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Predators or Protectors: Tales of Nigerian Police Force brutality on her Youths

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Abstract

The Nigerian Police Force (NPF) is constitutionally mandated to maintain law and order, yet the lived experiences of Nigerians are frequently marred by police brutality, extortion, and extrajudicial killings, particularly against young people, revealing a disturbing pattern of systemic abuse. This paper critically examines whether the police function as protectors or predators in Nigerian society, with a specific focus on persistent human rights violations against youths, through the lens of Howard Becker's Labelling Theory. A mixed-method approach was employed, collecting quantitative and qualitative data from students at the Federal University Oye-Ekiti. Findings indicate that nearly half of the respondents have experienced police brutality, with the majority

reporting that such encounters are recurrent. The study further reveals that brutality is often predicated on factors such as physiognomy and dress patterns, and that victims are frequently coerced into making fund transfers under threat of arrest. Based on these insight, the paper advocates a comprehensive institutional reform of the Nigerian Police Force to restore public trust and safeguard the rights of young citizens.

Keywords: *Police Misconduct, Social Justice, Human Right Abuse, Accountability and Youth violence*

Introduction

All over the world, police brutality is a serious issue that erodes justice, violates human rights, and damages the community's confidence in those meant to protect them. Across the globe, many people are expressing their outrage over the disturbing instances of police misconduct, such as misuse of power and unjust arrests, and are calling for significant changes. (Flores et al., 2021).

In Nigeria, police officers are supposed to safeguard lives and property, but for a lot of young folks, they often feel more afraid than safe around law enforcement agents. The Nigerian police force consistently abuses youth through excessive force and extrajudicial killings while corruption remains rampant among law enforcement officials (Danbaba et al., 2025). The problematic pattern has triggered both human rights advocates to sound the alarm and prompted society's different groups to organize protests and demand changes. Police brutality typically includes arbitrary arrests and physical violence against young people perceived as threatening or matching certain suspicious profiles according to law enforcement standards (Ogunfadebo & Abiodun, 2022). The problem intensifies further as overlapping traits such as age, sex financial status and ethnicity combine. The culture of impunity in the Nigerian police force worsens the problem because police officers receive minimal punishment for their actions which results in violence becoming a standard practice for maintaining control (Shodunke, 2024). The absence of accountability and transparency in the Nigerian police system obstructs initiatives to solve these problems. The existence of corruption in law enforcement organizations helps to create an environment where abuses go unpunished. Public trust in law enforcement declines through these ongoing practices while simultaneously, victims choose silence over reporting violent acts due to fear of more harm and inadequate support. Stereotypes and prejudices

create devastating effects on Nigerian Youths leading to their marginalization and alienation through an unstable justice system according to Anzizi (2024).

The prevalence of police corruption in Nigeria stems from deep-seated systemic problems that exist within the country's financial systems and political institutions along with its cultural background. Factors such as unsuitable organisational leadership, a deficiency in accountability and openness, not enough welfare, the politicised nature of the police force, avarice, and the pervasive desire for rapid wealth accumulation contribute to this phenomenon (Shodunke, 2024). A notable trend has emerged in public sentiment, wherein individuals who have engaged in the embezzlement of public funds are increasingly regarded as respected figures within the community, often receiving prestigious chieftaincy or national titles (Kaka et al., 2021). Officers implement law and order in ways that reiterate their financial interests, all the while safeguarding what Iwuoha & Aniche (2021) identify as the regime security of state officials, regardless of its legitimacy or popularity. Consequently, the public perceives them as a source of harm and uncertainty rather than as a means of assistance and protection. The phenomenon of corruption in Nigeria is deeply entrenched within its institutions, particularly evident in the policing systems where unethical conduct by law enforcement personnel often goes unchecked. This lack of accountability facilitates the transformation of policing into a mechanism for corrupt practices (Onuoha et al. 2021). It fosters a systemic cycle wherein high-ranking police officials misappropriate police funds or artificially inflate official contracts. They additionally uphold a system for gathering unlawful 'returns' from the funds consistently extorted by subordinate officers from motorists, as well as from crime victims and suspects (Ariyibi, 2024).

