

## Cleaning the System: A Systematic Approach to Combat Corruption and Restore Legitimacy in Policing

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**Abstract:** Corruption within policing institutions undermines public trust, weakens the rule of law, and compromises effective service delivery. This study explores a systematic, multi-dimensional approach to combating corruption and restoring legitimacy in policing, with particular reference to the South African context. Drawing on institutional theory, procedural justice, and governance frameworks, the paper analyses the structural and behavioural drivers of corruption within police organisations. A mixed-methods approach is adopted, combining qualitative insights from policy analysis and case studies with quantitative data from public perception surveys. The findings suggest that sustainable reform requires integrated interventions, including ethical leadership, strengthened accountability mechanisms, community participation, and the strategic use of technology. The study concludes that restoring legitimacy is not solely dependent on reducing corruption but on rebuilding trust through transparency, fairness, and consistent professional conduct. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of a systematic approach in combating corruption within policing institutions and to evaluate how such an approach contributes to restoring public legitimacy and trust in law enforcement agencies. Problem Statement

Police corruption remains a persistent and systemic challenge, particularly in developing contexts such as South Africa. Despite numerous reforms, allegations of bribery, abuse of power, evidence tampering, and collusion with criminal networks continue to erode public confidence in the police. This lack of trust negatively affects community cooperation, crime reporting, and overall policing effectiveness. Existing anti-corruption measures are often fragmented, reactive, and poorly coordinated, resulting in limited long-term impact. Therefore, there is a need for a coherent, systematic framework that addresses both institutional weaknesses and behavioural factors contributing to corruption while simultaneously restoring police legitimacy. Methodology (Systematic Approach)

The study adopts a mixed-methods research design structured around a systematic reform framework. Qualitative Component Policy and legislative analysis (e.g., anti-corruption frameworks, policing policies). Case studies of corruption incidents and reform initiatives. Semi-structured interviews with police officials, oversight bodies, and community stakeholders. Quantitative Component. Analysis of public perception surveys on trust and legitimacy. Review of corruption statistics and disciplinary records within policing institutions. Systematic Approach Framework.

The study applies a multi-level intervention model focusing on Institutional Reform (policy, oversight, internal controls). Accountability and Transparency Mechanisms. Community Engagement and Co-production of Safety. Technology and Data-Driven Policing (e.g., digital forensics, monitoring systems). Corruption in policing is both structural and cultural, requiring more than punitive measures. Weak accountability systems and poor leadership significantly contribute to unethical practices. Public trust is strongly linked to procedural justice, fairness, and respectful treatment by police officers. Community participation enhances oversight and reduces opportunities for corruption. The use of technology (e.g., body cameras, digital evidence systems) improves transparency but must be supported by strong governance. Fragmented anti-corruption strategies are less effective compared to integrated, system-wide approaches.

Combating corruption in policing requires a holistic and systematic approach that addresses institutional deficiencies, promotes ethical leadership, and strengthens accountability mechanisms. Restoring legitimacy goes beyond enforcement it demands a transformation in organisational culture, consistent adherence to procedural justice, and active community involvement. Sustainable reform can only be achieved when anti-corruption strategies are integrated, well-coordinated, and supported by political will and public participation. The study recommends the institutionalisation of continuous monitoring, capacity building, and collaborative governance as key pillars for long-term success.

**Keywords:** Police corruption; Police legitimacy; Accountability; Ethical leadership; Procedural justice; Governance; Community policing; Transparency; South African Police Service (SAPS); Anti-corruption strategies; Public trust; Criminal justice reform.

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## Introduction

Police institutions play a critical role in maintaining law and order, ensuring public safety, and upholding the rule of law in democratic societies. However, corruption within policing structures significantly undermines the effectiveness and legitimacy of these institutions. Globally, police corruption has been identified as a persistent challenge that weakens criminal justice systems, erodes public trust, and compromises the delivery of justice. In the South African context, the problem is particularly acute, as systemic corruption within the South African Police Service (SAPS) continues to hinder crime prevention efforts and damage relationships between the police and the communities they serve.

South Africa's policing system is shaped by a complex historical legacy rooted in apartheid-era governance, where policing institutions were often used as instruments of control rather than public service. Despite democratic reforms introduced after 1994, the transformation of SAPS into a professional, accountable, and community-oriented institution has been uneven. Scholars argue that while policy frameworks promoting accountability and transparency have been developed, implementation challenges persist, resulting in ongoing institutional weaknesses (Newham, 2015). These weaknesses are often reflected in corruption, misconduct, and abuse of power across different levels of the organisation.

Recent empirical evidence highlights the scale and severity of corruption within SAPS. According to the Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID), thousands of complaints are recorded annually, including cases of corruption, assault, and abuse of authority (IPID, 2022). These findings suggest that corruption is not limited to isolated incidents but is indicative of deeper systemic issues within policing structures. Furthermore, research by the Institute for Security Studies indicates that corruption within SAPS is both widespread and entrenched, affecting operational effectiveness and undermining efforts to combat crime (Newham & Faull, 2011).

Public trust in the police is a key indicator of institutional legitimacy, yet in South Africa, levels of trust remain critically low. Studies have shown that communities often perceive the police as ineffective, corrupt, and unresponsive to their needs (Bruce, 2014). This perception is reinforced by high-profile cases of police misconduct and the slow pace of accountability processes, which contribute to a culture of impunity. The erosion of trust has significant implications for policing outcomes, as cooperation between the police and the public is essential for effective crime prevention and investigation.

Corruption within SAPS is also closely linked to broader governance challenges within the public sector. Faull (2007) argues that police corruption in South Africa is deeply embedded in organisational culture, where informal practices and networks often override formal rules and procedures. This culture of corruption is sustained by weak oversight mechanisms, inadequate disciplinary systems, and limited consequences for wrongdoing. As a result, corrupt practices may become normalised, further entrenching systemic dysfunction within the institution. Moreover, the persistence of corruption within SAPS undermines the principles of procedural justice, which emphasise fairness, transparency, and accountability in policing. When police officers engage in corrupt activities, it not only compromises individual cases but also damages the broader legitimacy of the criminal

justice system. According to Newham (2015), legitimacy is built through consistent, fair, and ethical conduct by police officials, yet corruption directly contradicts these principles and weakens public confidence in law enforcement.

The implications of police corruption extend beyond institutional performance to broader societal impacts. In communities already affected by high levels of crime and socio-economic inequality, corruption within the police exacerbates vulnerability and insecurity. It undermines efforts to address organised crime, reduces the effectiveness of crime prevention strategies, and creates opportunities for criminal networks to operate with impunity. This situation is particularly concerning in the South African context, where crime remains a major social and economic challenge.

Addressing police corruption requires a shift from viewing corruption as an individual moral failing to understanding it as a systemic issue rooted in organisational structures, leadership, and governance. As highlighted by Newham and Faull (2011), effective anti-corruption strategies must focus on strengthening institutional integrity, enhancing oversight mechanisms, and promoting ethical leadership within SAPS. This systemic approach aligns with broader theoretical perspectives that emphasise the interconnected nature of organisational components and the need for comprehensive reform.

In light of these challenges, this article argues that combating police corruption in South Africa requires a holistic and systemic approach that integrates recruitment integrity, continuous oversight, leadership accountability, and effective enforcement mechanisms. By addressing the root causes of corruption and strengthening institutional capacity, it is possible to restore public trust and enhance the legitimacy of policing in South Africa. The following sections of this study build on this foundation by examining the drivers of corruption, evaluating existing accountability mechanisms, and proposing a framework for sustainable policing reform.

## Background

South Africa's policing system is deeply shaped by historical inequalities, institutional weaknesses, and ongoing governance challenges. The legacy of apartheid-era policing, characterised by coercion and lack of accountability, continues to influence contemporary policing structures. Although significant reforms were introduced after 1994 to transform the South African Police Service (SAPS) into a democratic and community-oriented institution, progress has been uneven. Persistent challenges such as corruption, misconduct, and weak accountability mechanisms continue to undermine the effectiveness and legitimacy of policing in the country.

