



Spatial Inequality and Police Professionalism During Political Transitions in Nairobi's Informal Settlements, Kenya

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Abstract

Political transitions frequently intensify tensions between democratic governance, public order management and police accountability within marginalised urban settlements. Globally and across Africa, electoral transitions have exposed challenges of coercive policing, selective law enforcement, and weak civilian accountability in informal settlements characterised by socio-economic inequality and uneven security provision. In Kenya, post-election periods have been associated with heightened police deployment, securitisation and allegations of excessive use of force within Nairobi's informal settlements of Kibera, Mathare, and Mukuru. Political transitions act as catalysts that intensify existing socio-spatial inequalities by increasing security operations, protest mobilisation and uneven enforcement practices, thereby shaping police behaviour and professionalism across different localities. This study examined the influence of spatial inequality on police professionalism during political transitions in Nairobi's informal settlements. Specifically, it examined the extent of adherence to professional policing standards, analysed the influence of spatial inequality on police professionalism, and assessed the role of civilian oversight institutions in monitoring and documenting policing malpractices. The study adopted a mixed-methods descriptive survey design grounded in the pragmatic paradigm and complemented by interpretivism. Data were collected from a sample of 384 respondents through questionnaires, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary review. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics while qualitative data were analysed thematically. Findings revealed that police professionalism remained moderate, spatially differentiated and operationally inconsistent. The Police Professionalism Index (PPI), computed from weighted indicators of legality, accountability, political neutrality, proportional use of force, ethical conduct and police-community engagement, recorded an overall score of 46%, with Mukuru scoring 55%, Kibera 45%, and Mathare 38%. Spatial inequality emerged as the strongest predictor of professionalism outcomes. The study recommends spatially responsive police training, equitable resource allocation and community-centred policing to address spatial inequalities and enhance professionalism during political transitions.

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Introduction

Political transition-related conflicts continue to generate significant tensions between democratic governance, public order management and police accountability, particularly within urban informal settlements. Contemporary scholarship demonstrates that political transitions, including elections, regime contestation and constitutional realignments, frequently intensify existing socio-spatial inequalities through heightened political competition, protest mobilisation, electoral insecurity and state securitisation (Aning & Edu-Afful, 2016; Tyler, 2017). During politically sensitive periods, marginalised urban settlements often become focal points of state security interventions, resulting in selective police deployment, surveillance-oriented policing, coercive crowd-control measures and differentiated enforcement practices. Consequently, political transitions do not merely occur alongside spatial inequalities but frequently amplify and weaponise them, producing uneven access to security, accountability and state protection within marginalised communities (Wacquant, 2024; Amnesty International, 2023).

Globally, informal settlements are increasingly recognised as spaces where socio-economic exclusion, weak public infrastructure and contested state legitimacy intersect with security governance challenges. Research demonstrates that communities characterised by poverty, unemployment and limited access to public services are more likely to experience aggressive policing, reduced procedural justice and lower levels of institutional trust during periods of political contestation (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Bolger & Walters, 2019). Police legitimacy is therefore shaped not only by institutional reforms but also by the broader spatial and socio-economic environments within which policing occurs. Where inequalities remain entrenched, political transitions often magnify existing tensions between citizens and law enforcement agencies, thereby placing considerable pressure on police professionalism and accountability.

In Africa, electoral transitions have repeatedly exposed tensions among democratic governance, constitutional freedoms, and state security management. Electoral cycles in several African states have been characterised by intensified securitisation, politically influenced deployment patterns and allegations of excessive force against protesters and opposition supporters (Aning & Edu-Afful, 2016). These patterns suggest that political competition frequently transforms marginalised urban areas into strategic sites of political control, surveillance and security enforcement, thereby reinforcing pre-existing socio-spatial inequalities.

In Kenya, the relationship between political transitions, spatial inequality and policing has evolved alongside broader democratic reforms. The 2007–2008 post-election violence represented a critical turning point in the country's policing and governance landscape. The Commission of Inquiry into Post-Election Violence (CIPEV, 2008) documented unlawful killings, forced displacement, excessive use of force and allegations of politically selective policing, particularly within informal settlements such as Kibera, Mathare and Mukuru. The violence exposed how socio-spatial marginalisation amplified vulnerability during periods of political contestation and revealed significant deficiencies in police accountability, professionalism and conflict management.

The aftermath of the 2007–2008 crisis informed the Constitution of Kenya 2010 and subsequent police reforms aimed at strengthening democratic policing and accountability. These reforms led to the establishment and strengthening of collaborative governance and civilian oversight structures, including the Independent Policing Oversight Authority (IPOA), the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (KNCHR), the Internal Affairs Unit (IAU), community policing committees and various civil society organisations. Collectively, these institutions were intended to promote



accountability, transparency, human rights protection and professional policing through multi-agency oversight and citizen participation in security governance.

