

ENHANCING POLICE LEGITIMACY AND COMMUNITY TRUST IN SOUTH AFRICA: A SYSTEMATIC ANALYSIS OF CHALLENGES, FRAMEWORKS, AND REFORM STRATEGIES

Dr. John Motsamai Modise *

Tshwane University of Technology

Corresponding Author: Dr. John Motsamai Modise

Tshwane University of Technology

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to examine the factors influencing police legitimacy and public trust in the South African Police Service (SAPS), and to explore how these factors affect the effectiveness of policing and crime prevention. The study aims to provide evidence-based recommendations to strengthen police-community relations and improve policing outcomes in South Africa. Despite the transition to democratic policing since 1994, SAPS continues to face a significant legitimacy crisis characterized by low public trust, high levels of crime, and persistent institutional challenges such as corruption, inefficiency, and weak accountability. This trust deficit undermines public cooperation, reduces crime reporting, and limits the overall effectiveness of policing. The study adopts a systematic literature review methodology, drawing on both South African and international sources. It integrates theoretical frameworks such as procedural justice, legitimacy theory, and community policing to analyze existing research, policy documents, and empirical studies. This approach enables a comprehensive and critical understanding of the relationship between police practices, public perceptions, and policing effectiveness. The study finds that public trust in SAPS remains low due to corruption, misconduct, and operational inefficiencies. Community policing initiatives, while valuable, are insufficient without broader structural reforms. Procedural justice characterized by fairness, respect, and transparency emerges as a key determinant of public cooperation. Additionally, visible policing strategies such as foot patrols improve community perceptions of safety, while international evidence highlights the importance of data-driven and intelligence-led policing approaches. The study concludes that restoring police legitimacy in South Africa requires a holistic and integrated approach that combines ethical leadership, strengthened accountability systems, community engagement, and technological innovation. Addressing the underlying structural challenges is essential for rebuilding public trust, enhancing policing effectiveness, and promoting safer, more secure communities.

Keywords: *Police legitimacy, community policing, SAPS, procedural justice, trust, governance, South Africa.*

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Introduction

Policing in democratic societies is fundamentally anchored in the principles of legitimacy, accountability, and public trust. Legitimacy refers to the belief by citizens that the police have the rightful authority to enforce the law, while trust reflects the willingness of communities to cooperate with law enforcement agencies in maintaining safety and order. In contexts where police legitimacy is strong, citizens are more likely to comply with the law, report crimes, and collaborate with policing initiatives. Conversely, where legitimacy is weak, policing becomes reactive, contested, and often ineffective. This relationship between legitimacy and effectiveness has been widely supported in international scholarship, which emphasizes that trust is a key determinant of voluntary compliance and cooperation with law enforcement institutions.

Globally, comparative studies show that trust in the police varies significantly across countries but remains a critical indicator of governance quality. For instance, data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) indicate that in

high-performing democracies such as Norway, approximately 77% of citizens report high or moderate trust in the police, while in New Zealand the figure is around 71%, and in Estonia approximately 74%. Even in countries facing governance challenges, such as Chile and Mexico, trust levels in the police remain relatively higher than trust in political institutions, with 52% and 58% respectively expressing confidence in the police. However, global evidence also reveals declining trust in some contexts; for example, in England only about 40% of citizens report trust in the police, largely due to high-profile misconduct cases. These international comparisons highlight that while trust varies, it remains a central pillar of effective and legitimate policing systems.

In South Africa, the transformation of policing since 1994 aimed to shift from a militarised, repressive force into a democratic, community-oriented service. The establishment of the South African Police Service (SAPS) was intended to reflect principles of accountability, transparency, and public participation. Mechanisms such as Community Police Forums (CPFs) were introduced to strengthen partnerships between the police and communities,

thereby enhancing legitimacy and cooperation. These reforms were part of a broader effort to align policing with constitutional values and human rights standards in a post-apartheid society.

Despite these efforts, persistent challenges continue to undermine this vision. Empirical evidence suggests that public trust in SAPS remains significantly low compared to international benchmarks. According to the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) through the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), only 22% of South Africans expressed trust in the police in 2022, representing one of the lowest recorded levels since 1998. Longitudinal data further indicates that trust in the police has remained consistently low over the past two decades, with most citizens expressing skepticism toward policing institutions. This stark contrast with OECD countries, where trust levels often exceed 60%, underscores the severity of South Africa's legitimacy crisis.

Additional national statistics reinforce this concern. The Governance, Public Safety and Justice Survey (2024/25) reveals that only 43.4% of households affected by housebreaking reported incidents to the police, while just over half reported robbery cases. These figures suggest a lack of confidence in police effectiveness and responsiveness, as citizens are less likely to engage with institutions they do not trust. Low reporting rates not only undermine crime prevention efforts but also weaken the broader criminal justice system, limiting the ability of the state to respond effectively to crime.

The decline in public trust in South Africa is closely linked to a range of structural and institutional challenges. High-profile incidents such as the Marikana massacre (2012) and the July 2021 civil unrest have significantly shaped public perceptions of the police, often reinforcing narratives of excessive force, lack of accountability, and political interference. Moreover, allegations of corruption, misconduct, and inefficiency within SAPS continue to erode public confidence. Scholars argue that these issues contribute to a "legitimacy deficit," where citizens no longer perceive the police as fair, effective, or representative of their interests.

International research further supports the importance of trust in shaping police-community relations. Studies indicate that perceptions of fairness, respect, and procedural justice during police interactions significantly influence public trust and legitimacy. For example, research on policing interactions demonstrates that respectful treatment and transparent processes enhance perceptions of legitimacy, while negative encounters contribute to distrust and non-cooperation. Similarly, contemporary studies on digital policing highlight that accountability mechanisms and community engagement tools can improve trust, but poorly implemented systems may exacerbate mistrust and alienation. These findings are particularly relevant for South Africa, where improving the quality of police-citizen interactions remains a critical challenge.

Furthermore, socio-economic conditions play a significant role in shaping perceptions of policing in South Africa. High levels of inequality, unemployment, and violent crime place immense pressure on the policing system, often exceeding its operational capacity. South Africa continues to experience high rates of violent crime, including murder, robbery, and gender-based violence, which intensify public demand for effective policing. However, when police institutions fail to meet these expectations, public trust

deteriorates further, creating a cycle of disengagement and inefficiency.

In contrast to countries with higher levels of institutional trust, where police are often seen as legitimate guardians of public safety, South Africa faces a dual challenge of addressing both crime and legitimacy deficits simultaneously. This situation requires a comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach that goes beyond policy reforms to include ethical leadership, institutional accountability, improved service delivery, and meaningful community engagement. Without such interventions, the gap between the police and the communities they serve is likely to widen, further undermining the effectiveness of policing.

In conclusion, while the transformation of policing in South Africa since 1994 has laid a foundation for democratic and community-oriented policing, persistent challenges continue to undermine public trust and legitimacy. Comparative international evidence demonstrates that high levels of trust are achievable and are essential for effective policing. However, South Africa's significantly lower trust levels highlight the urgency of addressing institutional weaknesses and rebuilding public confidence. Strengthening police legitimacy is therefore not only a policing priority but also a critical component of democratic governance, social cohesion, and sustainable development.

