Policing the coronavirus pandemic: Nigeria police senior officers’ views on preparedness, response, legitimacy and post-COVID policing

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Abstract
In the wake of pandemic policing occasioned by COVID-19, Nigeria police have been facing challenges of a lack of legitimacy, together with what is termed the militarization of police operations. This has impacted considerably on police–community relations. Meanwhile, early reports on the police response to the pandemic indicated high levels of lockdown violation, despite adoption of a militarized option in the enforcement of restriction orders. In reviewing one of the first police interventions on a public health crisis in Nigeria, a qualitative study was conducted among top-ranking police officers who supervised the enforcement of lockdown and other COVID-19 measures. Sixteen interviews were conducted and a thematic analysis of the narratives was carried out. Police unpreparedness for public health interventions, and public resistance to the use of repressive, force-led styles of policing were identified as major impediments to positive pandemic policing. Therefore, police officers are advised to ensure the application of procedurally just practices in their interactions with the public.

Keywords
COVID-19, Nigeria police, pandemic policing, police legitimacy, procedural justice

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Introduction
These are unprecedented and uncertain times. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to constitute a significant threat to global health. In aligning with other countries, the government of Nigeria has deployed a variety of measures to control the spread of the novel coronavirus (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, 2020). These measures include: the closure of airports, seaports and land borders; isolation and quarantining of persons; banning sporting, religious and social gatherings; closure of schools and other learning institutions, restaurants, hotels and public spaces; and partial or complete ‘lockdown’ (AfricLaw, 2020; Aljazeera, 2020). To ensure compliance with movement restrictions and other mandates accompanying the COVID-19 measures, the Nigeria police, assisted by other security services such as the Nigerian army, immigration and civil defence corps (NCDC), were empowered to supervise the lockdown orders that took effect from midnight on 30 March 2020.

However, between 30 March and May 2020, when the number of people that had died from coronavirus stood at...
11, the National Human Rights Commission of Nigeria (National Human Rights Commission, 2020) reported the extrajudicial killing of 21 people and received 105 complaints of human rights violations against law enforcement officials. In addition to reported cases of police brutality, video evidence of the unlawful use of force perpetrated by police officers was uploaded onto social media. In one video, two police officers were shown flogging a woman with long canes in Odo Ori market, Iwo, Osun state, two weeks into the lockdown (Aborisade, 2021; Premium Times, 2020). The woman was reported to be on her way to buy medicines and other household needs when she was accosted by officers.

In addition to reports and stories of the use of extreme force to enforce lockdown, there were also reports of police officers’ extorting money and other valuables from people in exchange for passage at checkpoints (The Africa Report, 2020). Based on information gathered from residents in Lagos, Ibadan, Enugu, Umuahia and Jalingo, The Guardian newspaper (2020a) reported that motorists and pedestrians were allowed free passage after paying bribes of between N200 (US $0.52) and N2000 (US $5.52). Also, Punch newspaper reported that a woman, identified as a widow with two children, was sexually assaulted by a police officer enforcing the compulsory wearing of face masks in Port-Harcourt, River state (Punch, 2020).

Indeed, concern that the high-handed policing of COVID-19 measures might become the new normal in the post-COVID era has been widespread and is the current focus of an appreciable number of empirical studies. In aligning with this trend, this study raises questions bordering on the performance of police officers in enforcing COVID-19 mandates and the ways in which pandemic policing might influence the future of police activities in Nigeria. Following reports of the unlawful use of force, extrajudicial killings, human rights abuses, extortion and misconduct against officers enforcing COVID-19 mandates, senior officers from the Nigeria police were engaged in this study. The study had the aim of extracting their views on the state of preparedness, response and legitimacy of the nation’s police system in the enforcement of COVID-19 mandates and the expected impact of COVID-19 policing on operations beyond the pandemic.

Theoretical background: Nigerian police legitimacy, pandemic policing and procedural justice theory

To achieve the effective, legal and ethical performance of policing responsibilities and functions in any society, police organizations require legitimacy (Tyler, 2003, 2011). When citizens consider the police to be legitimate, they tend to offer more cooperation and support to officers, defer to them in moments of crisis, and obey the laws the police enforce and to a certain extent embody (Cheng, 2020; Radburn and Stott, 2019; Tyler and Huo, 2002). In the absence of legitimacy, the police resort to ever-more repressive, force-led styles, contradicting their claim to be acting on behalf of and in cooperation with those they are policing. For instance, the veracity of the popular refrain used by the Nigeria police ‘Police is your friend’, has been subjected to debate over time due to incessant reports of police brutality, abuse of human rights and the use of force beyond the limit permissible by law (Aborisade, 2017; Aborisade & Fayemi, 2015; Akinlabi, 2017; Ayodele and Aderinto, 2014). This may have negatively impacted on the legitimacy of the Nigeria police in the perceptions of international organizations, local civil society and empirical studies reporting public expression of low confidence in police activities (Akinlabi, 2020; Amnesty International, 2014; Human Rights Watch, 2012; NOPRIN, 2010).

