

## Police Legitimacy and Procedural Justice among the Litigants in Punjab, Pakistan

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: December 18, 2025

Accepted: March 21, 2026

Published: March 30, 2026

#### KEYWORDS

*Police legitimacy;*

*Procedural justice;*

*Relationship;*

*Regression.*

### ABSTRACT

The effective operation of law in modern societies depends not only on the exercise of power but also on public trust and institutional credibility. The quality of the relationship between the police and the public determines the extent to which citizens cooperate with law-abiding and state institutions. In this context, concepts such as the legitimacy of the police and procedural justice have assumed fundamental importance in the criminal justice system. However, the objective of the present study was to explore the relationship between police legitimacy and procedural justice in Lahore, Pakistan. This study followed a cross-sectional research design by adopting the quantitative research method. The respondents of the present research were criminal case litigants in the district courts of Lahore. The sample of 383 criminal case litigants was taken using a multistage sampling technique. Both the descriptive and inferential statistics analyses were carried out by using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The findings of regression analysis conclude that police legitimacy has a significant positive relationship with procedural justice. Based on the findings the recommendations were suggested.

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### INTRODUCTION

Legitimacy refers to the attributes of authority that lead the community to perceive that the institution or authority is entitled to be obeyed and deferred. When people perceive authority as legitimate, they permit that authority to regulate and define norms for behaviour. Legitimacy is the obligation to exercise authority and acknowledgment by those who are governed by such entitlement (Kochel et al., 2011). Legitimacy has become central in police studies. Students of police in Western democracies consistently gave priority to legitimacy in a broad context, such as in the interpretation of the renowned 'Peelian principles' (Reiner, 2010). Police legitimacy and procedural justice have been gaining the attention of researchers since the last decade (Barnes & Forde, 2021). It is a fundamental component to understand the relationship between police and citizens (Bradford & Jackson, 2018). Police legitimacy refers to the perception that the police have the rightful authority to enforce the law, make decisions, and maintain order in society. It is grounded in public trust and the belief that law enforcement acts fairly and in the best interests of the community.

Procedural justice is a key framework for understanding and strengthening police legitimacy because it focuses on the fairness of the processes through which police exercise their authority. Prior research found a significant relationship between police legitimacy and procedural justice (Mazerolle et al., 2013). Literature also identified four key issues that contribute to its definition. Firstly, the individuals desire to provide an account of their circumstances or express their perspective to a law enforcement officer. Secondly, the opportunity to present arguments and evidence must be granted before the police decide on their action. Thirdly, individuals tend to respond positively when perceiving the authorities they interact with as impartial. This requires officers to decide matters based on legal guidelines and the facts of an incident rather than relying on bias and personal opinions. Finally, it is crucial for people to feel that they are treated with politeness and dignity and that their rights are valuable (Mazerolle et al., 2013). The matter of how individuals are treated by legal authorities consistently arises as a crucial element in their reactions to these interactions. Individuals expect to be treated with respect and strongly react to any demeaning or dismissive behaviour from others. Individuals tend to pay attention to signals that convey details about the integrity and intention of the legitimate authorities they interact with, commonly called their trustworthiness (Wolfe et al., 2016). Individuals tend to respond positively when they perceive individuals in positions of authority as kind, compassionate, and genuinely committed to acting in the best interests of those they are interacting with. Authorities address this concern by actively listening to people's accounts and providing explanations or justifying actions that demonstrate an understanding of and empathy toward their needs and concerns (Gau, 2014).

Police legitimacy and procedural justice are fundamental to the criminal justice system, as they directly affect public trust, cooperation, and voluntary obedience to the law. Legitimacy refers to the extent to which citizens perceive the powers of the police as legitimate and acceptable, while procedural justice emphasizes the extent to which the police are transparent, impartial and honorable in their decisions (Taylor, 2019). Modern research confirms that when police act fairly, public trust and adherence to the law are significantly enhanced (Chan et al., 2025).

Recent studies have also made it clear that procedural justice plays a key role in strengthening the legitimacy of the police, as it promotes institutional trust and social cohesion of citizens (Taylor & Lawton, 2012). Furthermore, new empirical research has shown that public perceptions of police fairness are directly correlated with police legitimacy (Boateng, 2020). Similarly, recent studies in different social and cultural contexts have shown that the legitimacy of the police is a dynamic concept that is shaped by the constant interaction between the public and state institutions (Cawthray & Bull, 2023). More modern research reviews have also highlighted the diversity and complexity of the field, particularly as perceptions of police legitimacy and procedural justice may vary among youth and different social groups, indicating the need for more in-depth research on the subject (Li et al., 2016). This research addresses the relationship between police legitimacy and procedural justice in Lahore. Most of the studies on police legitimacy and procedural justice have been conducted in Western contexts. There is a lack of research focusing on South Asian countries, particularly Pakistan, where social, cultural, and political dynamics differ substantially from those in Western societies (Mazerolle et al., 2013).