Background of the Study

The evolution of policing in South Africa is deeply rooted in the country's historical, political, and socio-economic context. During the apartheid era (1948–1994), policing institutions were primarily designed to enforce state control, suppress political dissent, and maintain racial segregation. The police operated as a militarised force with limited accountability to the public, particularly among Black communities who experienced policing as coercive and discriminatory. This historical legacy has had long-lasting implications for public perceptions of the police, contributing to persistent mistrust and strained police-community relations in the democratic era.

Following the democratic transition in 1994, the newly elected government introduced extensive reforms aimed at transforming policing into a service-oriented institution aligned with constitutional values. The establishment of the South African Police Service (SAPS) marked a significant shift from a force-based model to a community policing approach. Key policy frameworks, including the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) and the White Paper on Safety and Security (1998), emphasized accountability, transparency, human rights, and community participation. Mechanisms such as Community Police Forums (CPFs) were introduced to foster collaboration between the police and local communities, with the intention of rebuilding trust and enhancing legitimacy.

Despite these reforms, the implementation of community-oriented policing has faced significant challenges. Empirical evidence suggests that many communities continue to experience policing as ineffective, unresponsive, and, in some cases, abusive. According to the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), public trust in SAPS has remained consistently low, with only about 22% of South Africans expressing confidence in the police in recent years. This low level of trust reflects not only historical grievances but also contemporary issues such as corruption, misconduct, and inefficiency within the police service.

Crime levels in South Africa further complicate the policing landscape. The country continues to experience high rates of violent crime, including murder, armed robbery, and gender-based violence. According to official crime statistics, South Africa recorded over 27,000 murders in the 2022/2023 financial year, translating to one of the highest murder rates globally. Such high crime levels place immense pressure on SAPS to deliver effective policing services, often stretching resources beyond capacity. In many communities, particularly in urban townships and rural areas, residents report slow response times, limited police visibility, and inadequate investigative follow-up, all of which contribute to declining confidence in law enforcement.

The issue of underreporting of crime also highlights the broader legitimacy crisis. Data from the Governance, Public Safety and Justice Survey indicates that less than half of households experiencing crimes such as housebreaking report incidents to the police. This trend suggests that many citizens lack confidence in the ability or willingness of the police to respond effectively. As a result, alternative forms of security, including private security companies and community patrols, have become increasingly prominent in South Africa. The private security industry has grown rapidly and now employs more personnel than SAPS, reflecting a shift in public reliance away from formal policing institutions.

Institutional challenges within SAPS further exacerbate the situation. Reports of corruption, abuse of power, and lack of accountability have been widely documented. Oversight bodies such as the Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID) continue to investigate cases of police misconduct, including deaths in police custody and excessive use of force. However, concerns remain regarding the effectiveness of these oversight mechanisms and the extent to which they hold officers accountable. Additionally, internal challenges such as inadequate training, poor leadership, resource constraints, and low morale among officers contribute to the overall inefficiency of the policing system.

From an international perspective, South Africa's policing challenges are not unique but are more pronounced compared to many other democratic countries. Globally, policing reforms have increasingly focused on procedural justice, community engagement, and evidence-based strategies to enhance legitimacy and effectiveness. Countries such as the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia have implemented reforms aimed at improving police accountability, transparency, and public trust. For example, studies in the United Kingdom show that public confidence in policing is strongly influenced by perceptions of fairness and respectful treatment during police interactions. Similarly, research in the United States indicates that procedural justice practices such as giving citizens a voice, treating them with dignity, and making decisions transparently significantly enhance trust in law enforcement.

Comparatively, trust levels in police institutions in many developed countries are substantially higher than in South Africa. OECD data indicates that in countries like Norway and New Zealand, more than 70% of citizens express trust in the police, highlighting the effectiveness of strong institutional frameworks and accountability mechanisms. These international experiences demonstrate that improving police legitimacy is achievable through consistent and well-implemented reforms.

However, South Africa's socio-economic context presents unique challenges that complicate reform efforts. High levels of inequality, unemployment, and social fragmentation contribute to both crime and perceptions of insecurity. In many communities, particularly informal settlements, the relationship between the police and residents is characterized by tension and mistrust. This environment makes it difficult to implement community policing strategies effectively, as mutual suspicion often undermines cooperation.

Furthermore, the rapid advancement of technology presents both opportunities and challenges for policing in South Africa. While digital tools such as surveillance systems, data analytics, and forensic technologies have the potential to enhance crime detection and prevention, their implementation remains uneven. Issues such as limited funding, lack of technical expertise, and concerns about privacy and misuse of technology hinder their effectiveness. International research suggests that while technology can improve policing outcomes, it must be accompanied by strong governance frameworks to ensure accountability and public trust.

In conclusion, the background of policing in South Africa reflects a complex interplay of historical legacies, institutional challenges, socio-economic factors, and evolving global trends. While significant progress has been made in transforming policing since 1994, persistent issues such as low public trust, high crime rates, and institutional inefficiencies continue to undermine the effectiveness of SAPS. Understanding this context is essential for developing strategies that enhance police legitimacy, strengthen community trust, and improve overall public safety. The study therefore seeks to build on this background by examining the underlying factors affecting police legitimacy and identifying practical, evidence-based solutions for reform.

Problem of the Statement

The transformation of policing in South Africa since 1994 aimed to establish a democratic, accountable, and community-oriented police service. The South African Police Service (SAPS) was designed to operate in a manner that upholds human rights, fosters community engagement, and promotes public trust. Despite these reforms, there is persistent evidence that public trust in SAPS remains alarmingly low. The Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) reports that only 22% of South Africans currently express trust in the police, a statistic that has shown minimal improvement over the past two decades (HSRC, 2025). Low trust manifests in underreporting of crimes, reluctance to cooperate with investigations, and the rise of alternative security measures such as private security and community vigilante patrols.

High crime rates exacerbate this trust deficit. South Africa continues to experience some of the highest violent crime rates in the world, including over 27,000 murders in 2022/2023 (SAPS, 2023). In high-crime communities, particularly informal settlements and rural areas, citizens frequently report slow police response times, limited investigative follow-ups, and inadequate visibility of police officers. Such operational deficiencies further reduce perceptions of competence and fairness, undermining the legitimacy of the police in the eyes of the public.

Institutional challenges within SAPS also contribute to the problem. Corruption, misconduct, political interference, and weak internal accountability mechanisms have been documented extensively by oversight bodies such as the Independent Police

Investigative Directorate (IPID, 2024). These factors, combined with inadequate resources, low morale, and inconsistent implementation of community policing initiatives, create a cycle of inefficiency and mistrust.

International studies underscore that legitimacy and public trust are central to effective policing. Countries such as Norway and New Zealand, where public trust exceeds 70%, demonstrate that transparent, accountable, and procedurally fair policing strengthens citizen cooperation and crime prevention outcomes (OECD, 2024). In contrast, contexts with low legitimacy, such as parts of England and the United States, show reduced citizen cooperation, higher crime reporting gaps, and a reliance on alternative forms of security (Tyler, 2006; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). These international comparisons highlight the critical role of legitimacy as a determinant of police effectiveness.