"Police are your friends," is a saying used by the Nigerian police force, although it has come to contradict itself. This kind of slogan has lost relevance for Nigerians due to the brutal treatment received from so-called "friends" (Usman, 2023). According to Idowu and Chukwudi (2021), on October 20, 2020, the Nigerian Army and Police murdered at least 12 peaceful demonstrators and wounded a large number of others in Lagos State's at Alausa and Lekki. Human rights violations have been alleged against the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), including unlawful arrests, frequent torture of prisoners, coercing detainees (their victims) into giving them cash or property in return for their release, and sometimes murdering those who refused to comply with their requests.

According to Jude (2022), those between the ages of 17 and 30 are most vulnerable to being detained, tortured, or subjected to extortion by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). Even though the police have vowed to protect them, the average Nigerian is consistently subjected to cruel treatment by them. They go above their authority to apprehend, imprison, and frighten young men who seem prosperous. Since the government takes little or no action to apprehend and prosecute perpetrators, most of the time they get away with their crimes (Ilo, & Imosemi, 2022). Because the effect is greater on wealthy young people, almost every Nigerian is impacted by the systemic violence of the police, although to varying degrees.

Students of Federal University Oye-Ekiti have not been spared from the brutality that accompanies police presence. The Nigerian Police Force in this area has been accused of extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests and detention, beatings of detainees, and cooperation with criminals on multiple occasions. Hence, the research examined the interplay between the experience of youth and The Nigerian Police Force. Ifeanyichukwu (2023), posits that there is abundant evidence of bribery, extortion, case-fixing, opportunistic theft, kickbacks, predatory policing, and bribery inside the ranks and files of the police. Roadblocks erected by the police on roads are frequently used to extort money from drivers, not for reasons of safety or security.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims at achieving the following objectives which are to:

1. identify the key factors contributing to police brutality against Nigerian youths;
2. examine the various forms and frequency of police brutality in Nigeria; and
3. explore possible solutions for preventing police brutality against Nigerian youths.

Theoretical Framework

Sociologist Howard S. Becker first proposed labelling theory. Though early contributions by Edwin Lemert also laid its roots, his work—especially in the book, *Outsiders* (1963)—was crucial in forming the theory (Becker, 2015). By examining how the process of labelling individuals as "deviant" or "non-deviant" shapes their self-identity and

behaviour, this theory offers a sociological framework which holds that deviance results not from inherent qualities of an act, but from social process. What is considered 'deviant' depends on power relations within a community and the prevailing standards of society. The framework underlines how those in positions of authority decide which actions qualify as deviant. This can marginalise some groups and supports current social hierarchies. Once labelled, people may feel stigmatised, which could affect their self-identity and restrict possibilities. Often leading to exclusion from mainstream social groups, this stigmatisation reinforces deviant behaviour (Green et al., 2005). Labelling theory helps one understand why police officers harass young Nigerians. This sociological point of view emphasises how individuals or groups' social labels define their behaviour and interactions with one another. Labelling theory suggests that in the framework of police brutality, stigmatising labels and negative preconceptions about Nigerian youth can help to explain their disproportionate targeting by law enforcement. Labelling theory emphasises the crucial influence of power in forming opinions of deviance, a dynamic obviously observable in Nigeria's selective enforcement of laws against young people (Azende, 2018). Police methods, sometimes shaped by arbitrary standards like appearance or dress, mirror and support more general systematic prejudices. These prejudices are ingrained in institutional systems that favour some groups over others, thereby extending a cycle of violence and strengthening society's hierarchies. Furthermore, knowledge of the part labelling plays in police violence has important legislative ramifications. Understanding that labelling promotes a culture of impunity and systematic abuse, reform initiatives should go beyond mere operational adjustments including improved training and responsibility policies. They must also address the underlying social narratives that legitimize the misuse of power. Initiatives aimed at community engagement and public education can be instrumental in counteracting negative stereotypes, ultimately working to rebuild trust and establish a more equitable relationship between law enforcement and the youth.

