



Drivers' Experiences of Traffic Police Corruption and the Implications for Governance Reform: Case Study of Madagascar's National Police and Gendarmerie

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Abstract

This study explores drivers' experiences of traffic police corruption in Madagascar, focusing on operations within the National Police and Gendarmerie. Using qualitative research methods, the study conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 30 drivers from diverse socio-economic backgrounds who regularly interacted with traffic authorities in urban and rural regional in Madagascar. The interviews aimed to explore drivers' perceptions, personal experiences, and coping strategies for navigating traffic encounters caused by corruption. The results indicate that drivers face frequent bribery demands from traffic police, especially in cases of minor infractions, where bribery is considered an effective means to avoid legal penalties. The study also highlights the role of power dynamics and lack of accountability in these corrupt practices. Informal networks of drivers and police contribute to a cycle of mutual reinforcement. Drivers' responses also reveal a widespread erosion of trust in both the national police and gendarmerie, which are seen as a barrier to effective policing and public safety. The study underscores the need for reform of law enforcement practices, enhanced oversight, increased public awareness, and highlighting the critical role of the government in reducing corruption and improving traffic law enforcement in Madagascar.

Abstrak

Studi ini mengeksplorasi pengalaman pengemudi dalam korupsi polisi lalu lintas di Madagaskar, dengan fokus pada operasi di lingkungan Kepolisian Nasional dan Gendarmerie. Dengan menggunakan metode penelitian kualitatif, penelitian ini melakukan wawancara semi-terstruktur mendalam terhadap 30 pengemudi dari latar belakang sosial ekonomi yang berbeda yang secara rutin berinteraksi dengan otoritas lalu lintas di wilayah perkotaan dan pedesaan di Madagaskar. Wawancara ini bertujuan untuk menggali persepsi pengemudi, pengalaman pribadi, dan strategi mengatasi kemacetan lalu lintas yang disebabkan oleh korupsi. Hasil dari studi ini menunjukkan bahwa pengemudi sering menghadapi tuntutan suap dari polisi lalu lintas, terutama dalam kasus pelanggaran ringan, dimana suap dianggap sebagai cara yang efektif untuk menghindari hukuman. Studi ini juga menyoroti peran dinamika kekuasaan dan kurangnya akuntabilitas dalam praktik korupsi. Jaringan informal antara pengemudi dan polisi berkontribusi pada siklus yang saling menguatkan. Para pengemudi menyampaikan bahwa semakin hilang kepercayaan mereka terhadap kepolisian nasional dan gendarmerie, yang dipandang sebagai hambatan bagi keefektifitas kepolisian dan keselamatan publik. Studi ini menuntut perlunya reformasi praktik penegakan hukum, peningkatan pengawasan, peningkatan kesadaran masyarakat, serta menyoroti peran krusial pemerintah dalam mengurangi korupsi dan meningkatkan penegakan hukum lalu lintas di Madagaskar.

INTRODUCTION

In many developing countries, law enforcement corruption is still a major problem that affects public trust, the effectiveness of traffic police performance, and the broader societal landscape (Park et al., 2023). One area where this corruption is particularly evident is in traffic enforcement, where interactions between drivers and police officers are frequent and often subject to informal and illicit practices (Branion-Calles et al., 2025). This issue is pervasive in many countries across Africa, including Madagascar, where traffic police corruption, particularly within the National Police and Gendarmerie, remains a pressing concern (Guida-Johnson, 2025). This study seeks to explore drivers' experiences of traffic police corruption in Madagascar, providing a deeper understanding of how it manifests in daily interactions and the consequences it has for both individuals and the broader society.

Madagascar, an island nation off the southeastern coast of Africa, faces numerous socio-political challenges that contribute to the persistence of corruption within its public institutions, including the police (Klein et al., 2023; Rahman et al., 2019). The traffic police, which includes both the National Police and the Gendarmerie, play a crucial role in maintaining road safety, ensuring the enforcement of traffic laws, and regulating the flow of transportation across the country (Park et al., 2023). However, these institutions are often perceived as ineffective, particularly in dealing with corruption (Prakash Giri et al., 2024). The public, including drivers, frequently report instances of bribery, favoritism, and abuse of power by traffic officers, which undermines the legitimacy of law enforcement and public trust in the police system.

