was no solid police/community structure on the ground before the onset of the virus. Communities have often been wary of the police and they will rather rely on vigilante groups and other private security or ethno-militia groups for their security ...

(DSP Ogunnusi, Ogun SPC, Abeokuta)

However, the community leaders engaged in the study blamed police belief and frequent disposition towards the use of force in their assignments with members of the public, high level of corrupt practices, and other unprofessional conduct as major factors that hindered police-community partnership in the fight against COVID-19. Some of them pointed out that the police were supposed to approach the lockdown duties with some measure of empathy for community members considering the short notice (24 h) given to the public before the commencement of the shutdown was made.

... they (police) will rather deploy force, and use weaponry and other crude methods rather than carry the communities along in their enforcement assignment. The only time we are consulted is when they have found it impossible to crack cases and they need information from us. At least, we are in a better position to relate with our people (community members) and we can prevail upon them to obey police directives as well as what to do to ensure their safety. But the police have never respected us as a formidable entity ...

(Baba Alagbaka/ Coordinator, Vigilante group, Abeokuta)

Ideally, participants listed ways in which community engagement would have been essential in police operations against the spread of COVID-19. These would include risk communication to community members, regulating movement within communities, community support through volunteering, educating members, preventing public hostilities towards police officers on COVID-19 duties, providing information about non-compliance to the police, ensuring adherence to social distancing, wearing of facemask and other COVID-19 safety guidelines.

## **Discussion**

Without a doubt, a global emergency and crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic affects law enforcement practices and overstretches police resources, with physical and mental health consequences on law enforcement officers (Shirzad et al., 2020; Stogner et al., 2020). However, one of the biggest challenges that faced by pandemic policing has been reported to be a lack of police legitimacy (Jones, 2020; Stott et al., 2020). Tyler (2003) posited that legal authorities gain when they receive deference and cooperation from the public. Considerable empirical evidence has suggested that

the key factor that shapes public behaviour is the fairness of the processes used by legal authorities when dealing with members of the public (Bolger & Walters, 2019; Radburn & Stott, 2019; Tankebe, 2013; Terrill et al., 2016). In respect of policing the pandemic, studies have equally found that deploying procedurally just approaches have helped in effectively supervising COVID-19 rules (Aborisade & Ariyo, 2022; Farrow, 2020; Ghaemmaghmi, et al., 2021). Meanwhile, in deploying procedurally just approaches for policing the pandemic, the wider context of police-public engagement has been explored (Ghaemmaghmi, et al., 2021).

Community engagement has been recognised as an essential factor in reducing the burden of work on police towards ensuring compliance with lockdown protocols (Gonah, 2020; WHO, 2020a). Also, community engagement has been noted to help police connect with those affected by dire situations, and understand the risks communities face, while it also helps communities to understand the public safety response and how to access help from the police (Jones, 2020; Stott et al., 2020; WHO, 2020b). References have also been drawn from how community engagement helped in the fight against the recent Ebola outbreak, especially in Africa (Anoko et al., 2020). Furthermore, community participation was deployed in the United Kingdom to elicit volunteering services in responding to the pandemic (Butler, 2020). However, in the Nigerian case, community engagement has not been effectively deployed by the police in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, as findings from this study suggest. Therefore, pandemic policing stands to have far-reaching consequences on the well-being of officers, citizens' human rights, police-community relations, and the effectiveness of combating the spread of COVID-19 in the country.

Transparency International (2020) describes the approach adopted by the Nigerian police in monitoring and enforcing adherence to COVID-19 mandates as tantamount to criminalising the lockdown rules. In excusing the force, police executives engaged in the study suggested that the adoption of a militarised approach to responding to the pandemic was largely based on the unpreparedness of the police in intervening in the unprecedented global health crisis. They identified limited time and material resources needed to engage the public, low level of legitimacy and public trust before the pandemic as major factors that hindered community engagement. As a result, Nigerian police officers had to extrapolate and rely on the routine police operational training they had earlier attended to perform their COVID-19 duties. Meanwhile, considering that officers of the Nigeria police have often been accused of human rights violations (Aborisade & Obileye, 2017; Aborisade & Oni, 2020a; Akinlabi, 2017; Amnesty International, 2020a), the lack of preparation of the police for pandemic policing and community engagement has been flagged as constituting high-risk condition towards efforts at fighting the virus (Transparency International, 2020).

Police participants' narratives indicated that the enforcement of the government's COVID-19 directives by the police was characterised by a high level of public disobedience and hostilities toward officers. This position aligns with reports from news channels and monitoring organisations as regards the effectiveness of policing the pandemic in the country (The Africa Report, 2020; The Guardian, 2020). There were also reports of police engaging in human rights violations, aggression, and extra-judicial killings in the process of supervising the lockdown rules (Aborisade, 2021, 2022, Aborisade & Gbahabo, 2021; AfricLaw, 2020). Accounts of community leaders engaged in the study suggested that the low level of public trust for the police before the emergence of the pandemic was largely responsible for the uncooperative attitudes of the people.

Procedural justice theorist, Jones (2020), affirmed that the successful response of the police to the COVID-19 crisis is heavily reliant on public trust and confidence, and the level at which the public perceives the police as a legitimate power holder. Research conducted on the level at which the Nigerian police are seen by the public as a legitimate power holder which upholds the law and operates in the community in a procedurally just way has mainly reported negative perception (Akinlabi, 2017; Famosaya, 2020). Consequently, the public perception of the police and the reported high level of distrust may be responsible for the gross violation of the law governing the COVID-19 response and the low level of public support.