Methodology

The study design is a descriptive cross-sectional survey. The design of the study is in two parts; quantitative data obtained using questionnaires, and the qualitative data captured using key informant interviews. The

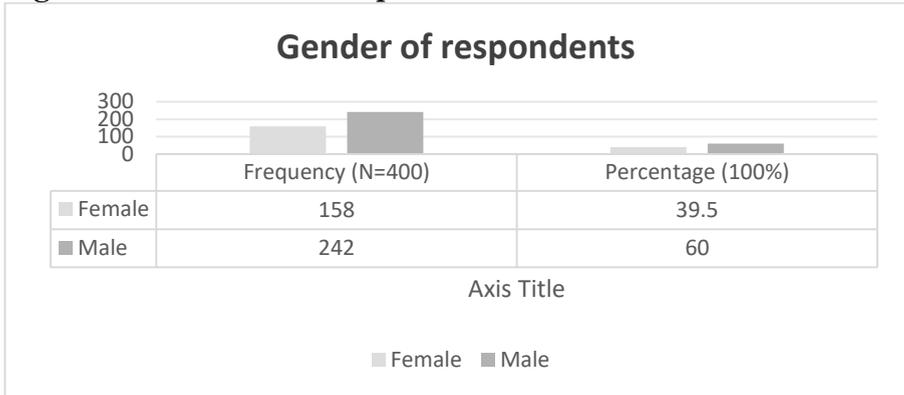
participants are undergraduate and postgraduate students at Federal University Oye-Ekiti. Males and females who are between 18 and 29 years old formed the study population. The choice of males and females that fall within this age range is not far-fetched given the fact that only this range is recognized as youth in Nigeria. (Odeh, 2022). Simple random sampling technique is employed to get data from 400 respondents. Given that the study area is predominantly a student-populated zone, it has become a focal point for intermittent police checkpoints and patrol operations. Questionnaires were distributed carefully by the researcher and research assistants to undergraduate and postgraduate students. Questionnaires were collected back immediately by the research assistant and the researcher after the respondents finished answering. Key informant interviews were conducted by the researcher and a research assistant, one of whom is a member of staff of Federal University Oye-Ekiti (FUOYE). Data entry, coding, and analysis at uni-variate levels were done using SPSS version 21. Qualitative data were analyzed using content analysis, by transcribing audio recordings into written form which would be integrated to quantitative data using N Vivo version 8. Ethical considerations were rigorously adhered to in this article. The researcher ensured that personal biases did not influence the research process or findings. All efforts were made to prevent the researcher's personal opinions from impacting the article or the interpretation of data. The responses of the respondents were faithfully transcribed and reported without any alterations, additions, or subtractions.

This article's main limitation borders on the fact that the sample was drawn exclusively from undergraduate and postgraduate students at Federal University, Oye-Ekiti. As such, the results primarily reflect the experiences and perceptions of a student-dominated population, which may not fully capture the broader spectrum of Nigerian youth. This demographic specificity limits the applicability of the findings to other segments of the youth population, particularly those not engaged in higher education

Findings

Distribution of Respondents by Socio-demographic Characteristics (n=400)

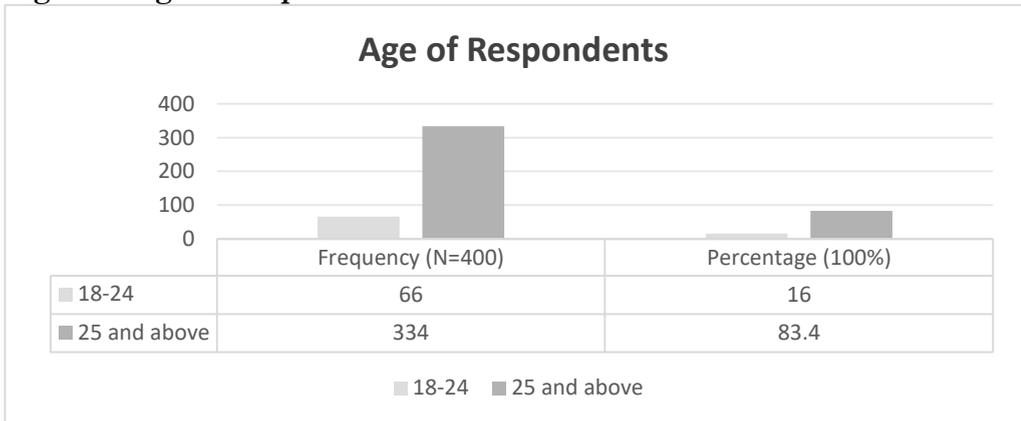
Figure 1: Gender of the Respondents



(Source: Field Survey, 2024)