Corruption has a wide-ranging effect on traffic law enforcement. Drivers are frequently forced to choose between facing legal penalties or complying with corrupt demands (Tenri Famauri et al., 2020). Such practices not only disadvantage individuals but also perpetuate a cycle of inequality, where those with limited financial resources are more vulnerable to exploitation. This creates an environment where the rule of law is undermined, and the public becomes increasingly skeptical of both the police and the government (Weger, 2009). The consequences of these practices extend beyond the roads, contributing to a broader sense of mistrust in state institutions and fueling corruption in other sectors of society.

The prevalence of corruption within Madagascar's police forces is not unique to the traffic division but is symptomatic of broader systemic issues within the country's public institution (Efendi et al., 2021). Corruption is deeply entrenched in various sectors of the economy, from judiciary to public health and education. Law enforcement, however, plays a central role in maintaining social order, and corruption within the police force undermines the state's ability to fulfil its obligations to citizens (Prakash Giri et al., 2024). In this context, understanding corruption in traffic policing

is not only a matter of road safety but also a critical issue of governance, rule of law, and human rights.

Lawrence Lessig (2011) argues that corruption is not only a matter of individual moral failings but can also originate in institutions. In this context, corruption occurs when institutional procedures or structures systematically enable or encourage behavior that deviates from ethical standards (Sebakeng & Cox, 2023). In the case of the traffic police and gendarmerie in Madagascar, institutional corruption can be understood as the ways in which systems, policies and norms within these organizations can facilitate or tolerate corrupt behavior (e.g. bribery, extortion, etc.). Traffic police corruption can arise due to low salary and poor working conditions that force policers to accept bribes to increase their income, weak institutional oversight that allows policers to act with impunity, and cultural factors where corruption becomes normalized in certain interactions, particularly in environments where public services are underfunded (Guida-Johnson, 2025).

There have been several initiatives over the last 20 years to address corruption within Madagascar's police forces, including the implementation of reforms and anti-corruption regulations (Emynorane et al., 2024). However, progress has been slow, and many drivers continue to report widespread corruption during traffic stops. These reforms have often been met with resistance from within the police forces, and the lack of enforcement or genuine political will to tackle corruption has limited their impact (Park et al., 2023). This study, therefore, contributes to the ongoing conversation about police reform in Madagascar, offering a grounded perspective on the realities of traffic policing and the systemic issues that fuel corruption.

Understanding the nature of traffic police corruption is essential for developing effective strategies to combat it (Klein et al., 2023). This includes not only identifying the conditions that allow corruption to thrive but also recognizing the factors that drivers themselves perceive as contributing to or mitigating these corrupt practices (Chalendard et al., 2021). Factors such as the perceived power imbalance between drivers and traffic officers, the lack of alternative mechanisms for addressing grievances, and the limited avenues for reporting corruption without facing retaliation all play a significant role in shaping the experiences of drivers.

In examining these issues, the study also draws on existing literature on police corruption and its effects on law enforcement practices in other developing countries (Pyman, 2021). Comparative studies from other African nations, as well as Latin America and Asia, provide valuable insights into the patterns of corruption that emerge in law enforcement and the challenges of addressing such issues within political systems that may lack the resources or political will to implement comprehensive reforms (Lutterbeck, 2013). By situating this study within the broader

context, the study highlights both the unique challenges faced by Madagascar and the shared experiences of many nations grappling with similar issues.

