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BUILDING POLICE CAPACITY IN FRAGILE SECURITY SETTINGS: EVIDENCE FROM RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING PRACTICES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Police effectiveness constitutes a foundational element of state capacity, particularly in fragile security environments where violent crime, insurgency, and public distrust undermine governance and social order. In Nigeria, persistent weaknesses in policing manifested in corruption, brutality, low investigative capacity, and strained police–community relations have endured despite repeated reform initiatives, most notably following the 2020 #EndSARS protests. This article argues that these deficiencies are not merely the result of individual misconduct or leadership failure but are rooted in structural weaknesses embedded in recruitment practices and training curricula within the Nigeria Police Force (NPF). Drawing on secondary data, policy documents, and recent empirical studies published between 2020 and 2025, the article examines how compromised entry standards, politicized recruitment processes, and outdated, militarized training frameworks undermine professional competence, operational effectiveness, and institutional legitimacy. Anchored in state capacity theory and human capital theory, the study demonstrates that Nigeria's policing challenges reflect deeper institutional fragility rather than isolated

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behavioral lapses. The article concludes that sustainable police reform in fragile security settings must prioritize merit-based recruitment, curriculum modernization, and continuous professional development as core strategies for rebuilding state capacity, legitimacy, and effective security governance.

Introduction

Effective policing is widely recognized as a cornerstone of internal security, rule of law, and democratic governance, particularly in contexts where the state's authority is contested and institutional trust is fragile (Jackson, Bradford, & Hough, 2023; World Bank, 2023). As the primary interface between the state and citizens in matters of coercion, order, and everyday security, the police play a decisive role in shaping public perceptions of state legitimacy and governance performance (Tankebe & Asif, 2022). In fragile and conflict-affected settings—characterized by weak institutions, persistent violence, and limited accountability—the police are often the most visible and consequential embodiment of the state at the local level (Denney & Jenkins, 2021; UNDP, 2022).

Where police institutions are professional, accountable, and embedded within the communities they serve, they can contribute to violence reduction, conflict mitigation, and the consolidation of state legitimacy. Conversely, where policing is ineffective, abusive, or corrupt, it deepens insecurity, fuels grievances, and accelerates public disengagement from formal governance structures (Akinlabi & Murphy, 2021; UNODC, 2023). Consequently, police reform has become a central pillar of state-building and security-sector reform (SSR) efforts in fragile states across the Global South, particularly since 2020 when governance shocks associated with the COVID-19 pandemic exposed institutional vulnerabilities in internal security systems (World Bank, 2020; OECD, 2022).

Nigeria exemplifies this dilemma with particular intensity. Despite being Africa's most populous country and one of its largest economies, Nigeria continues to experience overlapping and mutually reinforcing security challenges, including the Boko Haram and ISWAP insurgency in the Northeast, banditry and mass kidnapping in the Northwest, farmer–herder violence in the Middle Belt, separatist unrest in the Southeast, and escalating urban crime nationwide (UNODC, 2021; International Crisis Group, 2023). Although these threats differ in origin and dynamics, they share a common feature: the limited capacity of state security institutions especially the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) to prevent violence, protect civilians, and enforce the law effectively (SBM Intelligence, 2022; International Crisis Group, 2024).

The Nigeria Police Force is constitutionally mandated as the primary internal security agency, yet public confidence in the institution remains persistently low. Post-2020 survey data reveal widespread perceptions of corruption, excessive use of force, and

institutional unresponsiveness, reinforced by the violent suppression of the #EndSARS protests and the slow pace of accountability reforms (Afrobarometer, 2022; Amnesty International, 2023). These perceptions are not merely attitudinal; they have concrete security implications, including declining crime reporting, limited intelligence sharing, and the proliferation of vigilante groups and informal security arrangements across urban and rural communities (CLEEN Foundation, 2021; Meagher, 2022).