The figure above illustrates the gender distribution of respondents. The results indicate that a majority, 121 (60.5%), were male, while 79 (39.5%) were female. This suggests that male participants outnumbered their female counterparts in this study

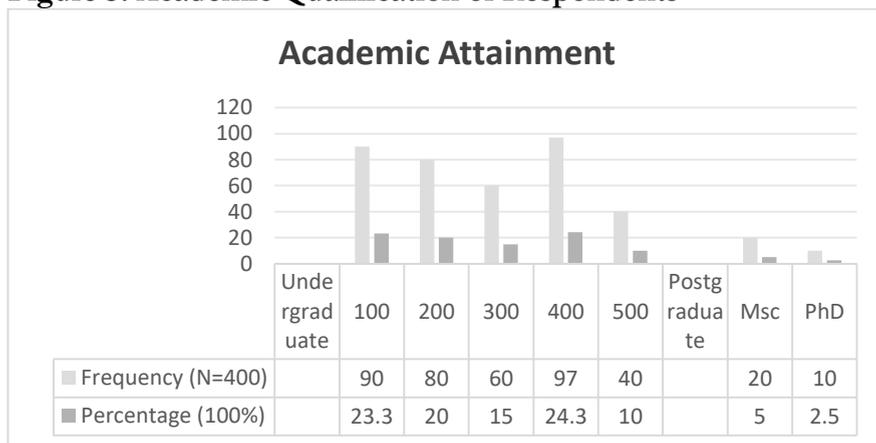
Figure 2: Age of Respondents



(Source: Field Survey, 2025)

The figure above presents the age distribution of respondents. The majority, 334 (83.5%), fell within the 18–24 age group, while 33 (66.0%) were between 25 and 34 years. This indicates that most participants were aged 18–24, which is unsurprising, as most students in tertiary institutions today fall within this age bracket

Figure 3: Academic Qualification of Respondents

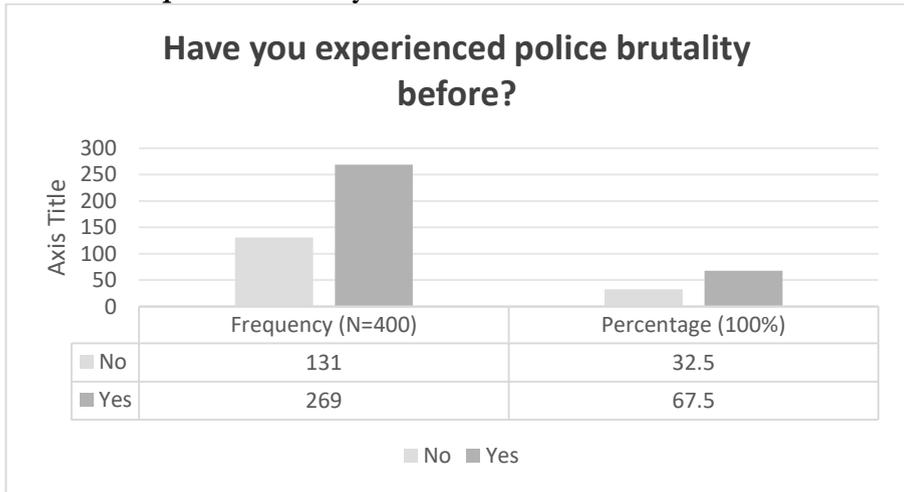


(Source: Field Survey, 2025)

The figure above illustrates the academic level distribution of respondents. The majority, 97 (24.3%), were in 400 level, followed by 90 (23.3%) in 100 level, 80 (20.0%) in 200 level, 60 (15.0%) in 300 level, and 40 (10.0%) in 500 level. Additionally, 20 (5.0%) were Master’s students, while the least represented group was Ph.D students, with only 10 (2.5%) respondents. These results suggest that 400 level students, being the largest group, may have greater knowledge and understanding of the study’s subject matter.