Despite these reforms, subsequent political transitions, including the 2013, 2017, and 2022 general elections, together with the nationwide protest movements of 2024 and 2025, continued to reveal tensions among democratic governance, police professionalism, and accountability (IPOA, 2024; KNCHR, 2025; Amnesty International, 2024). Reports of excessive use of force, militarised crowd-control tactics, arbitrary arrests and targeted deployment within low-income settlements indicate that policing practices remain influenced by political pressures, historical exclusion and uneven urban governance structures. Political transitions, therefore, continue to generate operational pressures that challenge adherence to professional policing standards, particularly within densely populated informal settlements characterised by infrastructural deficits, poverty and social exclusion.

Police professionalism is commonly conceptualised as adherence to legality, procedural justice, accountability, political neutrality, proportionality in the use of force and ethical conduct (Tyler, 2017; Bayley, 2023; Bradford, 2024). However, sustaining these standards within informal settlements remains challenging due to overcrowding, insecurity, limited public services, resource constraints and strained police-community relations. At the same time, the effectiveness of civilian oversight institutions and collaborative accountability arrangements remains constrained by political interference, delayed investigations, weak coordination, and limited enforcement capacity, particularly during politically sensitive periods (IPOA, 2024; KNCHR, 2025).

Despite growing scholarship on police reform, accountability, and democratic policing, limited empirical attention has been paid to understanding how spatial inequalities shape police professionalism during political transition-related conflicts in informal settlements. Existing studies predominantly focus on institutional reforms, police misconduct and human rights violations while giving less attention to the influence of overcrowding, infrastructural exclusion, uneven deployment patterns, police-community relations and civilian oversight on operational policing outcomes. This study addresses this gap by examining the influence of spatial inequality and civilian oversight on police professionalism during political transitions within Nairobi's informal settlements of Kibera, Mathare and Mukuru.

Literature Review

Spatial Inequality, Political Transitions and Police Professionalism

Contemporary policing scholarship demonstrates that police professionalism is shaped not only by institutional regulations but also by the socio-spatial and political environments within which policing occurs (Bayley, 2023; Bradford, 2024; Tyler, 2023). Political transitions, including elections, regime contestation and constitutional restructuring, often intensify existing spatial inequalities through selective securitisation, targeted deployment and differentiated enforcement practices, particularly within marginalised urban settlements (UN-Habitat, 2024; OECD, 2023; Aning & Edu-Afful, 2023). Studies from Brazil, France and the United States show that low-income communities disproportionately experience coercive policing and surveillance during periods of political unrest, reinforcing perceptions of spatial injustice and weakened police legitimacy (Caldeira, 2022; Wacquant, 2024; Tyler, 2023). Urban governance scholars further argue that informal settlements are frequently governed through exceptional security logics that prioritise containment over democratic protection and procedural justice (Davis, 2023; Caldeira, 2022).

Social Contract Theory explains that police legitimacy depends on the state's ability to provide equitable security and accountability across all social groups and territorial spaces (Rousseau,



1762/2021; Tyler, 2023). Complementarily, Conflict Transformation Theory posits that policing can either escalate or de-escalate social tensions depending on the extent to which institutions adopt participatory, accountable and rights-based approaches to conflict management (Lederach, 2014; Galtung, 2021). Together, these perspectives suggest that spatial inequality and political transitions significantly influence police behaviour and professionalism within informal settlements.

Police Professionalism During Political Transitions

Democratic policing literature conceptualises professionalism as encompassing legality, accountability, procedural justice, political neutrality, proportionality in the use of force, ethical conduct and public trust (Bayley, 2023; Bradford, 2024; Tyler, 2023). However, empirical studies indicate that these standards are often strained during elections and political protests when police institutions face pressure to maintain order and contain dissent (Human Rights Watch, 2024; Amnesty International, 2023). Across Africa, political transitions continue to expose tensions between democratic governance and coercive security practices, particularly within marginalised urban settlements (Branch & Cheeseman, 2023). Research from Uganda, Nigeria and South Africa reports militarised policing, arbitrary arrests and selective enforcement during elections and demonstrations, reflecting enduring colonial policing legacies and enforcement-oriented institutional cultures (Bruce, 2022; Aning & Abdallah, 2022; Hills, 2023).

In Kenya, these dynamics became particularly evident during the 2007–2008 post-election violence when Kibera, Mathare and parts of Mukuru experienced disproportionate violence, forced displacement and aggressive security operations (CIPEV, 2008). The Waki Commission documented allegations of excessive force, unlawful killings and politically selective policing, exposing how political contestation can transform informal settlements into securitised spaces. Similar concerns persisted during the 2013, 2017 and 2022 elections, with reports highlighting police brutality, political interference and uneven professionalism within informal settlements (IPOA, 2024; KNCHR, 2025). Existing evidence therefore suggests that police professionalism in these settlements remains influenced by political pressures, operational insecurity and historically embedded coercive policing cultures.

Spatial Inequality and Policing Within Informal Settlements

Research increasingly demonstrates that policing practices are closely linked to territorial inequality, socio-economic exclusion and uneven urban governance (Wacquant, 2024; Davis, 2023). Informal settlements are characterised by overcrowding, inadequate infrastructure, poverty and limited access to public services, creating complex security environments and often strained police–community relations (UN-Habitat, 2024). Comparative studies consistently show that marginalised communities experience greater surveillance, targeted deployment and coercive policing than more affluent areas, particularly during periods of political unrest (Bruce, 2022; Tyler, 2023).