### **Theoretical Underpinning**

Legitimacy theory presented by Suchman (1995) supports the present research. Suchman (1995) explained legitimacy theory as a broader perception or assumption that an entity's acts are deemed desirable, suitable, or appropriate within a socially formed framework of definitions, values, norms, and beliefs (Suchman, 1995). The social contract exists in every society in the world. Legality explains the function of police implementing and developing willingly societal and environmental exposure of information to execute a social contract. The social contract is the thing used to recognize their purpose and mission to stay alive in an environment of tension and rage. The societal point of view with respect to the actions of the police is to do jobs as per the wishes of social groups. Whenever the activities of police fail to respect social and moral values, the institution of police lacks the cooperation of the criminals (Mobus, 2005).

The procedural justice theory depicts the fairness of the process by which authorities, including the police, exercise their authority and make decisions and exercise their authority is crucial in shaping public perceptions of legitimacy (Tylor, 2016). This theory emphasizes the four main elements: dignity, neutrality, trustworthiness and respect, communication and emotional control. These elements contribute to individuals' perceptions of fairness, which affects their perceptions of the legitimacy of the police. Therefore, applying this theory to the instant study, one could argue that the police are legitimized with the statutory powers to maintain and promote the law-and-order situation in the state. When the police use legitimate powers for procedural justice in prescribed ways, the citizens of the locality cooperate with the police and trust in them (Gau, 2014). When the police are perceived as procedurally just, their actions are more likely to be viewed as legitimate. Therefore, this perception of legitimacy is crucial for maintaining public trust and support. Based on the theoretical background, this research proposed the following hypothesis;

Hypothesis: There is a significant positive relationship between police Legitimacy and Procedural Justice

### **METHODOLOGY**

This research was quantitative in nature and conducted in Lahore, a metropolitan city of Pakistan. However, the universe of the present study was the district of Lahore. The data were collected from 385\3 litigants pursuing their criminal cases in the district courts of Lahore. The sample size was selected using a multistage sampling technique. At the first stage, all police stations in the district of Lahore were selected. According to the Deputy Inspector General of Police (DIG) Operation Lahore, there are 84 Police Stations, 22 Circles, and 06 Divisions in Lahore Police. At the second step, the district court Lahore was selected for the data collection because after completion of the usual investigation, the accused are sent to judicial lockup, and a challan is sent to the court under section 173 Cr. P.C for further proceedings in the court. The court system in Lahore is divided into two blocks: sessions and magisterial courts. The magisterial court was further divided into three categories. The first block was (city courts), consisting of 34 police stations; the second block was (Model town courts), consisting of 24 police stations, whereas the third block (Cantt courts) had 23 police stations under its territorial jurisdiction. At the third stage, only criminal under-trial cases were selected by using a convenience sampling technique. A proportionate number of respondents were interviewed from each court block, depending upon the total number of under-trial cases in respective courts, detailed as in Table 1.

Table 1: Details of the sample size

Sr.	Name of the Court	Total Cases	Selected Cases
1	Session Courts	24238	123(32%)
2	Magisterial Courts	49474	260 (68%)

The questionnaire was developed using prior literature. Police legitimacy was considered as an independent variable, and the scale was adopted from the work of Tankebe et al. (2016). However, procedural justice was treated as a dependent variable, and the scale was adopted from the work of Tylor et al. (2006). The variables were measured on a three-point Likert scale.

Data was collected from the litigants appearing in the court on the date of the hearing in the courts concerned. A brief introduction related to the study variables was given at the beginning. The interview schedule was developed in English. However, communication with the respondents was conducted in Urdu and Punjabi. After collection, the data were entered into SPSS for regression analyses and testing the hypothesis.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The majority of the participants (90.3) were male. Most of the participants belong to the age group of 33-37 years. Most (46.2) of the participants were under matric. About 29.5% of the participants have a monthly income between 41000 and 50000 PKR.