This study, therefore, addresses a critical gap in the literature on police corruption in Madagascar and provides valuable qualitative insights into the daily realities of those who interact most frequently with traffic officers. By applying theories of institutional corruption and power dynamics, the study offers a conceptual framework for understanding how systemic weaknesses and informal practices perpetuate corrupt behaviors within traffic enforcement. The findings will be of particular interest to policymakers, law enforcement agencies, civil society organizations, and international bodies seeking to understand and combat corruption within police forces. Through the lens of drivers' lived experiences, this study presents a compelling narrative of how corruption impacts individuals and society, while also offering a theoretical foundation to inform future reforms and improve the integrity of traffic policing in Madagascar.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with in-depth semi-structured interview techniques (Oranga & Matere, 2023). Researchers conducted interviews with 30 drivers who came from various socio-economic backgrounds. The selection of informants was carried out using a purposive sampling technique with a criteria such as working as a driver for at least one year and have frequently interacted with the traffic authorities, both in urban and rural areas of Madagascar. This diverse sample selection aims to obtain a comprehensive perspective on how drivers' experiences and perceptions relate to corruption that occurs in traffic. In addition, the interview also explores the strategies used by drivers in dealing with situations involving corruption on the road. This approach provides space for informants to freely share their experiences, allowing researchers to better understand the social and economic impacts of corrupt practices in Madagascar's transportation system.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Lawrence Lessig's (2011) theory of institutional corruption is well suited to this study as it provides a lens through which to understand the driver's experience. Interactions between drivers and police in the transport system often involve negotiations in which corruption is part of the transactional nature of these encounters. In this light, this study reveals how institutional practices and structures within the national police and gendarmerie contribute to the persistence of corruption, and how drivers themselves can navigate these corrupt systems, through compliance, resistance, or avoidance. Furthermore, this grand theory can also guide study that

identifies the root causes of corruption within these institutions and provides a framework for analyzing the impact of this corruption on public trust, security, and broader societal issues in Madagascar.

Discussion

The findings from this study reveal the multifaceted nature of traffic police corruption in Madagascar, characterized by bribes, power imbalances, lack of accountability, and the role of informal networks. These elements together create an entrenched culture of corruption that not only affects individual drivers but also undermines the overall functioning of law enforcement and public trust.

Bribes from Traffic Officers

Bribery is a pervasive issue in the interactions between traffic officers and drivers in Madagascar (Abbas & Usman, 2023). The study found that police often ask for bribes in exchange for clearing minor traffic violations or receiving more lenient treatment. Drivers reported being frequently asked for bribes for violations such as speeding, failing to produce valid documents, or minor vehicle malfunctions (Myers, 2001). These bribe requests are often unrelated to serious crimes and are often used by traffic police as an opportunity to increase their income. Bribes are often given in cash, and the amount of the bribe varies depending on the importance of the driver or the discretion of the policers (Rumak, 2018). For many drivers, bribery is seen as the only way to avoid heavier penalties, making it an integral part of their daily commute.

This widespread corruption has normalized corrupt behavior by both drivers and policers (Moloeznik, 2020). Many drivers expressed that they had come to expect bribery during traffic stops, and in some cases, they carried small sums of money specifically to pay off corrupt officers. For those who did not comply with these requests, the alternative was often additional fines, delays, or even confiscation of their vehicles. Drivers often believed that protesting or resisting bribe requests would only make the situation worse, leading to more serious consequences. As a result, corruption has become an inherent and predictable part of the system, making it difficult for drivers to navigate the roads without encountering corruption (Emynorane & Arrive, 2024). The normalization of bribery reflects a broader problem within the police force, where policers are seen as having the power to manipulate traffic laws for personal gain.

The prevalence of bribery highlights the deeply systemic nature of corruption within Madagascar's traffic police force (Esmati et al., 2024). Widespread bribery undermines the rule of law and erodes public trust in law enforcement. Instead of acting as impartial traffic controllers, policers become exploiters, abusing their authority to extort money from drivers (Rahman et al., 2019). This corruption not only

perpetuates inequality, allowing wealthy drivers to avoid or mitigate bribe demands through negotiation or their connections, but it also has significant financial and psychological costs for the drivers who are forced to comply. Drivers often reported feelings of helplessness, as they had no choice but to pay the bribe to avoid further complications (Pyman, 2021). As long as bribery remains entrenched within the system, it will continue to undermine the effectiveness and legitimacy of traffic policing in Madagascar.

The Role of Power Dynamics

Power dynamics play a significant role in traffic police corruption in Madagascar. The relationship between traffic police and drivers is inherently unequal, with traffic police having considerable authority over the movements and actions of drivers (Klein et al., 2023). Policers have the power to fine, impound, or even arrest drivers, making it difficult for drivers to refuse bribe requests without facing serious consequences. This unequal power relationship creates a coercive environment in which drivers are forced to comply with corrupt demands, even when they recognize the injustice of the situation (Chalendard et al., 2021). For many drivers, resisting or challenging a bribe request can result in intimidation, delays, or higher fines, making it easier for them to pay the bribe and move on.

