

Unequal Reporting: Trust in the Police and Racial Disparities in Property Crime Reporting in Brazil

Introduction and theoretical motivation

Reporting a crime to the police constitutes a decisive institutional moment. It transforms a private experience of victimization into a formal interaction with the state, activates bureaucratic and investigative procedures, and contributes to the construction of official crime statistics. In this sense, reporting is not merely a behavioral outcome but a mechanism through which institutional protection is triggered and state authority is recognized. Yet not all victims report. A substantial proportion of crimes remain outside official records, generating the well-known “dark figure” of crime. This study examines these dynamics through a case study of Brazil, a context marked by high levels of violence, pronounced racial inequality, and historically strained police–citizen relations.

A broad literature shows that reporting behavior varies systematically across individuals and contexts (Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999; Skogan & Meares, 2004). Victims evaluate the perceived seriousness of the offense, the likelihood of police action, the expected benefits of engagement, and the potential risks associated with contact. Within this framework, police legitimacy and procedural justice theories emphasize trust as a key determinant of cooperation (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Tyler, 2005). Trust reflects expectations that police officers will act fairly and effectively, thereby lowering the anticipated costs of engagement (Murphy et al., 2014). When trust is high, victims may perceive reporting as worthwhile; when trust is low, the same action may appear futile or risky.

Empirical evidence, however, is not uniform. Some studies identify a positive association between trust and reporting, while others show that this relationship weakens once crime characteristics or contextual variables are considered (Boateng, 2018; Goudriaan et al., 2004; Xie & Baumer, 2019). This heterogeneity suggests that trust does not operate as a universal determinant but interacts with situational and structural conditions.

This study advances three theoretical arguments. First, reporting decisions differ across crime types. Theft and robbery, although both classified as property crimes, involve distinct levels of confrontation and perceived threat. Robbery typically entails direct interaction with offenders and heightened uncertainty regarding police response. Theft is often less confrontational and may be perceived as less urgent. These differences imply that trust may be more consequential in robbery cases, where discretion and expectations about police behavior are central.

Second, reporting behavior is embedded in structures of racial inequality. Research documents racial disparities in police contact and perceptions of discrimination (Weitzer & Tuch, 1999; Brunson & Weitzer, 2009). Such experiences shape anticipatory expectations regarding police interaction. Even when expressed levels of trust are similar, nonwhite individuals may anticipate higher risks or lower returns from engagement.

Studies show that racial gaps in reporting persist after controlling for socioeconomic and contextual factors (Baumer, 2002; Xie & Baumer, 2019). Reporting disparities therefore reflect broader institutional inequality rather than attitudes alone.

Third, certain property crimes carry administrative or economic stakes that independently motivate reporting. Vehicle-related incidents and the theft of documents or mobile phones frequently require an official police report to activate insurance claims or initiate bureaucratic procedures (Bowles et al., 2009; Corbacho et al., 2012). In such cases, reporting may occur even when trust in the police is limited. This dimension complicates the interpretation of reported crime as a straightforward indicator of public confidence.

Together, these mechanisms motivate three core hypotheses: trust in the police increases reporting; its effect is stronger for robbery than for theft; nonwhite victims are less likely to report net of trust and socioeconomic factors; and crimes involving higher administrative or economic stakes are more likely to be

Brazilian context

Brazil provides a relevant context for examining these dynamics. The country combines democratic institutions with high levels of violent crime and persistent socioeconomic inequality (Adorno & Cardia, 2000; Caldeira, 2002). Policing institutions are characterized by militarized structures and uneven institutional capacity across regions. Territorial disparities in access to police services generate variation in how citizens experience law enforcement.

Racial hierarchies are central to this landscape. Nonwhite Brazilians are disproportionately exposed to intrusive and coercive policing practices (Caldeira, 2002; Cano, 2010). These patterns shape expectations about institutional treatment and may influence decisions about whether to report victimization. The Brazilian case therefore offers a setting in which trust, inequality, and situational factors intersect in shaping reporting behavior.

Data and empirical strategy

The analysis uses data from the 2021 nationally representative victimization survey conducted as a module of the Continuous National Household Sample Survey. The survey includes detailed information on victimization experiences, reporting behavior, trust in the Military Police, crime characteristics, and socioeconomic attributes.

