

# Police corruption and crime: Evidence from Africa

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## Abstract

Using data from the Afrobarometer surveys, this paper finds that people living in regions in which police corruption is more prevalent are more likely to report that they or someone in their family have been victims of physical assault. People living in more corrupted regions are also more likely to report that they or someone in their family has had something stolen from their home. We find no statistically significant gender differences in the average marginal effects. Controlling for the incidence of corruption in other domains reduces the size of the estimated association but does not render it insignificant in terms of statistical significance or magnitude. Non-police corruption is also strongly associated with an increased risk of crime. For both types of crime, the evidence points to “transactional” police corruption (having to pay bribes to get help) rather than “predatory” police corruption (having to pay bribes to avoid problems) as driving the relationship. Finally, we show that, controlling for whether the respondent reports being a victim of either type of crime, police corruption predicts an increase in the probability that the respondent reports feeling unsafe while walking in their own neighborhood thus imposing a cost even on those who have not been victims.

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Corruption, the abuse of public power for private gain, remains endemic around the world and has strong negative effects on lives, societies, and economic activity. For example, evidence points to corruption as being a drag on national economic growth (Mauro, 1995; Swaleheen, 2011) and firm performance (Fisman & Svensson, 2007). Societies that are more corrupt are less trusting societies (Banerjee, 2016; Seligson, 2002; Uslaner, 2005) and are fertile ground for populists (Foresta, 2020). Corruption also harms both physical health (Azfar & Gurgur, 2008a; Dincer & Teoman, 2019) and mental health (Gillanders, 2016; Sharma et al., 2021). In this paper, our objective is to understand the relationship between police corruption and crime outcomes in Africa.

While corruption can take many forms and is possible whenever people come into contact with agents of the state, one of the most dangerous forms is police corruption. Such corruption can threaten the security and stability of a state and lead to increased violence and crime. For example, O'Day (2001) argues that corruption within the Mexican army has facilitated the country's drugs trade. Fraud in Malaysia facilitated the release of some terrorist suspects from police cells before evidence was gathered against them (Bakashmar, 2008). Banini (2020) argues that the ebb and flow of corruption adversely affected the effectiveness of military responses to defeat Boko Haram in Nigeria. Oarhe and Aghedo (2010) identify corruption as a threat to internal security in Nigeria while Hope (2018) identifies police corruption in Kenya as a threat to national security.

In addition to these significant structural costs to societies, there is also evidence that points to extremely damaging effects of police corruption on individual lives. Annan and Brier (2010), for example, point to police corruption as a significant challenge in the fight against domestic violence as it makes it more difficult for poor and politically weak victims to report. Using data from Peru, Hunt (2007) finds that victims of crime and other adverse shocks are more likely to pay bribes to public officials, with the strongest effects found in relation to the police. Evidence from Mexico points to such double victimisation as a driver of political alienation (Ponce et al., 2022). Dincer and Johnston (2021) find that the overall level of corruption in US states predicts police killings of black Americans and argue that this is capturing the effect of an accountability deficit on police behavior. Police corruption is clearly a threat to the lives and wellbeing of the population.

However, there is relatively little quantitative evidence that links police corruption to other crime outcomes or estimates of the size of such an effect. Azfar and Gurgur (2008b) present interesting cross country results using International Crime Victim Surveys data that links increased police corruption to increased crime and reduced reporting of crime to the police. However, they are limited to small sample of 38 to 57 countries and these relationships are insignificant in their two stage least squares models, though the negative effect of police corruption on crime reporting to the police is significant in a three stage least squares model. Abbink et al. (2020) provide intriguing experimental evidence of the effect of police corruption on crime outcomes. In their lab experiment, conducted in the United States of America, even corrupt monitors with the power to fine "law breakers" and extort bribes from law abiding participants lowers the incidence of crime relative to the baseline with no police. This is because bribes are used as a substitute punishment to the "legal" fines.

Building on this literature, our main objective in this paper is to examine the relationship between police corruption and household experiences of crime in Africa. To do this, we utilize data from the Afrobarometer. Alongside self-reported crime victimisation data, the Afrobarometer collects information on respondents' experiences of paying bribes to the police allowing us

to focus specifically on the role of police corruption. Moreover, the data allow us to examine if it is corruption in terms of having to pay bribes to get help - “transactional” police corruption- or having to pay to avoid trouble with the police - “predatory” police corruption - that matters.