The Nigeria police have been widely perceived as a control-dominated system characterized by a centralized structure, with crime control as the main aim, and as deriving their legitimacy mainly from the state (Akinlabi, 2017; 2020; Ayodele and Aderinto, 2014; Famosaya, 2020; Ike et al., 2021). Civil and human rights organizations have frequently reported incidents of high-handed dispositions by the Nigerian police in the discharge of their duties (Amnesty International, 2006, 2014; 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2012; NOPRIN, 2010; Transparency International, 2020). Consequently, the interfacing of the police with public health in the wake of the pandemic raised considerable concerns about how the Nigeria police would disrupt the spread of the virus without further aggravating the already strained relationship between the police and the public (Amnesty International, 2020; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020).

Tom Tyler, in his work on procedural justice theory, stated that one of the most potent ways of building legitimacy is for justice officials to treat people respectfully and fairly, to listen to what they have to say and to make fair decisions – in other words, to demonstrate procedural justice and fairness (Tyler, 1990, 2001). Research has consistently shown that people’s disposition in obeying the law is heavily dependent on public trust in the police and perceiving the police as legitimate (Bottoms and Tankebe, 2012; Mazerolle et al., 2012; Terrill et al., 2016). Therefore, in considering the uncertain times of the COVID-19 pandemic, Reicher and Stott (2020) opine that it is imperative that police officers understand their impact, the construct of police legitimacy and the tenets of procedural justice, and make substantial efforts to avoid creating an us versus them mentality.
In the case of Nigeria, for example, deployment of the enduring militarized approach by the police in supervising the COVID-19 measures, especially criminalizing stay-at-home orders, reportedly led to the emergence of social tension within the country (Amnesty International, 2020; Transparency International, 2020). In particular, intersectoral conflict between the police and frontline healthcare workers was the first major consequence of police use of a militarized approach, with medical workers embarking on industrial action in protest against police harassment and extortion (Aborisade and Gbahabo, 2021; Reuters, 2020; Sahara Reporters, 2020). Pockets of civil unrest and conflict with the police were reported across Nigeria, especially by workers’ groups and communities who perceived lockdown enforcement measures to be too draconian and inimical to their survival (The Africa Report, 2020).

The enduring problem of Nigerian police legitimacy and the social tension occasioned by pandemic policing were heightened early in October 2020, when footage of brutality and extrajudicial killings perpetrated by officers from the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) of the Nigeria police went viral (The Guardian, 2020b). The nationwide protests that ensued, tagged #EndSars, led to disbandment of the unit. However, protests continued even after the disbandment, as protesters clamoured for total reform of the police, accountability and justice for those killed extrajudicially by police officers (Vanguard, 2020). These massive protests against the Nigeria police are reflections of the prolonged strained relationship between the police and the Nigerian people, especially youths (Akinlabi, 2020). Set against the dictates of procedural justice theory, questions on the legitimacy of the Nigeria police as power holders, who stand for upholding the law and whose operations in the community are procedurally just, are being asked by a contesting public (The Guardian, 2020b; Vanguard, 2020).

Intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations that observed compliance with COVID-19 protocols in Nigeria remarked that police enforcement of stay-at-home orders was constrained due to apparent mistrust and the high-handed approach used by the police in engaging professionally with the public (The Africa Report, 2020; Transparency International, 2020). The Nigeria police was also described as over-policing low-income communities during the pandemic, which served to further widen the gap between the police and these communities (Amnesty International, 2020).

In assessing the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on policing globally, procedural justice theorists have suggested the need for the police top hierarchy to ensure the application of procedurally just practices in officers’ interactions with the public (Antrobus et al., 2019; Bolger and Walters, 2019; Mazerolle et al., 2012; Radburn and Stott, 2019). Police are expected to utilize the additional power and legislation in the time of the pandemic to ensure public safety. Tyler and Jackson (2014) assert that, significantly, police leaders should educate officers that enhancing or damaging police legitimacy is dependent on how they interact with the community in these uncertain times. This justifies the engagement of police leadership in the current study to examine their disposition towards building the legitimacy of the Nigeria police in the face of the current pandemic.