Across Africa, spatial inequality shapes the distribution of policing resources, operational deployment and access to accountability mechanisms (Aning & Edu-Afful, 2023). Studies from South Africa, Nigeria and Uganda indicate that settlements associated with socio-economic marginalisation or opposition mobilisation frequently experience militarised policing and disproportionate use of force during elections and protests (Bruce, 2022; Branch & Cheeseman, 2023). In Nairobi, Kibera, Mathare, and Mukuru have similarly experienced heightened surveillance, targeted deployment, and confrontational policing during elections and demonstrations due to perceived political volatility (Mutahi, 2024; KNCHR, 2025). Evidence from the Waki Commission and recent protest cycles further indicates that infrastructural deficits, socio-economic exclusion and territorial segregation continue to



shape policing outcomes and accountability practices within these settlements (CIPEV, 2008; KHRC, 2025).

Civilian Oversight, Institutional Collaboration and Police Professionalism

Civilian oversight institutions and collaborative governance structures are widely recognised as mechanisms for strengthening police accountability, democratic policing and public trust (Ansell & Gash, 2023). Evidence from the United Kingdom, Canada and South Africa shows that independent oversight bodies improve accountability through civilian review, independent investigations and human rights monitoring (Prenzler, 2022; Goldsmith, 2023). In Africa, however, oversight institutions frequently face challenges related to political interference, limited autonomy and weak enforcement powers (Aning & Abdallah, 2022).

In Kenya, post-2010 reforms established institutions such as IPOA and strengthened accountability frameworks to promote constitutional and professional policing (IPOA, 2024). Community policing initiatives, civil society engagement and multi-agency accountability mechanisms have similarly been promoted to improve police–community relations within informal settlements (KNCHR, 2025). Nevertheless, studies continue to identify delayed investigations, weak coordination, political interference and limited enforcement capacity as persistent barriers to effective oversight, particularly during politically sensitive periods (Amnesty International, 2023; KHRC, 2025). Within Kibera, Mathare and Mukuru, perceptions of oversight effectiveness are further constrained by limited accessibility, fear of reprisals and delays in complaint resolution (Mutahi, 2024). Consequently, civilian oversight remains unevenly institutionalised despite its growing importance in promoting police professionalism and accountability.

Despite growing scholarship on police reform and democratic policing in Kenya, limited empirical attention has been paid to how spatial inequality shapes police professionalism during political transitions in informal settlements. Existing studies largely focus on institutional reform, accountability and human rights violations while providing limited analysis of how socio-spatial exclusion, overcrowding, uneven deployment and police–community relations shape policing outcomes. Similarly, evidence on the effectiveness of civilian oversight institutions within informal settlements during political transitions remains limited. This study addresses these gaps by examining how spatial inequality, political transitions and civilian oversight collectively shape police professionalism within Nairobi's informal settlements.

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a mixed-methods descriptive and explanatory survey design to examine the relationship between spatial inequality and police professionalism in Nairobi's informal settlements during political transition-related conflicts. The descriptive component was used to examine the characteristics, patterns and manifestations of police professionalism, spatial inequalities, police–community relations and civilian oversight within the study area. The explanatory component sought to establish and explain relationships among spatial inequality, civilian oversight, and police professionalism using inferential statistical techniques, including correlation and multiple regression analyses. The design, therefore, enabled both the description of existing policing realities and the explanation of factors influencing professionalism during political transitions.

The mixed-methods approach facilitated the integration of quantitative and qualitative data, thereby providing both statistical measurement and contextual understanding of policing practices, accountability and police–community relations. Quantitative data facilitated the assessment of police



professionalism and its relationship with spatial inequality using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data generated deeper insights into lived experiences, operational realities, accountability processes and the contextual dynamics shaping policing within informal settlements during political transition-related conflicts.

Philosophically, the study was primarily anchored in the pragmatic paradigm, which guided the mixed-methods approach by emphasising methodological pluralism and integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence to address the research problem comprehensively. Interpretivism was applied specifically within the qualitative strand to facilitate the interpretation of participants' lived experiences, perceptions and contextual meanings associated with policing, civilian oversight and political transition-related conflicts. This philosophical positioning ensured methodological coherence by allowing pragmatism to serve as the overarching framework for data integration, while interpretivism provided a deeper understanding of the social realities underpinning policing practices within Nairobi's informal settlements.

In addition to primary data collection, the study utilised published and unpublished secondary documents, which were analysed. These included policy documents, legislation, government reports, oversight reports, commission reports, academic publications and institutional records relating to policing, civilian oversight and political transition-related conflicts in Kenya. Document analysis was primarily undertaken to provide contextual understanding, triangulate evidence from primary sources, and corroborate findings on police reforms, accountability mechanisms, oversight processes, and conflict management during political transitions.