Factors that Contribute to Police Brutality among Nigerian Youths

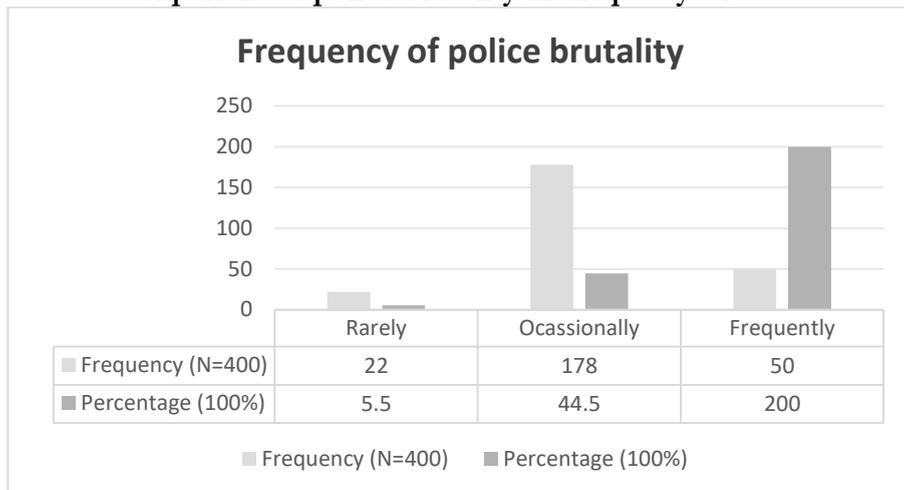
Figure 4: Distribution of Respondents who have experienced police brutality



(Source: Field Survey, 2025)

The figure above illustrates respondents' experiences with police brutality. The results show that a majority, 269 (67.5%), reported having experienced police brutality, while 131 (32.5%) indicated they had not. This finding aligns with Akinlabi's (2017) research on young people, procedural justice, and police legitimacy in Nigeria, which highlighted that Nigerian youth frequently encounter police brutality, brutality, and corruption.

Table 5: Distribution of Respondents and who they know to have experienced police brutality in the past year



(Source: Field Survey, 2025)

The figure above illustrates how frequently respondents or someone they know have experienced police brutality in the past years. The results indicate that a majority, 200 (50.0%), reported experiencing police brutality ‘frequently,’ while 178 (44.5%) indicated ‘occasionally,’ and 22 (5.5%) reported ‘rarely.’ These findings suggest that police brutality is a common experience among Nigerian youth. This aligns with Aborisade’s (2021) research on the unlawful use of force and police misconduct during the enforcement of COVID-19 measures, which revealed that Nigerian police officers have frequently been accused of abusing their power and committing gross human rights violations, including illegal detention, arbitrary killings, and extortion

One of the respondents narrated his ordeal at the hands of Rapid Response Squad (RRS) Police officers while travelling from Ado Ekiti to Oye-Ekiti

I have suffered in their hands oooooo. Ajeeee. When I dey resume from the break na all the four police check point between Ado and Oye stop our bus oooo. They tell us to open how bag, scatter everything inside and they search me self, na only the girls them use brain deal with.

(3:25:2025, Respondent Z, Male, 23years, 400, FUYOYE, Oye).

A female participant narrated her experience as follows while travelling from Lagos to school (FUOYE).

The Police officers concentrated more on the guys that were in the bus, they spoke to them harshly, searching their belonging, body and taking them away from the car to forcefully make transfer for them. One of the guys who could not make transfer was threatened with arrest, One of the police officer kept saying “Na our cell you go sleep tonight” . they only asked we the female in the bus where we were coming from and our destination. (3:28:2025, Respondent K, Remale, 21years, 400, FUOYE, Oje).

It could be deduced from the above that some of the respondents were subject to inhumane treatment, high-handedness, illegal detention and extortion by officers of the Nigerian Police Force.

Table 5: Factors that Contribute to Police brutality among Nigerian Youths



(Source: Field Survey, 2025)

The figure above highlights the key factors contributing to police brutality among Nigerian youths. The findings reveal that a majority of respondents, 206 (51.5%), strongly agreed that individuals are often targeted based on their appearance or attire. Additionally, 336 (84.0%) strongly agreed that corruption within the police force significantly

contributes to increased brutality. A total of 202 (50.5%) of respondents agreed that suspicion of illicit substance use or distribution is a factor, while 302 (75.5%) strongly agreed that inadequate oversight and accountability mechanisms exacerbate police brutality. Furthermore, 200 (50.0%) agreed that brutality is often a deliberate method of extortion, while 246 (61.5%) strongly agreed that limited awareness and education about citizens' rights and responsibilities contribute to the issue.