While existing scholarship and policy discourse frequently attribute police failure in Nigeria to corruption, political interference, inadequate funding, and weak leadership, such explanations often overlook a more foundational issue: the quality of human capital entering the police institution and the nature of professional socialization within training systems. Recent studies on policing in fragile contexts emphasize that recruitment standards and training curricula are central determinants of police professionalism, ethical conduct, and operational effectiveness (Denney, Ismail, & Domingo, 2020; World Bank, 2020). Where recruitment is politicized and training frameworks remain militarized and outdated, institutional reforms focused solely on equipment provision or salary adjustments are unlikely to produce sustainable improvements.

Recruitment determines who becomes a police officer, shaping the educational background, cognitive capacity, ethical orientation, and motivations of personnel. Training, in turn, socializes recruits into specific understandings of authority, legality, use of force, and citizen engagement. In fragile security environments, inadequate recruitment and poorly designed training systems have been shown to entrench predatory practices, normalize human rights violations, and weaken investigative and conflict-management capacities (Akinlabi & Murphy, 2021; UNODC, 2023). Conversely, merit-based recruitment and continuous, context-sensitive training are associated with improved police legitimacy, accountability, and performance, even under conditions of insecurity (UNDP, 2022).

This article therefore argues that recruitment and training constitute the foundational pillars of police professionalization and capacity in Nigeria. When these foundations are compromised—through patronage-based recruitment, low educational thresholds, inadequate training infrastructure, or curricula misaligned with contemporary security realities subsequent reforms remain superficial and unsustainable. The central question guiding this study is: *How do recruitment and training practices shape police capacity in Nigeria's fragile security settings?* By addressing this question, the article contributes to contemporary debates on police reform, state capacity, and security governance in the Global South, while offering policy-relevant insights for institutional rebuilding in fragile states.

State Capacity Theory

State capacity theory focuses on the ability of the state to design and implement policies, enforce laws, and provide public goods such as security (Migdal, 1988; Fukuyama, 2015). Policing institutions are a critical component of the state's coercive and administrative capacity, serving as the primary interface between citizens and state authority.

From this perspective, weak policing reflects deeper institutional fragility rather than isolated failures. In Nigeria, compromised recruitment processes undermine bureaucratic professionalism, while outdated training frameworks limit adaptive capacity to address evolving security threats. When police institutions lack capacity, states often resort to coercion rather than legitimacy, reinforcing cycles of violence and mistrust.

State capacity theory thus allows this study to situate police underperformance within broader patterns of institutional weakness, emphasizing that reform must address structural foundations rather than surface-level symptoms.

Human Capital Theory

Human capital theory posits that organizational performance depends fundamentally on the skills, knowledge, and competencies of its personnel (Becker, 1993). Policing is a knowledge-intensive profession requiring technical expertise, ethical judgment, communication skills, and situational awareness.

In contexts where recruitment favours patronage over merit and training emphasizes drills over critical thinking, institutional performance inevitably deteriorates. Human capital theory provides a framework for linking recruitment standards and curriculum design to operational outcomes such as investigative effectiveness, respect for human rights, and community relations.

Together, state capacity and human capital theories offer a complementary lens through which to analyze police failure as both an institutional and developmental problem.

Policing and Fragility

Policing in fragile states is often shaped by limited resources, politicization, and weak accountability mechanisms (Hills, 2008). African policing systems, in particular, have been influenced by colonial legacies that prioritized regime protection over public service, resulting in militarized and coercive institutional cultures (Tankebe, 2013).

These historical patterns persist in postcolonial states, where police institutions are frequently deployed as tools of political control rather than community protection. In such contexts, public trust erodes, informal security arrangements proliferate, and state authority weakens further.

Police Recruitment in Nigeria

Recruitment into the Nigeria Police Force has long been plagued by corruption, quota-based selection, and political interference (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2021). Entry

requirements are inconsistently enforced, allowing individuals with limited education, poor motivation, and inadequate psychological preparedness into the force.

Such practices undermine meritocracy and professional standards, reinforcing a culture of impunity and poor performance. In fragile security contexts, the consequences are particularly severe, as poorly recruited officers struggle to manage complex security challenges and civilian interactions.

