

“Police Reforms Symbolic”; Rethinking Police Reforms and residents of Informal Settlements in Urban Kenya.

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Abstract: Globally, policing reforms have increasingly sought to shift law enforcement from coercive, force-oriented models toward citizen-centered, service-oriented approaches in order to improve accountability, legitimacy, and public trust. In Kenya, this reform agenda intensified after the 2007–2008 post-election violence and culminated in the constitutional and legal transition from the Kenya Police Force to the National Police Service. While studies have largely examined reform implementation at the national level, limited empirical evidence exists on how such reforms are perceived and experienced by residents in informal urban settlements. This study addressed that gap by examining residents’ perceptions of police reforms in Makina Ward, Kibera sub-County, Nairobi County. Guided by Kurt Lewin’s (1947) Change Theory (unfreezing, change, and refreezing), the study adopted a cross-sectional descriptive design and mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data were collected using structured questionnaires administered to 381 residents, while qualitative data were generated through key informant interviews and focus group discussions with community leaders, youths, and police officers. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The study found that although many residents were aware of the transformation to a “service,” a substantial proportion perceived the change as largely symbolic rather than substantive. Nevertheless, respondents reported emerging improvements, including increased community engagement and improved police accessibility in some contexts. The findings underscore the need to strengthen trust-building, accountability, and consistent service-oriented policing in Kenya’s informal settlements and provide policy-relevant insights for advancing community-responsive reform.

Keywords: Police reforms, National Police Service, community policing, police-resident relations, Makina Ward, Kibera, trust, informal settlements.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Globally, declining public trust and persistent concerns about police integrity have prompted reforms aimed at making policing more democratic, accountable, and citizen-focused (Smith, 2012; Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2015). In many countries, these reforms have sought to shift law enforcement away from traditional force-oriented approaches toward service-oriented models that emphasize professionalism, community engagement, and respect for rights. Examples include modernization efforts in the United Kingdom through decentralization and technology (Hahn, 2003; Moran, 2005), accountability and bias-reduction initiatives in the United States following high-profile incidents of police violence (Urban Institute Report, 2021; James et al., 2020), transparency-driven reforms in China (Ministry of Public Security, 2021), and expanded community partnership approaches in parts of Latin America (Ungar, 2012; Willis, 2014).

Although these reforms share a common goal of strengthening legitimacy and improving police–community relations, evidence suggests that their outcomes vary significantly across contexts and over time. In some settings, reform initiatives have improved public confidence, enhanced police professionalism, and strengthened accountability mechanisms. However, in other contexts, reforms have produced limited changes in everyday police–citizen interactions, particularly in marginalized communities where historical mistrust and structural inequalities remain entrenched. This variation underscores the importance of examining police reform not only through institutional and policy transformations but also through the lived experiences of communities most affected by policing practices (Smith, 2012; Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2015; Boutellis, 2013).

In sub-Saharan Africa, police reforms are profoundly shaped by colonial legacies and post-independence governance challenges, including political interference, corruption, weak accountability systems, and limited institutional resources (Bruce, 2003; Agbibo, 2015; Boutellis, 2013). In South Africa, post-apartheid efforts to democratize the South African Police Service (SAPS) emphasized

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investigative capacity, minimum force, and community engagement; however, residents in informal settlements and townships often perceive these reforms as incomplete due to persistent paramilitary policing practices, low police visibility in deprived areas, and continued reliance on vigilante responses to insecurity (Bruce, 2003; Vorster, 2025). In Nigeria, community policing initiatives have faced skepticism in urban poor neighborhoods where residents report entrenched corruption, brutality, and extortion by officers, resulting in low trust and continued reliance on informal security arrangements (Agbibo, 2015). Similar concerns have been observed in Ghana and Ethiopia, where police reforms aimed at improving community trust are often undermined by poor response times, perceptions of procedural unfairness, and limited confidence in formal policing institutions among residents of marginalized urban communities (Boutellis, 2013; Modise, 2023).

Across these contexts, a recurring concern in the literature is whether institutional and legal reforms translate into meaningful change at the community level, particularly within informal settlements and marginalized urban areas. While many reform processes report structural and legislative progress, questions remain regarding how such changes are experienced by residents who interact most frequently with the police. Informal urban communities often face overlapping challenges including poverty, overcrowding, limited access to state services, and historically strained relations with law enforcement, all of which shape local perceptions of authority and legitimacy (Agbibo, 2015; Wainaina, Truffer & Lüthi, 2022; Boutellis, 2013).

This points to a critical gap in existing scholarship: although national-level policy analyses and institutional assessments dominate the field, there is limited localized, resident-centered empirical research examining how reforms are interpreted and lived within informal settlements. Understanding reform from the perspective of those directly affected is essential for evaluating whether policy transformation corresponds with changes in everyday policing practices.

This is where the Kenyan context becomes particularly relevant. The shift was largely prompted by the 2007–2008 post-election violence, which exposed systemic brutality particularly in areas like Makina Ward, Kibera through excessive force, extrajudicial killings, and arbitrary detentions (Human Rights Watch, 2018; Kenya National Commission on Human Rights, 2008; Ruteere, 2011). Internal factors such as corruption and resource constraints, alongside external pressures from civil society and international bodies, reinforced the need for change (Independent Policing Oversight Authority, 2019; Mutahi, 2011). The rebranding to “service” symbolized a move away from militarized colonial-style policing toward democratic, rights-respecting governance focused on community safety (Oteba, 2021).