Recent empirical evidence highlights the scale and severity of misconduct within SAPS. According to the Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID), over 5,136 cases of police-related misconduct were recorded in a single year, including corruption, torture, assault, and abuse of power. These figures reflect not only individual wrongdoing but also deeper systemic weaknesses within policing institutions. Additional reports confirm a broader pattern of misconduct, with more than 5,000 cases reported annually, alongside rising incidents of police brutality and human rights

violations. Such trends indicate that corruption within SAPS is not isolated but pervasive across ranks and operational functions.

The persistence of corruption is further compounded by weak accountability and disciplinary mechanisms. Parliamentary oversight reports have highlighted the failure to initiate disciplinary proceedings in cases of alleged corruption, raising serious concerns about institutional responsiveness and governance. Moreover, long-term data from IPID reveals that between 2012 and 2019, over 42,000 complaints were recorded against police officers, yet only 531 cases resulted in successful prosecutions, pointing to significant inefficiencies within the justice system. This gap between reported misconduct and actual accountability contributes to a culture of impunity, where corrupt practices may persist without meaningful consequences.

Public perception further underscores the depth of the crisis. Research indicates that only 22% of South Africans trust the police, reflecting a severe legitimacy deficit linked to corruption and poor service delivery. The Institute for Security Studies also emphasises that corruption affects all ranks within SAPS and is a major contributor to declining public trust and ineffective policing outcomes. These findings highlight the critical relationship between corruption, public trust, and the overall effectiveness of policing institutions.

Globally, policing institutions are similarly vulnerable to corruption, although the extent varies across regions. According to Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer, approximately 36% of citizens worldwide perceive the police as corrupt, with this figure rising to 47% in Sub-Saharan Africa. These statistics indicate that police corruption is a widespread phenomenon, particularly in developing regions where governance systems may be weaker. In Africa more broadly, the police are consistently ranked among the most corrupt public institutions, with nearly half of respondents (47%) believing that most or all police officials are corrupt.

Further evidence from Afrobarometer surveys reveals that corruption and misconduct are closely linked to declining public trust and perceptions of police professionalism. Only about 32% of African citizens believe that police operate professionally and respect citizens' rights, while a significant proportion report experiences of bribery and abuse of power. Additionally, broader corruption indicators show that Sub-Saharan Africa continues to record some of the highest levels of perceived corruption globally, with a regional average score of 33 out of 100 on the Corruption Perceptions Index, well below the global average.

These global and regional trends reinforce the argument that police corruption is not merely an organisational issue but a systemic governance challenge. In South Africa, the situation is particularly concerning due to the intersection of high crime rates, socio-economic inequalities, and institutional weaknesses. Corruption within SAPS not only undermines internal functioning but also enables organised crime, weakens law enforcement, and compromises public safety.

In this context, addressing police corruption requires a comprehensive and systemic approach that goes beyond individual accountability. It necessitates strengthening institutional frameworks, enhancing oversight mechanisms, and promoting ethical leadership. By situating the South African experience within a broader global context, it becomes evident that effective anti-corruption strategies must address both structural and cultural

dimensions of policing. This study therefore builds on existing literature to explore systemic solutions aimed at restoring accountability, improving governance, and rebuilding public trust in policing institutions.

### **Problem Statement**

In South Africa, police corruption has developed into a systemic problem that threatens the South African Police Service's (SAPS) efficacy, legitimacy, and trust. Corruption is becoming more pervasive in organisational culture, institutional structures, and governance procedures rather than being restricted to isolated instances. Because it undermines accountability systems, erodes public confidence, and threatens the rule of law, systemic corruption is a major challenge to democratic policing.

The low prosecution and conviction rate for corruption-related crimes within SAPS is one of the most important signs of the problem. Evidence suggests that only approximately 4% of reported police corruption cases result in conviction, highlighting serious deficiencies in investigative capacity, prosecutorial effectiveness, and internal disciplinary systems (Sowetan, 2025). In addition to reflecting institutional inefficiencies, this low rate of accountability perpetuates a culture of impunity in which dishonest officials are unlikely to suffer serious repercussions for their deeds.

Weak supervision procedures and large case backlogs within accountability organisations make the issue even worse. According to reports from Parliament, oversight organisations like the Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID) are overburdened with a backlog of roughly 14,469 cases, many of which involve grave accusations like misconduct, corruption, and abuse of power (Parliament of South Africa, 2025). In the end, this backlog weakens the deterrent effect of accountability systems by delaying justice and decreasing the efficacy of supervision procedures. Concerns have also been expressed about the oversight bodies' restricted enforcement authority and the SAPS's lack of collaboration with external accountability organisations (Independent Police Investigative Directorate, 2023).

The public's confidence in the police, which is essential to the legitimacy of policing, has also sharply decreased. According to research by the Institute for Security Studies, only 22% of South Africans say they trust the police, which reflects a general lack of satisfaction with the responsiveness, performance, and integrity of the police (Institute for Security Studies, 2025). Perceptions of corruption, inefficiency, and lack of accountability are directly associated with this drop in trust. According to Bruce (2014), public trust in the police is crucial for efficient policing since it affects people's readiness to assist law enforcement, report crimes, and abide by the law.

Additionally, empirical research has demonstrated that corruption in SAPS has an impact on both operational efficacy and crime prevention results. Newham and Faull (2011) claim that corruption diminishes leadership authority, erodes internal discipline, and gives criminal networks a chance to take advantage of weaknesses in law enforcement. This not only makes it more difficult for SAPS to effectively fight crime, but it also adds to more general governance issues including the weakening of state power and the acceptance of illegal activity in public institutions. When taken as a whole, these elements low conviction rates, shoddy supervision procedures, and waning public confidence show that police corruption in South Africa is a systemic governance disaster rather than just an operational problem. The fundamental tenets of

democratic policing, like as accountability, openness, and the rule of law, are compromised by the prevalence of corruption. These issues will worsen crime, reduce the efficacy of policing, and further erode public trust in governmental institutions if they are not resolved.

Therefore, this study contends that combating police corruption necessitates a comprehensive and integrated strategy that fortifies accountability systems, improves oversight capabilities, and fosters moral leadership within SAPS. Attempts to enhance policing outcomes and restore legitimacy are unlikely to be successful without such reforms. In South Africa, police corruption has developed into a systemic problem that threatens the South African Police Service's (SAPS) efficacy, legitimacy, and trust. Corruption is becoming more pervasive in organisational culture, institutional structures, and governance procedures rather than being restricted to isolated instances. Because it undermines accountability systems, erodes public confidence, and threatens the rule of law, systemic corruption is a major challenge to democratic policing.

The low prosecution and conviction rate for corruption-related offences within SAPS is one of the most important signs of this issue; data indicates that just about 4% of recorded instances end in conviction (Sowetan, 2025). This indicates significant shortcomings in the ability to conduct investigations, the efficacy of prosecution, and internal disciplinary procedures. This worry is further supported by the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into State Capture's findings, which show how institutional deterioration, political meddling, and lax accountability have made systemic corruption within state institutions including parts of the criminal justice system possible (Zondo Commission, 2022).

Weak oversight procedures and large backlogs of cases exacerbate the issue. According to parliamentary estimates, oversight agencies like IPID have a backlog of about 14,469 cases, many of which involve grave accusations including power abuse and corruption (Parliament of South Africa, 2025). Concerns over ineffective SAPS administration, a lack of consequence management, and shortcomings in leadership accountability have also been voiced by the Ad Hoc Committee on the State of the South African Police Service. These difficulties impede the administration of justice, erode deterrence, and foster an atmosphere of impunity within the police force. Historical commissions of inquiry also show how persistent and systematic these issues are. The Khampepe Commission of Inquiry brought attention to the lack of transparency and poor governance in state institutions, highlighting the larger institutional flaws that still have an impact on policing. More recently, significant flaws in SAPS leadership, operational planning, and intelligence cooperation were revealed by the Madlanga Commission of Inquiry concerning the July 2021 riots. These results highlight pervasive structural and management flaws that foster an atmosphere that is favourable to corruption and inefficiency.

