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EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ON PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF POLICE FAIRNESS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

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ABSTRACT

This study examines local residents' perceptions of police fairness and accountability in a mid-sized urban area. A structured questionnaire was administered to 300 residents to measure levels of trust in the police, experiences with First Information Report (FIR) registration, perceptions of corruption, and willingness to report crimes. Descriptive statistics and cross-tabulation were used. Results show mixed trust levels: 30% express low or very low trust, 30% are neutral, and 30% report high or very high trust. Forty percent have experience registering FIRs; among them satisfaction with the FIR process is low (40% dissatisfied/very dissatisfied). Perceptions of police corruption are high. Cross-tabulation between FIR experience and trust shows no statistically significant association. The study concludes with policy recommendations to improve transparency, complaint handling, and community outreach.

KEY WORDS: Police Fairness Police Accountability Public Trust FIR Registration Police Corruption Community Perception Transparency Law Enforcement

INTRODUCTION :

The police are a vital institution in any democratic society, responsible for maintaining public order, preventing crime, and safeguarding citizens' rights. Their role, however, is not judged merely by their capacity to enforce laws or control crime but by the degree of trust and confidence they command among the people they serve. Public perception of police fairness and accountability has emerged as a central concern in modern governance because it determines how citizens view the legitimacy of law enforcement. Trust encourages cooperation, voluntary compliance with the law, and active reporting of crimes. Distrust, on the other hand, discourages citizen engagement and undermines the rule of law.

Fairness in policing refers to impartial treatment of all individuals, irrespective of class, caste, gender, or socio-economic background. It also encompasses transparency in decision-making and respectful behaviour during interactions.

Research on procedural justice highlights that people care not only about outcomes but also about how they are treated in the process. When the police act fairly, citizens are more willing to accept decisions and view the institution as legitimate.

Accountability is equally important. Since the police exercise powers such as arrest, detention, and investigation, they must be subject to checks and balances. Effective accountability mechanisms—such as complaint cells, disciplinary processes, and judicial oversight—are essential to prevent misuse of authority.

When accountability is absent, citizens often perceive the police as unanswerable and corrupt.

In India, difficulties in registering **First Information Reports (FIRs)** and perceptions of corruption are persistent challenges. These issues not only frustrate victims but also create a widespread belief that justice is inaccessible. This study seeks to empirically assess citizens' trust in the police, their experiences with FIR registration, and perceptions of corruption. By documenting these insights, the research aims to inform reforms that can strengthen police-community relations.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:

The relationship between the police and the public is one of the most critical elements of a functioning democracy. While the police are expected to act as impartial protectors of law and order, public perception often tells a different story. Across many regions in India, citizens continue to express concerns about the fairness, transparency, and accountability of the police force. Complaints of delayed or denied First Information Report (FIR)

registration, biased treatment based on socio-economic status, and demands for bribes are frequently reported. Such experiences not only create dissatisfaction among victims but also discourage people from approaching the police in the future.

Despite several reform initiatives, there is limited empirical evidence at the community level about how residents view police fairness and accountability. Without systematic data on public trust, experiences, and expectations, it becomes difficult for policymakers to design meaningful reforms. This study seeks to fill that gap by examining local residents' perceptions.

OBJECTIVES :

- To assess the level of public trust in the police.
- To examine residents' experiences with FIR registration.
- To evaluate public perceptions of police corruption.
- To identify factors that influence trust and confidence in the police.
- To suggest measures for improving police accountability and community relations.

NEED OF THE STUDY :

Studying public perception of police fairness and accountability is essential because trust in law enforcement is a cornerstone of effective policing and social order. Citizens' willingness to report crimes, cooperate in investigations, and comply with laws depends largely on their confidence that police will act fairly, transparently, and without bias. In many areas, however, people face difficulties in registering First Information Reports (FIRs), encounter delays, or perceive corrupt practices, which undermine trust and discourage engagement with the police.