Despite these institutional advances, significant gaps persist in understanding the reforms’ impact in informal settlements like Kibera, where poverty, marginalization, and historical distrust continue to strain police-community relations (Mutua, 2016). National-level studies dominate the literature, often employing methodologies such as policy document analysis, institutional audits, or quantitative surveys that overlook the nuanced, lived experiences of residents in marginalized urban contexts. For instance, the Amnesty International (2013) report "Police Reform in Kenya: A Drop in the Ocean" provides a national overview of reform implementation through desk reviews and stakeholder interviews, focusing on structural changes but largely ignoring grassroots perceptions in informal settlements like Kibera. Similarly, the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (KNCHR, 2015) "Audit of the Status of Police Reforms in Kenya" utilizes quantitative performance indicators and national-level compliance assessments to evaluate oversight mechanisms, yet it bypasses qualitative insights from vulnerable communities, prioritizing institutional metrics over resident narratives. Another example is the KIPPRA (2023) study "Policing Reforms to Enhance Security in Kenya," which relies on econometric analysis and national surveys to assess reform outcomes on security indicators, but fails to disaggregate data for informal urban areas, thus neglecting behavioral changes and relational dynamics in settings like Makina Ward. These top-down approaches, while valuable for policy frameworks, expose a critical gap: limited qualitative, resident-centered research on perceptions of behavioral change and community-oriented policing effectiveness in informal settlements (Hahn, 2003; Moran, 2005). This research addresses that gap by examining how residents of Makina Ward perceive the transformation from force to service, committing to document narratives, evaluate relational impacts, and identify attitudinal factors.

This study is guided by Kurt Lewin’s (1947) Change Model, which outlines organizational transformation through three stages: unfreezing, changing, and refreezing. Unfreezing challenges the entrenched coercive and militarized culture of the former Kenya Police Force, changing introduces new service-oriented behaviors, community policing, and the official shift to the National Police Service, while refreezing seeks to institutionalize these changes for sustained acceptance by both officers and the community (Schein, 1995; Burnes, 2004; Fernandez & Rainey, 2017; Todnem By, 2005).

By centering residents' voices in an informal urban settlement, this study contributes to the success of global and national security sector reforms by highlighting the limitations of top-down approaches and advocating for inclusive, context-specific strategies that address persistent distrust in marginalized communities. In the ongoing debates within security literature such as the efficacy of community-oriented policing in post-colonial contexts (e.g., Bruce, 2003; Agbiboa, 2015), it adds empirical evidence from Kenya, challenging assumptions of uniform reform impacts and emphasizing the role of historical legacies in shaping perceptions. On policy fronts, the findings offer actionable insights for the National Police Service, IPOA, and civil society to enhance accountability, youth engagement, and resource allocation in informal areas, thereby fostering more equitable law enforcement. Broader still, it aligns with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 on promoting peaceful and inclusive societies, access to justice, and strong institutions, by demonstrating how localized police reforms can reduce urban violence, build trust, and support sustainable development in rapidly urbanizing low-income settings like Kibera.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a cross-sectional descriptive research design with a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of residents' perceptions.

2.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in Makina Ward, Kibera sub-County, Nairobi County, Kenya—an informal urban settlement characterized by high population density, poverty, and historical tensions with law enforcement, making it an ideal site for examining police reform impacts.

2.3 Study Population and Sample

The target population comprised residents aged 18 and above in Makina Ward. Qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews with 8 purposively selected participants (including police officers, community leaders, and youth representatives) and 4 focus group discussions (two with youths; one with elders including 2 women leaders, 1 CBO leader, 2 village elders, and 1 assistant chief; and one with 5 police officers, 1 assistant chief, 1 village elder, and 1 youth). Quantitative data were gathered from a representative sample of 381 residents, calculated using Yamane's (1967) formula for a population of approximately 50,000 at a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error.

2.4 Instrumentation, Validity, and Reliability

Data collection instruments included structured questionnaires for quantitative data and semi-structured interview guides and focus group discussion guides for qualitative data. Validity was ensured through expert review by the supervisor and pilot testing with 10% of the sample (n=38), leading to minor revisions for clarity. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, yielding scores above 0.7 for all scales (e.g., perceptions scale: 0.82; relations scale: 0.79).

2.5 Data Analyses and Presentation

Qualitative data were thematically analyzed using NVivo software to code and identify patterns. Quantitative data were processed in Excel and SPSS (Version 26), applying descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations) and inferential statistics (Pearson's correlation and multiple regression). The regression model was: $Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1X_1 + \beta_2X_2 + \beta_3X_3 + \varepsilon$ Where Y = Residents' Perceptions of Police Transformation (dependent variable); X1 = Narratives on Transformation; X2 = Police-Resident Relations; X3 = Factors Influencing Attitudes (independent variables). Results are presented in tables, graphs, and prose.

3. Ethical Considerations

All ethical standards were observed, including obtaining informed consent from participants (translated into Swahili for accessibility), ensuring voluntary participation with the right to withdraw, and maintaining confidentiality through pseudonyms and secure data storage. Approval was granted by NACOSTI and local authorities. A trauma-informed approach was adopted, allowing skips or breaks and referrals to psychosocial support if needed.

4.0 RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the study based on quantitative and qualitative data collected from residents of Makina Ward. The results are organized into descriptive statistics and thematic findings corresponding to the study objectives. Interpretation of the findings is reserved for the discussion section.