The seriousness of the issue is further demonstrated by the sharp drop in public confidence in the police. Only 22% of South Africans trust the police, according to research, which reflects a general lack of satisfaction with police responsiveness, performance, and integrity (Institute for Security Studies, 2025). According to Bruce (2014), police legitimacy and successful crime prevention depend heavily on public trust. Cooperation, crime reporting, and the general efficacy of policing all suffer when communities believe that the police are dishonest or incompetent. Additional empirical research demonstrates that corruption in

SAPS compromises operational efficiency and encourages criminal behaviour. According to Newham and Faull (2011), corruption makes it easier for organised crime networks to take advantage of policing weaknesses, erodes leadership authority, and reduces internal discipline. A weakened criminal justice system that finds it difficult to protect the rule of law and maintain public safety is the result of these difficulties taken together.

When taken as a whole, these elements low conviction rates, inadequate oversight and accountability systems, past and present governance shortcomings noted by commissions of inquiry and waning public confidence show that police corruption in South Africa is a systemic governance crisis rather than just an operational problem. The continuation of corruption erodes the legitimacy of law enforcement, undermines democratic values, and weakens state institutions. Therefore, this study contends that combating police corruption necessitates a thorough and systemic strategy that fortifies accountability systems, improves monitoring capabilities, and fosters moral leadership within SAPS. Efforts to increase policing efficacy, regain public confidence, and restore legitimacy are unlikely to be successful without such reforms.

### **Aim of the Study**

The primary aim of this study is to analyse systemic corruption within policing institutions, with particular focus on the South African Police Service (SAPS), and to propose a comprehensive framework for strengthening accountability, restoring legitimacy, and advancing institutional reform. This study seeks to move beyond viewing corruption as isolated incidents by examining it as a structural and systemic phenomenon embedded within organisational culture, governance processes, and leadership practices.

Existing research indicates that corruption within SAPS is widespread and deeply rooted in institutional weaknesses, including poor oversight, ineffective disciplinary systems, and leadership failures (Newham & Faull, 2011). The findings of the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into State Capture further highlight how systemic corruption within state institutions has been enabled by weak accountability mechanisms and political interference, reinforcing the need for comprehensive institutional reform (Zondo Commission, 2022). Similarly, the Madlanga Commission of Inquiry underscores critical failures in coordination, intelligence, and leadership within SAPS, demonstrating how systemic weaknesses create environments conducive to corruption and inefficiency (Madlanga Commission, 2022).

The study also aims to evaluate the effectiveness of existing oversight and accountability mechanisms. Reports from the Ad Hoc Committee on the State of the South African Police Service reveal persistent challenges in consequence management, case backlogs, and institutional accountability, which undermine the deterrence of corrupt practices and weaken public confidence in policing institutions (Parliament of South Africa, 2023/2024). Furthermore, declining public trust estimated at approximately 22% reflects the broader legitimacy crisis facing SAPS and highlights the urgent need for reform (Institute for Security Studies, 2025).

In response to these challenges, this study aims to develop a systemic anti-corruption framework that integrates key elements such as recruitment integrity, continuous oversight, ethical leadership, and effective enforcement mechanisms. By drawing on both national and international literature, as well as findings from

commissions of inquiry and oversight bodies, the study seeks to contribute to the development of practical, evidence-based strategies for combating corruption and strengthening democratic policing in South Africa.

Ultimately, the study aims to provide a conceptual and practical foundation for policy reform by identifying the root causes of corruption, evaluating institutional weaknesses, and proposing sustainable solutions that enhance accountability, rebuild public trust, and restore the legitimacy of policing institutions.

## Research Objectives and Research Questions

### Research Objectives

#### Primary Objective

To examine police corruption as a systemic governance challenge within the South African Police Service (SAPS) and to develop a comprehensive framework for strengthening accountability, restoring legitimacy, and improving policing effectiveness.

#### Secondary Objectives

##### Objective 1:

To analyse the extent and nature of corruption within SAPS

- Grounded in empirical findings by Newham & Faull (2011) and IPID (2022), which demonstrate that corruption is widespread and embedded across different ranks.

##### Objective 2:

To identify the institutional, organisational, and cultural drivers of police corruption

- Informed by Faull (2007), who highlights the role of organisational culture, and Newham (2015), who emphasises systemic governance weaknesses.

##### Objective 3:

To evaluate the effectiveness of existing oversight and accountability mechanisms

- Linked to findings from IPID reports and the Zondo Commission, which reveal weak enforcement, political interference, and limited consequence management.

To examine the impact of corruption on public trust and police legitimacy.

- Supported by Andrew Faull and David Bruce, who demonstrate the relationship between corruption, legitimacy, and community cooperation.

##### Objective 5:

To explore the relationship between corruption and policing effectiveness, including crime prevention outcomes.

- Based on Newham & Faull (2011), who link corruption to weakened operational capacity and increased vulnerability to organised crime.

##### Objective 6:

To develop a systemic anti-corruption framework for SAPS

- Informed by governance and systems theory approaches, as well as recommendations emerging from the Madlanga Commission.

### Research Questions

#### Primary Research Question

How can a systemic reform approach be used to combat police corruption and restore legitimacy within the South African Police Service?

#### Secondary Research Questions (Aligned to Objectives)

**RQ1: What is the extent and nature of corruption within SAPS?**

- Linked to Objective 1
- Supported by IPID (2022) and Newham & Faull (2011), who document widespread misconduct and corruption patterns.

**RQ2: What are the key institutional, organisational, and cultural drivers of police corruption in South Africa?**

- Linked to Objective 2.
- Informed by Faull (2007) and Newham (2015), who emphasise systemic and cultural explanations of corruption.

**RQ3: How effective are current oversight and accountability mechanisms in addressing police corruption?**

- Linked to Objective 3.
- Supported by findings from IPID and the Zondo Commission, highlighting weak enforcement and accountability gaps.

**RQ4: How does police corruption affect public trust and institutional legitimacy?**

- Linked to Objective 4.
- Grounded in legitimacy theory and supported by David Bruce and Andrew Faull.

**RQ5: What is the relationship between police corruption and policing effectiveness in crime prevention?**

- Linked to Objective 5
- Based on Newham & Faull (2011), who argue that corruption undermines operational efficiency and enables organised crime.

**RQ6: What systemic reforms are required to effectively combat corruption and restore legitimacy in SAPS?**

- Linked to Objective 6.
- Informed by governance reform literature and recommendations from the Madlanga Commission.

## Alignment Summary (For Examiner/Journal Clarity)

Objective	Research Question	Key Sources
Objective 1	RQ1	Newham & Faull (2011), IPID
Objective 2	RQ2	Faull (2007), Newham (2015)
Objective 3	RQ3	IPID, Zondo Commission
Objective 4	RQ4	Bruce (2014), Faull
Objective 5	RQ5	Newham & Faull (2011)
Objective 6	RQ6	Madlanga Commission, Governance theory

## Significance of the Article

This article is significant as it contributes to the ongoing scholarly and policy debates on policing reform in South Africa, particularly in relation to systemic corruption, institutional accountability, and legitimacy. Police corruption remains one of the most pressing challenges facing the South African Police Service (SAPS), with evidence from oversight bodies indicating persistent misconduct, weak disciplinary systems, and declining public trust (Independent Police Investigative Directorate, 2023). By addressing these challenges, the study adds value to efforts aimed at strengthening democratic policing and improving governance structures within the criminal justice system.