Study Area

The study was conducted in the informal settlements of Kibera, Mathare and Mukuru. Nairobi County, located between latitude 1° 09' South and longitude 36° 49' East, serves as Kenya's political, administrative, and economic centre and frequently experiences heightened political mobilisation, demonstrations, and security operations during electoral periods. According to the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) Population and Housing Census (2019), Kibera Sub-County had an estimated population of 185,777, Mathare Sub-County 206,564, and Mukuru approximately 242,941, yielding a combined population of about 635,282.

These socio-spatial disparities significantly influence policing operations, patterns of state presence, perceptions of insecurity and the nature of police engagement. Consequently, the study area provided



a suitable and contextually grounded setting for analysing how spatial inequality shapes police professionalism, civilian oversight and conflict management in informal settlements.

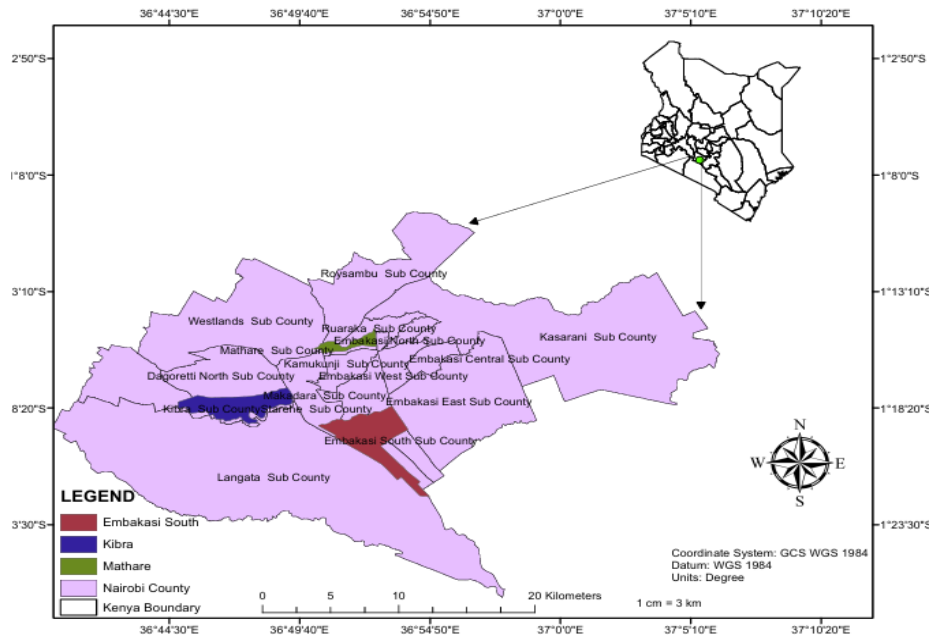


Figure 1: Map of the study area, Nairobi County

Source: Researcher, 2026

The map shown in Figure 1 above is a Geographic Information System (GIS)-generated representation of the study area within Nairobi County. This spatial representation supported the analysis of how spatial inequality influences policing dynamics, police professionalism and police-community relations.

Population and Sampling

The study targeted community members residing in the Kibera, Mathare, and Mukuru informal settlements in Nairobi County, Kenya, selected for their pronounced spatial inequalities, socio-economic marginalisation, and distinctive policing challenges. According to the 2019 Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) Population and Housing Census, the three settlements had a combined population of approximately 635,282 residents, which formed the sampling frame for the quantitative survey. Using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sampling framework, a sample size of 384 respondents was determined at a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error. The sample was proportionately allocated across the three settlements using the formula:

The original proportional allocation formula is:

$$n_i = \frac{N_i}{N} \times n$$

Where:

- n_i = Sample size allocated to the i^{th} settlement
- N_i = Population of the i^{th} settlement
- N = Total population of all settlements



- n = Total sample size

Using the study population figures:

- Kibera: $N_i = 185,777$
- Mathare: $N_i = 206,564$
- Mukuru: $N_i = 242,941$
- Total population: $N = 635,282$
- Total sample size: $n = 384$

The proportional allocation was computed as follows:

$$n_{\text{Kibera}} = \frac{185,777}{635,282} \times 384 \approx 112$$

$$n_{\text{Mathare}} = \frac{206,564}{635,282} \times 384 \approx 125$$

$$n_{\text{Mukuru}} = \frac{242,941}{635,282} \times 384 \approx 147$$

The proportional allocation yielded 112 respondents from Kibera, 125 from Mathare and 147 from Mukuru, ensuring representation of the different socio-spatial contexts within the study area. To complement the survey data, the qualitative component purposively selected police officers, civilian oversight officials, civil society representatives, faith-based organisations, community policing actors and local administrators. These participants were chosen for their institutional knowledge and operational experience in policing, accountability and urban governance. The qualitative sample comprised 18 Key Informant Interviews and six Focus Group Discussions, providing contextual and institutional insights into how spatial inequality influences police professionalism, accountability and policing practices within Nairobi's informal settlements.

Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected between January and March 2026 using structured questionnaires, 18 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), six Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and a documentary review. The mixed-methods approach enabled triangulation and enhanced the credibility and comprehensiveness of the findings. Questionnaires generated quantitative data on police professionalism, accountability, police-community relations, and spatial inequality, while KIIs and FGDs provided institutional and community perspectives on policing practices, civilian oversight, and socio-spatial challenges within Kibera, Mathare, and Mukuru. The documentary review examined relevant policy documents, legal frameworks, IPOA and KNCHR reports, and other publications on policing and accountability in Kenya. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved. A pilot study conducted in the Dandora informal settlement, involving 10% of the sample, confirmed the suitability of the instruments, while reliability testing yielded a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.82, indicating acceptable internal consistency. Content and construct validity were strengthened through expert review and methodological triangulation.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS Version 28 through descriptive and inferential statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, Pearson correlation, ANOVA and multiple regression. The Police Professionalism Index (PPI) was computed from six dimensions of professionalism—legality, accountability, political neutrality, proportional use of force, ethical conduct and community engagement—measured on a five-point Likert scale and converted into a percentage score. The aggregate mean score of 2.30 out of five yielded a PPI of 46%, indicating moderate and spatially uneven police professionalism across the study areas. Qualitative data from Key Informant Interviews



and Focus Group Discussions were transcribed, coded and analysed thematically using NVivo 14 through a hybrid inductive–deductive approach. The findings were integrated and presented through tables, figures and narrative interpretations to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between spatial inequality and police professionalism.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology (MMUST), while research authorisation was granted by NACOSTI and relevant local authorities. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all respondents and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through coded identifiers and secure data management. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage, and all data were used strictly for academic purposes in accordance with established ethical research standards.

Results and Discussion

Demographic Characteristics of the Study Population

This section presents the socio-demographic characteristics of community respondents who participated in the quantitative survey across Kibera, Mathare and Mukuru informal settlements. The variables examined included education level, gender, age, duration of residence, and settlement distribution, as these factors influence residents' experiences with policing, perceptions of police professionalism, and exposure to spatial inequality within informal settlements. Institutional and operational characteristics related to police rank, deployment, and years of service were analysed separately using qualitative findings from Key Informant Interviews.

The study achieved a response rate of 77.2%, comprising 237 completed questionnaires, 18 Key Informant Interviews and six Focus Group Discussions. Survey respondents were predominantly economically active adults with balanced gender representation and substantial familiarity with local policing dynamics, as most had resided in Kibera, Mathare and Mukuru for more than five years. Educational attainment was generally moderate, while high levels of unemployment and informal employment reflected the socio-economic conditions of the settlements. Qualitative participants included police officers, oversight officials, civil society representatives and local administrators with experience in policing, accountability and security governance. These characteristics provided a credible basis for examining police professionalism, spatial inequality and civilian oversight within Nairobi's informal settlements.

Education level of respondents

The study examined respondents' education levels to determine the educational composition of community residents participating in the study and to examine how educational exposure shapes perceptions of police professionalism and accountability within informal settlements.

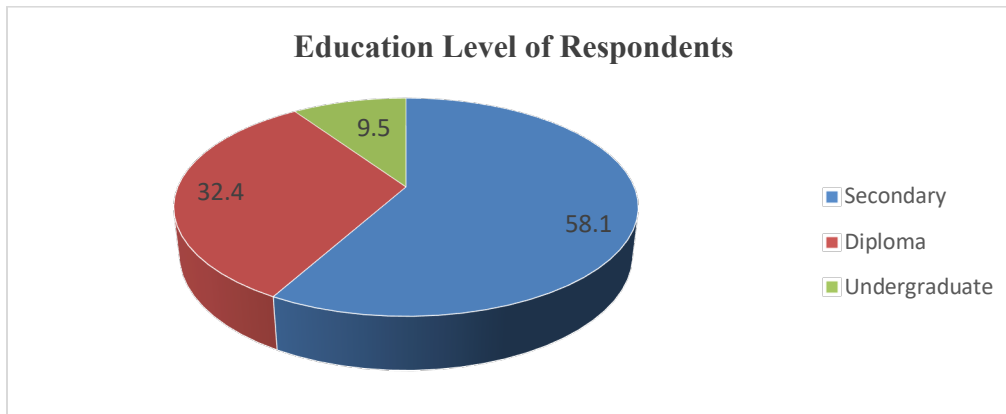


Figure 2: Education Level of Respondents

Source: Researcher (2026)

Findings indicate that 58.1% of respondents had attained secondary education, 32.4% had attained a diploma or college education, and 9.5% had attained an undergraduate education. The findings demonstrate that the majority of respondents possessed moderate levels of formal education sufficient to understand policing practices, accountability processes and institutional interactions within the informal settlements. The relatively low proportion of respondents with university education further reflects broader socio-economic inequalities and limited educational opportunities characteristic of marginalised urban settlements within Nairobi County.

Gender of respondents

The study examined the gender distribution of respondents to assess the representation of male and female community residents in the survey population.