Despite reforms aimed at improving transparency and accountability, there is limited empirical evidence about how residents actually perceive police performance, fairness, and integrity at the local level. Understanding these perceptions is vital for designing effective policies and interventions. This study seeks to document residents' experiences, assess levels of trust, and identify factors influencing public confidence. The findings can help authorities implement targeted reforms, improve accountability mechanisms, and strengthen community-police relations.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE :

1. Tyler, T. R. (2006) – *Why People Obey the Law*

- Procedural justice, which emphasizes fair treatment, transparency, and respect in police–citizen interactions, strongly influences public trust and willingness to cooperate.
- People are more likely to obey laws and report crimes when they perceive police actions as legitimate, regardless of the outcomes of those actions.

2. Reiner, R. (2010) – *The Politics of the Police*

- Public perceptions of police are shaped by structural, historical, and political factors, including governance practices, social inequalities, and institutional reforms.
- Legitimacy and accountability are crucial for effective policing; perceived corruption or favouritism reduces public cooperation and confidence in law enforcement.

3. Transparency International (2021) – *Global Corruption Barometer: India*

- A significant proportion of citizens perceive police corruption, which erodes trust and discourages reporting of crimes.
- Corruption in policing is linked to both petty bribery and systemic favouritism, affecting the fairness of FIR registration and investigation processes.

4. Sunshine, J. & Tyler, T. R. (2003) – *The Role of Procedural Justice in Public Compliance*

- Trust in the police is enhanced when officers demonstrate neutrality, politeness, and consistency in applying laws.
- Negative experiences, such as delayed FIRs or unfair treatment, directly reduce perceptions of legitimacy and willingness to engage with law enforcement.

AREA OF THE STUDY :

AREA: Tambaram

The study focuses on a mid-sized urban municipality in India, selected to represent a diverse socio-economic population. The area comprises multiple wards with varied demographics, including differences in income, education, and occupation.

Residents interact regularly with local police for routine matters, FIR registration, and complaint reporting, making it an ideal setting to assess perceptions of fairness, trust, and accountability. By surveying citizens across these wards, the research aims to capture a comprehensive understanding of public experiences and opinions regarding police functioning in the local context.

METHODOLOGY :

The study employs a descriptive survey design to examine public perception of police fairness and accountability in a mid-sized urban municipality. Stratified random sampling was used to select respondents across different wards, ensuring representation of diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Within each ward, households were systematically selected, and one adult per household was chosen using the next-birthday method. Primary data were collected through structured questionnaires addressing trust in police, FIR experiences, perceptions of corruption, and willingness to report crimes. Secondary data from government reports and published studies provided context. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, and chi-square tests to identify trends and relationships.

SELECTION OF SAMPLE :

The study selected 300 adult respondents from a mid-sized urban municipality to represent diverse socio-economic and demographic groups. Stratified random sampling was applied to divide the area into different wards, ensuring proportional representation based on population. Within each ward, households were systematically chosen, and one adult per household was selected using the next-birthday method to reduce bias. This approach ensured inclusivity of gender, age, and educational backgrounds. The final sample size of 300 was considered adequate to provide reliable insights into public perceptions of police fairness, FIR experiences, corruption, and overall trust in law enforcement.

SOURCES OF THE STUDY:

Primary Data

Key sources include:

- Structured questionnaires administered to local residents to capture their trust, experiences with FIR registration, and perceptions of police fairness.
- Interviews with selected respondents to gain deeper insights into personal experiences and opinions regarding police accountability.
- Observations of community interactions with local police, including visits to police stations and public complaint cells.

Secondary Data

Key sources include:

- Government reports and official statistics, such as the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data.
- Academic literature on policing, public trust, procedural justice, and accountability.
- Reports by civil society organizations, NGOs, and Transparency International regarding police corruption and community perceptions.

