Article

Police Journal: Theory, Practice and Principles

The Police Journal:
Theory, Practice and Principles
2025, Vol. 0(0) 1–20

DOI: 10.1177/0032258X251357474
journals.sagepub.com/home/pjx
Sage

Police accountability: The role of the police complaint response unit, Nigeria

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Abstract

Nigeria's Police Complaint Response Unit (CRU) serves as an internal accountability mechanism to receive and resolve complaints against police officers. This study evaluates the CRU's effectiveness using the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime assessment criteria for internal police complaint systems. The findings reveal that while CRU successfully serves as a bridge to improve the police-citizen relationship and its use of digital technologies leads to greater accessibility to trained officers to resolve complaints, however, critical deficiencies undermine its effectiveness. Transparency gaps fail to provide adequate public information about investigative processes and disciplinary outcomes. The unit's organisational structure remains opaque with unclear procedures, while digital divide challenges limit rural access. The study's recommendations include enhancing transparency through detailed public reporting, developing public accessible operational manual, and clarifying legislative mandates to strengthen police-citizen trust.

Keywords

Nigeria, Police accountability, complaint response unit

Introduction

The term 'police accountability' has become commonplace in human rights discourse on policing. As agents of the state, police are bound to respect, protect, promote, and fulfil human rights in carrying out their duties. These duties of states are recognised within Africa and internationally. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights requires states to respect and ensure rights (art.2 (1)). The African Commission on Human

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and Peoples' Rights in *SERAC v. Nigeria* held that all rights generate at least these four levels of duties for states to undertake (Social and Economic Rights Action Centre SERAC and Center for Economic and Social, 2001: para. 43–46). The *United Nations Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials* (1979: art.2), mandates that law enforcement officials are to 'respect and protect human dignity and maintain and uphold the human rights of all persons'. To regulate the use of force by law enforcement officials, several principles exist, the law enforcement principles which are principles of necessity and proportionality, and the human rights principles which are, the principles of precaution, assistance, prevention, and accountability (*United Nations Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials*, 1979: art 3; United Nations Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials, (1990: principles 4, 5, 6, 11(f), 22; and Osse, 2006: 126–128).

Accountability acknowledges the vital role the police play in protecting the rights and the need to be answerable in the performance of their duties. Given the enormous power wielded by police, accountability is essential; otherwise, these powers become grave threats to democracy and human rights. The intention is not to eliminate or undermine police power, but to control it from becoming an instrument of repression and exploitation, and to ensure power is exercised transparently and according to rules.

In this article, police accountability is described as involving both processes and mechanisms. As a process, it involves asking crucial questions: What happened? Who was responsible? How can the situation be remedied? How can a reoccurrence be prevented? As a mechanism, accountability involves both internal and external mechanisms to hold the police accountable. An important component of the accountability mechanisms is complaint mechanisms such as the Complaint Response Unit (CRU) of the Nigeria Police Force (NPF), which this article seeks to examine.

The UNODC identifies essential questions for assessing a police complaints system. These questions include: how does such an internal complaint system operate? Is it locally based? How do members of the public learn how to make a complaint? Can complaints be made anonymously? Can complaints be made without having to pay a fee? How are complaints recorded? Is there an independent process involving escalation to senior management, if need be, when dealing with complaints? Are outcomes of a complaint communicated to the complainant within a reasonable time, and are the results generally available to the public? (UNODC, 2006: sec. 5.2, para. E and F, 12- 13).

Using these UNODC assessment criteria, this article examines the CRU's role in creating a more accountable Nigeria Police Force (NPF). The findings expand theoretical knowledge of the CRU and fill research gaps on internal complaint mechanisms within Africa. It finds that the CRU can be more effective in enhancing accountability within the NPF by being more transparent and bridging the police-public gap by building trust in disciplinary processes and outcomes.

Following this introduction, the second section establishes a conceptual framework for police accountability mechanisms. The third section examines NPF complaints. Using UNODC's assessment questions, the fourth section analyses the CRU's structure and mandate, complaint processes, and public relations. The research

concludes with a critical assessment of the CRU's limitations and recommendations for enhancing its effectiveness.

Conceptual framework

Sigsworth describes accountability and oversight over the police as fundamental elements in democratic policing. (2019: 3). UNODC defines accountability as a system of checks and balances both within and outside the police which is aimed at ensuring the police carry out their duties to a high standard and are held responsible if they fail to do so (2011: 9). Police accountability involves individual accountability by all police officers, superior officers being accountable for the conduct of those under their command, and the entire police agency being accountable to the society at large (Osse, 2006: 187).