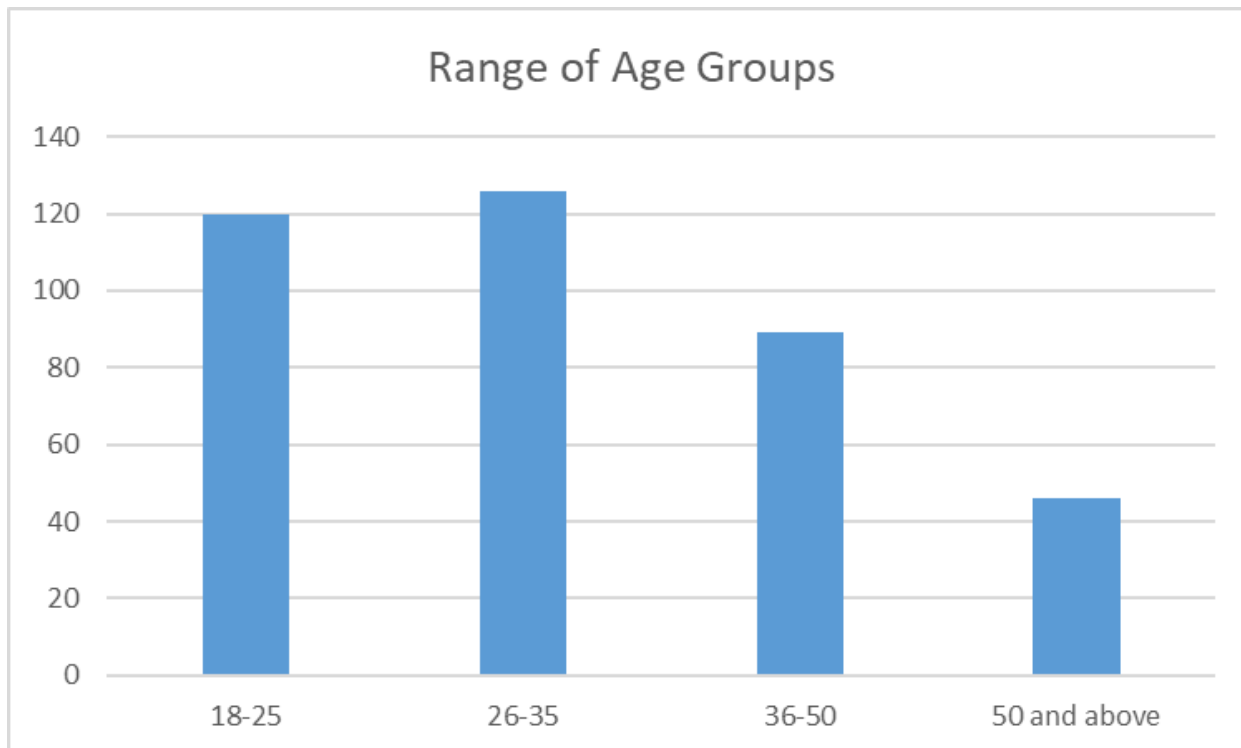
4.1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

A total of 381 residents participated in the survey. Of these, 220 respondents (57.7%) were male and 161 (42.3%) were female. Regarding age distribution, 120 respondents (31.5%) were aged between 18–25 years, 126 (33.1%) were aged 26–35 years, 89 (23.4%) were aged 36–50 years, and 46 (12.1%) were aged 50 years and above.

In terms of educational attainment, 162 respondents (42.5%) had completed secondary education, 139 (36.5%) had attained college or university education, 55 (14.4%) had completed primary education, and 25 respondents (6.6%) reported having no formal education.

With respect to duration of residence in Makina Ward, 117 respondents (30.7%) reported that they were born and raised in the area, 121 (31.8%) had lived in the area for more than 10 years, 49 (12.9%) had lived there for 6–10 years, and 94 respondents (24.7%) had lived in the area for less than five years.

Figure 1: Range of Ages

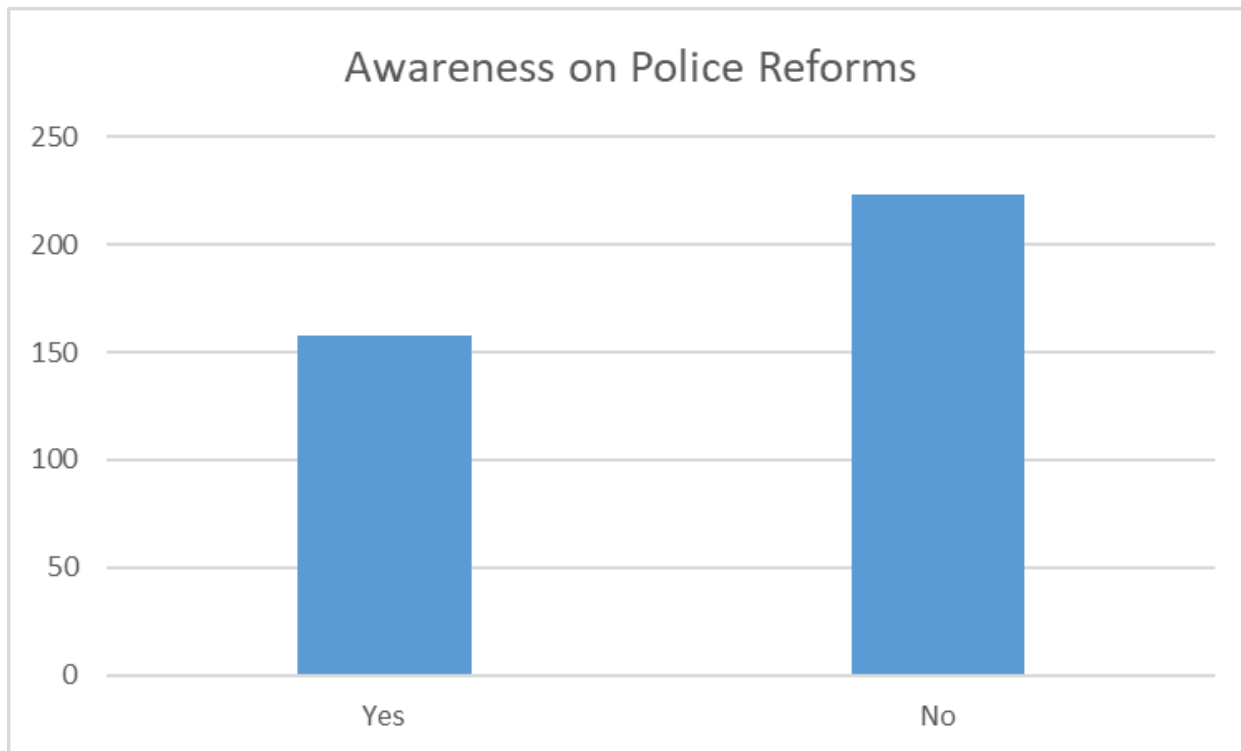


4.2 Awareness of the Transformation from Police Force to Police Service

Respondents were asked whether they were aware that the Kenya Police Force had been transformed into the National Police Service. Out of the 381 respondents, 158 (41.5%) indicated that they were aware of the transformation, while 223 respondents (58.5%) reported that they were not aware.