The present study

This study is one of the first attempts at engaging senior police officers to provide self-evaluation of police operations in Nigeria. Hitherto, empirical studies and reports of human rights and other non-governmental organizations have largely focused on victims and third-party accounts of police brutality, the use of unwarranted force and other misconduct (Aborisade and Oni, 2020; Akinlabi, 2020; Amnesty International, 2014; Human Rights Watch, 2012; NOPRIN, 2010). Also, reports of police misconduct and the use of excessive force that have characterized enforcement of the ongoing COVID-19 mandates have mainly been based on citizens’ accounts (AfricLaw, 2020; National Human Rights Commission, 2020; Punch, 2020; Transparency International, 2020), with only public relations officers and other appointed police personnel providing an official defence and the police position. This underscores the importance of engaging senior police who deploy and supervise officers enforcing COVID-19 measures in an empirical study.

This study aimed to ascertain senior officers’ perceived level of police preparedness for the function of enforcing local shutdown, supervising social distancing and ensuring the compulsory use of face masks. The study also aimed to examine senior officers’ evaluation of police conduct and performance in the enforcement of COVID-19 mandates, and their opinions about the essentiality of police legitimacy in the enforcement of stay-at-home orders and other COVID-19 measures. Finally, the lessons senior officers perceived to have been learnt from police activities in the current health crisis, which may impact future policing in Nigeria, were extracted. The imperative of this study is informed by the need to document the impressions of police chiefs on their field officers’ conduct in policing Nigeria. This engenders the synthesizing of theory, research and police practice that will address trends in officers’ misconduct, excessive use of force and human rights violations, while generally improving police–community relations in Nigeria, especially during times of public health crisis.
Method

This research was designed to adopt a qualitative approach, mainly as a result of the unexplored and complex nature of pandemic policing amidst issues touching on police preparedness, response and legitimacy. In addition, this study was aimed to capture the experience and viewpoints of senior police officers, rather than the commonality, and dominant discourses on police abuse of human rights and other misconducts in Nigeria. Because safety and anonymity are essential to this study, a group setting was not considered appropriate. In eliciting information from senior police officers, the interview questions were designed in such a way that they not only answered the research questions but also offered flexibility that allowed participants to express themselves freely.

Procedures and data collection

Agreement for participation in the study was sought from senior officers in four police state commands: Lagos, Oyo, Osun and Ogun. Aside from selection of the four commands based on convenience sampling, Lagos and Ogun, together with the Federal Capital Territory (Abuja), were the states placed under the complete shutdown announced by the federal government on 30 March 2020. Osun state government also announced a state-wide lockdown, while a curfew from 7 p.m. to 6 a.m. was enforced in Oyo state to curtail spread of the disease. In soliciting for participation in the study, letters of request were forwarded to the aforementioned state and zonal commands. Commands were informed that the study sought the opinions of senior officers to discuss police engagement in enforcing lockdown and other COVID-19 measures.

In spite of the approval given by the respective commands, request for participation was undertaken by the researchers through direct contact with prospective participants. This was done to reduce officers’ likelihood of giving official responses rather than personal opinions, as well as to give assurance of anonymity and confidentiality as promised to officials at the point of their enlistment for the interview. Although officers were given the option of signing written consent forms, only two obliged; the others elected to give verbal consent. The authors adhered strictly to all rules and guidelines on research involving human subjects. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study as well as their other rights, which include voluntary participation, privacy, anonymity, confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any point during the course of the interview. Finally, pseudonyms were used in place of participants’ real names in the presentation of data and analysis in this article.

Participants engaged in semi-structured interviews conducted by the authors. All participants declined audio-recording of the interview sessions, therefore the services of two note-takers were obtained to capture the proceedings. The length of the interviews ranged from 35 minutes to 1 hour 15 minutes. The duration of the interviews was based mainly on the willingness of participants to divulge detailed information; interviewers observed that some participants were wary of the responses they volunteered, especially in respect of evaluating the performance of officers enforcing COVID-19 measures and police legitimacy. This is in spite of the assurances of confidentiality given to participants. In total, 16 interviews were conducted.

Participants

Participants were senior officers in the Nigeria police force from the rank of assistant superintendent of police (ASP), whose job details include coordinating the activities of police officers deployed to enforce lockdown and other COVID-19 measures. Because of a dearth of studies that have engaged police officers in expressing their views on policing and police conduct in Nigeria, it was important for this study to not only capture information-rich narratives, but also to engage senior officers with a range of different experiences, beliefs and attitudes towards policing in Nigeria. Consequently, maximum variation sampling, an approach that turns the problem of heterogeneity between individual cases in small samples from an ostensible weakness into a strength, was used (Creswell, 2013).