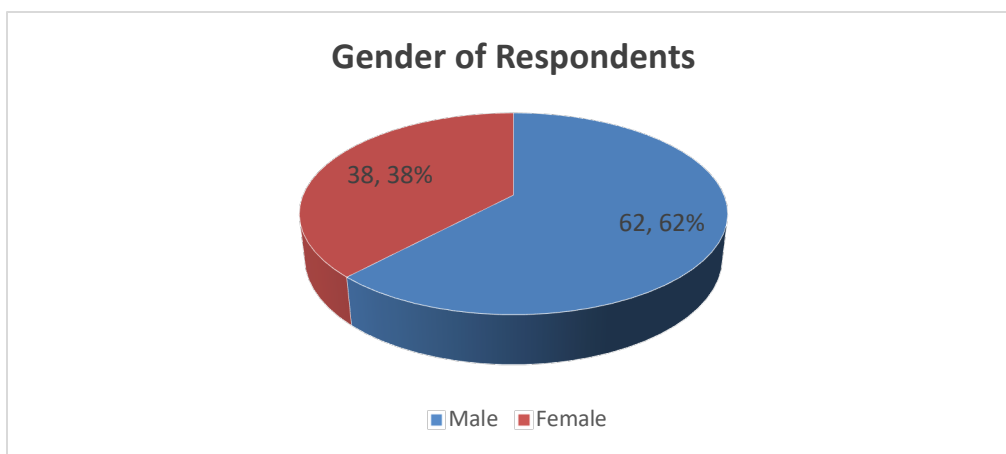


Figure 3: Gender of Respondents

Source, Researcher (2026)

The findings indicate that 54.4% of respondents were male, while 45.6% were female. The relatively balanced gender distribution enabled the study to capture diverse community experiences and



perceptions regarding policing practices, police professionalism and security conditions within Nairobi's informal settlements.

Age of the respondents

The study examined the age distribution of respondents to determine the dominant age categories in the study population.

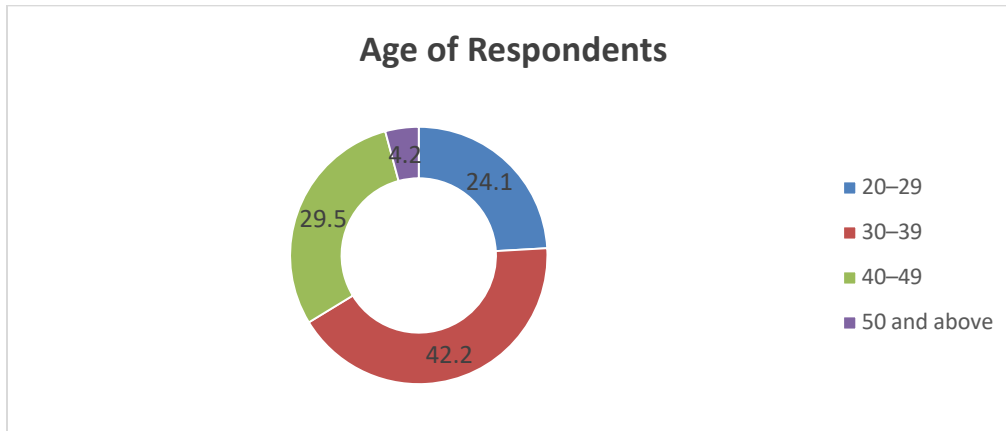


Figure 4: Age of Respondents

Source: Researcher (2026)

The findings show that 42.2% of respondents were aged between 30 and 39 years, 29.5% were aged between 40 and 49 years, 24.1% were aged between 20 and 29 years, while only 4.2% were aged 50 years and above. The distribution shows that more than 70% of the police workforce in the study areas falls in the 30–49 age bracket, indicating that policing operations during political transition-related conflicts are largely managed by officers in the most operationally active and experienced age category.

Duration of Residence Within Informal Settlements

The study examined respondents' length of residence to establish their familiarity with local policing dynamics, spatial inequalities, and police-community relations within the study areas. Findings revealed that the majority of respondents had resided in the Kibera, Mathare, and Mukuru informal settlements for extended periods, with most indicating that their residence exceeded five years. Participants in the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) observed that long-term residence enabled community members to develop a deeper understanding of recurring policing patterns, protest management approaches, and changes in police-community relations during political transition periods. One FGD participant in Mathare noted that community members who had lived in the settlement for many years were able to compare policing approaches across different election periods and identify persistent patterns of aggressive policing, selective enforcement and mistrust between residents and security agencies. The findings therefore suggest that the respondents possessed substantial contextual experience necessary to provide informed perspectives on police professionalism, accountability, and political transition-related conflicts within the informal settlements.