This power imbalance is particularly evident in the case of low-income drivers, who may feel particularly vulnerable due to limited financial resources and a lack of social or legal support (Guida-Johnson, 2025). These drivers are often the most vulnerable to exploitation by corrupt policers because they are less likely to have the means to challenge officers or seek legal redress. The fear of not being able to pay higher fines or facing lengthy delays that could disrupt their livelihoods further motivates them to comply with bribe demands (Sebakeng & Cox, 2023). In this way, power dynamics within the police force directly contribute to the systemic nature of corruption, as policers know that many drivers, especially those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, will make concessions to avoid further complications.

In addition, power dynamics within the police force are often reinforced by the institutional structure and culture of law enforcement. Due to weak oversight and accountability mechanisms, policers feel incentivized to abuse their power for personal gain (Kjærgaard & Lauritsen, 2024). Many policers see their role as one of authority and control, which they use to assert dominance over drivers. This lawless atmosphere not only creates conditions for corruption to flourish but also perpetuates the cycle of abuse (Yasanthi et al., 2024). The lack of consequences for policers who engage in corrupt behavior reinforces the perception that their actions are uncriticizable, making it more difficult for drivers to challenge (Branion-Calles et al.,

2025). Thus, the power dynamics in this context are not just the product of individual policers but are deeply embedded in the structure and culture of the police force itself.

The Lack of Accountability

One of the main factors contributing to the persistence of corruption in Madagascar's traffic police is the widespread lack of accountability within the police force. Many drivers reported that when they attempted to report corruption or make complaints to police, their efforts were often ignored or dismissed (Moloeznik, 2020). The lack of clear and accessible mechanisms to hold policers accountable means that corrupt practices continue unchecked. This lack of accountability undermines the integrity of the police because they do not face consequences for their actions and drivers have no means of seeking justice (Abbas & Usman, 2023; Oleinik, 2016). Without effective monitoring or disciplinary measures, policers have little incentive to stop engaging in corrupt practices.

The issue of accountability is further complicated by a lack of transparency in law enforcement. Drivers often feel that there is no formal process to address corruption within the traffic police force, and even when they are victims of blatant extortion, they believe that their complaints will not succeed without action (Modipa, 2024). With minimal independent oversight or investigative agencies overseeing the police, they can act with impunity. This lack of oversight creates an environment where corrupt behavior is not only tolerated but normalized. In some cases, drivers describe that even when they are aware of corruption, they do not trust the authorities to fix it, reinforcing the belief that law enforcement comes first.

Furthermore, the lack of accountability contributes to a vicious cycle of corruption that is difficult to break (Myers, 2001). When police officers do not face consequences for their actions, it creates an institutional culture in which corruption is seen as part of the job rather than a unique form of misconduct. This state of mind takes root among new recruits as well as experienced police officers, perpetuating the practice over time (Rumak, 2018). As a result, drivers continue to face frequent demands for bribes and those who wish to report corruption feel powerless. Until strong accountability mechanisms are in place, such as independent oversight bodies, transparent internal investigations, and meaningful sanctions for misconduct, traffic police corruption in Madagascar is likely to continue to erode public trust in law enforcement.

Informal Networks of Drivers and Traffic Police

Informal networks between drivers and traffic officers play a key role in perpetuating corruption in Madagascar's road traffic enforcement system (Prakash Giri et al., 2024). These networks are often formed through repeated interactions

between certain agents and regular drivers. Drivers on these networks often have established relationships with specific agents, which can lead to preferential treatment (Campion et al., 2019). Police may turn a blind eye to minor violations or reduce the amount of bribes demanded by those they recognize and trust, creating an unfair advantage for drivers with such relationships (Lutterbeck, 2013). These informal relationships create a system in which loyalty or familiarity with agents can mitigate the financial burden of corruption, fostering a sense of inequality among those without similar relationships.

The existence of these informal networks highlights the social dimensions of corruption within the traffic police force (Emynorane & Arrive, 2024; Tenri Famauri et al., 2020). For drivers without close relationships with the police, the corruption process is more transactional and often harsher, with higher bribes or less lenient police. The inequalities created by these networks perpetuate a system of corruption based not only on financial means but also on access to social connections (Modipa, 2023). Drivers without these informal connections often feel marginalized and exploited, which further reinforces the sense of injustice within the system. This division results in a two-tiered system, in which those who are part of the “group” of regular drivers or those who have personal relationships with the police are less likely to be victims of exploitation than those without such relationships.