Training Curriculum and Police Performance

The NPF training curriculum has been widely criticized for being outdated, overly militaristic, and disconnected from contemporary policing realities (Amnesty International, 2020). Training institutions emphasize drills, obedience, and force deployment while neglecting human rights education, forensic investigation, intelligence-led policing, and community engagement.

As a result, officers are ill-prepared for democratic policing environments, contributing to excessive use of force, poor investigative outcomes, and adversarial police–citizen relations.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative analytical approach, relying on secondary data from academic literature, government reports, civil society publications, and assessments by international organizations published between 2020 and 2025. Policy documents related to police recruitment and training were critically examined to identify institutional patterns, structural gaps, and reform challenges.

The choice of methodology is justified by the study's focus on institutional processes rather than individual behavior. Triangulation across multiple sources enhances analytical validity and allows for robust theoretical interpretation within the frameworks of state capacity and human capital development.

Recruitment as a Structural and Institutional Weakness

The findings reveal that recruitment into the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) is systematically shaped by patronage networks, politically enforced quotas, and informal financial inducements rather than meritocratic criteria. As a result, recruitment processes frequently admit individuals whose educational qualifications, psychological readiness, and ethical dispositions fall below the professional demands of modern policing. This pattern reflects not isolated irregularities but entrenched institutional practices that compromise the quality of human capital at the point of entry.

In fragile security settings such as Nigeria's, the consequences of compromised recruitment are particularly pronounced. Officers lacking adequate cognitive skills,

emotional resilience, and ethical grounding are more prone to poor judgment under pressure, excessive use of force, and misconduct during civilian encounters. Weak recruitment standards also limit investigative capacity and conflict-resolution skills, rendering the police ill-equipped to manage communal tensions, violent crime, and insurgency-related threats. Recruitment therefore constitutes a foundational structural weakness that shapes downstream performance, organizational culture, and public perception of policing.

Training Curriculum and Systemic Skill Deficits

The study further finds that police training in Nigeria remains largely reactive, hierarchical, and drill-oriented, reflecting a legacy of militarized policing rather than contemporary service-oriented models. The curriculum emphasizes discipline, obedience, and force deployment, while giving insufficient attention to analytical reasoning, problem-solving, community engagement, and ethical decision-making. Training institutions provide limited exposure to forensic investigation, intelligence-led policing, human rights standards, or civilian conflict management.

These systemic skill deficits leave officers poorly prepared to respond to the complex and evolving nature of insecurity in Nigeria. Challenges such as organized crime, cyber-enabled offenses, insurgency coordination, and urban violence require technical competence, situational awareness, and collaborative problem-solving skills largely absent from current training frameworks. Consequently, police–citizen interactions often become confrontational rather than cooperative, reinforcing adversarial relationships and deepening mutual mistrust between law enforcement and communities.

Implications for Police Performance and Institutional Legitimacy

The interaction between flawed recruitment and inadequate training produces a cumulative erosion of police professionalism and legitimacy. Officers enter the force with limited foundational capacity and receive insufficient institutional support to develop the competencies required for democratic policing. This condition fosters patterns of abuse, corruption, and inefficiency that shape public perceptions of the police as predatory rather than protective.

Public distrust has tangible security consequences. Citizens are less likely to report crimes, cooperate with investigations, or share intelligence, thereby weakening the police's preventive and investigative capacity. In many communities, this vacuum is filled by vigilante groups and informal security arrangements, further fragmenting state authority and exacerbating security fragility. The findings suggest that police underperformance in Nigeria is not merely a behavioral problem but an institutional failure rooted in structural deficits.

Discussion

The findings strongly affirm the explanatory relevance of state capacity and human capital theories in understanding police performance in Nigeria. From a state capacity perspective, weak recruitment and training undermine the bureaucratic coherence, professionalism, and legitimacy of the police key pillars of the state's coercive and administrative authority. Rather than consolidating state presence, policing practices characterized by incompetence and abuse weaken citizens' confidence in formal institutions and contribute to governance deficits.