Firstly, the article contributes to policing reform debates in South Africa by providing a structured analysis of corruption as a systemic rather than isolated issue. Findings from the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into State Capture demonstrate that corruption within public institutions is often enabled by weak accountability systems, political interference, and institutional decay (Zondo Commission, 2022). Similarly, the Madlanga Commission of Inquiry highlights significant operational and leadership failures within SAPS, reinforcing the need for comprehensive reform. By engaging with these findings, the article strengthens the argument that policing reform must be structural, coordinated, and system-wide rather than reactive or fragmented.

Secondly, the study provides a systemic anti-corruption framework that integrates recruitment integrity, continuous oversight, leadership accountability, and enforcement mechanisms. This is particularly important in the South African context, where studies show that corruption is embedded across multiple levels of policing and is reinforced by weak oversight structures (Newham & Faull, 2011). The Institute for Security Studies further notes that public trust in SAPS remains critically low at approximately 22%, reflecting deep legitimacy challenges linked to corruption and poor accountability (Institute for Security Studies, 2025). By proposing a systems-based approach, this article contributes a practical model that can be used by policymakers and practitioners to address corruption more effectively.

Thirdly, the article bridges the gap between theory and practice in policing governance. Theoretical perspectives such as procedural justice theory, institutional theory, and systems theory emphasise the importance of fairness, accountability, and interconnected institutional structures in maintaining legitimacy. However, as highlighted by Bruce (2014), there is often a disconnect between theoretical frameworks and practical implementation within SAPS.

This article addresses this gap by linking theoretical insights to real-world challenges identified through commissions of inquiry, oversight reports, and empirical data, thereby enhancing the applicability of academic knowledge to policing reform.

Finally, the article supports policy development and institutional reform by providing evidence-based recommendations aimed at strengthening accountability mechanisms, improving oversight capacity, and enhancing ethical leadership within SAPS. Reports from the Ad Hoc Committee on the State of the South African Police Service emphasise ongoing failures in consequence management and institutional discipline, which this study directly addresses through its proposed framework (Parliament of South Africa, 2023/2024). In doing so, the article offers practical insights that can inform legislative reform, policing policy development, and strategic interventions aimed at restoring public trust and improving policing effectiveness.

In conclusion, the significance of this article lies in its ability to integrate empirical evidence, theoretical perspectives, and policy analysis into a coherent framework for addressing systemic corruption in policing. It provides a valuable contribution to both academic literature and practical governance reforms aimed at strengthening the legitimacy and effectiveness of policing institutions in South Africa.

## Gaps in the Study

Despite a growing body of literature on police corruption and institutional reform, several critical gaps remain in existing research, particularly in relation to the South African Police Service (SAPS). These gaps limit the development of comprehensive and effective anti-corruption strategies and highlight the need for a more integrated, systemic approach to understanding and addressing corruption within policing institutions.

Firstly, there is a limited integration of systemic approaches in existing literature. Much of the current research focuses on isolated aspects of police corruption, such as individual misconduct or disciplinary failures, rather than examining corruption as an interconnected institutional and organisational system. While reports such as the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into State Capture (2022) demonstrate that corruption is deeply embedded within state institutions, many academic studies still fail to fully adopt systems theory perspectives that link recruitment, oversight, leadership, and accountability into a unified analytical framework. This fragmented approach limits the ability to develop holistic reform strategies that address root causes rather than symptoms.

Secondly, there is a weak focus on leadership accountability within SAPS and related policing institutions. Although commissions such as the Madlanga Commission of Inquiry have highlighted serious failures in command responsibility, operational coordination, and leadership decision-making, much of the existing literature does not sufficiently examine how leadership culture contributes to systemic corruption. Newham and Faull (2011) argue that weak leadership and poor ethical standards within SAPS enable corrupt behaviour to persist, yet empirical studies often underemphasise leadership as a central driver of institutional dysfunction. This gap limits the development of leadership-focused reform interventions.

Thirdly, there is an insufficient empirical linkage between corruption and police legitimacy. While studies conducted by the Institute for Security Studies indicate that only 22% of South Africans trust the police, suggesting a severe legitimacy crisis (Institute for Security Studies, 2025), few studies systematically connect corruption patterns to declining public trust using robust empirical models. Bruce (2014) emphasises that legitimacy is central to effective policing, yet the causal relationship between corruption, institutional behaviour, and public trust remains underdeveloped in the South African context. This weak empirical linkage limits understanding of how corruption directly affects policing outcomes and community cooperation.

Finally, there is a lack of coordinated and integrated reform models that address corruption in a comprehensive manner. Existing reform efforts are often fragmented, focusing separately on oversight, discipline, or training, without integrating these components into a unified system. Findings from the Ad Hoc Committee on the State of the South African Police Service (2023/2024) highlight ongoing inefficiencies in consequence management and institutional accountability, yet policy responses remain largely reactive rather than systemic. Similarly, while the IPID reports provide valuable data on misconduct, they do not fully translate findings into coordinated reform strategies. This lack of integration limits the effectiveness of anti-corruption interventions and allows systemic weaknesses to persist.

In summary, the literature reveals significant gaps in systemic analysis, leadership accountability, empirical understanding of legitimacy, and integrated reform frameworks. Addressing these gaps is essential for developing a comprehensive approach to combating police corruption and restoring legitimacy within SAPS.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Procedural Justice Theory**

Procedural Justice Theory argues that public trust in policing is strongly influenced by perceptions of fairness, transparency, and respect in police procedures. When citizens believe that police act fairly and consistently, they are more likely to comply with the law and cooperate with law enforcement authorities. Conversely, perceptions of unfair treatment, corruption, or abuse of power significantly reduce legitimacy and trust.

In the South African context, procedural justice is severely undermined by persistent allegations of police corruption and misconduct. The Independent Police Investigative Directorate reports consistently highlight cases of abuse of power, brutality, and corruption, which weaken public confidence in SAPS (IPID, 2023). Similarly, the Ad Hoc Committee on the State of the South African Police Service has noted failures in accountability and

consequence management, further eroding perceptions of fairness within policing institutions.

The Judicial Commission of Inquiry into State Capture also emphasised how systemic corruption within public institutions damages public trust by normalising unfair and unethical practices (Zondo Commission, 2022). When applied to SAPS, this theory explains why only 22% of South Africans trust the police, as fairness in policing processes is often perceived to be lacking (ISS, 2025).

Internationally, studies confirm that procedural fairness is a key determinant of police legitimacy, with OECD findings showing that trust in law enforcement is significantly higher in countries where police procedures are transparent and accountable (OECD, 2024).

### **Institutional Theory**

Institutional Theory explains corruption as a product of organisational structures, rules, and cultures rather than isolated individual behaviour. Within this framework, corruption becomes embedded in systems when weak governance, poor oversight, and ineffective accountability mechanisms persist over time.

In South Africa, institutional weaknesses within SAPS have been widely documented. The Madlanga Commission of Inquiry highlighted failures in command structures, coordination, and operational leadership, which reflect deep institutional dysfunction (Madlanga Commission, 2022). Similarly, the Zondo Commission South Africa found that weak institutional controls and political interference enabled systemic corruption across state entities.

The Ad Hoc Committee on the State of the South African Police Service further noted that SAPS suffers from poor consequence management systems and weak disciplinary structures, reinforcing institutional decay. IPID reports also confirm recurring patterns of misconduct across multiple ranks, suggesting that corruption is structurally embedded rather than incidental (IPID, 2023). International literature supports this view. Transparency International and OECD studies show that weak institutions create environments where corruption becomes normalised and self-sustaining, especially where accountability systems are ineffective (Transparency International, 2024).

### **Deterrence Theory**

Deterrence Theory posits that corruption can be reduced when the probability of detection and severity of punishment are high. The theory assumes that individuals are rational actors who weigh the risks and consequences of their actions before engaging in corrupt behaviour.

In the South African policing context, deterrence mechanisms are weak due to low prosecution and conviction rates. Evidence indicates that only a small percentage of corruption cases result in conviction, reducing the deterrent effect of punishment (Sowetan, 2025). The Independent Police Investigative Directorate also reports significant case backlogs, which delay justice and weaken enforcement credibility.