Sixteen senior officers between the rank of ASP and chief superintendent of police (CSP) in Lagos, Ogun, Oyo and Osun state commands were interviewed. The majority of the participants (nine) were of the rank of ASP, whereas the remaining seven identified with the three ranks of deputy superintendent of police (DSP; three), superintendent of police (SP; three) and CSP (one). Length of experience within the senior cadre of the police ranged from 4 to 15 years. Although, this study is not particularly about gender, attempts were made to invite both male and female officers. However, only one of the six female officers contacted agreed to be part of the study. There was high rejection rate for participation in the study (65%) with only 16 of the 46 officers contacted agreeing to take part. Ethnically, the participants formed a diverse group, with slightly more than a quarter of officers (five) identifying with the Yoruba ethnic group. Three participants identified with the Igbo and two with the Hausa, the third major ethnic group in Nigeria. The remaining six participants identified with six of the minority ethnic groups in Nigeria. Participants’ work experience within Nigeria spanned 32 of the 36 states in the federation.
Interview protocol

Interviews were designed to follow a semi-structured protocol in exploring the opinions of senior police officers on the performance of the police in containment of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. Interview questions focused on four cardinal areas of research, preparedness, response, legitimacy and post-pandemic policing. These include the preparedness of the police force in checking the spread of the disease and an evaluation of the actual police response. Participants were also asked about legitimacy issues that arose from lockdown duties and the lessons learnt from policing the pandemic that might impact on post-pandemic policing. Examples of these exploratory questions include: ‘How would you describe the preparation of police officers for intervening in health emergency brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic?’, ‘Were there specific trainings for officers that enforced the COVID-19 measures?’, ‘In your own opinion, how do you evaluate the operations of the police as frontline officers in checking the spread of the pandemic?’, ‘How do you describe the response of the people/citizens to the authority of the police in restricting movement during the lockdown and enforcing the curfew?’ and ‘From your observations and professional experience, what are the useful lessons learnt by the police hierarchy from the policing operations during the pandemic?’.

Analysis strategy

In the current study, the opinions of senior officers in the Nigeria police were obtained on key issues that touched on police enforcement of national lockdown, curfew and other measures put in place to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus in Nigeria. An inductive thematic analysis approach, a method that detects, examines and reports patterns within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006), was adopted by the researchers. The analysis commenced with the first author reading through eight randomly selected transcripts, and noting apparently common and contrasting thematic elements among the selected samples; a preliminary coding scheme was then drafted. In this first codebook, participants’ descriptions of preparations, police activities, legitimacy and their use of normalizing and/or problematizing themes in their various accounts were tracked. Also, information they shared about lessons learnt from ongoing operations that could be transferred to post-COVID policing were tracked.

Thereafter, the second author and an independent coder who is a sociologist examined the same eight transcripts with the use of the codebook. At that time, the independent coder was already familiar with the study goals because he had been consulted earlier on the construct validity check for the research instruments. The first and second authors, together with the independent coder then discussed discrepancies in their conceptualizations and the coding schemes were amended accordingly. The two authors and the independent coder, then separately coded all the remaining transcripts. On completion of this process, the authors met with the independent coder to resolve all the discrepancies so that all the applied codes were mutually agreed.

Results

Preparedness for public health intervention

Ten of the 16 participants accepted that there was no prior training for police officers engaged in COVID-19 shutdown enforcement duties. These participants hinged their opinions on the novel nature of the disease and the suddenness with which it emerged. ASP Jegede (not real name) of the Lagos State Police Command (LSPC) submitted that apart from officers not being trained in enforcing COVID-19 measures, they were not also trained in how to protect themselves considering that they were equally vulnerable:

The police officers were not prepared at all, most of them were not knowledgeable about the virus and as such didn’t even know what to watch out for. Also the FG (federal government) didn’t provide any preventive measures for the police officers. They were supposed to enforce the lockdown as if the officers were special breeds that the virus couldn’t attack.

(ASP Jegede, LSPC, Lagos)

The other nine participants who opined that Nigeria police officers were not prepared to operate efficiently in the task of checking the spread of the coronavirus disease shared ASP Jegede’s view. Although all the participants agreed that this was the first time Nigeria police had had to intervene in a public health crisis, six argued that Nigeria police officers had been trained to engage in eventualities such as maintaining public order and other emergency situations. Therefore, knowledge from this training could be imported into the prevailing health emergency. CSP Ogar is one of those that held this opinion:

First of all, COVID-19 is a deadly disease and the aim of the police is 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 ensuring compliance with the lockdown. The police is not limited to enforcing traffic regulation and enforcing municipal by-laws.