We find that those living in areas with a greater incidence of police corruption are more likely to report that they or someone in their families has been the victim of a physical assault. This is also true when we use reported theft of property from the home as our outcome variable. While we do not have information on the nature of reported assault, and the surveys ask about direct experience or those of family members, men and women face different risks of sexual assault and non-sexual assault. We thus investigate if the marginal effects of police corruption vary with the gender of the respondent but find no significant differences. These results point to a significant cost of police corruption for men and women. We further find that the link between police corruption and crime is driven by the need to pay bribes to police to get help, rather than the tendency for police to extract bribes “to avoid problems.” Importantly, we find that corruption in other spheres of the public service also predicts an increased risk of corruption. It is not only police corruption that increases the risk of crime. This in line with the literature noted above that finds that corruption in general undermines economic opportunity, increases poverty, and distorts norms.

The surveys also ask about respondents’ fear of crime. Building on our main results, we present evidence that corruption increases the fear of crime. While some people may be able to purchase a sense of safety by bribing the police, on average the level of corruption in a region has a spill-over effect that imposes a further cost on individuals.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, we discuss the potential mechanisms through which police corruption can influence an individual’s exposure to crime. We then provide an overview of the Afrobarometer data and provide detail of our approach. Our results section follows, and we conclude with a summary of our findings and their implications, a discussion of the limitations of our study, and some suggestions for further research.

## 1.1 | Police corruption and crime

There are several ways in which police corruption can lead to less effective policing and an increased risk of crime. Perhaps the most obvious is that corrupt police may allow criminals to go free in exchange for bribes. Bowles and Garoupa (1997) present a modification of the standard Becker model of crime that allows criminals to bribe police officers to escape punishment. They conclude that this modification has implications for the optimal severity of sanction that criminals face as the social cost of increased corruption is traded off against the social cost of crime. Moreover, police corruption creates an additional demand on policing resources in order to police the police. Chang et al. (2000) extend this model to incorporate social norms and conclude that increased punishment severity can actually be counterproductive in terms of reducing crime if corruption is widespread. Ultimately, corrupt police may work to support criminals who will pay them better than government, rather than try to catch them or deter them from committing crimes.

In addition to active collusion with criminals, it is also plausible that police focused on rent extraction will not do their jobs or will distort their allocation of resources and tasks away from the social optimum. Khemtong (2017) conducted interviews with members of the Royal Thai Police and identifies rent seeking behaviors ranging from distorted allocation of resources to extortion and bribery. The potential for incentives to shape police behavior has also been

demonstrated in the US where laws that allowed police forces to retain portions of seized assets from drugs enforcement actions led to increases in arrests and increases in their discretionary budgets (Benson et al., 1995; Mast et al., 2000).

Holmes (2020) identifies procurement as a potentially highly lucrative source of illegal income for senior police officers. If funds from equipment and training budgets are embezzled or contracts are awarded based on kickbacks and connections, police effectiveness will suffer. Funds needed for basic operations can also be embezzled leading to reduced capabilities to prevent and investigate crime. In addition, Agbiboa (2015) notes that embezzlement by senior officers is a driving force behind corrupt acts by rank and file officers in the Nigerian police. Similarly, Mutahi, Micheni, and Lake (2021) conclude that corruption by officers on the street is “quasi-promoted” by their superiors. By reducing the incentives for accountability, from senior to junior and junior to senior, corruption creates a system that protects officers from the consequences of misconduct (Dincer & Johnston, 2021).

Control of processes also offers scope for rent seeking behaviors that can reduce the efficacy of a police force. Both theory and evidence point to corruption as a meaningful determinant of excess regulation and red tape (Breen & Gillanders, 2022; Guriev, 2004). Police may also create inefficiencies and red tape to create incentives for victims of crime or potential victims of crime to pay bribes. By increasing the cost of reporting for victims, this can serve to lower the expected cost of criminality as perpetrators know that they are less likely to be caught in regions where the police force is more corrupt. We also know that corruption undermines trust in institutions, including the police (Kääriäinen, 2007; Semukhina & Reynolds, 2014). Police forces that lack the public's trust or are seen as illegitimate will face additional challenges in preventing and investigating crime (Tyler, 2004). Singh (2022) also argues that police corruption leads to reduced confidence in and fragmented communal relations with the police. Perceptions or experiences of police misconduct predict underreporting of crime in several contexts (Gingerich & Oliveros, 2018; Lichtenstein & Johnson, 2009; Soares, 2004). This is another way in which a corrupt police force can increase crime by reducing the chances that a perpetrator will be reported and punished. In addition, the perception of illegitimacy reduces compliance with laws and law enforcement (Tyler, 2004) and corruption has been shown to trigger such legitimacy effects (Boly et al., 2019). Gillanders and van der Werff (2022) find that victims of corruption are more likely to state that they would seek revenge themselves rather than seek the assistance of the police. Thus, even honest officers in a force perceived to be corrupt will face additional challenges in preventing crime.