In South Africa, however, the gap between the principles of democratic policing and actual practice remains substantial. Persistent low trust and legitimacy impede crime prevention, reduce citizen engagement with law enforcement, and perpetuate social insecurity. Despite policy frameworks and reform efforts, the underlying factors that sustain public mistrust such as perceived inefficiency, misconduct, and lack of accountability remain inadequately addressed.

The central problem is that the South African Police Service continues to face a significant legitimacy and public trust deficit, which undermines its ability to effectively prevent crime and maintain public safety. This deficit stems from historical legacies, institutional inefficiencies, operational challenges, and socio-economic factors, resulting in low community cooperation, underreporting of crime, and reliance on alternative security measures. Without addressing this central problem, the effectiveness of SAPS as a democratic, accountable, and community-oriented policing institution remains severely constrained.

This study, therefore, seeks to examine the underlying causes of the legitimacy deficit in SAPS and its impact on policing effectiveness. By identifying institutional, operational, and social factors that contribute to low trust, the research aims to provide evidence-based recommendations to strengthen police legitimacy, improve public cooperation, and enhance the effectiveness of crime prevention strategies in South Africa.

Aim of the Study

The primary aim of this study is to critically examine the factors contributing to the legitimacy and public trust deficit in the South African Police Service (SAPS) and to evaluate how this deficit affects the effectiveness of policing in South Africa. The study further aims to explore the relationship between police legitimacy, community trust, and crime prevention, with a view to identifying institutional, operational, and socio-economic challenges that undermine public confidence in the police.

In addition, the study seeks to assess the effectiveness of existing policing strategies, including community policing and accountability mechanisms, in enhancing trust and cooperation between the police and communities. Drawing from both South African and international best practices, the study aims to develop practical, evidence-based recommendations that can strengthen police legitimacy, improve public trust, and enhance the overall effectiveness of crime prevention efforts in South Africa.

Research Objectives

- To assess the current state of police legitimacy in South Africa. Research shows that police legitimacy is closely linked to perceptions of fairness, justice, and procedural conduct, not just crime control outcomes (Tyler, 2006). In South Africa, questions about policing legitimacy have been highlighted in both academic and policy literature (Burger, 2007).
- To analyse factors influencing public trust in the South African Police Service (SAPS). Public trust in policing is shaped by procedural justice, social identity dynamics, perceptions of corruption, and day-to-day police–citizen interactions (Bradford, 2014; Tyler, 2006).
- To evaluate the effectiveness of community policing in building police–community trust. Community policing is widely recognised as an approach that can strengthen relationships between police and citizens, yet implementation challenges persist in the South African context (Burger, 2007; Elphick et al., 2021).
- To identify best practices from international policing models that enhance legitimacy and public confidence. Comparative research shows that procedural justice-oriented and inclusive policing models are effective in building legitimacy and trust in diverse contexts (Tyler, 2006; Bradford, 2014).
- To propose evidence-based reform strategies for improving policing legitimacy and public trust in South Africa. Reform strategies grounded in procedural justice theory, community policing principles, and international best practices offer a roadmap for legitimacy improvements (Tyler, 2006; Bradford, 2014; Elphick et al., 2021).

Research Questions

- **What factors undermine police legitimacy in South Africa?**

Legitimacy failures often stem from perceived injustice, biased law enforcement, corruption, and ineffective community engagement all of which have been documented in both South African research and international policing studies (Burger, 2007; Tyler, 2006).

- **How effective is community policing in enhancing trust between SAPS and local communities?**

Community policing strategies are theorised to build trust through procedural fairness and inclusive engagement, but effectiveness varies significantly by implementation context (Elphick et al., 2021; Bradford, 2014).

- **What theoretical frameworks explain police-community relations and perceptions of legitimacy and trust?**

Procedural justice theory and social identity theory are two key frameworks that explain why people obey the law and how police legitimacy is constructed in communities (Tyler, 2006; Bradford, 2014).

- **What lessons can South Africa learn from international policing practices that enhance legitimacy and community trust?**

International models that prioritise procedural fairness, accountability, and community collaboration offer insights that

may be transferable to the SAPS context (Tyler, 2006; Elphick et al., 2021).

Significance of the Study

This study is significant in advancing both theoretical and practical understanding of policing, legitimacy, and governance within the South African context. It contributes to multiple domains, including policy reform, academic scholarship, community relations, and crime prevention strategies.

Firstly, the study contributes to policy reform within the South African Police Service (SAPS) by providing evidence-based insights into the factors undermining police legitimacy and public trust. Persistent low levels of trust estimated at approximately 22% among South Africans highlight the urgent need for institutional reform (Human Sciences Research Council, 2025). By identifying systemic challenges such as corruption, inefficiency, and weak accountability, the study offers practical recommendations that can inform national policing policies, strategic frameworks, and oversight mechanisms. This aligns with findings by the South African Government and oversight bodies, which emphasize that improving accountability and professionalism is essential for enhancing service delivery and restoring public confidence (Independent Police Investigative Directorate, 2024).

Secondly, the study contributes to the academic literature on policing and governance by integrating both South African and international perspectives on police legitimacy. While extensive research exists globally on procedural justice and legitimacy theory, there remains a relative gap in context-specific studies focusing on South Africa's unique socio-political environment. By drawing on established international theories such as those advanced by Tom R. Tyler, which emphasize fairness and legitimacy as key drivers of public compliance, this study contextualizes these frameworks within South Africa's realities of inequality, high crime, and historical mistrust. Furthermore, the study complements international research by organizations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, which demonstrates that countries with higher levels of institutional trust tend to experience more effective governance and lower crime rates (OECD, 2024).

Thirdly, the study holds practical significance in promoting improved community-police relations. Effective policing relies heavily on cooperation between law enforcement agencies and the communities they serve. However, in South Africa, strained relationships between police and communities continue to undermine crime prevention efforts. Studies indicate that when citizens perceive police as fair, respectful, and accountable, they are more likely to cooperate and comply with the law (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). By examining the role of community policing initiatives such as Community Police Forums (CPFs), this study provides insights into how these structures can be strengthened to foster trust, collaboration, and shared responsibility for safety. Improving these relationships is particularly critical in high-crime areas, where mistrust often leads to underreporting of crime and reliance on informal or private security measures.

Fourthly, the study contributes to the development of effective crime prevention strategies. South Africa continues to experience high levels of violent crime, with over 27,000 murders recorded annually (South African Police Service, 2023). Addressing crime in such a context requires more than reactive policing; it demands

proactive, intelligence-led, and community-based approaches. International research on evidence-based policing suggests that strategies such as hotspot policing, procedural justice practices, and community engagement significantly improve crime prevention outcomes (Lum & Koper, 2017). By integrating these approaches with local realities, this study offers practical strategies that can enhance policing effectiveness in South Africa. Furthermore, improving police legitimacy has been shown to increase crime reporting and public cooperation, both of which are critical for successful crime prevention.