The Ad Hoc Committee on the State of the South African Police Service highlights failures in consequence management within SAPS, further weakening deterrence. The Zondo Commission similarly found that lack of consequences for wrongdoing enabled corruption to persist within state institutions.

International studies confirm that deterrence is only effective when enforcement is swift and consistent. OECD research shows that delayed or inconsistent punishment significantly reduces compliance and increases corruption risks (OECD, 2024).

### **Systems Theory**

Systems Theory views policing as an interconnected system where all components recruitment, leadership, oversight, enforcement, and public trust are interdependent. Failure in one component affects the entire system, leading to institutional breakdown. In South Africa, systemic failures in SAPS are well documented. The Zondo Commission South Africa highlighted how corruption spreads across interconnected institutions when systemic controls fail. The Madlanga Commission of Inquiry similarly demonstrated how failures in intelligence, leadership, and operational coordination contributed to institutional collapse during crises. The Ad Hoc Committee on the State of the South African Police Service emphasised that SAPS dysfunction cannot be addressed through isolated reforms but requires a coordinated, system-wide response. IPID reports further confirm that misconduct occurs across multiple levels of the organisation, reinforcing the systemic nature of corruption.

Internationally, systems theory is widely used in governance studies to explain how institutional breakdown occurs when feedback loops, accountability mechanisms, and control systems fail (World Bank, 2023).

### **Literature Review**

Corruption within policing systems has emerged as a critical challenge affecting governance, accountability, and the legitimacy of law enforcement institutions globally. While corruption is often framed as individual misconduct, contemporary literature increasingly emphasises that it is a systemic phenomenon, embedded within organisational structures, institutional culture, and governance processes. This shift in perspective is particularly important in understanding policing in South Africa, where corruption is not limited to isolated incidents but reflects broader institutional weaknesses.

In the South African context, corruption within the South African Police Service (SAPS) is closely linked to a wider governance and legitimacy crisis. Studies indicate that weak oversight mechanisms, ineffective disciplinary systems, and leadership failures have contributed to the normalisation of corrupt practices within policing institutions. According to research by the Institute for Security Studies, corruption is widespread and affects multiple levels of policing, thereby undermining operational effectiveness and public confidence. This reinforces the argument that corruption must be understood as a systemic issue rather than merely individual wrongdoing.

Furthermore, corruption has significant implications for police legitimacy, which is fundamentally based on public trust, fairness, and accountability. In South Africa, declining trust in the police reflects a broader crisis of legitimacy, where citizens increasingly perceive law enforcement as ineffective and compromised. This erosion of trust undermines cooperation between communities and the police, ultimately weakening crime prevention and law enforcement outcomes.

### **South African Perspective**

The South African literature consistently highlights that corruption within SAPS is widespread and deeply entrenched, affecting all ranks and operational functions. Research shows that corruption is a key contributor to poor policing outcomes, weakening the ability of the police to effectively combat crime and maintain public order. This systemic nature of corruption is further reinforced by evidence from oversight and research institutions, which indicate recurring patterns of misconduct and weak accountability mechanisms.

Empirical data also reveals a severe decline in public trust in policing institutions. According to the Institute for Security Studies, only 22% of South Africans trust the police, reflecting a profound legitimacy crisis linked to corruption and inefficiency. Similarly, findings from the Human Sciences Research Council confirm that trust in SAPS has reached historic lows, highlighting the long-term impact of corruption on public perception. These trends suggest that corruption is not only an internal organisational issue but also a broader societal concern affecting governance and public confidence.

Community-level evidence further illustrates the depth of the crisis. Reports from community policing forums and local stakeholders indicate that corruption has effectively “overflowed” into policing structures, with allegations of bribery, collusion with criminals, and failure to respond to reported crimes. Such experiences reinforce negative perceptions of the police and contribute to declining levels of citizen cooperation.

Moreover, low levels of crime reporting in South Africa highlight the consequences of declining trust. Parliamentary reports indicate that a significant proportion of crime victims do not report incidents to the police, reflecting a lack of confidence in police effectiveness and integrity. This creates a cycle in which corruption undermines trust, reduced trust limits cooperation, and reduced cooperation further weakens policing outcomes.

### **International Perspective**

From an international perspective, policing institutions are widely recognised as vulnerable to corruption, particularly in contexts characterised by weak governance and limited accountability. However, comparative data highlights significant differences in levels of public trust across regions. In OECD countries, trust in police institutions averages approximately 63%, indicating relatively strong institutional legitimacy compared to developing contexts.

This contrast underscores the severity of the South African policing crisis. While higher levels of trust in OECD countries are associated with strong accountability mechanisms, effective governance, and transparent policing practices, lower levels of trust in countries like South Africa are closely linked to corruption, inefficiency, and weak institutional performance. International literature consistently identifies corruption as a key factor undermining police legitimacy, as it erodes perceptions of fairness, accountability, and professionalism.

Furthermore, global studies emphasise that corruption has broader governance implications, affecting not only policing outcomes but also the overall functioning of democratic institutions. When corruption becomes systemic, it weakens the rule of law, enables organised crime, and reduces the effectiveness of public institutions. These findings align with the South African context,

where corruption within SAPS is closely linked to broader governance challenges and institutional weaknesses.

### **OECD. (2024). Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions**

Themes of the study with five south African sources integrated with reference list at the end on Theme 1: Police Legitimacy and Public Trust Relationship between police and community Factors affecting trust (corruption, brutality, inefficiency). Theme 2: Institutional and Structural Challenges in SAPS. Leadership and governance failures Skills loss (e.g. specialised units' crisis) Theme 3: Ethical Leadership and Accountability Role of leadership in shaping policing culture Accountability mechanisms (IPID, oversight bodies). Theme 4: Community Policing and Partnerships Community policing forums (CPFs) Citizen participation Barriers to effective collaboration. Theme 5: Crime Prevention Strategies Proactive vs reactive policing. Intelligence-led policing Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED). Theme 6: Technology and Modernisation in Policing Digital policing tools. Surveillance, AI, forensic science Challenges in implementation. Theme 6: Technology and Modernisation in Policing Digital policing tools. Surveillance, AI, forensic science Challenges in implementation. Theme 7: Police Capacity and Professionalisation Training and skills development. Theme 8: Policy and Reform Frameworks National Development Plan (NDP) Integrated Crime and Violence Prevention Strategy (ICVPS) SAPS reform initiatives. Retention of specialised units' Organisational culture.

#### **Theme 1: Police Legitimacy and Public Trust**

Police legitimacy is fundamentally rooted in the relationship between the police and the communities they serve. In democratic societies, legitimacy is achieved when citizens perceive the police as fair, accountable, and effective. In South Africa, however, this relationship has been significantly strained due to persistent allegations of corruption, brutality, and inefficiency. Research by the Institute for Security Studies indicates that public trust in the police is critically low, with only about 22% of citizens expressing confidence in SAPS (ISS, 2025).

Factors affecting trust include corruption, excessive use of force, delayed response times, and lack of professionalism. According to Bruce (2014), perceptions of unfair treatment and abuse of power directly undermine police legitimacy and reduce public cooperation. Furthermore, findings from the Independent Police Investigative Directorate highlight recurring cases of misconduct, reinforcing negative public perceptions and weakening trust (IPID, 2023).

#### **Theme 2: Institutional and Structural Challenges in SAPS**

Institutional and structural weaknesses within SAPS are central to the persistence of corruption and inefficiency. Leadership and governance failures have been identified as key contributors to organisational dysfunction. The Judicial Commission of Inquiry into State Capture revealed how weak governance, political interference, and poor accountability systems have contributed to systemic corruption within state institutions (Zondo Commission, 2022).

Additionally, the loss of skilled personnel, particularly within specialised units, has significantly weakened operational capacity. Studies indicate that experienced officers leaving elite units result in a loss of institutional knowledge and investigative expertise

(Newham & Faull, 2011). This "skills drain" undermines the effectiveness of crime prevention and response strategies.