Among those who were aware of the transformation (n = 158), 71 respondents correctly associated the change with the period 2010–2011. Forty-two respondents indicated that they did not know when the transformation occurred, while 43 respondents were unsure of the timeline.

Figure 2: Awareness on Police Transformation



4.3 Descriptive Findings on Perceived Police Transformation

Respondents who were aware of the transformation were asked to describe the nature of changes they had observed in the police. The most frequently reported change was that the police had become more approachable and respectful, reported by 86 respondents (54.4%). Fifty respondents (31.6%) indicated that the police were less violent and more service-oriented, while 46 respondents (29.1%) reported that there had been no significant change. Fourteen respondents (8.9%) described the police as more bureaucratic and less effective.

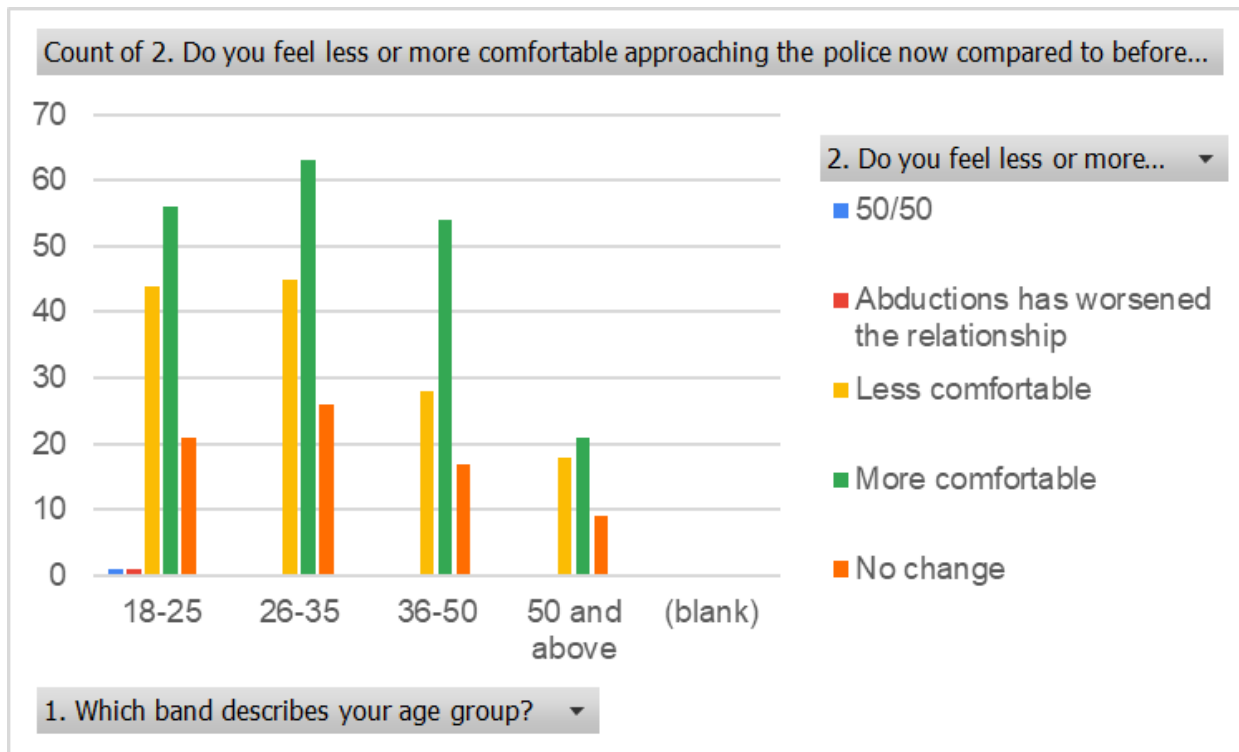
Regarding how residents currently describe the police compared to the past, 129 respondents (33.9%) described the police as untrustworthy, 119 (31.2%) described them as forceful and aggressive, 123 (32.3%) described them as respectful, and 121 respondents (31.8%) described them as service-oriented.

4.4 Police–Resident Relations after the Transformation

Respondents who were aware of the reforms were asked to assess changes in their relationship with the police. Out of 155 valid responses, 38 respondents (24.5%) indicated that the relationship had improved significantly, 68 respondents (43.9%) reported that it had somewhat improved, 39 respondents (25.1%) indicated that the relationship had remained the same, and 10 respondents (6.5%) reported that the relationship had worsened.

When asked whether they felt comfortable approaching the police, 42% of respondents indicated that they felt comfortable, while the remainder reported either discomfort or uncertainty.