The objectives of police accountability are multifaceted and essential for democratic policing. Primarily, accountability mechanisms seek to ensure that police powers are used responsively and responsibly for the common good, which includes monitoring the exercise of these powers to prevent misuse and violation of citizens' rights. UNODC outlines threefold objectives of police accountability: preventing abuse of power by police officers, curtailing the misuse of police authority by political actors, and lastly enhancing police effectiveness, which in turn (re)-establishes police legitimacy and restores public confidence in the police. (UNODC, 2011: 9). Where there is misconduct, accountability aims to identify, address, and remedy, provide justice for victims, and ensure that police behaviour conforms with the requirements of society. Appropriate consequences for misconduct serve both as a deterrent against future misconduct by police officers and as a mechanism for re-establishing police legitimacy and rebuilding public trust. Hence, the aim of accountability is not punitive or for condemnation but to enforce the answerability of the police about performance, cost and conduct. (International Advisory Commission of the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), 2005: 17; and Alemika, 2010: 9).

Police accountability – process and mechanisms

The entire spectrum of accountability involves both a process and mechanisms that carry out the process. As a process, accountability in human rights as argued by Thomas Probert, involves three main components: investigation of the alleged violation; provision of effective remedy; and the implementation of reform to prevent a recurrence (Probert, 2020: 31). These processes provide answers to the questions: what happened? Who was responsible? How can the situation be remedied? How can a reoccurrence be prevented?

Accountability mechanisms carry out these processes. The African Commission on Peoples' and Human Rights has held that such mechanisms form the core of democratic governance and restore public confidence in the police amongst others (2006: para 1). These mechanisms can operate at different levels, internal accountability – from within the police; external accountability (state accountability and independent mechanisms) and accountability by the public – by communities, NGOs, and media (Osse, 2006: 195-219 and UNODC, 2011: 11-13). These can more broadly be divided into external and internal police accountability mechanisms.

External accountability mechanisms refer to organisations and processes outside the police departments, ensuring efficiency, discipline, and responsiveness. (Alemika, 2010: 11). It can be broadly categorised into accountability to the State (executive, legislature, judiciary) and accountability to independent external mechanisms. (Osse, 2006: 189 – 190). Key actors include the judiciary, parliament, independent organisations distinct from the official state governance system, which involves human rights commissions, citizens' complaints, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), research centres, think tanks, and the media (Boiano, 2024a: 20–24; Chemonics International Inc., 2016: 17–18).

For the NPF, the main external accountability mechanisms are the Police Service Commission (PSC) and the Police Council. The PSC handles disciplinary control and other functions over all officers in the NPF except the IGP (*PSC (Establishment) Act*, 2001: sec.6 (1); *Constitution of Nigeria*, sec. 30 part 1, 3rd schedule), formulating policies and guidelines for the appointment, promotion, and discipline of officers of the NPF. (Nigeria Police Act, 2020: sec. 16; *PSC (Establishment) Act*, 2001: sec. 6 (1) (c)). According to the PSC, it has a Public Investigation Division, which receives, processes, and investigates complaints of police misconduct. (PSC, 2020: 57–59). However, the PSC faces several challenges. Firstly, it grapples with a lack of cooperation from the NPF in disciplining officers. (Network on Police Reform in Nigeria (NOPRIN) and Open Society Justice Initiative (OSJI), 2010: 98). Additionally, the large discretionary power of the president over the PSC weakens the PSC. The *PSC (Establishment) Act* grants the president the power to give 'directives of a general nature or relating generally to matters of policy with regard to the performance by the PSC' (sec. 19). Moreover, the president is also responsible for the appointment and dismissal of members of the PSC. ((PSC (Establishment) Act, 2001: sec. 4(2), 5(1)).

The NPC is the highest policy-making body in matters relating to the Police Force. It comprises key political officeholders in the country – the president, the Governors of the 36 states, the chairman of the PSC and the IGP. (*Nigeria Police Act*, 2020, sec. 6 (1) (2); *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999*, sec. 27 and 153, Part 1, 3rd schedule). Its role is mainly supervisory as it is charged with supervising the NPF and advising the president on the IGP's appointment, the organisation and administration of the NPF and all other related matters except 'matters on the use and operational control of the Force or the appointment, disciplinary control and dismissal of members of the force'. (*Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999* sec. 28, Part 1, 3rd schedule; *Nigeria Police Act*, 2020, sec. 6 (3)). In addition, it is responsible for deliberating on reports of policing matters and security concerns and advising the president or the IGP. (*Nigeria Police Act,* 2020, sec. 6 (3)(d)). A significant limitation of the NPC is its political composition, which renders it vulnerable to political instrumentalisation. (Isima, 2011: 41; Araromi and Oke, 2014: 192).

External mechanisms generally provide increased credibility and public trust, as they are perceived as more impartial and objective compared to internal mechanisms. External oversight embodies the principle that it is against natural justice for one to be a judge in their own cause. (Boiano, 2024a: 23). Furthermore, external mechanisms often feature more transparent procedures for complaint intake and investigation and greater citizen access. However, they face significant challenges, including insufficient resources, lack of

necessary legal powers, lack of political support, and difficulty in obtaining police co-operation. They may also lack the specific skills or understanding of police culture needed for thorough investigations. (Boiano, 2024b: 23).