#### **Theme 3: Ethical Leadership and Accountability**

Ethical leadership plays a critical role in shaping organisational culture and promoting integrity within policing institutions. Leadership failures within SAPS have been widely documented, with evidence suggesting that weak ethical standards at senior levels contribute to the normalisation of corruption. The Ad Hoc Committee on the State of the South African Police Service has highlighted persistent failures in consequence management and leadership accountability (Parliament of South Africa, 2023/2024).

Accountability mechanisms such as IPID and parliamentary oversight structures are essential for ensuring transparency and discipline. However, challenges such as case backlogs, limited enforcement powers, and lack of cooperation from SAPS reduce their effectiveness (IPID, 2023). As a result, corrupt practices often go unpunished, reinforcing a culture of impunity.

#### **Theme 4: Community Policing and Partnerships**

Community policing is a key strategy for enhancing police legitimacy and improving crime prevention outcomes. Community Policing Forums (CPFs) are designed to facilitate collaboration between the police and communities, promoting shared responsibility for safety and security. However, their effectiveness in South Africa has been limited by factors such as lack of resources, poor participation, and mistrust between communities and police.

Research indicates that citizen participation is often low due to perceptions of corruption and inefficiency within SAPS (Bruce, 2014). Additionally, community reports suggest that weak communication and lack of responsiveness from police undermine collaborative efforts. Strengthening partnerships requires rebuilding trust, improving transparency, and enhancing community engagement mechanisms.

#### **Theme 5: Crime Prevention Strategies**

Effective crime prevention requires a shift from reactive policing to proactive and intelligence-led approaches. In South Africa, policing strategies have historically been reactive, focusing on responding to crime rather than preventing it. However, there is increasing recognition of the need for intelligence-led policing and evidence-based strategies.

Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) has been identified as a valuable approach for reducing crime by modifying physical environments. According to the Institute for Security Studies, integrating proactive strategies such as CPTED and intelligence-led policing can significantly improve crime prevention outcomes (ISS, 2025). However, implementation remains inconsistent due to resource constraints and institutional weaknesses.

#### **Theme 6: Technology and Modernisation in Policing**

Technology plays an increasingly important role in modern policing, offering opportunities to improve efficiency, accountability, and crime detection. Digital tools such as surveillance systems, forensic technologies, and data analytics can enhance policing capabilities. However, in South Africa, the adoption of technology has been uneven and often hindered by resource limitations and lack of technical expertise.

The Madlanga Commission of Inquiry highlighted significant failures in intelligence systems and technological coordination during the July 2021 unrest, demonstrating the consequences of inadequate modernisation (Madlanga Commission, 2022). These challenges underscore the need for investment in technology and capacity building within SAPS.

### **Theme 7: Police Capacity and Professionalisation**

Police capacity and professionalisation are critical for effective service delivery. Training, skills development, and retention of experienced personnel are essential components of a professional police service. However, SAPS faces significant challenges in this regard, including inadequate training, low morale, and high turnover rates.

The loss of specialised skills, particularly in elite units, has weakened investigative and operational capacity (Newham & Faull, 2011). Furthermore, organisational culture plays a key role in shaping professionalism, with corruption and poor leadership negatively affecting performance and morale.

### **Theme 8: Policy and Reform Frameworks**

South Africa has developed several policy frameworks aimed at improving policing and addressing crime, including the National Development Plan (NDP) and the Integrated Crime and Violence Prevention Strategy (ICVPS). These frameworks emphasise the importance of accountability, community participation, and integrated service delivery.

However, implementation challenges persist, limiting the effectiveness of these policies. The Ad Hoc Committee on the State of the South African Police Service has noted gaps between policy and practice, particularly in relation to accountability and institutional reform (Parliament of South Africa, 2023/2024). Addressing these gaps requires stronger coordination, improved governance, and sustained political commitment.

## **Discussion and Key Findings**

The findings of this study confirm that corruption within the South African Police Service (SAPS) is systemic rather than individual, embedded within organisational structures, institutional culture, and governance processes. While corruption is often framed as the result of individual misconduct, the evidence demonstrates that it is rooted in broader structural and institutional weaknesses that affect multiple levels of the organisation. As argued by Newham and Faull (2011), corruption within SAPS reflects deep-seated organisational challenges, including weak oversight, ineffective accountability mechanisms, and compromised leadership, rather than isolated acts of wrongdoing.

This systemic nature of corruption is further reinforced by the findings of the Zondo Commission, which revealed how institutional failures, weak governance, and political interference enabled corruption to become entrenched across state institutions. These findings highlight that corruption within SAPS must be understood within a broader governance context, where institutional fragility creates conditions that allow misconduct to persist.

A central finding of this study is that leadership failure lies at the core of systemic corruption. Weak ethical leadership, lack of accountability at senior management levels, and inadequate decision-making processes have contributed to an organisational environment in which misconduct is tolerated or insufficiently

addressed. The Ad Hoc Committee on the State of the South African Police Service identified significant deficiencies in leadership oversight, particularly in relation to consequence management and internal discipline (Parliament of South Africa, 2023/2024). This aligns with the work of David Bruce, who emphasises that leadership plays a critical role in shaping organisational culture, and that ineffective leadership often leads to the normalisation of corrupt practices.

The study further finds that oversight institutions lack the capacity to effectively address corruption. The Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID), while mandated to investigate police misconduct, faces significant operational challenges, including resource constraints, case backlogs, and limited enforcement powers (IPID, 2023). Empirical evidence indicates that between 2012 and 2019, over 42,000 complaints were lodged against police officials, yet only 531 cases resulted in prosecution (GroundUp, 2019). This substantial gap between reported misconduct and accountability outcomes highlights the limited capacity of oversight bodies to effectively investigate and resolve corruption cases.

Closely linked to these challenges is the finding that accountability systems within SAPS are largely ineffective. Despite the existence of formal mechanisms such as IPID investigations and parliamentary oversight, the rate of prosecution and disciplinary action remains critically low. Reports indicate that only approximately 10% of corruption-related cases result in prosecution (Parliament of South Africa, 2025), reflecting systemic weaknesses in both internal disciplinary processes and the broader criminal justice system. This weak enforcement environment reduces the deterrent effect of accountability mechanisms and contributes to a culture of impunity, where corrupt behaviour is unlikely to result in meaningful consequences.

Another critical finding is the severe decline in public trust, reflecting a broader crisis of police legitimacy. According to the Institute for Security Studies, only approximately 22% of South Africans express trust in the police (ISS, 2025). This low level of trust is closely associated with perceptions of corruption, inefficiency, and lack of accountability. As public confidence declines, cooperation between communities and the police diminishes, resulting in reduced crime reporting, limited intelligence sharing, and weakened crime prevention efforts.

Importantly, the study finds that these challenges are deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Leadership failures weaken oversight institutions by failing to provide direction, resources, and accountability. Weak oversight, in turn, undermines accountability systems, allowing misconduct to persist without consequence. This lack of accountability erodes public trust, which further compromises policing effectiveness. The cumulative effect is a self-reinforcing cycle of systemic corruption, where institutional weaknesses perpetuate dysfunction and undermine legitimacy.

This cycle can be understood as a governance failure in which organisational, institutional, and societal dimensions interact to sustain corruption. Without targeted intervention, these dynamics are likely to persist, further weakening SAPS and its ability to fulfil its constitutional mandate.

In summary, the findings of this study demonstrate that corruption within SAPS is driven by four interrelated factors:

- **Leadership failures**, characterised by weak ethical direction and lack of accountability
- **Limited oversight capacity**, particularly within institutions such as IPID
- **Ineffective accountability mechanisms**, resulting in low prosecution and disciplinary rates
- **Declining public trust**, reflecting a broader legitimacy crisis

These factors do not operate in isolation but form a systemic pattern that sustains corruption and undermines policing effectiveness. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive and integrated reform approach that strengthens leadership accountability, enhances oversight capacity, improves enforcement mechanisms, and actively rebuilds public trust.