One of the respondents narrated his ordeal at the hands of Police officers of the Ologede Divisional Police Headquarters at their check point in Ado Ekiti while travelling from Akure to Oye-Ekiti

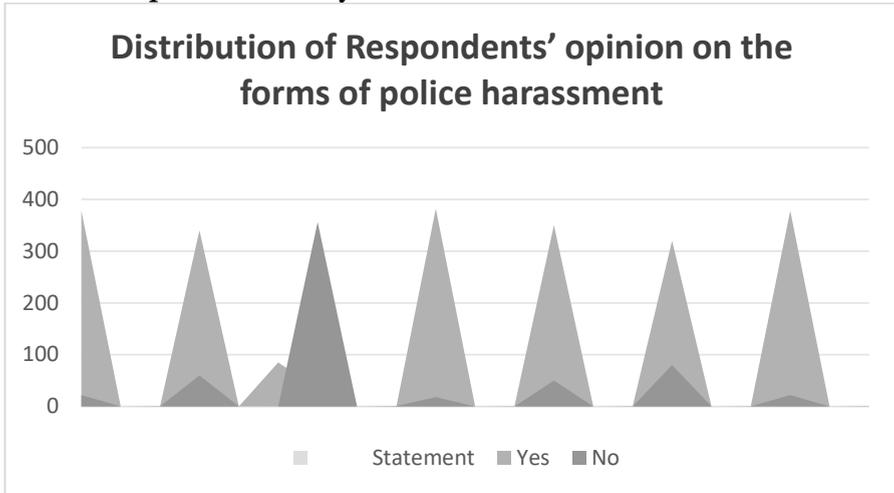
Immediately I sight them for front like this, I told the girl sitting beside me to help me hide my big phone in her pocket, but she refused, she say me I don't know you or want wahala ooooo, when we got to their check point I was wearing this crazy jeans and big t shirt that they drew skull at the front, as the driver was about to take off they saw me and said park park park driver. I was the only person they told to come down, they search me and my belongings but they found nothing, after they said I cant go that am a suspect, they also seized my phone, I shall beg and do transfer to their account, their Oga in their car now said they should let me go. (3:25:2025, Respondent G, Male, 21years, 200, FUOYE, Ikole).

Another male participant narrated his experience while driving to go and fill his gas cylinder at the gas station

The police car parked in front of the Oba's palace, so as I drove past them with my car (Muscle Camry) they started chasing me blowing siren, so I had to park, they said I should come down, they requested for car papers and drivers license which I give them, they come talk say wetin, I dey do wey I buy this kind car, I said my Daddy gave me the car, they said I should call my daddy. That was how the argument started and one of the officers slapped me and said they should take me to the station, they drag me to the station and charged me with the crime of been an armed robber, na my padi come bail me the next day ooo with 50 k Ajeeeeeee. (3:29:2025, Respondent M, male, 24years, MSc, FUOYE, Oye).

It can be inferred from the above that some respondents experienced police brutality based on their clothing, appearance, and physical accessories.

Table 7: Distribution of Respondents' opinion on the forms of police brutality



(Source: Field Survey, 2025)

The figure above presents respondents' opinions on the various forms of police brutality. The majority, 378 (94.5%), agreed that verbal abuse or the use of offensive language constitutes a form of police brutality. Additionally, 340 (85.0%) identified physical assault or excessive use of force as a form of police brutality, while 356 (89.0%) acknowledged racial or ethnic profiling as a contributing factor. A significant number, 382 (95.5%), agreed that extortion or bribery is a form of police brutality, and 350 (87.5%) recognized invasion of privacy as another form. Furthermore, 320 (80.0%) indicated that brutality based on socio-economic status occurs, while 378 (94.5%) acknowledged unlawful arrests or detentions as a prevalent form of police brutality. These findings align with Adenuga's (2023) empirical investigation on police brutality of private university students in Ogun State, Nigeria, which identified racial or ethnic profiling as a key factor influencing police brutality of undergraduates in the region.