Human capital theory further illuminates how deficiencies in recruitment standards and training investments translate into poor organizational outcomes. Policing effectiveness depends on the cognitive skills, ethical orientation, and adaptive capacities of officers. When recruitment prioritizes patronage over competence and training emphasizes force over problem-solving, institutional performance inevitably deteriorates. The Nigerian case thus demonstrates that policing failures are structurally produced rather than merely the result of individual misconduct.

Importantly, the findings expose the limitations of reform initiatives that focus narrowly on material inputs such as equipment procurement, salary adjustments, or episodic retraining. While such measures may improve morale or operational reach in the short term, they do not address the foundational question of who becomes a police officer and how that officer is professionally socialized. Without systematic reform of recruitment and training, police reforms remain superficial, reactive, and ultimately unsustainable.

In fragile security settings, where legitimacy and trust are as critical as coercive capacity, neglecting these institutional foundations risks reproducing coercive policing models that exacerbate insecurity rather than resolve it. Sustainable police reform, therefore, requires a long-term commitment to human capital development as a core component of state capacity building.

Conclusion

Building police capacity in fragile security settings requires addressing foundational institutional weaknesses. In Nigeria, flawed recruitment practices and outdated training curricula have significantly undermined police effectiveness and legitimacy. This article demonstrates that sustainable police reform must prioritize human capital development as a core element of state capacity building. Without such reforms, policing will continue to reproduce insecurity rather than resolve it.

Recommendations

Institutionalizing Merit-Based Recruitment

A fundamental step toward strengthening police capacity in Nigeria is the institutionalization of merit-based recruitment processes. Recruitment should be

centralized and governed by transparent, standardized criteria that prioritize educational qualifications, psychological fitness, ethical disposition, and aptitude for public service. Political patronage, quota manipulation, and informal financial inducements must be decisively eliminated through independent recruitment boards and digitalized application systems. Insulating recruitment from political interference would enhance professionalism, reduce corruption at entry points, and ensure that only candidates with the requisite competencies and motivations are admitted into the force. In fragile security contexts, such reforms are critical for rebuilding institutional credibility and public trust.

Modernizing the Police Training Curriculum

The Nigeria Police Force training curriculum requires comprehensive modernization to align with contemporary policing challenges and democratic norms. Training should move beyond militarized drills and emphasize rights-based policing, forensic investigation, intelligence-led operations, conflict de-escalation, and community engagement. Integrating modules on human rights law, gender sensitivity, counterinsurgency coordination, and cybercrime will better prepare officers to operate effectively in complex security environments. Curriculum reform should be guided by evidence-based policing principles and regularly updated to reflect evolving threats and societal expectations.

Strengthening Continuous Professional Development

Policing in fragile contexts is dynamic and requires continuous skill enhancement. Mandatory in-service training and periodic re-certification should be institutionalized to ensure that officers remain adaptable and professionally competent. Continuous professional development programs should focus on leadership training, ethical decision-making, investigative techniques, and stress management. Such programs would not only improve operational effectiveness but also foster a culture of professionalism and accountability within the police institution.

Enhancing Civilian Oversight and Accountability

Effective police reform requires robust civilian oversight mechanisms to monitor recruitment, training, and professional conduct. Independent oversight bodies comprising representatives from civil society, professional associations, and human rights organizations—should be empowered to evaluate recruitment processes, training institutions, and curriculum implementation. Transparent reporting and grievance redress mechanisms would enhance accountability, deter misconduct, and strengthen public confidence in policing institutions. In fragile security contexts, civilian oversight serves as a critical bridge between the police and the communities they serve.

Leveraging International Best Practices and Partnerships

Nigeria can benefit significantly from strategic partnerships with professional police institutions and international organizations that possess expertise in police reform and capacity building. Such partnerships can facilitate curriculum development, instructor training, and exposure to best practices in democratic policing and security governance. Exchange programs, joint training initiatives, and technical assistance can help localize global standards while adapting them to Nigeria's specific security realities. Importantly, international cooperation should complement—not replace domestic reform efforts, ensuring sustainability and local ownership of policing reforms.

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