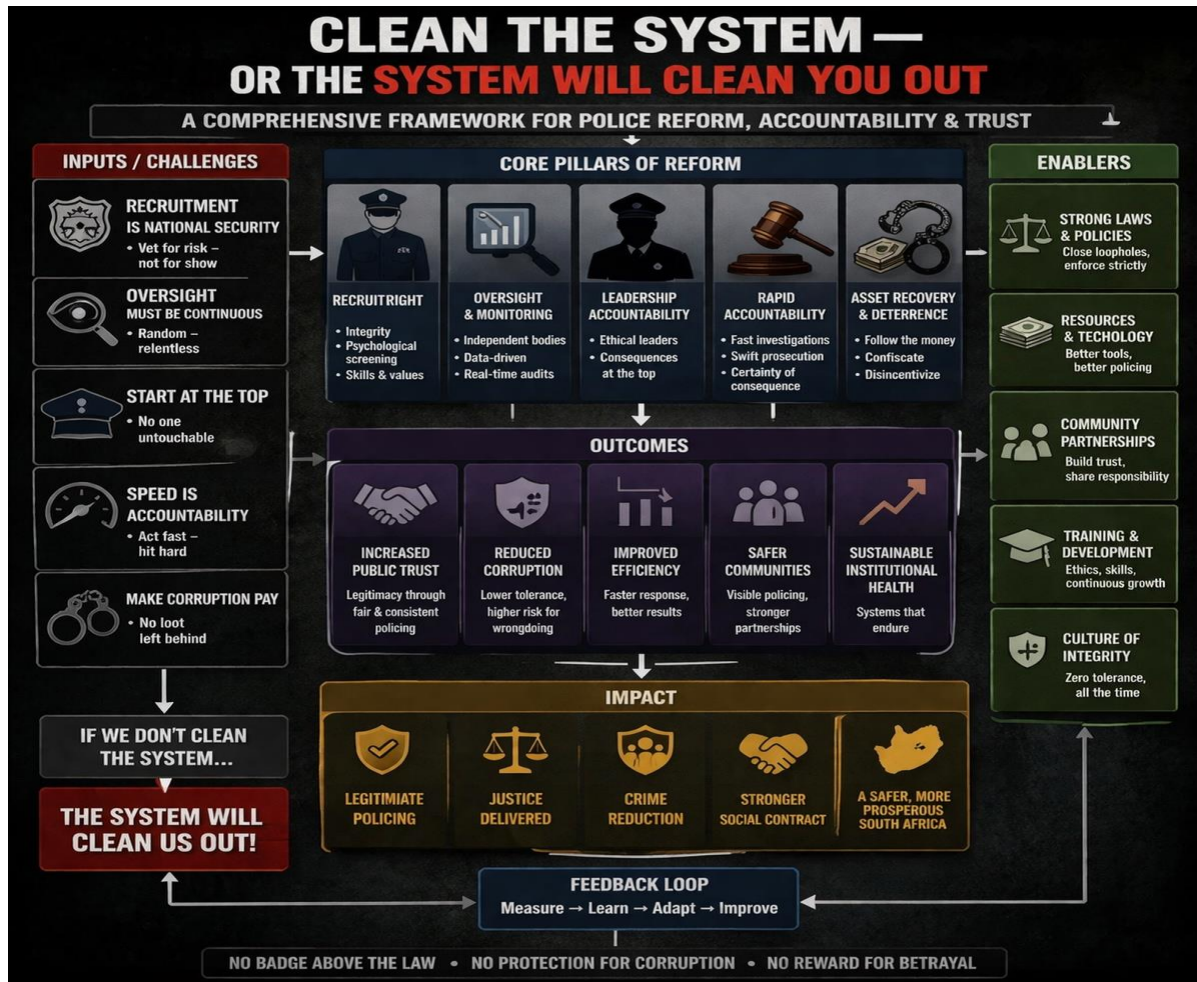


Figure1.1: Diagram on illustration of the study

### Recommendations for Saps

To address systemic corruption, SAPS must prioritise strengthening internal controls, particularly in recruitment and personnel management. The implementation of rigorous vetting and recruitment systems is essential to prevent the entry of individuals with a high risk of engaging in corrupt activities. Research by Newham and Faull (2011) emphasises that weak recruitment standards have historically contributed to corruption within SAPS, highlighting the need for comprehensive background checks, integrity testing, and continuous monitoring of personnel.

In addition, SAPS should implement mandatory lifestyle audits for officers, particularly those in high-risk units such as detectives, crime intelligence, and procurement divisions. Lifestyle audits can identify unexplained wealth and deter corrupt behaviour. The Independent Police Investigative Directorate has repeatedly highlighted patterns of corruption linked to financial misconduct,

reinforcing the need for proactive monitoring mechanisms (IPID, 2023). Strengthening internal integrity systems will enhance accountability and reduce opportunities for corruption.

### Recommendations for Government

The South African government must take a leading role in addressing systemic corruption by reforming oversight institutions and strengthening governance frameworks. The findings of the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into State Capture emphasise that weak oversight structures and political interference have enabled corruption across state institutions (Zondo Commission, 2022). Therefore, reforms should focus on enhancing the independence, authority, and effectiveness of oversight bodies.

Furthermore, government must increase funding and ensure the operational independence of oversight institutions, particularly those responsible for investigating police misconduct. Resource constraints have significantly limited the ability of oversight bodies

to perform their functions effectively. The Ad Hoc Committee on the State of the South African Police Service has highlighted the need for improved funding and institutional capacity to address backlogs and ensure accountability (Parliament of South Africa, 2023/2024). Adequate resourcing is critical for strengthening oversight and restoring public confidence.

### **Recommendations for Oversight Bodies**

Oversight institutions must enhance their operational effectiveness by reducing case backlogs and improving investigative capacity. The Independent Police Investigative Directorate reports indicate that large volumes of unresolved cases undermine accountability and delay justice (IPID, 2023). Addressing these backlogs requires improved case management systems, increased staffing, and better coordination with prosecutorial authorities.

Additionally, oversight bodies should strengthen investigative capacity through specialised training, technological support, and improved inter-agency collaboration. According to Bruce (2014), effective oversight depends on the ability to conduct timely, thorough, and independent investigations. Enhancing these capabilities will increase the likelihood of successful prosecutions and strengthen the deterrent effect of accountability mechanisms.

### **Recommendations for Policy Makers**

Policy makers play a crucial role in shaping the legal and institutional framework for combating corruption. There is a need to introduce and enforce zero-tolerance anti-corruption policies within SAPS and the broader criminal justice system. Newham and Faull (2011) argue that consistent enforcement of anti-corruption policies is essential for changing organisational culture and reducing misconduct.

In addition, policy makers must strengthen whistleblower protection mechanisms to encourage reporting of corruption without fear of retaliation. Existing frameworks are often inadequate, discouraging individuals from exposing misconduct. Strengthening legal protections, ensuring confidentiality, and providing incentives for whistleblowers can significantly improve reporting rates and support accountability efforts. Findings from the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into State Capture highlight the importance of protecting whistleblowers as a key strategy in combating systemic corruption (Zondo Commission, 2022).

### **Co-impact of the Study**

The implementation of a systemic anti-corruption framework within the South African Police Service (SAPS) is expected to generate significant co-benefits across policing, governance, and broader societal outcomes. These co-impacts are interconnected and reinforce one another, contributing to sustainable improvements in public safety, institutional performance, and democratic governance.

### **Improved Public Trust**

One of the most critical co-impacts of addressing systemic corruption is the restoration of public trust in policing institutions. Public trust is a cornerstone of police legitimacy and directly influences the willingness of citizens to cooperate with law enforcement. According to the Institute for Security Studies, trust in SAPS remains critically low at approximately 22%, largely due to perceptions of corruption, inefficiency, and lack of accountability (ISS, 2025).