Additionally, the study has broader implications for democratic governance and social cohesion. Trust in the police is closely linked to trust in government institutions and the rule of law. Low levels of trust can undermine state legitimacy, weaken social order, and contribute to instability. Conversely, strengthening police legitimacy can enhance citizen confidence in public institutions, promote compliance with the law, and support long-term socio-economic development. As highlighted in international governance studies, trust in public institutions is a key driver of effective democracy and sustainable development (OECD, 2024).

In conclusion, this study is significant in that it provides a comprehensive analysis of police legitimacy in South Africa while offering practical, evidence-based recommendations for reform. By contributing to policy development, academic discourse, community relations, and crime prevention strategies, the study plays an important role in advancing efforts to build a more effective, accountable, and trusted policing system.

Gaps in the Study

Despite the growing body of literature on policing, legitimacy, and community trust, several critical gaps remain, particularly within the South African context. Addressing these gaps is essential for developing a comprehensive understanding of the challenges facing the South African Police Service (SAPS) and for designing effective, evidence-based interventions.

Firstly, there is a limited integration of theoretical frameworks with empirical realities in South Africa. While international theories such as procedural justice and legitimacy theory advanced by scholars like Tom R. Tyler have been widely applied in developed countries, their applicability within South Africa's unique socio-political and historical context remains underexplored. Many local studies reference these theories but do not sufficiently test or adapt them to conditions characterized by high crime rates, inequality, and historical mistrust of law enforcement. This creates a gap between theory and practice, limiting the effectiveness of policy interventions.

Secondly, there is a lack of longitudinal and comparative studies on police legitimacy in South Africa. Although surveys such as the Human Sciences Research Council's SASAS provide valuable data on public trust trends, there is limited in-depth analysis linking these trends to specific policing strategies or reforms over time. Furthermore, few studies systematically compare South Africa with international contexts where police legitimacy has improved significantly. International research, including reports by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, demonstrates that countries with sustained reforms in accountability and transparency achieve higher trust levels. However, these comparative insights are not sufficiently localized or operationalized within South African research.

Thirdly, there is an insufficient focus on the effectiveness of community policing structures, particularly Community Police Forums (CPFs). While CPFs are widely recognized as a cornerstone of democratic policing in South Africa, existing studies often highlight their challenges such as low participation, lack of resources, and limited influence without providing robust empirical evaluations of their actual impact on crime reduction and trust-building. This gap limits the ability of policymakers to strengthen or redesign these structures effectively.

Fourthly, there is a lack of research on the role of technology and innovation in enhancing police legitimacy in South Africa. Globally, policing has increasingly incorporated digital tools such as predictive analytics, surveillance systems, and data-driven crime mapping. Studies indicate that such technologies can improve efficiency and accountability when properly governed. However, in South Africa, there is limited research on how technological innovations can be integrated into policing strategies to enhance transparency, responsiveness, and public trust. This gap is particularly significant given the rapid advancement of digital policing internationally.

Fifthly, there is an underrepresentation of marginalized and rural communities in policing research. Much of the existing literature focuses on urban areas, leaving rural communities, informal settlements, and vulnerable populations underexplored. These communities often experience unique policing challenges, including limited access to police services, higher vulnerability to crime, and weaker institutional presence. The absence of context-specific research on these groups limits the inclusivity and relevance of existing studies.

Sixthly, there is a limited examination of the link between police legitimacy and crime reporting behaviours. While studies indicate that low trust leads to underreporting of crime, there is insufficient empirical research in South Africa that quantitatively and qualitatively explores this relationship. Understanding how legitimacy influences reporting behaviour is critical for improving crime data accuracy and enhancing policing effectiveness.

Seventhly, there is a gap in evaluating the impact of leadership and organizational culture within SAPS on legitimacy and performance. Issues such as corruption, poor leadership, and low morale are frequently cited in reports, yet there is limited scholarly research that systematically examines how these internal dynamics influence external perceptions of legitimacy and trust. International studies suggest that ethical leadership and organizational accountability are key drivers of institutional trust, but this relationship remains underexplored in the South African policing context.

In conclusion, the existing literature provides valuable insights into policing and legitimacy but fails to fully address several critical areas within the South African context. These gaps include the need for context-specific theoretical applications, longitudinal and comparative analyses, empirical evaluation of community policing, integration of technology, inclusion of marginalized communities, and deeper exploration of organizational dynamics within SAPS. This study seeks to address these gaps by providing a comprehensive, evidence-based analysis that bridges theory and practice, thereby contributing to more effective policing strategies and improved public trust.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in three complementary theoretical perspectives: Procedural Justice Theory, Legitimacy Theory, and Community Policing Theory. These frameworks collectively provide a comprehensive lens for understanding the relationship between police behaviour, public trust, and effective crime prevention in South Africa.

Procedural Justice Theory

Procedural Justice Theory posits that individuals are more likely to cooperate with law enforcement when they perceive police actions as fair, transparent, and respectful. The theory emphasizes four key elements: fairness in decision-making, transparency in processes, respectful treatment of citizens, and opportunities for public voice during interactions. When these elements are present, citizens are more likely to view the police as legitimate and to comply with the law voluntarily.

In the South African context, the relevance of procedural justice is particularly significant given the country's history of oppressive policing and ongoing challenges of mistrust. Research indicates that negative encounters with police characterized by disrespect, corruption, or abuse of power—significantly undermine public trust and willingness to cooperate. Conversely, positive interactions enhance perceptions of fairness and legitimacy. According to Prinsloo (2019), the application of procedural justice principles in South Africa can improve police-community relations by fostering respect and accountability. Similarly, Bradford et al. (2014) highlight that perceptions of fairness in policing are strongly associated with increased public confidence and compliance.

Empirical studies in South Africa further show that communities are more likely to report crime and collaborate with police when they feel treated with dignity and fairness (Govender & Pillay, 2021). Therefore, procedural justice serves as a critical framework for understanding how police conduct influences public trust and cooperation.

Legitimacy Theory

Legitimacy Theory focuses on the extent to which the public perceives the police as having the rightful authority to enforce laws and maintain order. Legitimacy is closely linked to trust and is a key determinant of public compliance and cooperation. When citizens believe that the police act in the best interests of society and adhere to legal and ethical standards, they are more likely to accept police authority and support law enforcement efforts.

In South Africa, legitimacy remains a significant challenge due to historical legacies and contemporary issues such as corruption, inefficiency, and misconduct. Studies show that public trust in the South African Police Service (SAPS) is consistently low, with only a small proportion of citizens expressing confidence in the institution. According to Lamb (2021), police legitimacy in South Africa is undermined by both structural inequalities and negative public perceptions of police performance. Similarly, Tankebe (2013), in studies relevant to African contexts, emphasizes that legitimacy is not only about legal authority but also about moral alignment with community values.

South African research further indicates that legitimacy is influenced by both institutional performance and individual

experiences with police officers. For example, Dlamini (2024) notes that communities are more likely to view police as legitimate when they demonstrate accountability, professionalism, and responsiveness to local needs. This suggests that improving legitimacy requires both systemic reforms and changes in day-to-day policing practices.