(CSP Ogar, LSPC, Lagos)

The opinions of the five senior officers who shared CSP Ogar’s view on police preparedness for the enforcement of COVID-19 measures were equally premised on the
operational training that officers had received prior to emergence of the disease. The participants argued that officers were adequately trained and equipped to intervene in cases of public disorder and states of emergency. ‘Therefore, officers should be able to adequately extend the trainings, knowledge and experience already gained in maintaining social order to the COVID-19 enforcement duties’ (DSP Abubakar).

However, CPS Fayemi of the Oyo State Police Command appeared to counter the claims of DSP Abubakar on the transferability of the usual operational training of the police to the intervention demands of the current health crisis:

… when talking about the preparation, I believe that COVID-19 took everyone by surprise and came with a lot of peculiarities, especially as regards working with other sectors like the health workers during the lockdown period and in taking sick people to isolation centres. Therefore, to think or say that the police prepared for the pandemic will be untrue, and previous police trainings can hardly be extended to safeguarding the community from the dangers COVID-19 poses.

In identifying the peculiarities of the enforcement of COVID-19 measures compared with public order maintenance commonalities, ten participants listed the total clampdown on freedom of movement running into weeks, freedom of association, enforced wearing of face masks, officers’ enlightenment of the public on COVID-19 protocols, intersectoral collaboration with healthcare workers for public safety, officers’ safety from infection, unclear and conflicting rules, and directives from police authorities. According to participants, these accounted for why officers were confronted with daunting challenges in performing their duties during the COVID-19 outbreak. By contrast, the six participants who held that officers were adequately prepared, premised their views of pandemic policing as related to ‘maintenance of public order’, ‘enforcement of curfew and other movement restriction duties, like environmental sanitation days’ and ‘supervision of states of emergency’. However, they all acknowledged that the present operations that border on public health provide some peculiarities.

**Evaluation of the police response**

Despite the majority of participants expressing the non-preparedness of the Nigeria police for supervising the lockdown occasioned by the coronavirus, 13 believed that the performance of officers who enforced COVID-19 measures was ‘fair’. Only three participants described officers’ performance as ‘poor’. Nine of the 13 participants who gave the ‘fair’ score indicated that their mark was based on considerations of lack of preparation, inadequate equipment and lack of protection and incentives for officers who were assigned to these unprecedented duties:

… despite the lack of incentives to members of the force from the government it will be pretty fair to say that men and women of the force did a very good job enforcing the lockdown all over the federation.

(DSP Orji, Osun SPC, Osogbo)

Meanwhile, only four participants were able to give a ‘fair’ score in respect of the actual performance of field officers with regard to the supervision of lockdown and upholding the rights of citizens. One, CSP Ogar, offered an analysis:

The operations of the police as frontline officers in checking the spread of the pandemic entailed a lot. They assist the NCDC when a sick person needs help before getting to the hospital or by calling the NCDC. Also, they ensured no gathering of people more than three [in number], enforced the lockdown to avoid the spread of the virus, while maintaining traffic regulation. During this period they also had to protect the public from criminal activities…while dealing with COVID-19 they still had to deal with their day-to-day duties. I think they fared considerably well in enforcing the lockdown. Apart from some incorrigible elements who turned it into an opportunity for financial gains.

(CSP Ogar, LSPC, Lagos)

The four participants who provided an evaluation of officers interfacing with the public during lockdown admitted that there were cases of human rights abuses and general misconduct. But they opined that the ‘few’ incidents should not be enough to downplay the overall good performance by officers. In the words of ASP Olaolu,

Well, as we all know there was much noise over the abuse of power by police officers during the lockdown. However, you ought to know that bad news travel faster than the good ones so judging by the performance in my areas with stories from my colleagues in their own areas. I believe it was a 50/50 fairness.

(ASP Olaolu, Oyo SPC, Ibadan)

However, three interviewees gave a poor performance score to officers who supervised the lockdown orders. The award of a poor performance score was mainly based on a general failure to properly enforce the restriction of movement as ‘officers compromised and were allowing human and vehicular movements after collecting bribes’, ASP Muhammed of the LSPC submitted. The only female participant in the study, ASP Adeyeye also gave a ‘poor’ score for police performance:
The operations of the police as frontline officers in checking the spread of the pandemic is relatively not encouraging as they resort to extortion and manhandling of innocent individuals, throwing their fundamental human rights into the bin. In a lot of ways, they exposed themselves and other people they interacted with to the risk of contracting the virus because a lot of them failed to observe the protocols and guidelines given to them. It was as if they also didn’t believe in the reality of the health crisis just like the people that doubted the existence of corona virus.