By strengthening accountability mechanisms, enhancing transparency, and promoting ethical leadership, the proposed reforms can significantly improve public perceptions of fairness and integrity. As noted by Bruce (2014), when citizens perceive the police as legitimate and trustworthy, they are more likely to report crimes, provide information, and comply with the law. Improved trust therefore serves as a foundation for more effective and cooperative policing.

### **Enhanced Crime Prevention**

A second key co-impact is enhanced crime prevention and operational effectiveness. Corruption within SAPS undermines crime prevention efforts by allowing criminal activities to go unchecked and enabling collusion between police officials and criminal networks. Newham and Faull (2011) argue that corruption weakens internal discipline and reduces the effectiveness of policing strategies, particularly in combating organised and violent crime.

By addressing corruption and strengthening institutional capacity, SAPS will be better positioned to implement proactive and intelligence-led policing strategies. Improved trust between communities and the police will also increase the flow of information, which is essential for effective crime prevention. The Independent Police Investigative Directorate emphasises that reducing misconduct and improving accountability can lead to more efficient and credible policing outcomes (IPID, 2023).

### **Strengthened Governance**

The reduction of corruption within SAPS contributes directly to strengthened governance and institutional integrity. Effective policing is a key component of the broader governance framework, and weaknesses within SAPS have far-reaching implications for the rule of law and public administration. The findings of the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into State Capture highlight how systemic corruption within state institutions undermines governance, accountability, and service delivery (Zondo Commission, 2022).

By improving oversight mechanisms, enhancing leadership accountability, and strengthening institutional controls, the proposed reforms will contribute to more effective governance across the criminal justice system. This, in turn, supports democratic principles, promotes transparency, and reinforces the rule of law.

### **Reduced Organised Crime Influence**

Another important co-impact is the reduction of organised crime influence within policing and society. Corruption creates opportunities for organised crime groups to infiltrate and exploit policing institutions, undermining law enforcement efforts and facilitating illegal activities. The Ad Hoc Committee on the State of the South African Police Service has highlighted concerns regarding the vulnerability of SAPS to criminal infiltration and the impact of corruption on crime control (Parliament of South Africa, 2023/2024).

By strengthening accountability systems and reducing opportunities for corruption, SAPS can disrupt the relationship between corrupt officials and organised crime networks. This will enhance the ability of law enforcement to combat organised crime, improve public safety, and restore confidence in the criminal justice system.

Overall, the co-impacts of addressing systemic corruption in SAPS are mutually reinforcing. Improved public trust enhances cooperation, which strengthens crime prevention efforts. Stronger governance supports accountability and institutional effectiveness, while reduced organised crime influence improves overall safety and stability. These outcomes demonstrate that anti-corruption reforms in policing have far-reaching benefits beyond the institution itself, contributing to broader social and economic development in South Africa.

## Article Impact

This study makes a significant contribution to the field of policing and governance by providing a systemic reform model that integrates theory, policy, and practice. Unlike fragmented approaches that focus on isolated aspects of corruption, this study adopts a holistic perspective, recognising corruption as an interconnected institutional challenge that requires coordinated and multi-level interventions.

The integration of theoretical frameworks such as procedural justice, institutional theory, deterrence theory, and systems theory strengthens the analytical foundation of the study, enabling a deeper understanding of how corruption operates within policing systems. By linking these theories to empirical evidence from South Africa, including findings from the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into State Capture and oversight reports from the Independent Police Investigative Directorate, the study bridges the gap between conceptual analysis and practical application (Zondo Commission, 2022; IPID, 2023).

Furthermore, the study contributes to sustainable policing reform by proposing an integrated framework that addresses key institutional weaknesses, including leadership failures, weak accountability systems, and declining public trust. Research by Newham and Faull (2011) highlights the need for systemic approaches to tackling police corruption, while Bruce (2014) emphasises the importance of professionalism and legitimacy in policing. This study builds on these insights by offering a structured model that can guide policy development, institutional reform, and operational improvements within SAPS.

The findings also have broader implications for governance and public administration. By strengthening accountability, enhancing oversight capacity, and promoting ethical leadership, the proposed framework supports the development of more effective and transparent state institutions. The Ad Hoc Committee on the State of the South African Police Service has emphasised the need for comprehensive reform to address systemic challenges within SAPS (Parliament of South Africa, 2023/2024). This study responds to that need by providing evidence-based recommendations that can inform both policy and practice.

In addition, the study contributes to academic literature by advancing the understanding of the relationship between corruption, legitimacy, and governance in the South African context. It provides a foundation for future research, particularly in areas such as empirical analysis of corruption patterns, evaluation of reform interventions, and comparative studies across different policing systems.

### Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that must be acknowledged.

Firstly, the study relies heavily on secondary data sources, including reports from oversight bodies, commissions of inquiry, and existing academic literature. While these sources provide valuable insights, they may not fully capture the complexity of corruption within SAPS. The Independent Police Investigative Directorate reports and findings from the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into State Capture offer important evidence, but the absence of primary data limits the ability to explore lived experiences and internal organisational dynamics in greater depth.

Secondly, the study is affected by the underreporting of corruption cases. Corruption is often hidden and difficult to detect, and many incidents go unreported due to fear of retaliation, lack of trust in reporting mechanisms, and perceived ineffectiveness of accountability systems. As noted by Newham and Faull (2011), underreporting is a significant challenge in studying police corruption, as it results in incomplete data and may underestimate the true extent of the problem.

Thirdly, there is limited access to internal SAPS data, particularly regarding disciplinary processes, internal investigations, and operational decision-making. This limitation restricts the ability to conduct a comprehensive analysis of internal accountability systems and organisational behaviour. The Ad Hoc Committee on the State of the South African Police Service has also highlighted challenges related to transparency and access to information within SAPS (Parliament of South Africa, 2023/2024), further complicating research efforts.

These limitations suggest that future research should incorporate primary data collection methods, such as interviews and surveys with police officials and community members, to provide a more nuanced understanding of corruption within SAPS. Additionally, improving access to internal data and strengthening reporting mechanisms will be essential for advancing research and informing effective policy interventions.

## Conclusions

Police corruption in South Africa represents a profound and systemic crisis that threatens the very foundations of democratic governance, public safety, and the rule of law. The evidence presented throughout this study demonstrates that corruption within the South African Police Service (SAPS) is not the result of isolated misconduct, but rather a deeply embedded institutional challenge driven by weaknesses in recruitment processes, leadership failures, inadequate oversight, and ineffective accountability systems. Findings from the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into State Capture and reports by the Independent Police Investigative Directorate reinforce the reality that corruption has become normalised within certain structures of policing, undermining both performance and public confidence.

The continued decline in public trust highlighted by research from the Institute for Security Studies—signals a deepening legitimacy crisis. When communities lose confidence in the police, cooperation diminishes, crime reporting declines, and the effectiveness of policing is severely compromised. This erosion of legitimacy not only weakens SAPS but also threatens broader social stability and governance outcomes.

Addressing this crisis requires more than incremental reforms or reactive interventions. It demands a coordinated, system-wide transformation that tackles the root causes of corruption across all levels of the organisation. Strengthening recruitment and vetting

systems, promoting ethical and accountable leadership, enhancing the capacity and independence of oversight institutions, and enforcing robust accountability mechanisms are critical steps toward meaningful reform. Equally important is the need to rebuild trust through transparency, community engagement, and consistent demonstration of integrity in policing practices.

Ultimately, restoring legitimacy in South African policing depends on the ability of institutions to move from fragmented responses to a holistic, integrated reform approach. Without decisive and sustained action, corruption will continue to erode public trust and weaken the effectiveness of law enforcement. However, with strong political will, institutional commitment, and evidence-based reform strategies, it is possible to rebuild a policing system that is accountable, professional, and trusted by the communities it serves. The future of policing in South Africa depends on this transformation.

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