The analytical sample consists of $N = 3,417$ victims of theft and $N = 677$ victims of robbery. Separate probit models are estimated for each crime type, reflecting theoretical expectations that reporting mechanisms differ across offenses. The dependent variable is a binary indicator equal to one if the victim reported the incident to the police.

Trust in the police is measured as a binary indicator distinguishing high or moderate trust from low or no trust. Race is coded as a binary indicator identifying nonwhite respondents relative to White respondents. Crime attributes capturing administrative or economic stakes include indicators for vehicle-related incidents and for cases involving documents

or mobile phones. The models control for gender, age, education, employment status, household income quartiles, prior victimization, urban residence, perceived neighborhood crime, and macro-region. Survey weights ensure national representativeness. Results are presented as average marginal effects.

Descriptive patterns

Descriptive statistics reveal that robbery is reported at substantially higher rates than theft. Robbery victims are more likely to reside in areas characterized by perceived neighborhood crime and more frequently experience vehicle involvement. Both crime types are predominantly urban, reflecting national victimization patterns.

Trust in the police is moderately prevalent in both samples, though slightly lower among robbery victims. Nonwhite individuals constitute a majority of victims in both theft and robbery samples, underscoring the intersection between race and exposure to crime.

Multivariate findings

The multivariate analysis provides consistent support for the theoretical framework. Trust in the police is positively associated with reporting across all specifications. However, the magnitude of this association differs by crime type. For theft, the effect is statistically significant but substantively limited. For robbery, the association is considerably stronger, suggesting that trust becomes more relevant in contexts characterized by confrontation and uncertainty.

Racial disparities persist across all models. Nonwhite victims are consistently less likely to report both theft and robbery, even after accounting for trust, socioeconomic characteristics, prior victimization, neighborhood context, and region. The reporting gap is larger for robbery. These findings indicate that institutional engagement is structured by racial inequality in ways that extend beyond attitudinal differences in trust.

Crime attributes linked to administrative or economic stakes display large effects. Vehicle-related incidents and cases involving documents or mobile phones substantially increase reporting probabilities in both theft and robbery models. In several specifications, these effects are larger than those associated with trust. Reporting thus reflects not only evaluations of police legitimacy but also procedural requirements embedded in insurance and bureaucratic systems.

Control variables exhibit patterns consistent with prior research. Prior victimization increases reporting, possibly reflecting learning effects or cumulative material losses. Urban residence and perceived neighborhood crime are positively associated with reporting, suggesting that institutional availability and local context shape engagement. Regional indicators reveal persistent spatial heterogeneity, highlighting territorial differences in policing environments.

Interpretation and implications

The findings demonstrate that crime reporting in Brazil reflects structured differences in institutional engagement rather than a uniform expression of police legitimacy. Trust matters, particularly in robbery cases where confrontation and uncertainty heighten the salience of expectations about police behavior. However, reporting is also shaped by racial inequality and by procedural requirements linked to administrative necessity.

These results carry important implications for the interpretation of official crime statistics. When reporting is influenced by practical requirements and structured inequality, reported crime does not necessarily reflect underlying victimization patterns or public confidence. Policies that rely heavily on reported crime to allocate resources or assess performance should account for the selective nature of reporting behavior.

Limitations and conclusion

The study relies on cross-sectional survey data and self-reported measures of trust, limiting causal interpretation. Measures of trust capture general attitudes rather than situational evaluations at the moment of victimization. The aggregation of nonwhite categories masks heterogeneity within racial groups. Future research should incorporate more detailed measures of prior police contact, perceived risk, and institutional accessibility to further clarify the mechanisms linking trust, inequality, and reporting.

Despite these limitations, the study provides systematic evidence that reporting decisions for property crimes in Brazil are shaped by an interplay of trust, race, crime type, and administrative necessity. By distinguishing theft from robbery and integrating attitudinal, structural, and situational dimensions, the analysis clarifies why prior research has produced heterogeneous findings and offers a more nuanced understanding of crime reporting in unequal and high-violence contexts.

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