(ASP Adeyeye, LSPC, Lagos)

Although there was no consensus among participants as regards the performance of the police who enforced the COVID-19 mandates, all participants agreed that officers faced a number of challenges that made their operations cumbersome. Some of the identified challenges mentioned were: ‘grossly inadequate PPE [personal protective equipment]’, ‘inadequate equipment and gadgets for communication and logistics’, ‘limited information and knowledge about the virus’, ‘uncooperative attitudes of citizens, especially the elite’ and ‘conflicting communication and instructions, leading to confusion’. One participant who gave a ‘fair’ score to COVID-19 enforcement officers submitted that ‘with all the aforementioned challenges, it will be unfair to say the officers performed poorly’.

**Public perception of police legitimacy**

Participants were asked to describe the attitudes and perceptions of the public towards their public health interventions, particularly their disposition towards enforcing lockdown and other COVID-19 mandates. The majority expressed that the public was generally uncooperative and hostile towards the police and this posed a great challenge to the success of maintaining social distancing and restriction of movement. Although, nine participants attributed the negative perception of police enforcement of COVID-19 mandates to a poor police–community relationship, six observed that the hostility of the public was based on the poor welfare conditions of people who were forced to stay at home without palliatives or other measures to cushion the effects of the lockdown. ASP Nwaifor stated that officers were generally unappreciated: ‘none at all, rather, it was insult left, right and centre, the bad news circulating about of some officers abusing and extorting people even made the disrespect worse’.

DSP Ogunnusi commented that people showed gross disobedience to the restriction orders:

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

(DSP Ogunnusi, Ogun SPC, Abeokuta)

Some participants who indicated that the public showed considerable support for police interventions also stated that they were still able to perceive negative perceptions against the police. ASP Bako explained ‘We enjoyed public support for the police. Even though it is not enough, the public does not really like the police for reasons best known to them, but the support is close to average’. However, CSP Ogar was one of four participants who admitted that they received complete cooperation from the public:

Despite the rigorous challenge of remaining indoors, the members of the public were really supportive by ensuring that they obeyed every laid down rule, making the job of enforcing the lockdown a lot easier for police officers.

CSP Ogar and the three participants who reported absolute cooperation from the public were further probed about whether they considered the perceived cooperation from the public to be a product of trust in the police or a fear of the police. All stated that it could be a mixture of the two. Meanwhile, comments from the participants suggested that COVID-19 enforcement officers largely resorted to the use of discretion in dealing with civilians apprehended for flouting the lockdown order. Whereas five participants were of the view that those who flouted curfew and lockdown orders should be arrested and charged in mobile courts, 11 suggested that those who flouted the order should be delayed at checkpoints, have their vehicles impounded or freed after a warning. In the words of DSP Orji, ‘many had their vehicles impounded. Some were charged to court, while some were let go with mere warning. You know this is the first time this will be happening, so the treatment of offenders isn’t so definite and all cases can’t be treated seriously’.

**Lessons for post-COVID policing**

Participants expressed their views on the lessons learnt from pandemic policing. They identified operational and administrative lapses that should be addressed, and how the experience would reshape policing in Nigeria after the pandemic. All participants identified training gaps for officers in public health interventions as the most outstanding lesson learnt. Others identified that training gaps based on the lessons from COVID-19 enforcement include a
... the federal government and the entire police authority should have learnt from this health crisis intervention that there is a limit to what force can achieve. The people defied the force and aggression of the police to still move around with many not believing the existence of the virus because they were not properly enlightened. Therefore, with adequate training in public engagement in times of health emergencies, the police will be able to succeed in controlling [health] crisis with the application of minimal force.

(SP Adeniyi, LSPC, Lagos)

The majority of participants also reiterated SP Adeniyi’s position on the need for community engagement in policing. They affirmed that people largely defied stay-at-home orders despite the application of brute force by officers because they were mostly oblivious to the health risks occasioned by coronavirus. It is on this premise that participants believe community engagement would have helped in soliciting and obtaining the support of the public in disrupting the spread of the virus. In addition, they found the need for the deployment of more information and communication technologies for crime-mapping, tracking and crime-busting operations, engagement of more police personnel in field operations, advanced education of police personnel on human rights protection in times of emergency, formation of special units squads within the police to intervene in duties of health emergencies and more effective monitoring exercises for officers to check their corruptive activities and other forms of misconduct.

... the officers could be collecting bribes to allow human and vehicular passage at checkpoints in the middle of a pandemic that threatens public health and safety, then it is time we address this menace within the force. The corruption within the force is getting pretty dangerous and it must then be nipped in the bud.