One of the respondents narrated his ordeal at the hands RRS of officers covering the Oye Ekiti to Ido Ekiti Axis while they came to raid their hostel.

The police van parked in front of our lodge 4:30am in the morning, on knowing that they were the one I didn't open my door while they knocked, they forced my door open by breaking the lock, one of the officer said that you think you are mad abbi . they forced all the boys

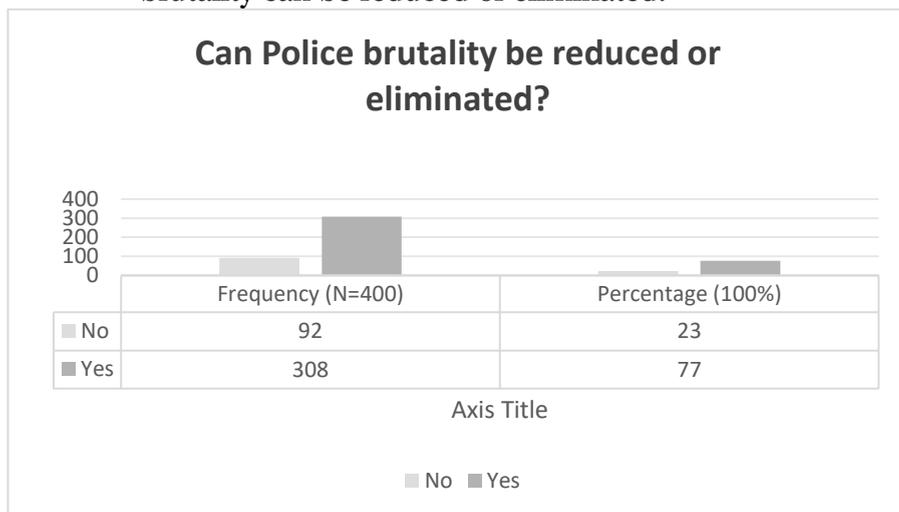
in the lodge to make transfer to them and threatened us of coming back to arrest us if we reported the case to the school authorities. (3:29:2025, Respondent T, Male, 21years, 300, FUYOYE, Oye).

Another female participant narrated her experience in her Hostel after Irare junction

That night was the champions league match between Real Madrid and Atletico Madrid so all the guys were home to prepare for the match, the police came to our compound and knocked on specific doors of the big boys in the compound, who gave them money things in black nylons and they left with smiles on their faces (3:12:2025, Respondent B, female, 20years, 100, FUYOYE, Oye).

It can be inferred from the above that some respondents were particularly targeted by officers of RRS unit based on their gender and socioeconomic standing. Also, while discharging this duties fundamental human rights were violated.

Figure 8: Distribution of Respondents: Do you believe that police brutality can be reduced or eliminated?



(Source: Field Survey, 2025)

The figure above illustrates respondents' opinions on whether police brutality can be reduced or eliminated. The results show that a majority, 77.0%, responded 'yes,' while 23.0% answered 'no.' This suggests that

most respondents believe that police brutality can be mitigated and, ultimately, eradicated.

One of the respondents narrated his ordeal at the hands of RRS officers shortly after Ekiti State University Gate

This is Nigeria where anything is possible ooooooo, if the government want them to stop it they can oooooo, but even the person you are reporting the case to might be connected to it. (3:27:2025, Respondent W, Male, 32years, PHd, FUOYE, Oye).

It could be inferred from the above response that Police brutality could be reduced and mitigated but the quagmire is systemic as many leaders and top government functionaries are involved.

Table 9: Distribution of Respondents on Possible Solutions to Stop Police brutality in the Society



(Source: Field Survey, 2025)

The findings indicate that a majority of respondents, 338 (84.5%), agreed that legal measures could help address and prevent police brutality. However, 220 (55%) disagreed that training and education would be an effective solution. Additionally, 227 (56.7%) supported community engagement as a viable approach. A significant number, 362 (90.5%), endorsed technological solutions, while 368 (92%) favored institutional reforms as a means to combat police brutality. Conversely, 202 (97.0%) rejected international support and collaboration as a viable solution in the Nigerian context. Based on these results, the most

effective solutions for addressing police brutality include legal measures, community engagement, technological advancements, and institutional reforms. However, some respondents expressed skepticism about the effectiveness of training and education, community engagement, and international collaboration. These findings align with Uwazuruike's (2020) research on EndSARS: The Movement Against Police Brutality in Nigeria, which highlighted the crucial role of legal measures in tackling police misconduct

One of the respondents suggested that:

The police no need training and education at all, the government should scrap the current ones, then go and employ new ones that we do the job appropriately (3:22:2025, Respondent P, Male, 22years, 500, FUYOYE, Oye).