Table 2: Demographic profile of the participants (n = 383)

Sr #	Demographics	Description	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Sex	Male	246	90.3
		Female	37	9.7
2.	Age	18-22	23	6
		23-27	46	12
		28-32	65	17
		33-37	123	32.1
		38-42	99	25.8
		43+	27	7
3.	Education level of respondents	Under Matric	177	46.2
		Matriculation	66	17.2
		Intermediate	54	14.1
		B.A/BSc.	48	12.5
		M.A/MSc or above	37	9.7
4.	Total Monthly Household Income	Below 20000	23	6
		21000-30000	69	18
		31000-40000	105	27.4
		41000-50000	113	29.5
		51000 and above	73	19.1

The findings depicted that there was a significant positive relationship between police legitimacy and procedural justice ( $\beta=0.372$ ;  $p < 0.000$ ). Similarly, the  $R^2$  value shows that a one percent change in police legitimacy 13.8% regress the dependent variable. Additionally, the F value (61.026<sup>\*\*\*</sup>) shows the significance of the regression model.

Table 3: Relationship between police Legitimacy and Procedural Justice

Constructs	$\beta$	F	R2
Police legitimacy	0.372 <sup>***</sup>	61.026 <sup>***</sup>	.138

## Discussion

This research was conducted in Lahore, Pakistan. The data was collected from 385 litigants pursuing their cases in various courts in Lahore. The findings of the proposed hypothesis revealed that there is a significant positive relationship between police legitimacy and procedural justice among litigants in Punjab, Pakistan. Recent empirical research also supports this hypothesis. According to a meta-analysis, strong and positive associations have been found between procedural justice and police legitimacy in various social contexts, indicating the general status of this view (Chan et al., 2025). Procedural justice not only enhances legitimacy, but it moderates the effects of other social factors, which further strengthens its role (Nam & Melde, 2024). Furthermore, according to the dialogic model of legitimacy, legitimacy is a dynamic process that is shaped by the constant interaction between the police and the public. In this context, procedural justice is a mechanism that gives a positive direction to this interaction and strengthens public trust (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012).

This relationship is also important with regard to youth and different social groups. Procedural justice experiences create positive perceptions of the police among young people, which strengthens legitimacy in the long term (Li et al., 2024). Similarly, the legitimacy achieved through procedural justice can also be helpful in reducing lawbreaking tendencies in the future (Liu, 2025). Overall, theoretical and empirical evidence strongly supports that procedural justice is a key tool to improve the legitimacy of the police. On this basis, current research establishes the hypothesis that procedural justice positively affects the legitimacy of the police, which leads to an increase in public trust and adherence to the law.

## Limitations

This research considers the following limitations. Firstly, the current study focuses only on criminal cases, whereas civil cases are frequently dealt with in the district courts at the same time. This category of dispute also needs to be explored. Further, the persons who have been discharged from the cases by the court of competent jurisdiction, the people with mentally challenged conditions, and the respondents under the age of 18 are not addressed in the current study. Secondly, the male and female adults (complainants, accused, and witnesses) appearing in the district courts of Lahore will be the respondents of the current study. Hence, the results of the research cannot be generalized to other districts. Moreover, there are two types of cases (criminal and civil) tried in district courts, but the current study is only about the criminal cases. Thirdly, this research is based on self-reported data, which may include bias and personal opinions of respondents, which may affect the accuracy of the results to some extent.

Due to the cross-sectional design of the research, the cause-and-effect relationship between variables cannot be clearly proven, but only the association can be identified. In the future, these limitations should be considered. Future research should also consider a longitudinal research model to get fruitful results.

## Implications

This research presents several important practical and theoretical implications in the field of police legitimacy and procedural justice. First, these results indicate that public trust can be significantly enhanced if the police promote transparency, impartiality, and respect in their attitudes, which is a fundamental condition for effective law enforcement. On this basis, policymakers should incorporate principles of procedural justice in police training programmes to bring about a positive change in the attitudes of personnel. Secondly, this research highlights the importance of institutional reforms. The relationship between the public and the police can be improved by strengthening measures such as police accountability systems, grievance redressal mechanisms, and community policing. This will not only increase legitimacy but also improve crime prevention and public cooperation. Third, the study also provides guidance for future research, especially in developing countries such as Pakistan, where empirical research on the subject is limited. In future studies, it will be important to examine the impact of procedural justice in the context of different social groups, such as youth and vulnerable groups, to make policy-making more targeted and effective. Overall, this research emphasizes that the adoption of a justice-based approach, rather than just the use of harshness or force, is indispensable for improving police effectiveness, which in the long-term contributes to social stability and the rule of law.

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