(ASP Olaolu, Oyo SPC, Ibadan)

Some participants also opined that the insecurity that prevailed during lockdown, which prompted residents of various neighbourhoods to constitute themselves into vigilante to guard their areas, has some positive impacts for post-COVID policing. SP Abdullahi offered details on this:

... there was a time a group of hooligans called One-Million Boys started disturbing all areas and many communities really came together to render support and help to the police over securing their areas. As such, I believe they now have little knowledge of what policing is about and their interactions with police as at that time would have built trust, such that they can now provide the police with information when necessary.

(SP Abdullahi, Ogun SPC, Abeokuta)

Eleven participants indicated that interactions between the police and the public during lockdown and other periods within the health crisis opened up vital opportunities for citizens to interact and cooperate with the police. ‘One of the positives of enforcing the lockdown successfully is that it shows the public at large that the police are ready for the protection of their lives and properties’, CSP Ogar explained. According to DSP Ogunnusi,

... the COVID-19 experience brought the police and citizens together and made the police realise the need to work more with the community for the benefit of Nigerian society. We got more assistance from the public than we normally do. We can consolidate on this and ensure people continue to assist the police in discharging its duties.

All participants agreed that there are lessons from the pandemic policing that could be incorporated into police administration and operations in Nigeria. They all submitted that the federal government should leverage on the experience of pandemic policing to plan and reshape policing in Nigeria in order for the institution to be able to serve the Nigerian people better.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to engage police executives in Nigeria to evaluate the performance of the Nigeria police force in the promotion of public health and safety set against the novel coronavirus disease. As stated in the Introduction, it is clear that the unprecedented nature of the coronavirus disease, and the previous absence of police intervention in public health crises in Nigeria, present a daunting challenge to policing the pandemic. Participants’ narratives confirmed the unpreparedness of the police for a public health intervention, and admitted that it posed a major threat to effective policing during the pandemic. According to participants, police officers had to rely on residual knowledge and experiences of procedural policing for the unprecedented task of enforcing lockdown, supervising social distancing and wearing of face masks.

Civil and human rights organizations have pointed out...
rights-approach to pandemic policing is the prior lack of officer training in the use of emergency powers (Amnesty International, 2020; National Human Rights Commission, 2020; Transparency International, 2020). Aside from the Nigerian case, the problem of police unpreparedness in intervening in the coronavirus health crisis appears to be a global concern (Jones, 2020; Stott et al., 2020), particularly with regard to police handling of emergency powers within the context of human rights (Human Rights Watch, 2020; Johnson and Wolf, 2020).

Study participants submitted that the lack of specialized training in a public health intervention had a telling effect on officers’ interactions with the public, self-protection against contracting the virus, and providing social support to disrupt spread of the virus. At the higher police authority level, unpreparedness impacted negatively on effective information flow, conflicting directives fuelling confusion, and an inability to work out effective and harmonious ways of collaborating with other front-line workers. This lacuna may be responsible for the intersectoral conflict between the police and health workers that led medical doctors to call for indefinite strike action during lockdown as a result of what they termed ‘harassment and extortion from police officers enforcing lockdown’ (Sahara Reporters, 2020; The Africa Report, 2020; The Guardian, 2020a).

In responding to the impending health crisis, participants remarked that police officers enforcing lockdown had to heavily rely on the use of force to drive public compliance. This is consistent with the control-dominated approach that the Nigeria police has always used in their engagement with citizens (Adisa et al., 2018; Akinlabi, 2020), which has often led to the extreme use of force and human rights abuses (Aborisade and Obileye, 2017; Akinlabi, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2012; Ike et al., 2021). The majority of participants awarded lockdown enforcement officers a score of ‘fair’ for their performance and reported that officers recorded remarkable success in enforcing the government’s stay-at-home order. However, this position of police chiefs runs contrary to reports from the news media and international monitoring organizations on the success of police enforcement of the government’s lockdown order in Nigeria (Amnesty International, 2020; The Africa Report, 2020; Transparency International, 2020). Most participants also declined to acknowledge the widely reported cases of extortion and sundry misconduct by lockdown enforcement officers (Reuters, 2020; Sahara Reporters, 2020; Transparency International, 2020).