Internal police accountability mechanism refers to rules, processes, and mechanisms within the police used to ensure the rules are followed, receive complaints, investigate complaints, and enforce sanctions (Araromi and Oke, 2014: 202). Key elements include the chain of command, police leadership, supervisors, internal affairs units, standard operational procedures (SOPs), reporting procedures, internal disciplinary systems and a mechanism for receiving and dealing with complaints from the public. (Araromi and Oke, 2014: 202-27; Osse, 2006:195–205). Within the NPF, internal accountability operates through mechanisms such as the Provost Force Marshal, responsible for conducting Orderly Room Proceeding in serious cases involving use of force (NPF: Revised Order 237 on the Use of Force, 2019), sec. 2(F) (2.5)) and the CRU, which is the focus of this article.

Internal mechanisms offer distinct advantages, such as better knowledge of police culture, environment, policies, and procedures, crucial for effective investigation. However, they face significant challenges, including bias vulnerability, perceived lack of independence, poor structure, inadequate resources, lack of transparency, and the infamous 'wall of silence', which contribute to public distrust. (Amnesty International, 2015: 12; Punch M, 2011: 7; and Araromi and Oke, 2014: 205–207:

The scholarship on police accountability emphasises that effective police accountability requires both internal and external mechanisms in a complementary system where each serves as a check on the other. (Karimu and Osunyikanmi, 2012: 252; OSCE, 2008: 25–26; Dunne, 2018; UNODC, 2011: 12). External mechanisms need to be complemented by internal controls, commitment from the police, especially leadership, to be effective at the investigation or implementation stages. While internal mechanisms require external validation to maintain credibility. When properly organised, this dual approach creates mutual reinforcement that maximises accountability effectiveness, potentially including external auditing of internal investigations. Amnesty International, 2015: 37; UNODC, 2011: 12–13; Alston, 2010: para 28; Osse, 2006: 185).

As noted above, central to any accountability framework is an accessible complaint avenue for both the public and police officers. Complaints put the state on notice that a potential violation has occurred and set the wheels of the accountability process in motion – investigations into the complaints, remedies where a violation has occurred, and reforms to prevent a recurrence of the violation. Investigations, remedies and reforms have been identified as the broad components involved in the process of human rights accountability (Probert, 2020: 31). While primarily reactive in addressing victims' grievances (African Police Civilian Oversight Forum (APCOF), 2008: 2), effective complaint mechanisms also function proactively by deterring misconduct through visible disciplinary consequences. The NPF's CRU exemplifies such a mechanism and will be discussed subsequently.

Complaints against the NPF

Like other police agencies, the NPF is responsible for a myriad of duties, including protecting constitutionally guaranteed rights (*Nigeria Police Act*, 2020: sec. 4 and 5).

In fulfilling these duties, they possess powers such as the power to arrest, detain and the power to use force – albeit reasonably (*Nigeria Police Act*, 2020: part VII).

These extensive police powers are meant to safeguard the public, but when abused, they can infringe on citizens' rights. The history of police abuse in Nigeria traces back to the colonial government, where the police force served as a tool of public oppression by ruling elites. (Ojomo, 2010: 25–26; Alemika, 1988:165–168; Amusan and Saka, 2018, 107–109.) Human rights organisations have documented and severely criticised the NPF for abuse of police powers by engaging in excessive use of force, illegal arrest, and extrajudicial killings, which has led to public mistrust in members of the NPF. (see Amnesty International Nigeria, 2016; Amnesty International Nigeria, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2005; Human Rights Watch, 2010). Former IGP Mohammed Dahiru Abubakar acknowledged that:

> The Police Force has fallen to its lowest level...justice has been perverted, people's rights denied, innocent souls committed to prison, torture and extra-judicial killing perpetrated, so many people arbitrarily detained in our cells...Our respect is gone, and the Nigerian public has lost even the slightest confidence in the ability of the police to do anything good (Vanguard, 2012).

Persistent incidents of police misconduct have deteriorated police-public relations, culminating in widespread civil demonstrations. A notable manifestation of this public discontent was the #EndSARS campaign, which emerged in waves between November 2017 and 2020. This sustained protest campaign specifically targeted the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a specialised unit within the NPF that had gained notoriety for systematic human rights violations and abuse of authority, ultimately leading to its dissolution. (Ojedokun et al., 2021; Spaces for Change, 2021: 17).

In response to these persistent allegations, numerous reform initiatives have been attempted to reform the NPF and promote discipline and accountability within the NPF. In 2005, President Obasanjo established the Muhammad Dan Madami Presidential Committee on Police Reform. The committee observed that NPF-public relations were marred by mutual distrust due to repressive law enforcement, police inefficiency, corruption, brutality, and incivility. (Dan-Madami, 2006: chp 5, paras.1.1, 2.0, 3.0, 4.0). The committee recommended establishing an Independent Police Complaints Commission and strengthening internal disciplinary procedures (Dan-Madami, 2006: chp. 5, para 3.2 (vi)). It also recommended that an effective and accessible complaints mechanism should be introduced by the NPF, complaint boxes should be mounted in public places, and police emergency telephone numbers should be widely advertised. (Dan-Madami, 2006: chp 5. para 4.2 (vi)). Years after this recommendation, UN Special Rapporteur Manfred Nowak observed in 2007 that widespread human rights violations persisted, with current systems unable to effectively hold law enforcement accountable. (Nowak, 2007: para 66).