**Table 1.** Participant Characteristics.

Variables	Total N = 74	Percentage (%)
Age (years)		
<30	12	16.2
31–40	16	21.6
41–50	24	32.4
51–60	20	27.1
>60	2	2.7
Gender		
Male	68	91.9
Female	5	8.1
Educational qualification		
No education	2	2.7
Primary education	7	9.5
Secondary	14	18.9
Post-Secondary education	51	68.9
Status of community members	N = 18	Percentage (%)
Chairman – landlords and tenants association	2	11.1
Opinion leaders	2	11.1
Spiritual/Religious leader	2	11.1
Local chiefs	4	22.2
Head of community security units	4	22.2
Head of community vigilantes/Neighbourhood watch	4	22.2
Police officers' ranks	N = 56	Percentage (%)
Chief Superintendent of Police (CSP)	7	12.5
Assistant Superintendent of Police (ASP)	9	16.1
Inspector of Police	9	16.1
Sergeant	11	19.6
Corporal	14	25.0
Constable	6	10.7

Source: Field survey 2022.

Suggestions from the study findings indicate that both the police executives and community leaders agree with the importance of community partnership in engendering a successful response to the pandemic. However, they both noted the challenges confronting the establishment of a police-community partnership in the country. Some of the identified problems that may impede community outreach, especially during a COVID-19 emergency include non-cordial police-community relationship, insufficient logistics, poor funding, and poor structure of community associations. Therefore, there is a need for conscious efforts to be made by the government, police agencies, and other stakeholders for the realisation of an effective community engagement in efforts aimed at combating the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study is not without limitations. We recognise that with a small-scale sample, these findings represent a pilot study; however, this exploratory study offers new insights into policing during uncertain times, which may inform further studies. We also accept the sample breadth for certain socio-demographic characteristics, ethnicity in particular. In selecting communities, the study focused more social class categorizations, while ethnic distributions were not considered. This may have led to the under-representation of minority ethnic groups in the study, despite Lagos being an ethnically heterogeneous society.

### *Implications for Policy, Practice and Future Studies*

The findings of this study indicate that the Nigeria police were not only ill-prepared for health crisis intervention but possible adoption of community engagement in pandemic policing was also

hindered by a lack of public trust in the country's police agency. All these circumstances posed considerable impediments to police-community relations for pandemic policing. Therefore, to build better community relations, the Nigerian police should purge itself of the usual militarised system of conducting its operations when dealing with the public. In doing this, police officers, especially the ones that interface with the public, should be made to undergo procedural justice training. Also, community engagement policies should be formulated to establish and build police-public relationships by opening up lines of communication. This will not only bring policing to the community level, but it will also increase the public's trust level with the police.

The Nigerian government needs to also support police efforts by facilitating police-community relations, especially in times of health crisis. Also, effective two-way communication between the police and community members should be enhanced while sharing of information on the public safety response is encouraged. To build public trust, there is a need for a drastic reduction in the corruption index of the police as well as the unwarranted use of force by the police.

Further research needs to triangulate the perspectives of other security agents (formal and non-formal) and health personnel, with that of government officials (police service commission) and a cross-section of community members. This will enable multiple viewpoints and the development of a policy framework for community engagement during health crises and other uncertain times.

## Conclusion

While other research efforts have highlighted the benefits of community participation in the collective response to pandemics, this current study, inspired by the avalanche of reports of public strife against police agencies enforcing the COVID-19 protocols, examined the approaches used by the Nigeria police to intervene in the health crisis. This research has captured a rich description of the experiences of COVID-19 enforcement officers, their supervisors and community leaders during the crisis lockdown, and findings indicate that lack of legitimacy and inadequate community engagement negatively impacted police supervision of COVID-19 rules. The manifestations of legitimacy challenges in policing the COVID-19 lockdown are similar to that of routine policing, however, consequences of low public support as evinced in the study resulted in physical confrontations between the public and the police, verbal abuse, chronic stress, and burn-out. The strength of pre-COVID legitimacy of the police in pandemic policing has been highlighted. Therefore, recognition of the relevance of legitimacy in pandemic policing, consideration of procedurally just policing and development of a framework for community engagement has been suggested. This will promote an important double gain where the burden of policing emergencies will be reduced and public cooperation and safety will be gained.

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## ORCID iD

Richard Abayomi Aborisade  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7485-2351>



## Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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## Author Biographies

**Richard Abayomi Aborisade**, PhD, is a reader in criminology and victimology at the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State. He received his doctorate from the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. He also holds an MBA in Information Technology from Coventry University, UK. His research themes include violence against women and girls, policing 21st century Nigeria, security and sustainable development in Nigeria, and family-based violence. He has published in both local and international journals in these areas. He is the author of *Crime and Delinquency: A Sociological Introduction*; published by Ibadan University Press. Email: [aborisade.richard@oouagoiwoye.edu.ng](mailto:aborisade.richard@oouagoiwoye.edu.ng)

**Oladele Adeleke Adeleke**, PhD, is a criminologist who lectures at the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State. He received his doctorate from Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Nigeria. His research themes include rural criminology, policing rural Nigeria, and traditional social control. He has published in both local and international journals in these areas. He has been involved in collaborative research funded by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFUND), United Nations Fund Population Agency (UNFPA). Email: [oladele.adeleke@oouagoiwoye.edu.ng](mailto:oladele.adeleke@oouagoiwoye.edu.ng)