Community Policing Theory

Community Policing Theory emphasizes collaboration between the police and the community as a strategy for preventing crime and enhancing public safety. It is based on the idea that effective policing cannot be achieved without active community participation and shared responsibility for safety. This approach includes initiatives such as Community Police Forums (CPFs), neighborhood patrols, and partnerships with local stakeholders.

In South Africa, community policing has been a central component of policing reform since 1994. The establishment of CPFs was intended to bridge the gap between the police and communities, fostering trust and cooperation. However, the effectiveness of these structures has been mixed. According to John Motsamai Modise (2025), while community policing initiatives such as foot patrols can improve visibility and public perceptions of safety, their impact is often limited by resource constraints, lack of community participation, and weak institutional support.

Further studies by Tyabazayo (2023) indicate that community policing in South Africa faces challenges such as low public engagement, lack of trust, and insufficient training of police officers. Nonetheless, where effectively implemented, community policing has been shown to enhance cooperation, improve information sharing, and reduce crime. Govender and Pillay (2021) also argue that strengthening community-police partnerships is essential for improving service delivery and addressing local crime issues.

Integration of Theoretical Frameworks

These three theories are interconnected and collectively inform this study. Procedural justice influences perceptions of fairness, which in turn shapes legitimacy. Legitimacy then determines the extent to which communities are willing to cooperate with police. Community policing provides the practical mechanism through which these relationships can be strengthened. In the South African context, integrating these frameworks is essential for addressing the complex challenges of policing, including historical mistrust, high crime rates, and institutional weaknesses.

By applying these theories, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how police behavior, institutional practices, and community engagement influence public trust and policing effectiveness. The framework also supports the development of evidence-based recommendations aimed at enhancing police legitimacy and improving community safety.

Literature Review

The literature on policing, legitimacy, and community safety highlights the complex relationship between police performance, public trust, and crime prevention. This section reviews key South African and international perspectives, structured around core themes relevant to this study.

South African Perspectives

Police legitimacy and corruption

Police legitimacy in South Africa is significantly undermined by corruption, misconduct, and lack of professionalism. According to Lamb (2021), public trust in the South African Police Service (SAPS) remains low due to persistent allegations of corruption and abuse of power. Similarly, Govender and Pillay (2021) argue that unethical conduct and weak accountability structures negatively affect public perceptions of police legitimacy. Research by Newham (2015) further highlights that corruption within SAPS erodes institutional credibility and weakens the rule of law, making it difficult for communities to view the police as legitimate authority figures.

Impact of crime and misconduct on police image

High levels of violent crime in South Africa, combined with instances of police misconduct, contribute to a negative public image of the police. According to Burger (2013), the inability of SAPS to effectively address crime has led to declining confidence among citizens. Additionally, the Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID) reports consistently document cases of excessive use of force and deaths in police custody, further damaging public perceptions (IPID, 2024). These findings suggest that both crime levels and police behavior play a critical role in shaping legitimacy.

Community policing and trust deficits

Community policing has been widely promoted as a strategy to enhance trust and cooperation between police and communities. However, its effectiveness in South Africa remains limited. Tyabazayo (2023) notes that community policing initiatives often fail due to low levels of trust, poor communication, and lack of community participation. Similarly, Dlamini (2024) argues that while community policing is conceptually sound, its implementation is hindered by resource constraints and institutional weaknesses.

Role and challenges of Community Police Forums (CPFs)

Community Police Forums (CPFs) are central to South Africa's community policing strategy. They are intended to facilitate dialogue and collaboration between police and communities. However, research indicates that CPFs face significant challenges, including low participation, lack of funding, and limited influence on policing decisions. According to Rauch (2002), CPFs often struggle to fulfill their mandate due to weak institutional support and lack of trust between stakeholders. More recent studies confirm that while CPFs have potential, their impact remains inconsistent across different communities (Dlamini, 2024).

Foot patrols and community engagement

Recent studies highlight the importance of visible policing strategies such as foot patrols in improving community engagement and perceptions of safety. John Motsamai Modise (2025) found that increased police visibility through foot patrols enhances public confidence and fosters positive interactions between police and communities. These findings suggest that localized and proactive policing strategies can play a significant role in rebuilding trust.

International Perspectives

Trust as a foundation of policing effectiveness

International literature consistently emphasizes that trust is central to effective policing. Studies by Tom R. Tyler demonstrate that when citizens perceive police as legitimate, they are more likely to comply with the law and cooperate with law enforcement. This highlights the importance of fairness, transparency, and accountability in policing practices globally.

Digital policing and public trust

The integration of technology in policing has gained prominence worldwide. Digital tools such as surveillance systems, predictive analytics, and online reporting platforms can enhance efficiency and engagement. However, research indicates that poorly implemented technologies may increase mistrust, particularly if they raise concerns about privacy and misuse of data. International studies show that transparency and accountability are critical for ensuring that technological innovations support, rather than undermine, public trust.

Hotspot policing and crime reduction

Hotspot policing, which focuses on targeting high-crime areas, has been shown to reduce crime when effectively implemented. Evidence-based studies indicate that concentrating police resources in specific locations can lead to significant reductions in crime rates without displacing criminal activity. This approach has been successfully applied in various countries and is increasingly recommended as part of modern policing strategies.

Public perception and governance

Public perception plays a crucial role in shaping the success of policing and governance. International research shows that citizens' trust in the police is closely linked to their trust in government institutions. Where police are perceived as fair and effective, overall confidence in governance tends to improve. Conversely, negative perceptions of policing can undermine broader state legitimacy.

Evidence-based policing

Evidence-based policing emphasizes the use of research and data to inform policing strategies. According to Lum and Koper (2017), adopting evidence-based approaches leads to more effective crime prevention and resource allocation. This approach encourages continuous evaluation and adaptation of policing practices, ensuring that interventions are both efficient and effective.

Themes of the Study

Based on the literature reviewed, this study is structured around four interrelated themes that are central to understanding policing challenges and reform in South Africa. These themes reflect key issues influencing police legitimacy, effectiveness, and community safety.

Police Legitimacy and Trust

Police legitimacy and public trust form the foundation of effective policing in democratic societies. Legitimacy is shaped by citizens' perceptions of fairness, accountability, and professionalism in police conduct. In South Africa, studies show that public trust in the South African Police Service (SAPS) remains low, largely due to concerns about corruption, inefficiency, and misconduct.

According to Lamb (2021), legitimacy is weakened when police fail to act in a procedurally just and transparent manner. Similarly, Govender and Pillay (2021) argue that respectful treatment and ethical behaviour by police officers significantly influence public perceptions and willingness to cooperate.

Furthermore, research indicates that when communities perceive police as fair and accountable, they are more likely to comply with the law and engage with law enforcement agencies. However, persistent negative experiences, particularly in high-crime areas, continue to erode trust and undermine the legitimacy of SAPS.