Distribution of Respondents by Informal Settlement

The study further examined the spatial distribution of respondents in order to ensure adequate representation across Kibera, Mathare and Mukuru informal settlements. Findings indicated that respondents were proportionately distributed across the three settlements in accordance with the study sampling framework, thereby capturing diverse policing environments and socio-economic conditions. Participants in the FGDs emphasised that experiences of policing and political transition-related conflicts varied across the settlements due to differences in population density, levels of political mobilisation, infrastructural conditions and historical police–community relations. FGD participants from Mathare particularly described recurrent confrontational policing during demonstrations, while respondents from Mukuru reported comparatively higher levels of police engagement and community collaboration. Participants from Kibera highlighted the coexistence of both cooperative and confrontational policing depending on the intensity of political activity. The spatial distribution of respondents therefore strengthened the comparative and contextual validity of the study findings across the three informal settlements.

Police Professionalism Within Nairobi's Informal Settlements

Respondents reported that policing within Kibera, Mathare and Mukuru was frequently characterised by reactive enforcement approaches, periodic coercive operations and uneven application of procedural fairness, particularly during demonstrations, security crackdowns and politically sensitive periods. Community experiences further suggested that police professionalism differed across settlements depending on infrastructural conditions, operational accessibility and perceived security risks.

One respondent stated:

“In areas like Kibera, policing is more forceful, but in other areas it is calmer and more controlled” (KII, Kibera, 2026).

The findings, therefore, suggest that police professionalism within Nairobi's informal settlements is spatially differentiated and influenced by localised socio-economic and environmental conditions. Variations in infrastructure, settlement density, and accessibility contributed to differing policing approaches and community perceptions of fairness, accountability, and proportionality in the use of force.

Spatial Inequality and Police Professionalism

Findings demonstrated that spatial and socio-economic inequalities significantly influenced policing practices and professionalism within the informal settlements of Kibera, Mathare, and Mukuru. Respondents reported that overcrowding, poor road networks, inadequate street lighting, limited public infrastructure and high population density constrained policing operations and frequently contributed to confrontational policing approaches.

One respondent observed:

“There are areas where there is no proper lighting, so even at night it becomes very difficult to see what is happening or to respond well” (KII, Police Officer, Kibera, 12.03.2026).

The findings further revealed that spatial marginalisation and poverty limited residents' ability to seek legal redress or pursue accountability following incidents of police misconduct. Consequently, communities experiencing deeper socio-economic deprivation were more likely to report aggressive policing practices, delayed police response and strained police–community relations. The findings therefore indicate that spatial inequality not only shapes operational policing conditions but also



influences the quality, accessibility and professionalism of policing services within Nairobi's informal settlements.

Civilian Oversight and Police Professionalism

Findings revealed that civilian oversight mechanisms within informal settlements remained constrained by institutional, financial and geographical accessibility challenges. Respondents indicated that long distances to oversight offices, fear of retaliation and bureaucratic reporting procedures discouraged reporting of police misconduct.

One participant stated:

"There are places where people have to move a long distance to reach oversight offices, so sometimes they just decide not to report" (KII, NGO Representative, Mathare, 10.01.2026).

Participants further reported that accountability processes often depended on civil society intervention, media exposure and external pressure before institutional action could occur. These findings suggest that uneven accessibility of oversight institutions across urban spaces reinforces existing spatial inequalities and weakens accountability mechanisms within informal settlements.

Challenges Affecting Police-Community Collaboration

Findings identified weak communication structures, low public trust, inadequate distribution of police posts, and limited accessibility of oversight institutions as major barriers to collaboration among police institutions, oversight bodies, and community actors. Respondents indicated that some settlements experienced limited police visibility and delayed operational response due to infrastructural constraints and uneven allocation of security resources. These conditions contributed to strained police-community relations and weakened confidence in policing institutions within spatially marginalised communities.

Inferential Analysis

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis revealed a strong positive relationship between spatial socio-economic inequalities and police professionalism ($r = 0.868, p < 0.001$). The findings indicate that spatial conditions significantly shape policing outcomes and professionalism within Nairobi's informal settlements. Civilian oversight effectiveness was also positively correlated with police professionalism ($r = 0.735, p < 0.001$) while collaboration between police institutions and oversight actors demonstrated a moderate positive relationship ($r = 0.651, p < 0.001$).

Multiple Regression Analysis

Multiple regression analysis established that spatial socio-economic inequalities, civilian oversight and institutional collaboration jointly explained 83.2% of the variation in police professionalism ($R^2 = 0.832, F = 367.25, p < 0.001$). Spatial socio-economic inequality emerged as the strongest predictor of police professionalism ($\beta = 0.52$), followed by civilian oversight ($\beta = 0.33$) and institutional collaboration ($\beta = 0.24$).

Police Professionalism

$$= 0.52 + 0.48(\text{Spatial Inequality}) + 0.31(\text{Oversight}) + 0.21(\text{Collaboration})$$

The regression findings demonstrate that policing outcomes within Nairobi's informal settlements are significantly shaped by spatial disparities, uneven resource distribution and varying accessibility of accountability structures. The findings therefore support the argument that spatial inequality remains a central determinant of police professionalism within marginalised urban environments.