The M.D. Yusufu Presidential Committee on the Reform of the NPF was inaugurated in 2008. Like the previous committee, it emphasised strengthening internal disciplinary mechanisms and recommended establishing a public complaints unit within the presidency to investigate cases of 'neglect, unnecessary use of force, injury, corruption or

misconduct'. (Yusuf, 2008: para 38.0 & 53.0(v)) This was followed by other panels, including the 2022 establishment of a National Commission of Inquiry and State Judicial Panels in response to the #EndSARS campaign. (Agbakwuru, 2020).

The CRU, this paper's focus, represents another reform initiative to enhance discipline and accountability within the NPF. Launched on 13 November 2015 as a community-oriented unit to receive complaints against police officers from within and outside the police and resolve such complaints. (Arase, 2017: 171). It gained legislative backing through the *Police Act,* which establishes its mandate and process (2020, Part XVI).

Assessing the CRU

As noted above, the UNODC raises essential questions to be used in assessing an internal police complaints system. Such as how does such an internal complaint system operate? How do members of the public learn how to make a complaint? Can complaints be made anonymously? Can complaints be made without having to pay a fee? How are complaints recorded? Are outcomes of a complaint communicated to the complainant within a reasonable time, and are the results generally available to the public? (UNODC, 2006: sec. 5.2, para. E and F, 12- 13). This paper groups these questions into three broad categories: Mandate and Structure, Receiving and Processing Complaints, and Relations with the Public. The NPF's CRU is examined under these categories.

Before delving into the analysis, it should be noted that the limited availability of independent data and statistics on this CRU represents a key constraint. The reliance on the CRU's annual reports and social media posts may not completely reflect the operational realities. Future qualitative research is recommended to provide more comprehensive insights into the CRU.

Mandate and Structure of the CRU

Using digital technologies to receive complaints and investigate, the CRU aims to bridge the gap between the police, its personnel, and the public (Nigeria Police Force, 2020b: 7). According to Solomon Arase, the IGP at the inauguration of the CRU, the CRU was born out of the need to improve relations between the police and the public and enlighten the public on their civil duties (2017: 171). At the inauguration, it was stated that the broad objective was to entrench police accountability values and encourage active citizen participation in the policing framework (NPF, 2015).

The *Police Act* in section 133 (1) states that the CRU 'shall' receive complaints or information about misconduct of officers from the public or other police officers. It proceeds to state in section 133 (2) that the CRU 'may' receive complaints alleging *misconduct* which results in death or serious injuries, complaints showing criminal offence by a police officer, and complaints showing professional misconduct by a police officer.

The use of 'shall' and 'may' in describing the mandate of the CRU raises room for questions. In Nigeria, the use of 'may' and shall in legislation has been subject to numerous judicial pronouncements. The general attitude of the courts has been to interpret

the use of 'may' on a case-by-case basis in furtherance of legislative intent and justice. Hence, some courts have interpreted may to mean mandatory, and others to mean discretionary. The supreme court in *Madam Iyoho v. Effiong & anor* held that 'may can be synonymous with shall or must, usually in an effort to effectuate legislative intent' (2007). For instance, in *Ogualaji v. AG Rivers State,* the Supreme Court held that 'may' is to be interpreted as mandatory where it imposes a duty on a public body/functionary for the benefit of a private citizen (1997). However, in *Emokpae v. University of Benin,* it was held that 'may' will be interpreted as discretionary where there is no imposed duty on a public body to act for the benefit of private citizens (2002).

It is unclear if the legislative intent in separating the functions of the CRU into different categories using 'may' and 'shall' was to create mandatory and discretionary functions of the CRU. However, since the main aim of the CRU is to receive complaints about the police from the public and within the police, it connotes that the CRU is to receive all complaints alleging police misconduct.

There is no definition of what amounts to misconduct that the CRU has jurisdiction over. However, the *Police Regulation* contain a code of conduct and a schedule which extensively defines what amounts to offences against discipline. A contravention of the code of conduct or any of the offences described as an offence against discipline can be categorised as misconduct (Nigeria Police Regulations, 1968: Reg. 369 (2); 370). Some of the offences in the code of conduct include conflict of private interests with public duties, receiving presents, borrowing, and actions amounting to serious financial embarrassment (Nigeria Police Regulations, 1968: reg. 353, Reg. 354, Reg. 369, Reg. 361). Examples of offences against discipline include corrupt practices, discreditable conduct, improper conduct, and unlawful or unnecessary exercise of authority (Nigeria Police Regulations, 1968: Schedule 1). It can therefore be said that the CRU can receive complaints involving any of these conducts.

The CRU in its reports, including the 2020 report released after the enactment of the 2020 *Police Act*, categorises complaints into, excessive use of force, dirty in-person, traffic-related offences, police involvement in civil issues, demanding money for bail, incivility, professional misconduct, and benefit/entitlement related (Nigeria Police Force, 2020b: 3). These categories are a bit ambiguous, for instance demanding money for bail which is illegal and excessive use of force can be described as professional misconduct, however, these are separate categories. Going forward, it would be better organised if complaints in CRU's reports are categorised as provided under the *Police Act* – misconducts which result in death or serious injuries, complaints showing criminal offence by a police officer, and complaints showing professional misconduct by a police officer.