Figure 3: Comparing age groups with comfort levels



4.5 Perceived Trust and Fear toward the Police

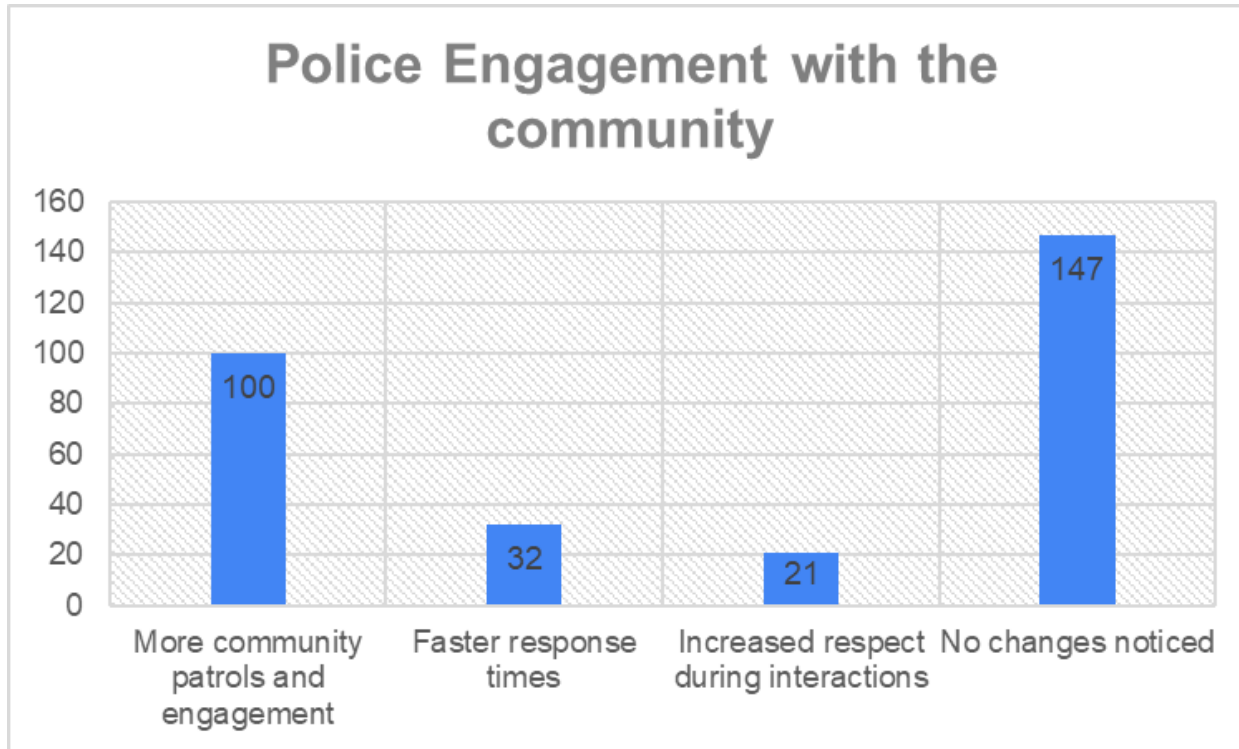
Respondents were asked whether the transformation of the police had influenced levels of trust or fear within the community. Ninety respondents (56.9%) reported that they had more trust in the police, 40 respondents (25.3%) reported experiencing more fear, while 35 respondents (22.2%) indicated that the transformation had made no difference.

4.6 Community Narratives and Qualitative Findings

Qualitative data from focus group discussions and key informant interviews revealed mixed narratives regarding police transformation. Some participants reported increased police visibility, improved communication, and greater engagement through community meetings and patrols. Other participants reported continued experiences of harassment, corruption, and selective enforcement.

Several respondents highlighted that police engagement varied depending on the situation and the officers involved. Youth participants frequently reported experiences of stop-and-search encounters, while community leaders noted increased collaboration through community policing forums.

Figure 4: Police engagement



| Variable | Perceptions (Y) | Narratives (X1) | Relations (X2) | Attitudes (X3) |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Perceptions (Y) | 1 | | | |
| Narratives (X1) | 0.812** | 1 | | |
| Relations (X2) | 0.765** | 0.682** | 1 | |
| Attitudes (X3) | 0.834** | 0.715** | 0.698** | 1 |

Correlation significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed).

4.7 Regression Analysis

Model Summary: $R^2 = 0.796$ (79.6% variance explained).

ANOVA: $F(3,346) = 750, p=0.001$ (model significant).

Coefficients: Constant ($\beta_0=0.45, p=0.01$); Narratives ($\beta_1=0.352, p=0.002$); Relations ($\beta_2=0.298, p=0.003$); Attitudes ($\beta_3=0.371, p=0.002$).

Normality (Shapiro-Wilk): $p>0.05$ (normal). Linearity (ANOVA deviation): $p>0.05$ (linear).

5. DISCUSSION

This section discusses the key findings in relation to existing literature on police reform and community policing, drawing comparisons across similar (African/informal settlement) and different (global/post-conflict) contexts. Using Lewin's (1947) Change Theory, it interprets patterns of uneven reform adoption: the "unfreezing" of coercive norms has occurred institutionally but remains incomplete at the behavioral level in marginalized settings; "changing" shows partial emergence of service-oriented practices; and "refreezing" is hindered by persistent distrust and structural barriers. The analysis highlights novelty in centering understudied informal settlement residents often the most affected by insecurity yet least represented in reform evaluations offering original scholarly reasoning on why top-down reforms appear symbolic in such contexts. It engages recent (2015–2025) debates on inclusive, community-responsive policing amid urbanization, inequality, and post-colonial legacies, relevant to ongoing Kenyan NPS policies and global SDG 16 targets for accountable institutions.

5.1 Awareness and Perceptions of Police Transformation

A central finding of this study is that awareness of the transformation from the Kenya Police Force to the National Police Service remains uneven among residents of Makina Ward. Although the reform was institutionalized more than a decade ago, a substantial proportion of respondents either lacked awareness of the transformation or interpreted it primarily through their daily encounters with officers rather than through formal constitutional or legislative changes. This suggests that reform communication has not penetrated consistently into informal settlements, where poverty, limited civic sensitization, and historical distrust shape how institutional change is received. From a Lewinian perspective, this indicates that while "unfreezing" occurred at the structural level through constitutional and legislative reforms, the cognitive and perceptual unfreezing within marginalized communities remains incomplete.