Community Policing Effectiveness

Community policing is a central strategy aimed at improving relationships between the police and communities. In South Africa, Community Police Forums (CPFs) serve as key platforms for engagement, collaboration, and information sharing. However, the effectiveness of community policing remains uneven across different regions.

According to Dlamini (2024), while CPFs have the potential to enhance trust and cooperation, their impact is often limited by low community participation, lack of resources, and weak institutional support. Tyabazayo (2023) further highlights that trust deficits between police and communities hinder meaningful collaboration, reducing the effectiveness of community policing initiatives.

Despite these challenges, evidence suggests that when properly implemented, community policing can improve communication, strengthen partnerships, and contribute to crime prevention. This underscores the need for strengthening CPF structures and enhancing community engagement strategies.

Institutional Accountability

Institutional accountability is a critical determinant of police legitimacy and effectiveness. It refers to the mechanisms through which police actions are monitored, evaluated, and regulated to ensure compliance with legal and ethical standards. In South Africa, accountability challenges such as corruption, abuse of power, and weak oversight structures continue to undermine public confidence in SAPS.

Newham (2015) emphasizes that corruption within the police service erodes trust and weakens the rule of law, making it difficult for citizens to view the police as legitimate authority figures. Similarly, reports from the Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID, 2024) highlight ongoing issues related to police misconduct, including excessive use of force and deaths in custody.

Burger (2013) argues that strengthening accountability mechanisms, improving leadership, and enhancing transparency are essential for restoring public trust and ensuring effective policing. Without strong accountability systems, efforts to improve legitimacy and performance are unlikely to succeed.

Crime Prevention Strategies

Effective crime prevention remains a central goal of policing in South Africa, given the country's high levels of violent crime. Traditional reactive policing approaches have proven insufficient in addressing complex crime challenges, necessitating the adoption of proactive and evidence-based strategies.

Research by Burger (2013) indicates that crime prevention requires a combination of visible policing, intelligence-led operations, and community involvement. Additionally, John Motsamai Modise (2025) highlights that strategies such as foot patrols and localized policing can improve public perceptions of safety and enhance community engagement.

Furthermore, Tyabazayo (2023) emphasizes the importance of integrating community-based approaches with formal policing strategies to address the root causes of crime. This includes addressing socio-economic factors such as poverty, unemployment, and inequality, which contribute to criminal activity.

Overall, the literature suggests that effective crime prevention in South Africa requires a holistic approach that combines proactive policing, community participation, and evidence-based practices.

Discussion and Findings

This study examined the factors influencing police legitimacy and public trust in South Africa, with a particular focus on the South African Police Service (SAPS). The findings reveal a complex interplay between institutional weaknesses, community dynamics, and policing strategies. These findings are discussed below in relation to the key themes of the study.

Low Public Trust in SAPS

The study confirms that public trust in SAPS remains significantly low, largely due to persistent challenges such as corruption, inefficiency, and misconduct. Evidence from the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) indicates that trust levels have remained consistently low over time, reflecting a deep-rooted legitimacy crisis. Studies by Lamb (2021) and Govender and Pillay (2021) further support this finding, highlighting those unethical behaviours, lack of professionalism, and poor service delivery continue to undermine public confidence in the police.

Additionally, reports from the Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID, 2024) document ongoing cases of excessive use of force and abuse of power, which reinforce negative public perceptions. These issues contribute to a cycle of mistrust, where citizens are less likely to cooperate with police, thereby reducing the effectiveness of crime prevention efforts.

Limitations of Community Policing Without Structural Reform

While community policing remains a cornerstone of democratic policing in South Africa, the study finds that it is insufficient on its own to address the legitimacy crisis. Community Police Forums (CPFs) and other engagement initiatives have shown limited impact due to structural challenges such as inadequate resources, lack of training, and weak institutional support.

Dlamini (2024) and Tyabazayo (2023) emphasize that trust deficits between police and communities hinder meaningful participation, reducing the effectiveness of these initiatives. The findings suggest that without broader structural reforms—such as improved accountability, better resource allocation, and strengthened leadership—community policing efforts are unlikely to achieve their intended outcomes.

Influence of Procedural Justice on Public Cooperation

The study highlights the significant role of procedural justice in shaping public perceptions and cooperation. When police officers

treat citizens with fairness, respect, and transparency, communities are more likely to view them as legitimate and cooperate with law enforcement.

This finding aligns with both South African and international research. Prinsloo (2019) notes that procedural fairness is a key determinant of public trust in South Africa, while studies by Tom R. Tyler demonstrate that legitimacy derived from fair treatment enhances voluntary compliance with the law.

In contrast, negative interactions such as disrespect, discrimination, or abuse significantly reduce trust and willingness to engage with police. This underscores the importance of improving the quality of police-citizen interactions as a central component of policing reform.

Impact of Foot Patrols and Localized Engagement

The study finds that visible policing strategies, particularly foot patrols, play a crucial role in improving community perceptions of safety and trust. Increased police visibility enhances accessibility, fosters positive interactions, and creates opportunities for relationship-building between officers and community members.

Research by John Motsamai Modise (2025) supports this finding, indicating that foot patrols contribute to improved public confidence and a greater sense of security. Similarly, Burger (2013) argues that visible policing is essential for deterrence and community reassurance.

These findings suggest that localized and proactive policing approaches can serve as effective tools for rebuilding trust, particularly in high-crime areas where police presence is often limited.

Importance of Data-Driven and Intelligence-Led Policing

The study also highlights the importance of adopting data-driven and intelligence-led policing strategies. International models demonstrate that the use of data analytics, crime mapping, and targeted interventions can significantly improve policing outcomes.

While South Africa has begun to incorporate some of these approaches, their implementation remains uneven. The findings indicate that greater investment in technology, training, and data systems is needed to enhance the effectiveness of policing strategies. Tyabazayo (2023) emphasizes that integrating evidence-based approaches with local knowledge can improve crime prevention and resource allocation.

Furthermore, the study finds that combining intelligence-led policing with community engagement strategies can create a more holistic and effective approach to crime prevention.

Synthesis of Findings

Overall, the study reveals that police legitimacy in South Africa is shaped by a combination of institutional performance, police behavior, and community engagement. Low levels of trust are primarily driven by corruption, inefficiency, and misconduct, while community policing initiatives are constrained by structural limitations. However, the findings also highlight opportunities for improvement through procedural justice, visible policing, and data-driven strategies.

The integration of these approaches is essential for addressing the legitimacy deficit and enhancing the effectiveness of SAPS. Without such reforms, the gap between the police and the

communities they serve is likely to persist, undermining efforts to

reduce crime and promote public safety.