Ultimately, police corruption can negatively affect crime and security outcomes by acting as an “incubator” for crime and terrorism (Shelley, 2014). Corruption reduces the available public expenditure on policing (Banini, 2020; Oarhe & Aghedo, 2010), weakens the quality of governance and institutional quality of a state (Downie, 2013; Sewall, 2016; Singh, 2022), and impedes economic development (Glickman, 2005; Mauro, 1995; Méon & Sekkat, 2005).

However, it has also been argued that corruption can “grease the wheels” of an economy by allowing people to bypass costly and inefficient regulation and red tape (Huntington, 1968). In the current context, a mechanism such as this could drive a negative association between police corruption and crime as people are able to seek protection and restitution by paying police officers to operate either in an unofficial capacity or bypass or expedite reporting requirements. For example, Jha et al. (2022) find that corruption is used by victims of conflict to obtain protection. It is important to test the association between police corruption and crime in light of these findings. If police corruption does offer some level of protection, reform efforts should be aware of this in designing interventions.

## 2 | DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Corruption can, and does, occur in many different sectors and is often categorized as grand or petty. While we have learned a great deal from composite indicators such as Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), the World Bank's Control of Corruption and PRS Group's International Country Risk Guide, such metrics cannot distinguish between different types of corruption or point to where it occurs. Survey data of people's experiences however, allow us to capture corruption in different aspects of daily life and examine the consequences (Reinikka & Svensson, 2006).

The Afrobarometer surveys are nationally representative surveys, and they include questions that ask respondents about their experiences of paying bribes to public officials in several contexts. We use data from the seventh round, which was conducted between 2016 and 2018 in 34 African countries. While earlier rounds did ask about police bribery, the question either did not distinguish between the context of paying to avoid problems and paying to get help, or only asked about the former context. Demarest (2017) presents evidence consistent with interviewer error in earlier rounds and from Round 7 onwards, Afrobarometer introduced computer assisted personal interviewing to increase data reliability. For these reasons, we limit our analysis to the data from Round 7.

Crucially for our purposes, the Round 7 survey asks about bribe paying to the police in two regards. They first ask those who have requested assistance from the police in the past twelve months how often, if ever, they had to "pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favor for a police officer" in order to get the assistance they needed. The second question about experiences of police corruption relates to encounters over the past twelve months with police in other situations "like at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation." Respondents are asked how often they had to "pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favor for a police officer in order to avoid a problem during one of these encounters."

From this information, we create three variables. *policebribe* takes a value of one if the respondent reports having paid a bribe in the past twelve months in either circumstance and zero otherwise.<sup>1</sup> From Table 1, it can be seen that approximately 11% of respondents have either paid a bribe to get help from the police or avoid trouble. *helpbribe* and *problembribe* are dummy variables that take a value of one if the respondent reports having had to pay a bribe to get help from the police or avoid trouble with the police, respectively. We can see from Table 1 that it is more common to have to pay a bribe to avoid predatory police than it is to get help.

While we control for the respondent's own experiences in our models, our interest is in the regional incidence of police corruption. We obtain this variable, *policebribe incidence*, by averaging the individual experience variables over the sub-national region in which the respondent lives.<sup>2</sup> There are 400 regions identified in the Afrobarometer. These units correspond to sub-national units of government - provinces, districts, or states, depending on the country. The average number of respondents per region is 114 with a median of 80 and a range of 8 (for 8 of the 400 regions with small populations such as the Dakhla-Ouad Eddahab region of Morocco) to 1152 (for the São Tomé region of São Tomé and Príncipe).