This finding partially conforms to Ruteere and Pommerolle (2003), who examined police-community dynamics in Kenya through qualitative interviews and historical analysis involving urban stakeholders and civil society actors. Their study found that reforms often prioritize legal restructuring without adequately transforming everyday perceptions in marginalized spaces. However, their research did not focus specifically on informal settlement residents and relied on smaller, primarily qualitative samples. In contrast, the present study combines survey data from 381 residents with qualitative interviews and focus group discussions within a single high-density informal settlement. By centering Makina Ward residents who experience frequent and direct contact with police; the current study extends Ruteere and Pommerolle's conclusions by demonstrating that awareness gaps are particularly pronounced where socio-economic vulnerability and long-standing mistrust are concentrated.

A similar pattern emerges in the work of Blair et al. (2021), who conducted coordinated field experiments across six Global South contexts, including Uganda and Liberia, involving sample sizes ranging between 1,000 and 2,000 participants per site. Their randomized interventions found that community policing initiatives produced limited awareness gains and modest improvements in trust, particularly in marginalized urban and peri-urban areas. While their design emphasized causal inference across multiple contexts, it aggregated diverse settings and did not deeply embed analysis within a single informal settlement. The findings from Makina Ward both align with and refine Blair et al.'s conclusions. They align in showing that increased police-community contact does not automatically translate into transformed perceptions. However, they extend the analysis by demonstrating that in densely populated informal settlements with entrenched colonial legacies and uneven service delivery, awareness deficits stem not only from intervention design but also from structural marginalization and lived historical experiences that shape how reforms are interpreted.

Comparable insights emerge from Faull's (2010) ethnographic work in South African townships, where residents reported mixed awareness of post-apartheid police reforms and frequently viewed institutional change as superficial in the face of ongoing brutality and low police visibility. Faull's study, based on in-depth qualitative interviews in deprived township communities, revealed that reform rhetoric often failed to displace deeply embedded perceptions of coercive policing. The Makina findings conform to this pattern in highlighting skepticism among marginalized residents. However, the present study strengthens the empirical base by combining qualitative narratives with a larger quantitative sample (n=381), demonstrating that uneven awareness is not anecdotal but systematically distributed within the settlement. Moreover, while Faull emphasized persistent coercion, the Makina data reveal evidence of partial "changing," such as increased approachability, even though "refreezing" of a service-oriented identity remains incomplete.

Taken together, these comparisons show that uneven awareness and skeptical perceptions of reform are not unique to Makina Ward but are recurrent across informal and marginalized contexts. However, the present study contributes original insight by focusing specifically on an understudied informal settlement population in Nairobi, where residents are highly exposed to policing yet minimally represented

in national reform evaluations. By grounding analysis in localized lived experience rather than policy metrics alone, the study challenges the assumption that legislative transformation automatically reshapes public perception. Instead, it demonstrates that in informal settlements, awareness and legitimacy are shaped primarily through everyday interactions. This finding is particularly relevant to contemporary Kenyan debates on community policing under the National Police Service and broader global discussions on inclusive, community-responsive reform aligned with SDG 16 objectives for accountable institutions.

5.2 Police–Resident Relations after the Reform

The findings indicate that a majority of informed residents in Makina Ward perceived some improvement in police–resident relations, particularly in communication, accessibility, and officer engagement in community forums. Respondents noted increased police visibility and occasional participation in local meetings, which appear to have normalized certain interactions between residents and law enforcement. From a change-theory perspective, this suggests evidence of partial “changing,” where new service-oriented practices are emerging at the interactional level, even if not fully consolidated institutionally.

This pattern conforms to procedural justice research by Tyler and Huo (2002), whose survey-based study of urban communities in the United States found that perceptions of fairness, respectful treatment, and accessibility significantly enhance police legitimacy. Although their research was conducted in a more stable Western urban context with comparatively structured institutional systems, the Makina findings support the broader theoretical argument that engagement and visibility positively influence public perceptions. However, unlike the populations studied by Tyler and Huo who operated within comparatively resourced policing environments the residents of Makina experience policing within conditions of socio-economic marginalization and high police exposure. This contextual difference helps explain why improvements in engagement coexist with ongoing mistrust.

The findings also align with Makori and Makenzi’s (2019) research on community policing in Kenyan informal settlements, which used survey and interview data to assess public perceptions of local policing initiatives. Their study reported cautious optimism among residents where officers engaged through community policing forums. Similarly, Makina respondents acknowledged improved approachability in some cases. However, the present study extends Makori and Makenzi’s conclusions by demonstrating that improved engagement remains inconsistent and situational rather than institutionalized. Whereas their study emphasized positive relational shifts, the Makina data reveal deeper fragmentation, where service-oriented interactions coexist alongside coercive practices.

At the same time, the persistence of harassment, corruption, and selective enforcement reported by Makina residents’ mirrors concerns documented by Human Rights Watch (2018), which investigated policing practices in Kibera and other low-income Nairobi neighborhoods. Based on interviews with residents and documentation of specific incidents, that report found continued extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, and excessive force despite the formal adoption of reform measures. The Makina findings conform to this pattern, suggesting that structural reforms have not fully displaced frontline coercive behaviors in densely populated informal settlements. In Lewinian terms, while institutional “unfreezing” has occurred through legal reform, residual norms associated with force-based policing remain embedded at the operational level.

Similarly, Mutahi (2011), in his qualitative study of police reform and civil society engagement in Kenya, found that community policing forums were often introduced without corresponding transformation of institutional culture. The study population included civil society actors, police officers, and community representatives across urban contexts. He observed that engagement structures frequently operated alongside persistent informal practices such as bribery and intimidation. The present study both confirms and sharpens this insight by showing that in Makina Ward where residents have frequent day-to-day contact with officers; these contradictions are experienced directly and repeatedly. This produces what can be described as relational duality: residents recognize increased engagement but simultaneously encounter misconduct, resulting in cautious rather than consolidated trust.