Another respondent suggested that:

Those police dey try oooo, they should try and increase their salaries, that work no easy walabiiii (3:22:2025, Respondent Q, Female, 23years, 300, FUYOYE, Oye).

It could be inferred from the response that training and education of police officers might be counter productive in reducing and mitigating Police brutality while improved salary package could boost officers' morale and dedication to duty

Discussions

The respondents for the survey comprised 60% males and 40% females. Regarding their academic attainment, the highest proportion of respondents were 400 level students (24%). The findings of the study on if respondents had experienced police brutality before, revealed that majority had experienced police brutality before. This is corroborated by the research carried out by Akinlabi (2017) on young people, procedural justice, and police legitimacy in Nigeria, which revealed that most Nigerian youths are faced with an epidemic of police brutality, brutality, and corruption. Furthermore, on the frequency of police brutality, (50%) of the respondents accented to it as been frequent. These findings suggest that police brutality is a common experience among Nigerian youth. This aligns with Aborisade's (2021) research on the unlawful use

of force and police misconduct during the enforcement of COVID-19 measures, which revealed that Nigerian police officers have frequently been accused of abusing their power and committing gross human rights violations, including illegal detention, arbitrary killings, and extortion.

The results of the study also highlight the main elements causing police violence among Nigerian young people to be physiognomy, appearance, and clothing, corruption inside the police force, suspicion of illegal substance use or distribution; poor oversight and responsibility mechanisms, deliberate extortion, and a lack of awareness and education about citizens' rights and responsibilities. This is in line with the research of Cobbinadungy et al., (2022) on "defund the police" perspective among protestors in the 2020 March in Washington, which investigated the many facets of policing, including police-community relations, use of force, and accountability mechanisms, so illuminating the dynamics of police brutality.

The results exposed the forms of police brutality used by Nigerian Police Force officials to be verbal abuse or offensive language, physical assault or excessive use of force, racial or ethnic profiling extortion or bribery, invasion of privacy, brutality based on socioeconomic level, and illegal arrests or detentions. This is corroborated by the research carried out by Adenuga (2023) on an empirical investigation of police brutality of private university students in Ogun State, Nigeria, which showed that the factors influencing police brutality of undergraduates in Ogun State include racial or ethnic profiling. Additionally, the result revealed that police brutality could be reduced and mitigated. However, a holistic approach needs to be considered as the problem is systemic as many leaders and top government functionaries are involved.

Furthermore, the study underscores possible solutions to stopping police brutality to be enforcement of legal measures against erring officers, community engagement, technological advancements, and institutional reforms. However, some respondents expressed skepticism about the effectiveness of training and education, community engagement, and international collaboration which is in consonance with Uwazuruike's (2020) research on "EndSARS: The Movement Against Police Brutality in Nigeria", which highlighted the crucial role of legal measures in tackling police misconduct

Conclusion and Recommendations

In summary, this study underscores the severity of police brutality while also highlighting the potential for meaningful reform by implementing legal measures, fostering community involvement, leveraging technological advancements, and enacting institutional changes which can transform police-youth relations into one characterized by justice, respect, and genuine protection. However, while Nigerian youths are not without a fault, crime prevention and detection must be carried out within the confines of the law by the Nigerian police.

Based on the preceding conclusion, the following recommendations are made: Strict legal measures must be entrenched for the Nigerian Police Force by establishing clear guidelines, consequences and avenues for accountability which include: use of force standards, independent investigation, civilian review boards, legal liability and ending qualified immunity. Moreover, the Nigerian Police Force must actively engage in robust community involvement to foster mutual understanding, respect, and trust between law enforcement agents and the communities they serve, ultimately promoting safer and more equitable societies.

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