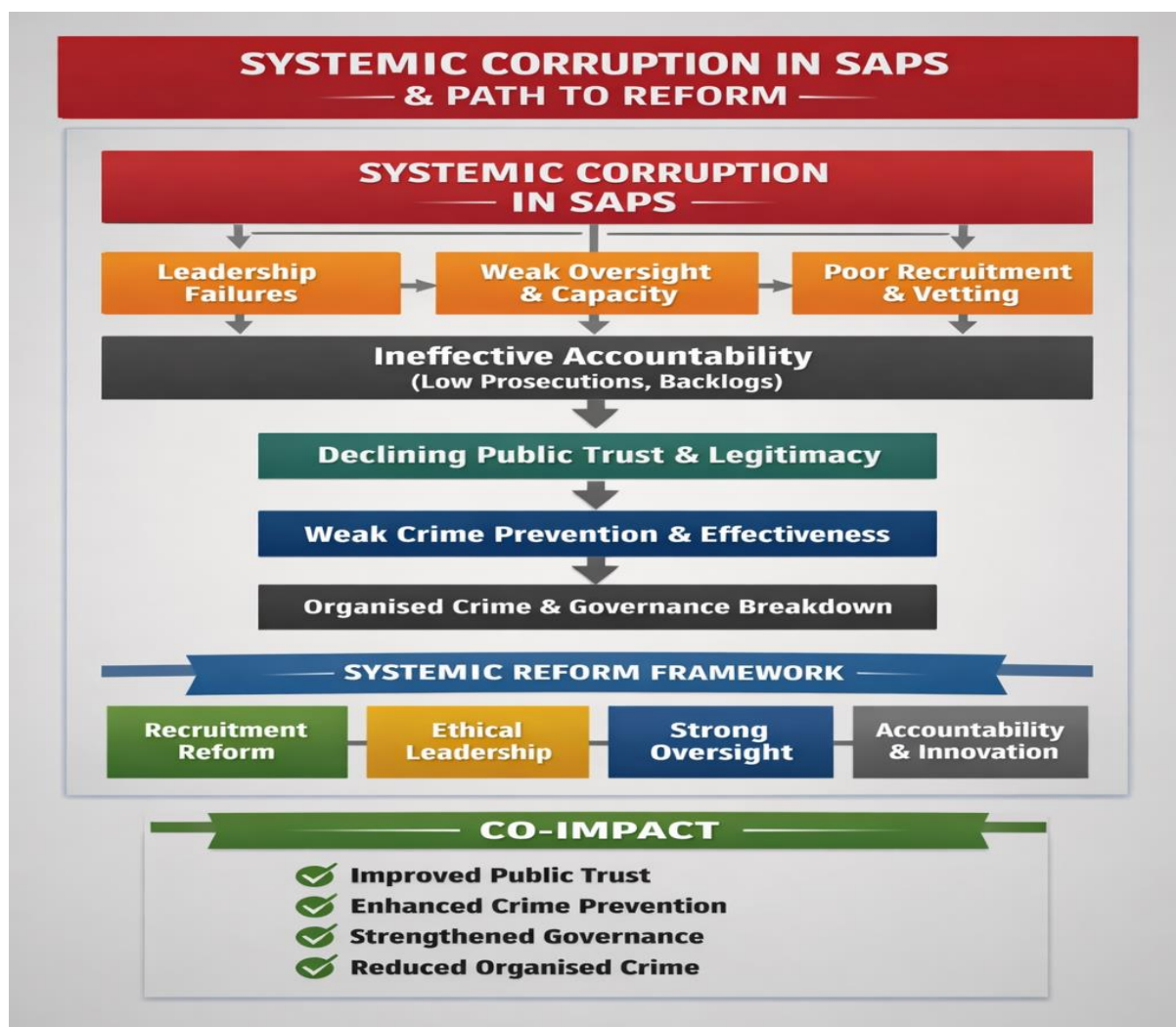


Figure 1.1 Diagram illustration of the study.

Practical Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, a multi-stakeholder approach is required to address the legitimacy and trust deficit in the South African Police Service (SAPS). The recommendations are structured across three key stakeholders: SAPS, government, and communities.

Recommendations for the South African police service (saps)

Strengthening Ethical Leadership and Accountability Systems

SAPS should prioritize the development of strong ethical leadership at all levels of the organization. Leadership plays a critical role in shaping organizational culture, promoting professionalism, and ensuring accountability. There is a need to strengthen internal disciplinary systems and reinforce the role of oversight mechanisms such as the Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID) to ensure that misconduct is addressed swiftly and transparently. Research by Newham (2015) indicates that improving accountability systems is essential for restoring public trust and reducing corruption within SAPS.

Enhancing Training on Procedural Justice

Training programs should be restructured to emphasize procedural justice principles, including fairness, respect, transparency, and effective communication. Officers must be equipped with skills to engage communities in a manner that promotes dignity and trust. Studies by Prinsloo (2019) and Tom R. Tyler demonstrate that procedural justice significantly enhances public cooperation and compliance with the law. Continuous professional development and scenario-based training should be implemented to reinforce these principles.

Increasing Visibility Through Foot Patrols

SAPS should expand visible policing strategies, particularly foot patrols, to improve accessibility and community engagement. Increased police presence in communities has been shown to enhance perceptions of safety and trust. According to John Motsamai Modise (2025), foot patrols create opportunities for positive interactions between police and citizens, thereby strengthening relationships and improving public confidence. Localized policing strategies should be prioritized in high-crime areas.

Recommendations for Government

Investment in Policing Technology and Infrastructure

The government should allocate greater resources toward modernizing policing through technology and infrastructure development. This includes investing in data analytics systems, surveillance technologies, forensic capabilities, and digital reporting platforms. Evidence from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2024) shows that countries with advanced policing technologies and data-driven systems achieve higher efficiency and public trust. In the South African context, improved infrastructure can enhance response times, investigative capacity, and overall service delivery.

Strengthening Oversight Bodies and Governance

Government must reinforce the independence and capacity of oversight institutions such as IPID and parliamentary committees responsible for policing. Effective oversight ensures accountability, transparency, and adherence to legal standards. Burger (2013) emphasizes that strong governance structures are critical for improving police performance and legitimacy. Additionally, policy frameworks should be regularly reviewed and updated to address emerging challenges in policing.

Recommendations for Communities

Promoting Active Participation in Community Police Forums (CPFs)

Communities should be encouraged to actively participate in Community Police Forums (CPFs) as platforms for engagement and collaboration. Increased participation can enhance communication, build trust, and ensure that local policing priorities reflect community needs. Dlamini (2024) highlights that effective CPFs can serve as a bridge between police and communities, fostering mutual understanding and cooperation.

Encouraging Collaborative Crime Prevention Strategies

Community members should take an active role in crime prevention through partnerships with the police. This includes initiatives such as neighborhood watch programs, information sharing, and community awareness campaigns. Tyabazayo (2023) argues that collaborative approaches to crime prevention are more effective than isolated policing efforts, as they address both the symptoms and root causes of crime.

Furthermore, building trust requires consistent engagement, transparency, and shared responsibility between police and communities. Strengthening these partnerships can lead to improved safety outcomes and more sustainable crime prevention strategies.

Conclusion of Recommendations

Overall, these recommendations emphasize the need for a coordinated and integrated approach to policing reform in South Africa. Strengthening ethical leadership, enhancing training, improving visibility, investing in technology, reinforcing oversight, and promoting community participation are all critical components of building a legitimate and effective policing system.