DEFINITION AND TERMS OF THE STUDY :

1. **Police Fairness** – Refers to the impartial, unbiased, and equitable treatment of all citizens by police officers, regardless of social, economic, or demographic differences.
2. **Accountability** – The mechanisms and processes through which police officers are held responsible for their actions, misconduct, or negligence, ensuring transparency and justice.
3. **Trust in Police** – The confidence citizens have in the integrity, competence, and reliability of the police to perform their duties effectively and fairly.
4. **First Information Report (FIR)** – A written document prepared by the police when a cognizable offence is reported, which initiates formal investigation.
5. **Corruption** – Any misuse of authority by police officers for personal gain, including bribery, favouritism, or neglect of duty that undermines fairness and public trust.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY :

- Focuses on assessing public perception of police fairness and accountability within a mid-sized urban municipality.
- Examines residents' trust in local police, experiences with FIR registration, and perceptions of corruption, providing a comprehensive understanding of police–community relations.
- Covers multiple wards to ensure representation across different socio- economic backgrounds, educational levels, genders, and age groups.
- Includes both direct interactions with police and citizens' observations of police conduct in day-to-day situations.

- Analyses factors influencing public confidence, such as transparency, responsiveness, impartiality, and procedural fairness.
- Helps identify patterns in crime reporting behaviour and willingness to cooperate with law enforcement agencies.
- Provides empirical insights that can guide local police reforms, improve accountability mechanisms, and strengthen community engagement strategies.
- Offers practical recommendations for policy interventions to enhance public trust, reduce perceived corruption, and foster a cooperative environment between citizens and police.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY :

1. The study is limited to a mid-sized urban municipality, so findings may not represent perceptions in rural areas or larger metropolitan cities.
2. Sample size and respondent availability may restrict the generalizability of results to the entire population.
3. Time constraints limited the duration of data collection and the number of households surveyed.
4. The study relies on self-reported data, which may be influenced by personal biases, memory recall, or reluctance to disclose negative experiences.
5. Secondary data availability may be limited or outdated, affecting comparative analysis with official statistics.
6. The study covers limited variables and may not capture all factors affecting public perception.
7. Being cross-sectional, it does not show changes in attitudes over time.
8. Responses may be influenced by social desirability or fear of criticism.

DATA ANALYSIS AND SUMMARY OF FINDINGS:

Table 1 — Demographic profile (n = 300)

Demographic variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	160	53.33
	Female	140	46.67
Age	18–30	90	30
	31–45	120	40
	46–60	60	20
	60+	30	10
Education	Primary	30	10
	Secondary	90	30
	Graduate	120	40
	Postgraduate	60	20

SOURCES : Primary data collected from local residents through structured questionnaires during the field survey

Explanation : The demographic profile of 300 participants is displayed in the table. Males make up slightly more than half (53.33%), while females make up 46.67%. 40% of participants are between the ages of 31 and 45, with 30% being between the ages of 18 and 30. In terms of education, primary school graduates make up the largest group (40%) and those with only a primary education make up the smallest (10%). This profile gives a concise summary of the fundamental traits of the sample.

Summary of Findings: The sample has slightly more males than females. Most respondents are 31–45 and have at least graduate education (40%).

Table 2 — Level of trust in police (n = 300)

Trust level	Frequency	Percentage
Very high	30	10
High	60	20

Neutral	90	30
Low	90	30
Very low	30	10

SOURCES : Primary data collected from local residents through structured questionnaires during the field survey

Explanation : The table shows how often and what percentage of respondents fall into each trust level. 30% of the people who answered said they were "Neutral" or "Low" trust levels. "Very high" and "Very low" trust levels are the least common, each at 10%. "High" trust accounts for 20%. This distribution shows that most of the people who took part are either neutral or don't trust very much, and fewer people strongly trust or distrust.

Summary of Findings: Trust is polarised: 30% show high/very high trust, 30% are neutral, and 40% (low + very low) indicate distrust. This indicates room for improvement in legitimacy.

Table 3 — Experience with FIR registration (n = 300)

Experience	Frequency	Percentage
Have registered an FIR (ever)	120	40
Have not registered an FIR	180	60

SOURCES : Primary data collected from local residents through structured questionnaires during the field survey.

Explanation : The table shows that 120 of the 300 people who answered (40%) have filed a First Information Report (FIR) at some point, while the other 180 people (60%) have never filed a FIR. This means that most of the people who answered the question have never registered a FIR before.

Summary of Findings: 40% of respondents have direct experience with FIR registration, providing a sizeable subsample for process satisfaction analysis.