Information about the structure of the CRU is sparse. However, what is certain is that members of the CRU are deployed from within the NPF and are said to be trained in properly handling complaints (NPF, 2016d). The Police Act (2020: sec. 132 (2)) only states that the CRU should be headed by a senior officer, not below the rank of a chief superintendent of police. Furthermore, members of the CRU ought to include representatives from the Federal or State Intelligence Bureau and the Police Provost Marshal (*Police Act* 2020: sec. 132 (2)). The Federal/State Intelligence Bureau and the Police *Provost Marshal* are specialised units within the NPF. While the Federal/State

Intelligence Bureau is responsible for providing intelligence on crime and national security, the Provost Marshal is charged with investigating all cases of use of force by police officers (NPF, Revised Order 237 on the Use of Force, 2019: sec. 2(F)(5), and sec. 10(C)(1)). The IGP also has the power to appoint representatives from other units within the NPF to join the CRU (Police Act 2020: sec. 132 (1)). One of such units from which the IGP might recruit a representative is the Force X-Squad Unit, as it is responsible for investigating corruption within the NPF and other governmental agencies throughout the country (Nigeria Police Force, 2017a: 2).

While the *Police Act of 2020* has attempted to define the mandate of the CRU to receive complaints of police misconduct, the structure of the CRU remains unknown. Information such as the number of operatives, the division, if any of the CRU across the various state commands, and the internal organisation structure of the unit is unknown to the public.

Receiving and investigating complaints

The CRU prides itself on being technologically driven with multiple platforms for always receiving complaints 24/7 via seven channels – phone calls, text messages, Blackberry Messenger, WhatsApp messages, emails, Facebook, and X (previously called Twitter). The unit has considered scrapping the Blackberry Messenger platform as it has become redundant (Nigeria Police Force, 2020a: 9). Complaints can be received from the public and from within the police without payment of a fee. When complaints are received from any of the CRU's platforms, it is recorded immediately, and a tracking number is generated. Complainants who knowingly give false information or information they should reasonably know to be false will be tried according to the relevant laws in force (*Police Act* 2020: sec. 134(b).

X (previously called Twitter) has become an important platform for the CRU to receive complaints. The official X page of the CRU was opened in October 2015 and has amassed over 163 thousand followers (Police Complaints @PoliceNG_CRU, 2015). Through this account, the CRU makes announcements, receives complaints from the public, provides a tracking number for the complainants to follow up, and subsequently posts feedback on such complaints. The CRU via its X (previously called Twitter) account urge individuals who report complaints via social media to also provide full details such as when, what, where, who, and why, to make resolving the complaints easier (Police Complaints (@PoliceNG_CRU), 2019).

While some Nigerians complain about non-response to complaints on X (previously called Twitter), the CRU has received much praise for responding to and resolving complaints shared on X (Yitkyim (@Yitkyim), 2021; Olayinka (@lloydmvp), 2021). For instance, the case of a young student who was assaulted by some policemen and extorted of some amount of money was reported on social media by the victim, evidence of the bank transfer was also attached to the complaint – which was soon shared by other X users, tagging the CRU X (previously called Twitter) account and the then head of the CRU (Oluwapelumi (@ZondMan01), 2021a). The CRU immediately responded and provided a tracking number. Four days after this, the CRU via its account announced that three policemen who were involved had been investigated, arraigned for an orderly room

trial, and subsequently found guilty and dismissed from service. The victim was also refunded the money extorted (Oluwapelumi (@ZondMan01), 2021b; Police Complaint (@PoliceNG_CRU), 2021).

These social media platforms operated by the CRU are advantageous for reporting complaints, as they serve as an amplifier for the complaints. Members of the public on social media and human rights organisations become aware of such complaints and watch out for the response of the CRU. It also allows complainants to attach videos or pictures to their complaints. According to Odeyemi and Obiyan (2018: 100), this promotes increased transparency for the police and creates an avenue for increased communication between the police and the people. Furthermore, the online platforms prevent the complainant from physically going to the police station, which reduces the likelihood of intimidation by officers or some police officers demanding money before investigating the complaints (Sahara Reporters, 2021).

Despite the popularity of the CRU on X (previously called Twitter), reports of the CRU reveal that phone calls remain the most popular avenue for receiving complaints. The 2019 report of the CRU revealed that 45.86% of the total complaints of that year were received via phone calls, while only 12.03% came from X (previously called Twitter), and 2.13% from Facebook (Nigeria Police Force, 2019: 7). By the first half of 2020, it would appear the gap between the use of X (previously called Twitter) and phone calls for complaints is closing – with 34.9 % of complaints received via phone calls, and 27.9% of complaints received via X (previously called Twitter) (Nigeria Police Force, 2020b: 7). However, it is not surprising that phone calls are more popular than X (previously called Twitter) as only about 2.5% of the total population in Nigeria is on X (previously called Twitter) (Sasu, 2023). Also, the X (previously called Twitter) ban by the Federal government between 5 June 2021 to 13 January 2022 further reduced the use of that platform (Princewill and Busari, 2021).