Furthermore, the use of informal networks complicates anti-corruption efforts within the traffic police force (Moloeznik, 2020). These networks operate outside the formal system, making it difficult to monitor or regulate the behavior of actors involved in corrupt practices. Since bribery is not always a public, transparent transaction and is often handled within these private, informal relationships, it becomes harder for authorities or oversight bodies to identify and address corruption effectively (Abbas & Usman, 2023). The existence of these networks also undermines public trust in the fairness and integrity of traffic law enforcement. Unless these informal connections are eliminated and a system is created in which all drivers are treated equally, anti-corruption efforts will face significant obstacles. The deep integration of these informal networks into the traffic police culture further reinforces the need for structural reform to ensure a more transparent and equitable system.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the deeply ingrained issue of traffic police corruption in Madagascar, where bribery, power imbalances, and weak accountability mechanisms create a culture of exploitation between drivers and law enforcement authorities. The pervasive nature of corruption is further facilitated by informal networks that blur the lines between the police, gendarmerie, and drivers. By focusing on the dynamics of these interactions, the study emphasizes the critical need for

institutional reforms and stronger policies to combat corruption within the transportation sector. In light of this, the study contributes valuable insights into the broader political and governance landscape of Madagascar, highlighting how systemic weaknesses and corruption hinder effective state functioning and public trust in law enforcement institutions.

The findings of this study hold significant theoretical implications for understanding corruption in the context of developing countries, especially regarding the relationship between socio-economic factors, power structures, and corrupt practices. By examining how individuals develop coping strategies to navigate such environments, this study adds depth to theories addressing governance, corruption, and institutional failures. Furthermore, it brings new perspectives on the role of weak institutional structures in fostering corrupt behavior, providing a broader framework for studying citizen-state relations. Although the study is limited by its small sample size and focus on the driver's perspective, it offers crucial insights into the political and governmental dimensions of corruption, offering implications for policy and institutional reforms aimed at improving governance and law enforcement accountability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results and discussion, some recommendations are addressed to the following entity:

First, the government needs to take a leading role in addressing traffic police corruption by implementing comprehensive institutional reforms to improve transparency, accountability, and integrity in law enforcement. This includes establishing independent oversight bodies with the authority to monitor traffic police performance, investigate complaints of corruption, and hold police officers accountable. The government should also prioritize strengthening the judicial system, ensuring that complaints of misconduct are taken seriously and investigated thoroughly. Furthermore, the government could invest in technology to create a more transparent system, such as body cameras or mobile reporting platforms, that allow both drivers and officers to document interactions. By enacting and enforcing clear anti-corruption policies, improving institutional accountability, and ensuring that traffic law enforcement is fair and transparent, the government can begin to restore public trust in the police force.

Second, the National Police and the Gendarmerie must take active measures to combat corruption in the country and foster a culture of professionalism within their ranks. This includes regular anti-corruption training for policers, focusing on ethics, the consequences of corruption and the importance of treating all citizens equally. It is essential to develop and enforce a clear code of conduct for policers, with

serious consequences for any representative found to be involved in corrupt activities. In addition, the National Police and the Gendarmerie must work to dismantle the informal networks that facilitate corruption by ensuring the objective and consistent application of highway laws. The implementation of internal control mechanisms, such as internal audits or independent inspection teams, can help identify and eliminate corrupt practices. Traffic police officers should be encouraged to adhere to ethical behavior through performance evaluations that reward integrity and professionalism.

Third, drivers also have a role to play in combating traffic police corruption and can take steps to protect themselves and help address systemic issues. For this, drivers should be encouraged to report any corrupt practices they encounter using anonymous channels or dedicated complaint platforms. By doing so, they can help expose corrupt practices and hold policers accountable for their actions. Drivers should also be made aware of their rights and responsibilities, understand that they are entitled to fair treatment under the law and should not feel obliged to pay bribes. Additionally, creating a culture of non-compliance with corruption, where drivers refuse to engage and instead challenge policers respectfully and legally, can begin to change societal attitudes toward corruption. Drivers can support broader efforts for reform by actively participating in public awareness campaigns and advocating for better, more transparent systems of law enforcement.

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