The police chiefs reported negative public perceptions of police operations in the enforcement of lockdown and other COVID-19 measures, which negatively impacted on people’s obedience of stay-at-home orders. According to participants, this put police operations to disrupt spread of the disease in jeopardy. Although the majority of participants attributed negative public attitudes to the enduring poor public–police relationship, others held that it was a product of the harsh economic realities with which people were confronted as a result of lockdown. This outcome makes procedural justice theory relevant to our study. According to Tyler (1990, 2003), citizens tend to comply with police directives when they view the police as legitimate. In respect of the pandemic, Jones (2020) and Stott et al. (2020), assert that citizens who view the police as legitimate will be more likely to obey stay-at-home orders and other COVID-19 protocols. By contrast, studies on citizens’ perceptions of the Nigeria police prior to the emergence of coronavirus have equally reported low levels of respect, trust and obedience in the police (Akinlabi, 2020; Ayodele and Aderinto, 2014; Famosaya, 2020).

The key lessons learnt from policing the pandemic, as identified by the police chiefs, include the negative impacts of training gaps on pandemic policing and the challenges faced due to uncooperative public attitudes. Therefore, participants admitted that training police officers for emergency operations, the use of a human-rights-based approach in maintaining social order, and community engagement in policing duties to garner public support are the imperatives that will shape post-COVID policing in Nigeria. The submissions of the police chiefs on the lessons learnt from the COVID-19 policing experience align with the positions of procedural justice theorists who examined how pandemic policing will impact on the post-pandemic police–public relationship (Johnson and Wolf, 2020; Jones, 2020; Stott et al., 2020).

**Implications for theory, policy, practice and research**

From an academic perspective, the findings of this research highlight the relevance of procedural justice theory to the specific question of policing and the coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria. Policing the COVID-19 pandemic has presented a wider context within which police legitimacy and the consent-based policing model should be considered in societies where an authoritarian approach or control-dominated policing systems are deployed. A major implication of the procedural justice theory perspective is that if the exercising of authority by the police is perceived as legitimate, communities will show a higher level of restraint and self-regulate by adhering to government-imposed measures such as stay-at-home orders, social distancing and the wearing of face masks. However, reports from previous studies and evidence from the current one indicate that the police–citizen relationship is damaged when Nigeria police officers make use of repressive and force-led styles in enforcing government mandates. Aside from reports of violent resistance, industrial action and conflict against
the state and the police in enforcing lockdown, millions of
Nigerian youth took to the streets from the first week of
October 2020, protesting police brutality and calling for
the disbandment of an anti-robbery unit of the nation’s
police. This is further evidence of negative police legiti-
macy, and a call for timely policy intervention.

In addressing the health and security threats posed by
COVID-19, it is imperative that the leadership of the
Nigeria police develop strategic approaches and policing
models focused on the facilitation of public needs and exer-
cise their powers with fairness, proportionality, respect for
human life and legitimacy. In other words, the leadership
of the Nigeria police should ensure that procedurally just
practices are occurring in police dealings with the public.
To achieve this, considerable procedural justice training
should be conducted among junior and senior ranks of the
Nigeria police in order for officers to build trust and earn
the respect of the public. Police chiefs should make it
clear to their officers that the manner in which they interact
with the public during the COVID-19 pandemic will either
build or damage legitimacy. As already observable from the
nationwide protests against police brutality that emerged in
the middle of the pandemic, police legitimacy in Nigeria is a
matter of concern that requires serious and urgent
intervention.

Future research efforts should consider the adoptability
of a procedural justice approach as a policing model in
Nigeria. Triangulated perspectives of police officers and
legal practitioners with those of a cross-section of the
public should be considered from multiple perspectives.
This will help to broaden our understanding of problems
with police legitimacy, and how a procedural justice
approach and consent-based policing can help bring about
positive changes in police and community relations in
Nigeria.

Conclusion
In addition to the high rate of lockdown violation by the
people, Nigeria police officers have struggled to enforce
COVID-19 mandates across the country leading to resis-
tance, conflict, industrial action and ultimately, a nation-
wide protest challenging police brutality. These are
ominous signs of dwindling police legitimacy in Nigeria,
which calls for urgent attention. This research has captured
the rich opinions of police leaders in respect of police pre-
paredness and response to COVID-19, as well as issues of
police legitimacy that negatively impacted on police
COVID-19 operations and how these could reshape post-
pandemic policing. The control-dominated approach of
the police that sees the use of repressive and force-led
styles has been shown to be of less effect in eliciting com-
pliance to COVID-19 protocols in Nigeria. Police leaders
have to see this experience as an opportunity for the
police to rebuild lost legitimacy with communities. The
need for police leaders to communicate to their respective
units the importance of procedural justice, and orientate
officers on how to achieve it by ensuring fairness, encour-
aging public participation in issues affecting the people,
demonstrating transparency and impartiality, have been
stressed.

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