The CRU's power is limited to receiving complaints, investigating, and making recommendations. The *Police Act* provides that the CRU is to monitor all investigations it initiates, and investigative units have 21 days from the day complaints were initiated to conclude investigations and submit findings to the CRU (*Nigeria Police Act*, 2020: sec. 133 (3)(5)).

After an investigation, the investigation report and recommendations are then forwarded to the IGP or Commissioner of Police of State or the Federal Capital Territory, who then sends a copy of the CRU'S investigative report and recommendations to the 'appropriate police or oversight authority for proper disciplinary action if the investigations reveal that the offence committed is against discipline' (*Nigeria Police Act*, 2020 Sec. 134 (a)).

This provision of the *Police Act* is unclear as it fails to specify which police or oversight authority it refers to as the 'appropriate police or oversight authority for proper disciplinary action'. This uncertainty gives room for assumptions. Could it be the superior officers or the Police Service Commission (PSC)? The PSC seems the most likely answer, as it serves as a civilian oversight body over the NPF. It has been described as the 'most important institution governing police accountability in Nigeria' (Arase, 2017: 183). The PSC has the power to appoint, discipline and dismiss

members of the NPF except the IGP (*Police Service Commission (Establishment Etc) Act*, 2001: sec. 6 (1)(b)).

According to the *NPF's Guideline on Discipline,* the PSC normally receives feedback and disciplinary recommendations from the NPF. On receipt of such recommendations, the PSC deliberates on the case and makes the final decision, before forwarding its decision to the IGP for implementation (Guidelines on Appointment, 2018: Guideline 3.2 (para v–vii)). The PSC expects the IGP to provide returns on whatever disciplinary action is taken (Guidelines on Appointment, 2018: Guideline 3.9).

Having an external civilian oversight body working with a police internal disciplinary process builds credibility with the public. As discussed earlier, an effective system of police accountability should have both internal and external accountability mechanisms to complement each other. (Araromi and Oke, 2014: 203, UNODC, 2011: 13; Osse, 2006: 185; Alston, 2010: para 28). This is because both mechanisms could serve to mutually reinforce each other to have the maximum effect; for instance, the recommendations of an external mechanism would have a greater impact if internal mechanisms were in place (Osse, 2006: 185). For Philip Alston, external oversight can provide an independent check on the internal mechanism and can serve as another forum for citizens to make complaints (2010: para 28). However, the disciplinary power of the PSC is questionable as it relies on reports from the IGP to exercise such powers (Arase, 2017: 186-187). Discipline of rank and file officers (inspectors and below) is carried out internally via an orderly room trial, while investigations of senior police officers are carried out internally and the final reports are sent to the PSC for approval (Guidelines on Appointment, 2018:3 and 3.2). The PSC depends on the police to implement disciplinary decisions (Guidelines on Appointment, 2018:3.2 (vii); Amnesty International Nigeria, 2016: 10, 20). It is no surprise that the PSC's oversight over the police has been described as 'symbolic' (Arase, 2017: 187). Unfortunately, the challenges and criticism faced by the PSC have made it lose its credibility with the public. For instance, the #EndSARS protests of October 2020 due to police misconduct and the failure of the government to implement promised police

Table 1. Overview of complaints received.

Year Jan. – Dec	Complaints received	Resolved/closed cases	Pending complaints	False complaints
2016	3187	2660	191	338
2017	2523	2080	329	114
2018	2018	1670	291	57
2019	2161	1621	324	216
*2020	1237	989	180	62

*Covers just the 1st half of 2020 (January – June). Source: Nigeria Police Force, 2016a: 7; Nigeria Police Force, 2016b: 9; Nigeria Police Force, 2016c: 7; Nigeria Police Force, 2017a: 11; Nigeria Police Force, 2017b: 8; Nigeria Police Force, 2017c: 10, Nigeria Police Force, 2017d: 8, Nigeria Police Force, 2018a: 8; Nigeria Police Force, 2018b: 9; Nigeria Police Force, 2019: 8; Nigeria Police Force, 2020a: 7; Nigeria Police Force, 2020b: 7.

reforms resulted in among others, a demand for an independent body to be established to investigate reported cases of police misconduct was an expression of public distrust in the NPF and its oversight mechanisms (Spaces for Change, 2021: 52–53).

From its available reports, the CRU has recorded a high number of resolved complaints. See Table 1 below.

Looking at the table above, according to the CRU, it has resolved/closed over 80% of the total complaints. However, the reports do not explain at what point a complaint becomes resolved or closed. Some of the CRU's report records the amounts of money recovered from police officers. In its third-quarter report of 2016, it retrieved a sum of 2.75 million (approximately 9010 USD) from an Assistant Commissioner of Police. In its 2019 report, it recorded that about 6.66 million naira (approximately 21,694 USD) was retrieved from police officers and returned to the rightful owners (Nigeria Police Force, 2016c: 11; Nigeria Police Force, 2020a: 8).