Discussion

The findings demonstrate that police professionalism during political transition-related conflicts within Nairobi's informal settlements remains moderate, spatially differentiated and operationally inconsistent. The overall Police Professionalism Index (PPI) score of 46%, together with variations across Mukuru (55%), Kibera (45%) and Mathare (38%), indicates that professionalism is experienced unevenly across the settlements. Quantitative findings were corroborated by qualitative evidence from Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions, which revealed concerns regarding procedural fairness, responsiveness, accountability and the use of force during politically sensitive periods. Documentary evidence from oversight reports similarly highlighted recurring concerns regarding police conduct and accountability. The convergence of these findings confirms that police professionalism remains influenced by contextual factors beyond formal institutional reforms.

These findings are best explained by Social Contract Theory, which served as the study's primary theoretical framework. The theory posits that state institutions derive legitimacy from their ability to provide security and justice while respecting citizens' rights and expectations. The findings suggest that persistent overcrowding, poverty, infrastructural exclusion and socio-economic marginalisation weaken public trust and perceptions of procedural fairness, thereby contributing to strained police-community relations and uneven policing outcomes during political transitions.

The study further established that spatial inequality is a significant determinant of police professionalism. Statistical analysis revealed a strong relationship between spatial inequality and police professionalism ($r = 0.868$, $p < 0.001$), with regression analysis identifying spatial inequality as the strongest predictor of policing outcomes ($\beta = 0.52$). Qualitative evidence attributed these outcomes to overcrowding, poor infrastructure, limited accessibility, unemployment and uneven service provision, which constrained police operations and encouraged reactive and enforcement-oriented policing approaches. The findings, therefore, demonstrate that policing outcomes are shaped not only by institutional factors but also by the socio-spatial environments within which policing occurs.

The findings additionally revealed that civilian oversight positively influences police professionalism and accountability. Oversight effectiveness was significantly associated with professionalism ($r = 0.735$, $p < 0.001$). Evidence from surveys, interviews and documentary review identified the Independent Policing Oversight Authority (IPOA), the Internal Affairs Unit (IAU), civil society organisations and community accountability structures as important mechanisms for promoting transparency and accountability. However, delayed investigations, limited accessibility, inadequate resources, and weak enforcement capacity continue to constrain the effectiveness of oversight.

Similarly, collaboration between policing institutions and oversight actors was positively associated with police professionalism ($r = 0.651$, $p < 0.001$). Qualitative findings indicated that police-community engagement, community policing initiatives and multi-agency collaboration improve information sharing, conflict prevention and public trust. These findings support Conflict Transformation Theory, which complements Social Contract Theory by demonstrating that sustainable accountability and professionalism require addressing underlying structural inequalities, historical grievances and adversarial state-society relations through collaborative governance and institutional transformation.

Triangulation of quantitative, qualitative, and documentary evidence demonstrates that police professionalism during political transitions is fundamentally shaped by the interaction among spatial inequalities, institutional legitimacy, civilian oversight, and collaborative governance. The findings confirm social contract theory as the principal explanatory framework while Conflict Transformation



Theory provides complementary insight into the importance of addressing structural grievances through accountability, collaboration and institutional reform. Sustainable improvements in police professionalism, therefore, require strengthened civilian oversight, enhanced police–community engagement, and broader interventions to address the socio-spatial inequalities that continue to shape policing environments in Nairobi's informal settlements.

Conclusion

The study concludes that police professionalism during political transition-related conflicts in Nairobi's informal settlements remains moderate, uneven and strongly shaped by spatial inequalities, socio-economic marginalisation and the effectiveness of accountability institutions. Despite constitutional reforms, democratic policing principles, and the establishment of civilian oversight mechanisms, professionalism is inconsistently operationalised across Kibera, Mathare, and Mukuru, reflecting the influence of localised operational realities, infrastructural deficits, political pressures, and unequal access to security services. The findings demonstrate that policing outcomes are not determined solely by institutional reforms but are fundamentally shaped by the interaction among spatial inequalities, community–state relations, and accountability structures within informal settlements.

The study further concludes that the Independent Policing Oversight Authority (IPOA), the Internal Affairs Unit (IAU), the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (KNCHR), civil society organisations and grassroots community-based organisations constitute critical oversight and accountability actors that influence police professionalism, accountability and public confidence during political transitions in Nairobi's informal settlements. While these actors have contributed to strengthening oversight, promoting accountability and enhancing public scrutiny of police conduct, their effectiveness remains constrained by resource limitations, accessibility barriers, delayed investigations, weak enforcement of recommendations and coordination challenges. Consequently, oversight interventions have not always translated into consistent improvements in police professionalism across the study areas.

In sum, the study establishes that sustainable improvements in police professionalism during political transitions require integrated interventions that strengthen the institutional capacity of IPOA, the IAU, KNCHR, civil society organisations and grassroots community-based organisations, promote spatially responsive police training, equitable resource allocation and community-centred policing and address the underlying socio-spatial inequalities that continue to shape security governance within informal settlements. The study therefore contributes to contemporary debates on democratic policing by demonstrating that police professionalism is not merely an institutional outcome but a function of the broader political, spatial and governance contexts within which policing occurs.

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