The coexistence of improved engagement alongside continued misconduct therefore suggests that reform outcomes are fragmented rather than uniform. Unlike studies conducted in more stable or resource-rich contexts where procedural justice interventions yield clearer legitimacy gains, the Makina case demonstrates that reform in informal settlements unfolds unevenly. While elements of service-oriented policing are emerging, the “refreezing” of new norms remains incomplete due to entrenched institutional practices and socio-economic pressures. This analysis contributes to ongoing debates in African and Global South scholarship by illustrating that reform implementation is not a linear process; instead, it reflects negotiated change shaped by local histories, structural inequality, and frontline discretion.

5.3 Trust, Fear, and the Persistence of Mistrust

The findings reveal a dual pattern in Makina Ward: while a majority of respondents reported increased trust in the police, a significant minority continued to express fear or perceived no meaningful change. Trust, therefore, appears to be emerging but remains conditional and encounter-based rather than institutionalized. This duality reflects what Bruce and Neild (2021), in their comparative analysis of police reform in African post-authoritarian contexts, describe as “islands of progress” within broader environments of institutional inertia. Drawing on case studies from South Africa and other sub-Saharan settings, they argue that reform often produces pockets of improved engagement without fundamentally displacing entrenched coercive norms. The Makina findings conform to this interpretation, demonstrating that incremental improvements in communication do not necessarily translate into generalized trust across marginalized communities.

However, the Makina case extends Bruce and Neild’s analysis by grounding this duality within a densely populated informal settlement where police presence is frequent and youth-police encounters are highly visible. Unlike broader national or post-conflict analyses, this study’s mixed-methods data (n=381 survey respondents plus focused youth discussions) show that trust fluctuations are closely tied to daily frontline behavior rather than institutional announcements. From a change-theory perspective, this suggests that while the “changing” phase is partially visible, the “refreezing” of trust remains unstable because old coercive practices continue to surface intermittently.

Youth respondents expressed particularly strong reservations, linking mistrust to experiences of stop-and-search practices, harassment, and profiling. This pattern aligns with Human Rights Watch’s (2018) documentation of policing in Kibera and other Nairobi informal settlements, where interviews with residents revealed disproportionate targeting of young men during security operations. The report highlighted repeated cases of arbitrary detention and excessive force, reinforcing perceptions of punitive rather than protective policing. The Makina findings conform to these documented patterns, indicating that reform has not fully altered youth-police dynamics at the operational level.

Similarly, Okallo’s (2017) case study of community policing and gender-based violence interventions in Kibera based on interviews with youth and community leaders found that despite the establishment of formal community policing structures, young residents often perceived police engagement as inconsistent and selective. Many participants reported reluctance to seek police assistance due to fear of intimidation or stigmatization. The present study corroborates these observations but adds quantitative breadth by demonstrating that such perceptions are not limited to anecdotal accounts; they are reflected across a broader sample of settlement residents.

Comparable youth-centered findings emerge in Agbiboa’s (2015) study of urban policing in Nigeria, where interviews with young men in Lagos revealed persistent profiling and coercive enforcement practices despite reform rhetoric. Agbiboa argued that structural reform does not automatically dismantle generational mistrust rooted in repeated encounters with authority. The Makina data resonate with this conclusion, suggesting that youth mistrust is not simply resistance to reform but a response to continued exposure to coercive discretionary practices. However, unlike Agbiboa’s context of overtly corruption-driven enforcement, Makina presents a more nuanced picture in which improved engagement coexists with selective profiling, producing ambivalent rather than uniformly hostile attitudes.

Taken together, these comparisons demonstrate that persistent youth mistrust is a recurrent feature of reform processes in marginalized urban contexts. However, the originality of this study lies in showing how trust in Makina Ward is neither wholly absent nor uniformly restored; rather, it is negotiated through repeated encounters. This indicates that reform has disrupted but not yet displaced the legacy of force-oriented policing. In Lewinian terms, the “unfreezing” of coercive identity has begun, and elements of “changing” are visible, but the stabilization of a service-oriented norm remains incomplete where youth experiences contradict reform promises.

These findings contribute to contemporary debates on inclusive and youth-responsive policing in rapidly urbanizing African cities. They suggest that without addressing discretionary frontline practices, particularly those affecting young men trust-building initiatives risk remaining partial and fragile. In informal settlements such as Makina, where youth form a large proportion of the population and are frequently at the center of security operations, sustainable reform requires not only structural accountability but consistent behavioral transformation.

5.4 Implications for Police Reform in Informal Settlements

The findings from Makina Ward demonstrate that police reforms in informal settlements cannot be adequately evaluated through legal or structural milestones alone. Although the 2010 Constitution and the National Police Service Act (2011) established an institutional framework for accountability and service-oriented policing, residents' responses indicate that reform effectiveness is primarily assessed through everyday encounters with police officers. This supports a growing body of scholarship arguing that legitimacy in marginalized settings is shaped less by institutional architecture and more by routine frontline behavior (Tyler & Huo, 2002; Bruce & Neild, 2021).

This pattern aligns with Bruce and Neild's (2021) comparative analysis of police reform in African contexts, which drew on case studies from South Africa, Kenya, and Nigeria. Their work shows that reforms often achieve policy-level transformation without fully altering organizational culture or daily practices, particularly in historically marginalized communities. The Makina findings conform to this conclusion but extend it by demonstrating how such gaps are experienced at the micro-level within an informal settlement. While residents recognize symbolic indicators of reform such as changes in terminology, community forums, and increased police visibility these shifts have not been consistently reinforced through everyday conduct, limiting their impact on trust consolidation.