Public relations

The NPF has made efforts to raise awareness of the existence and mandates of the CRU. In line with the 'Change Begins with Me' campaign by the Federal Government in 2016, the then IGP launched mass public awareness on the activities of the CRU (Nigeria Police Force, 2017a: 12–16). Flyers and handbills were distributed all over the country, with details of the CRU and avenues for contacting the unit. In addition to English, flyers were also produced in the 3 major languages in Nigeria – Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, and pidgin English (Nigeria Police Force, 2017a: 1–2).

A jingle in English and the three main Nigerian languages – Igbo, Hausa, and Yoruba – was also created, to raise awareness of the functions of the CRU, and the different mediums by which the public can access the unit (Nigeria Police Force, 2017a, NPF, 2016: 17). The aim of this campaign according to the then IGP Ibrahim Idris was to inform Nigerians that the police remain a friend and are accessible to the public (Nigeria Police Force, 2017a: 1). More sensitisation campaigns are carried out by the CRU via face-to-face distribution of bumper stickers, flyers, and media interviews, reminding the public that 'bail is free' and any police officer who demands money should be reported to the CRU (Nigeria Police Force, 2017d: 12).

The CRU produces press releases and periodic reports. In 2015 and 2016, the reports were produced quarterly; this changed to bi-annual reports in 2018, and an annual report in 2019. The reports usually show the number of complaints received per state, the number of resolved complaints, false complaints and complaints pending investigations, and categories of complaints. The CRU also uses X (previously called Twitter) and Facebook as avenues for relating with the public, entertaining questions, receiving complaints, and providing feedback to complainants and the public.

However, the reports of the CRU are difficult to access online as the CRU lacks a designated website. As a proclaimed technologically driven unit, it would be imperative for the CRU to have a website where members of the public can find more information about the unit and easily access its reports.

Shortcomings and the way forward for the CRU in enhancing police accountability

As previously examined, internal investigations and discipline are essential components in fostering a culture of accountability, discipline, and respect within the police (Alston, 2010: para 24). Internal accountability requires the police to take responsibility for their organisation and actions. Also, such mechanisms often have better investigative skills than external mechanisms. They also have an edge over external mechanisms, as such mechanisms have better knowledge of police actions and procedures, and how possible misconduct can be covered up (UNODC, 2011: 14).

However, as noted above, internal police accountability mechanisms have been largely criticised for different reasons. One key criticism is the perception of bias and lack of impartiality, as the public often believes that officers will protect each other or that police leadership will shield subordinates, thus undermining the credibility of investigations (Alston, 2010: para 25; UNODC, 2011: 14). Internal mechanisms are also criticised for lack of transparency and limited information on complaints or final decisions (Alemika, 2010: 13). This secrecy contributes to a widespread lack of public trust in internal systems. To address these concerns, an internal mechanism faces the task of building public trust in its system by being transparent and impartial. As Osse notes, accountability and transparency go hand in hand (2006: 185). A key strategy for building public trust is through transparency via its reports. By providing public-facing reports that provide clear information about complaints received, processes followed in investigating, and disciplinary measures taken against officers. This information can be made accessible through manual reports and online publications via police websites and regularly updated to foster transparency and promote trust in the police. (Boiano, 2024a: 20; Osse, 2006: 216).

In light of this, to enhance the effectiveness of the CRU and promote public trust, it is imperative to establish a comprehensive operational manual that delineates its practices and procedures. While the provisions of the *Police Act 2020* represent a positive development, they constitute only an initial step towards adequately mapping out the practices and procedures of the CRU. A detailed operational manual should encompass critical aspects such as the selection criteria for CRU members, the unit's scope of authority, and standardised protocols for complaint reception and investigation. This documentation should be accessible to the public to promote transparency. Such a manual should be made publicly available to ensure transparency and facilitate independent scrutiny by the public. The Kenya National Police Service Internal Affairs Unit's Operational Manual provides a good model for this, it is publc accessible and it explicitly outlines not only the unit's functions but also includes administrative directives governing complaint procedures and investigative protocols. (KNPS Internal Affairs Unit, 2018).

Secondly, the CRU needs to build trust by improving transparency. As noted above, the reports of CRU, while providing an account of complaints received and complaints resolved/closed, provide scant information, and statistics of disciplined officers when compared to resolved/closed complaints. The CRU's reports merely record the number of complaints received, the number of complaints closed/resolved, pending complaints, and false complaints. Beyond this, the reports generally fail to give an account of sanctioned

officers. For instance, its reports for 2016 do not contain any data about disciplined officers, however, the CRU recorded that it resolved 899 out of 1054 complaints in the first quarter, and 799 out of 906 in the second quarter (Nigeria Police Force, 2016a: 7; Nigeria Police Force, 2016b: 9). In the fourth quarter report of 2016, the CRU recorded that a police sergeant was demoted in ranks for extortion and that officers captured in viral videos were identified and were undergoing disciplinary actions (Nigeria Police Force, 2017a: 16). Beyond this, no further information was provided on what viral videos the report referred to, nor the number of officers who were reportedly undergoing departmental disciplinary actions. Lack of specificity in such cases leaves the public in doubt about the effectiveness of internal accountability.