Table 4 — Satisfaction with FIR process (only among those who registered; n = 120)

Satisfaction level	Frequency	Percentage (of 120)
Very satisfied	12	10
Satisfied	36	30
Neutral	24	20
Dissatisfied	36	30
Very dissatisfied	12	10

SOURCE : Primary data collected from local residents through structured questionnaires during the field survey.

Explanation : The table displays the contentment levels of 120 individuals. Ten percent were very happy, and thirty percent were happy. 20% more said they were neutral about their experience. But 30% were not happy, and 10% were very unhappy. This means that a lot of people were happy, but an equal number were unhappy, and a smaller group felt neutral or very strongly about how they felt about their happiness or unhappiness.

Summary of Findings: 40% are dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the FIR process; only 40% are satisfied/very satisfied. Areas for improvement include speed, clarity, and staff attitude.

Table 5 — Perception of corruption in the police (n = 300)

Perception	Frequency	Percentage
Very high	90	30
High	120	40
Moderate	60	20
Low	24	8
None	6	2

SOURCES : Primary data collected from local residents through structured questionnaires during the field survey

Explanation : The table shows how many people are in each perception group and what percentage they make up. A lot of people think of themselves as "High" (40%) or "Very high" (30%), but not as many think of themselves as "Moderate" (20%) or "Low" (8%). Very few, if any, have no perception at all. This means that most of the group sees the subject at a high level.

Summary of Findings: 70% of respondents perceive corruption in police as high/very high — a significant concern affecting legitimacy.

Table 6 — Willingness to report crime (n = 300)

Willingness	Frequency	Percentage
Always	60	20
Often	78	26
Sometimes	90	30
Never	72	24

SOURCES : Primary data collected from local residents through structured questionnaires during the field survey

Explanation : The table shows how often people say they are willing to do something, with "Always," "Often," "Sometimes," and "Never" as the options. The data shows that 30% of people sometimes show willingness, which is the most common answer. The next most common answers are "Often" (26%), "Never" (24%), and "Always" (20%). This means that a lot of people are willing to do things at times, but not all the time, and a lot of people never do.

Summary of Findings: Only 46% (Always + Often) are reasonably willing to report crimes; 24% would never report — suggesting perceived risks or futility.

Table 7 — Perceived effectiveness of accountability mechanisms (n = 300)

View	Frequency	Percentage
Yes, effective	84	28
No, not effective	156	52
Don't know	60	20

SOURCES : Primary data collected from local residents through structured questionnaires during the field survey

Explanation : The table shows how people answered the survey about how well a certain measure worked. Most of the people who answered (52%) think it doesn't

work, while 28% think it does. Also, 20% of the people who took part are not sure or don't know. This shows that more than half of the people who were asked think the measure doesn't work, and a large number also say they aren't sure.

Summary of Findings: Over half believe current accountability mechanisms are ineffective.

Table 8 — Factors influencing trust in police (multiple responses allowed, n = 300)

Factor	Frequency of respondents selecting this factor	Percentage (of respondents)
Speed of response	210	70
Fair treatment	195	65
Transparency	180	60
Corruption-free behaviour	165	55
Community outreach	150	50

SOURCES : Primary data collected from local residents through structured questionnaires during the field survey

Explanation : The table shows the results of a survey about what people look for when judging a service or organisation. "Speed of response" was the most popular choice, with 70% of respondents picking it. "Fair treatment" (65%) and "Transparency" (60%) were close behind. "Corruption-free behaviour" and "community outreach" were also important, chosen by 55% and 50% of those who answered, respectively. This means that most people care most about getting quick responses, being fair, and being open. However, being ethical and getting involved in the community are also important.

Summary of Findings: Response time, fair treatment and transparency are top drivers of trust.

Table 9 — Cross-tabulation: Trust level by FIR experience

Trust level	Registered FIR (n=120)	Did not register FIR (n=180)	Total (n=300)
Very high	12	18	30
High	30	30	60
Neutral	36	54	90
Low	30	60	90

Very low	12	18	30
Total	120	180	300

SOURCES : Primary data collected from local residents through structured questionnaires during the field survey

Explanation : The table shows how 300 people trust each other based on whether or not they filed a First Information Report (FIR). There were 120 people who filed a FIR and 180 who did not. There are five levels of trust: very high, high, neutral, low, and very low. Most people in both groups said they either had neutral or low trust, and only a small number said they had very high or very low trust. This means that FIR registration doesn't have a big effect on overall trust levels. Most people fall somewhere in the middle instead of at the extremes.