Similarly, Agbiboa's (2015) study of urban informal settlements in Nigeria, based on interviews with youth and low-income residents in Lagos, found that reforms emphasizing accountability and community policing struggled to gain traction where socio-economic exclusion and discretionary enforcement persisted. Agbiboa argued that reforms fail when they do not address how poverty, unemployment, and repeated police encounters shape perceptions of authority. The Makina case reflects this dynamic: high population density, unemployment, and frequent youth-police interactions intensify the visibility of both positive and negative encounters. Where reforms are applied inconsistently, coercive incidents tend to outweigh reform signals, reinforcing skepticism even among residents who acknowledge some improvement.

Comparable insights are also evident in Human Rights Watch's (2018) investigation of policing in Nairobi's informal settlements, which drew on interviews with residents across Kibera and Mathare. That report documented how structural reforms and oversight mechanisms coexisted with continued harassment, selective enforcement, and excessive force at the grassroots level. The Makina findings support this assessment but add analytical depth by showing that these contradictions produce conditional rather than absolute trust. Residents do not uniformly reject reform; instead, they respond positively in situations where officers act professionally, suggesting that reform potential exists but remains unevenly realized.

From a change-theory perspective, these findings indicate that the "unfreezing" of the force-oriented identity has occurred at a symbolic and policy level, while the "changing" phase is only partially consolidated in practice. The absence of consistent behavioral reinforcement has prevented the "refreezing" of service-oriented norms within informal settlements like Makina. This incomplete transition explains why reforms are often perceived as visible yet fragile present in structure but unreliable in experience.

The broader implication is that reform strategies must move beyond top-down institutional redesign and explicitly engage with localized institutional culture, officer discretion, and youth-police dynamics. Studies of community policing in African informal settlements consistently show that without sustained supervision, localized accountability, and continuous behavioral training, reforms are vulnerable to regression (Mutahi, 2011; Bruce & Neild, 2021). The Makina case reinforces this argument by illustrating that reform success depends on consistency rather than intent.

Importantly, the study demonstrates that trust in informal settlements is not absent but conditional. Where officers demonstrate fairness, responsiveness, and restraint, residents respond with cooperation and cautious trust. This suggests that reform in informal settlements is possible, but only when policy intentions are translated into predictable, everyday practice. For policymakers and law enforcement leadership, this underscores the need to prioritize frontline behavioral change as the core mechanism through which institutional reform gains legitimacy, rather than relying solely on legislative transformation or symbolic rebranding.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Conclusions

This study examined residents' perceptions of the transformation of the police from a force to a service in Makina Ward, Kibera, Nairobi County. The findings reveal several key conclusions.

First, awareness of the transformation from the Kenya Police Force to the National Police Service remains uneven among residents. While some respondents were aware of the institutional change, a significant proportion either lacked awareness of the reform or were uncertain about when the transformation occurred. This suggests that information and civic sensitization regarding the reform has not reached all segments of the community.

Second, the findings indicate that residents perceive some positive changes in police behavior, particularly in terms of increased approachability, improved communication, and greater police visibility in certain contexts. These developments suggest emerging efforts toward service-oriented policing within the community.

Third, the study found that police–resident relations have improved for some residents, particularly through increased engagement in community forums and interactions with local leaders. However, these improvements remain inconsistent and situational rather than uniformly experienced across the community.

Fourth, although some respondents reported increased trust in the police, a considerable number of residents still expressed fear, mistrust, or uncertainty in their interactions with law enforcement. Experiences of harassment, corruption, and selective enforcement—especially among youth—continue to influence perceptions of policing.

The study concludes that the transformation from a police force to a police service has produced partial but uneven change in Makina Ward. While there are signs of progress in engagement and accessibility, many residents continue to perceive the reform as largely symbolic due to the persistence of negative policing experiences.

6.2 Recommendations

Based on the study findings, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen police reform implementation in informal urban settlements such as Makina Ward:

1. Strengthen Localized Community Engagement, Sensitization, and Youth Inclusion

The National Police Service, in partnership with IPOA, community leaders, and local administrators, should roll out continuous, context-specific civic education and sensitization programs tailored to informal settlements. These should use accessible channels (community barazas, local radio, multilingual materials, and youth-focused dialogue forums) to raise awareness of reforms, citizens' rights, accountability mechanisms, and the meaning of the shift to a "service." Special emphasis should be placed on youth inclusion through mentorship programs, joint peacebuilding activities, and targeted interventions to reduce profiling, harassment, and fear. This will help close the awareness gap, foster active collaboration beyond consultation, and support the refreezing of trust-based norms.

2. Deepen and Institutionalize Community Policing with Resident Collaboration

Community policing should be formalized and resourced as a core operational strategy in informal settlements, moving from sporadic initiatives to regular, inclusive forums involving residents, youth groups, women leaders, village elders, and police. These forums should enable genuine co-identification of local security priorities and joint problem-solving, rather than top-down consultation. Adequate logistical support (staffing, transport, communication tools) must be allocated to ensure timely, professional responses and visible police presence, reducing reliance on informal or corrupt practices and reinforcing service-oriented behavior on the ground.

3. Enhance Mandatory Officer Training, Behavioral Accountability, and Local Oversight:

Continuous, mandatory training for officers deployed in informal settlements should be intensified, with a strong focus on human rights, ethical conduct, de-escalation techniques, trauma-informed approaches, and community-sensitive policing. To sustain behavioral change, visible accountability mechanisms must be strengthened at the ward level: safe, accessible reporting channels for misconduct (in close collaboration with IPOA and community structures), swift and transparent consequences for violations,

and formal recognition/rewards for exemplary service-oriented conduct. These steps are essential to institutionalize new norms, prevent regression, and build credibility among residents who remain skeptical due to past experiences.

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