In celebration of its 2 years in existence, the CRU announced that it had sanctioned 81 officers. Of these 81 officers, 10 were dismissed, one was severely reprimanded, two were suspended, four officers were demoted in rank, and 64 others were awarded other punishments (Idris, 2018: 6–7). There is no further information on these officers or the misconduct leading to these disciplinary measures. Furthermore, a record of only 81 sanctioned officers, out of 5927 verified and resolved/closed complaints, raises the question of what amounts to a resolved or closed complaint by the CRU.

In its first half of 2020 report – the most recent report available, the CRU recorded that it resolved/closed 79% of complaints – 981 out of 1237 (Nigeria Police Force, 2020b: 7). The report again does not contain the names of officers – at least a corresponding number of officers who were disciplined for the extortion, or other complaints which it classified as resolved/closed. However, some of the CRU reports contain 'examples' of dismissed officers. The 2019 report in what it calls 'notable cases' provides the names of two police officers who were dismissed during the year (Nigeria Police Force, 2020a: 8). The second half of the 2018 report contains the names of four officers who were dismissed over the same complaint (Nigeria Police Force, 2019: 9). This inconsistency in reporting undermines trust and hinders independent scrutiny of the police. Publishing full records of disciplinary decisions, even in anonymised form, would align with best practices.

The structure of the reports shows a need for further transparency by the CRU. It is not enough to show the number of complaints received and reports, and the demographics of the complaints; it will be good practice for the CRU to further provide complete data on sanctioned officers within each reporting period. Furthermore, as stated above, the reports of the CRU should also categorise complaints into the types of misconduct that the *Police Act* empowers the unit to receive. The annual performance reports of the Kenya National Police Service Internal Affairs Unit provide an exemplary model for enhancing the CRU's annual reports. These reports, which are published regularly and readily accessible through their official website, offer comprehensive documentation of the Unit's operations. The reports systematically detail the Unit's core functions, annual achievements, including public awareness initiatives and professional development programs, operational capabilities, and detailed statistical analyses of police complaints. This level of systematic documentation and transparency represents a crucial element in the process of rebuilding public trust in the police. (KNPS Internal Affairs Unit, 2023).

The CRU's use of digital technologies – internet, mobile phones, and social media – to receive complaints is commendable. However, this does not automatically translate to a

more accountable police agency or better service delivery. Also, digital technologies in Nigeria encounter some challenges. Barriers such as low literacy, high internet costs, and poor connectivity, particularly in rural areas, continue to limit access to these services in Nigeria (Odeyemi and Obiyan, 2018: 105–106). The CRU noted in its first half of 2020 that some states that have recorded low or no complaints over time have 'comparatively low literacy levels, less internet penetration and population.' (Nigeria Police Force, 2020b: i). Further noting that these states also adopt informal alternatives to settling differences between the public and police, like the use of local chiefs and religious leaders (Nigeria Police Force, 2020b: i). Despite these challenges, there are also advantages to using digital technologies by the CRU. It allows the public to directly connect to specially trained officers who can attend to their complaints, thus avoiding the bottlenecks associated with police stations. It also allows the public to get involved with policing and increases citizen engagement in policing, thus improving police-citizen relations. However, to maximise these benefits, the CRU must expand outreach and establish physical offices with trained personnel in areas with limited digital access.

Conclusion

This paper set out to assess the role of the CRU of the NPF towards a more accountable police force. It went about this by examining the CRU using questions raised by the UNODC in assessing the internal police complaints system, which were categorised into Mandate and Structure, Receiving and Processing Complaints, and Relations with the Public. The CRU is no doubt an applaudable addition to the NPF's internal accountability mechanism. Since its establishment, the CRU appears determined to ensure accountability within the NPF and live up to its motto – No to impunity. To this effect, it has not only provided various platforms for lodging complaints, but has carried out massive sensitisation exercises via flyers, handbills, vehicle stickers, and radio jingles in different languages to inform the public of its existence, and modalities for lodging complaints.

However, as pointed out, the CRU is still faced with two major tasks to better promote accountability. Firstly, there is a need for greater transparency. This includes transparency as to the structure of the CRU, such as the number of officers under the unit, the investigative processes carried out by the unit and the complaints received by the unit. The CRU in its reports should properly define the different categories of complaints received, and what it connotes when complaints are classified as resolved/closed. The CRU should also include data on the exact number of officers disciplined per reporting period. Furthermore, the CRU needs to ensure its reports are regular and publicly available. Secondly, the CRU must bridge the communication gap caused by illiteracy and poor internet access. This can be done by targeted sensitisation in rural areas that have reported minimal complaints to the CRU, and by setting up physical offices with specially trained officers in such areas. Making these changes will ensure that the CRU is better placed to fulfil its role in building relations with the public and holding the NPF more accountable.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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