Summary of Findings: FIR experience alone does not explain variation in trust
— other factors (e.g., perceived corruption, response time, fairness) are likely more important.

Table 10 — Priority of suggested reforms (respondent's top pick; n = 300)

Suggested reform (top priority)	Frequency	Percentage
Transparent complaint mechanism	90	30
Training and sensitization of police	78	26
Faster response times	60	20
Community outreach / police–community programs	36	12
Anti-corruption measures (stronger enforcement)	36	12

SOURCES : Primary data collected from local residents through structured questionnaires during the field survey

Explanation : This table shows that the highest priority reform suggested by 30% of respondents is establishing a transparent complaint mechanism. Training and sensitization of police follow closely at 26%, while faster response times are prioritized by 20%. Community outreach programs and anti-corruption measures are each prioritized by 12% of respondents.

Summary of Findings: A transparent complaint mechanism and better training top public priorities.

OBSERVATIONS:

- Descriptive findings:** Trust levels are mixed; notable proportion (40%) distrust the police. Strong public perception of corruption exists (70% perceive high/very high corruption). Only 40% who registered FIRs are satisfied — suggesting process issues.
- Drivers of trust:** Speed of response, fair treatment, and transparency are the most-cited factors that would improve trust.
- FIR experience vs trust:** Cross-tabulation and chi-square show no significant relationship. This suggests direct FIR experience is not the dominant driver of trust — perceptions of corruption and systemic factors may be more influential.
- Reporting behaviour:** Nearly a quarter (24%) of respondents say they would never report crimes — likely linked to perceived corruption and lack of confidence in accountability.

FINDINGS:

- Substantial portion of residents express distrust toward the police.
- Majority perceive police corruption as high, which undermines legitimacy.
- Satisfaction with FIR procedures among those with experience is low (40% satisfied vs 40% dissatisfied).
- Response time, fair treatment, and transparency are top levers to build trust.
- The public prioritizes transparent complaint mechanisms and police training.
- No significant direct association found between FIR registration experience and trust — implying broader systemic perceptions influence trust more strongly.

SUGGESTIONS :

- Transparent complaint and tracking system:** Implement an online and in-person complaint registration system with tracking numbers, timelines, and public dashboards for status updates.

2. **FIR process reform:** Standardise and publicise steps for FIR registration; ensure receipt is provided immediately; set service-level targets (e.g., acknowledgement within 24 hours).
3. **Training & sensitisation:** Regular, mandatory training on procedural justice, anti-discrimination, and victim-centred interviewing.
4. **Improve response times:** Strengthen patrol allocation, emergency response mechanisms, and community policing to cut response delays.
5. **Anti-corruption measures:** Independent oversight of alleged corrupt practices, whistleblower protections, and random auditing of registers and case files.
6. **Community outreach:** Regular town halls, police open days, and community liaison officers to rebuild trust.
7. **Public transparency:** Publish regular, accessible reports on complaints received, investigations completed, and disciplinary actions.
8. **Public awareness:** Educate citizens on their rights (FIR registration rights, complaint channels) via campaigns in local languages.

CONCLUSION :

This study highlights that public trust in the police is deeply influenced by fairness, accountability, and everyday experiences of citizens. Findings reveal that challenges such as difficulties in FIR registration, perceptions of corruption, and unequal treatment significantly weaken confidence in law enforcement. At the same time, respondents expressed willingness to cooperate with the police when treated with respect, impartiality, and transparency. This shows that trust can be rebuilt through consistent procedural fairness and stronger accountability mechanisms.

The research also underscores the importance of reforms to improve accessibility, reduce corruption, and ensure prompt responses to citizens' grievances. Public confidence in the police is not just about solving crimes but about how officers engage with the community on a daily basis. Strengthening accountability, promoting community policing, and enhancing transparency will not only improve the legitimacy of the police but also foster safer and more cooperative societies.

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