By implementing these recommendations, SAPS and its stakeholders can work toward restoring public trust, improving

service delivery, and enhancing crime prevention efforts, ultimately contributing to safer and more secure communities.

Co-impact (Collaborative Impact)

The successful implementation of the recommended policing reforms is expected to generate significant collaborative impact (co-impact) across multiple stakeholders, including the South African Police Service (SAPS), government institutions, and communities. These impacts are interdependent and contribute to strengthening the overall effectiveness of policing and governance in South Africa.

Improved Trust Between Police and Communities

One of the most critical outcomes of collaborative policing efforts is the restoration and enhancement of trust between the police and the communities they serve. When police officers engage communities through fair, respectful, and transparent practices, public perceptions of legitimacy improve. Research in South Africa indicates that trust is strengthened when communities experience consistent, positive interactions with law enforcement and when police demonstrate accountability and professionalism. Strengthened trust fosters open communication, increases public confidence, and encourages citizens to cooperate with police in crime prevention efforts.

Reduction in Crime Through Joint Initiatives

Collaborative approaches to policing are expected to contribute to a measurable reduction in crime. When communities actively participate in initiatives such as Community Police Forums (CPFs), neighborhood watch programs, and information-sharing platforms, they become partners in maintaining safety. Studies show that joint initiatives between police and communities improve intelligence gathering, enhance early detection of criminal activities, and support proactive crime prevention strategies. By combining local knowledge with formal policing strategies, crime prevention efforts become more targeted and effective.

Strengthened Governance and Accountability

Co-impact also extends to improved governance and accountability within the policing system. Collaboration between SAPS, oversight bodies, and communities enhances transparency and ensures that police actions are subject to scrutiny. Stronger accountability mechanisms reduce corruption and misconduct while promoting ethical leadership and professionalism. Furthermore, increased public participation in oversight processes contributes to more democratic policing, where citizens play an active role in shaping safety and security policies. This strengthens institutional legitimacy and supports broader governance objectives.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into police legitimacy and community trust in South Africa, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations that may influence the interpretation and generalizability of the findings.

Reliance on Secondary Data

The study primarily relies on secondary data sources, including existing literature, reports, and surveys. While these sources provide valuable information, they may not fully capture current or localized dynamics within specific communities. The absence of

primary data collection limits the ability to obtain firsthand perspectives from police officials and community members.

Limited Empirical Fieldwork

The study does not include extensive empirical fieldwork, such as interviews, observations, or case studies. As a result, the findings are based largely on existing research rather than direct engagement with participants. This may limit the depth of analysis, particularly in understanding nuanced, context-specific experiences of policing and community relations.

Context-Specific Findings

The findings of this study are specific to the South African context, which is characterized by unique historical, socio-economic, and political factors. While some insights may be applicable to other countries, the results may not be universally generalizable. Differences in policing systems, governance structures, and societal conditions must be considered when applying these findings in other contexts.

Key Takeaways

The study highlights several critical insights into policing, legitimacy, and community safety in South Africa. These key takeaways reflect the core findings and their implications for policy and practice.

Legitimacy is Central to Effective Policing

The study underscores that police legitimacy is fundamental to the success of any policing system. When the public perceives the police as legitimate, they are more likely to comply with the law, report crimes, and cooperate with law enforcement. In the South African context, improving legitimacy is essential for addressing the current trust deficit and enhancing policing effectiveness.

Trust is influenced by Fairness and Accountability

Public trust in the police is strongly shaped by perceptions of fairness, transparency, and accountability. The study finds that respectful treatment, ethical conduct, and consistent application of the law are key drivers of trust. Conversely, corruption, misconduct, and lack of accountability significantly undermine public confidence in the South African Police Service (SAPS).

Community Policing Requires Structural Support

While community policing remains a vital strategy for improving police-community relations, the study reveals that it cannot succeed in isolation. Effective implementation requires adequate resources, strong leadership, institutional support, and active community participation. Without these elements, initiatives such as Community Police Forums (CPFs) are unlikely to achieve their intended impact.

Technology and Data-Driven Strategies are Critical

The study highlights the growing importance of technology and evidence-based policing in enhancing effectiveness. Data-driven approaches, including crime mapping and intelligence-led policing, can improve decision-making, resource allocation, and crime prevention outcomes. However, their success depends on proper implementation, governance, and integration with community-based strategies.

Impact of the Study

This study makes significant contributions to policy, academic knowledge, and practical policing outcomes in South Africa.

Supports Policy Reform in SAPS

The findings provide evidence-based insights that can inform policy reform within SAPS. By identifying key challenges such as low trust, weak accountability, and operational inefficiencies, the study offers practical recommendations that can guide strategic planning, institutional reform, and improved service delivery.

Enhances Academic Understanding of Policing in South Africa

The study contributes to the academic discourse on policing by integrating theoretical frameworks with the South African context. It bridges gaps in the literature by examining the relationship between legitimacy, trust, and policing effectiveness, while also incorporating international perspectives. This enhances scholarly understanding of policing dynamics in transitional and developing contexts.

Contributes to Safer Communities

Ultimately, the study aims to support the development of safer communities by improving policing practices and strengthening community engagement. By promoting trust, accountability, and collaboration, the study contributes to more effective crime prevention strategies and improved public safety outcomes. Strengthened relationships between police and communities are essential for sustainable crime reduction and social stability.

Conclusion

Police legitimacy in South Africa remains a deeply contested and urgent challenge, shaped by enduring historical legacies, institutional weaknesses, and complex socio-economic realities. Although significant reforms have been introduced since 1994 most notably the shift toward community policing the evidence demonstrates that these efforts have not fully translated into sustained public trust or effective policing outcomes. The persistence of corruption, inefficiency, and weak accountability mechanisms continues to erode confidence in the South African Police Service (SAPS), limiting its ability to function as a truly democratic and community-oriented institution. This study has shown that legitimacy is not achieved through policy frameworks alone, but through consistent, fair, and transparent practices that resonate with the lived experiences of communities. Without addressing deeper structural issues such as leadership deficits, resource constraints, and organizational culture reform initiatives risk remaining symbolic rather than transformative. Community policing, while essential, cannot succeed in isolation; it must be supported by strong institutional foundations and genuine community partnerships.

Importantly, the findings highlight that restoring legitimacy requires a holistic and integrated approach. Ethical leadership must set the tone for accountability and professionalism within SAPS. Procedural justice must guide everyday police-citizen interactions to ensure fairness and respect. Community engagement must move beyond consultation toward meaningful collaboration and shared responsibility for safety. At the same time, technological innovation and data-driven policing must be leveraged to enhance efficiency, responsiveness, and evidence-based decision-making.

Ultimately, rebuilding trust in policing is not only a matter of improving law enforcement performance it is central to strengthening democratic governance, social cohesion, and the rule of law in South Africa. A legitimate police service is one that is trusted, accountable, and responsive to the needs of its citizens. Achieving this vision requires sustained commitment, coordinated action across stakeholders, and a willingness to confront systemic challenges head-on. Only through such comprehensive reform can South Africa move toward a policing system that truly serves and protects all its people.

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