Whereas one's own experiences of crime are clearly endogenous with exposure to the police, and thus to corruption risk (Hunt, 2007), the regional incidence of police corruption can, through the mechanisms outlined above, lead to a greater risk of crime for individuals. While bribery is only one modality of police corruption, we can capture both predatory and transactional contexts and low-level corruption is often sanctioned by, or in service of, higher-level police authorities.

Our measures of crime experience relate to assault and theft from the home. The surveys ask "during the past year, have you or anyone in your family: (A) had something stolen from your

TABLE 1 Summary statistics.

	No. of observations	Mean	Standard deviation
Attacked	44,384	0.0943583	0.2923299
Stolen	44,364	0.2990262	0.4578365
Feltunsafe	44,315	0.2674715	0.4426454
Fearcrime	44,336	0.2058372	0.4043167
Policebribe	44,384	0.1078542	0.3101997
Policebribe Incidence	44,384	0.1082464	0.0814651
Helpbribe	44,369	0.0357457	0.1856575
Helpbribe Incidence	44,384	0.0359378	0.0419049
Problembribe	44,379	0.0889835	0.2847232
Problembribe Incidence	44,384	0.0893610	0.0707657
Otherbribe	44,193	0.1693481	0.3750633
Otherbribe Incidence	44,384	0.1697115	0.1179931
Female	44,384	0.5005407	0.5000053
Age	44,384	37.170350	14.923830
Poverty	44,384	1.1872970	0.9096954
Urban	44,384	0.4451154	0.4969841
Station	44,384	0.3374414	0.4728422

house? (B) Been physically attacked?" Respondents who say yes, can then indicate that the crime happened once, twice, or three or more times. We focus on dummy variables, *attacked* and *stolen*, that take a value of one if the respondent indicates that they or their family has been the victim of these crimes in the past year, and zero otherwise. In a robustness test, we use the full range of information and estimate an ordered probit model. We distinguish between theft and assault as these different types of crime may have different risk factors. Table 1 shows that just under 30% of the sample report having suffered theft from their homes and 9.4% indicate that they or someone in their family has been the victim of assault. These variables have an advantage over reported crime statistics as existing evidence points to corruption as a deterrent to reporting crime to the authorities (Gingerich & Oliveros, 2018; Lichtenstein & Johnson, 2009; Soares, 2004).

To estimate the relationship between police corruption and crime outcomes, we estimate probit models of the following form:

$$Pr(\text{crime}_{ij} = 1) = \Phi(\beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{policebribe}_i + \beta_2 \text{bribeincidence}_j + \beta_3 \text{female}_i + \beta_4 \text{age}_i + \beta_5 \text{poverty}_i + \beta_6 \text{urban}_i + \beta_7 \text{station}_i + \beta_8 \text{education}_i)$$

where  $\text{crime}_{ij}$  capture the crime experience in terms of assault or theft of respondent  $I$  in region  $j$ .  $\text{policebribe}_i$  is a binary measure of their own experience of paying a bribe to the police and  $\text{bribeincidence}_j$  is the regional incidence of police bribery. We also control for a number of factors that are plausibly correlated with both crime risk and exposure to the police, and police corruption.  $\text{female}_i$  takes a value of one if the respondent is female,  $\text{age}_i$  is the respondent's age, and  $\text{education}_i$  is a categorical variable capturing the respondent's highest completed level of education. Following the findings of Justesen and Bjørnskov (2014) that the poor are at increased risk of corruption we include a lived poverty index,  $\text{poverty}_i$ , based on the respondent's self-reported shortages of food, water, medicine, cash income, and cooking oil. It takes values between 0 and 4, with larger numbers corresponding to greater deprivation. Finally  $\text{urban}_i$  and  $\text{station}_i$  are binary



variables indicating that the respondent lives in an urban primary sampling unit (PSU) and the presence of a police station in or near the PSU. We include country fixed effects in all specifications and cluster our standard errors at the regional level.

### 3 | RESULTS

#### 3.1 | Assault

Table 2 presents the results of our examination of the *attacked* outcome. Column 1 omits the regional incidence of police corruption and shows that those who have paid a bribe are more likely to report to the survey enumerator that they or someone in their family has been the victim of a physical assault. As noted above, this significant association cannot be interpreted as evidence of police corruption causing crime, but it will be important to control for in all models as it is plausibly correlated with both the regional incidence of police corruption and the outcomes of interest. The results for the control variables indicate that women are less likely to be assaulted, though the data do not speak to the nature or severity of assault. Older people are less likely to have been assaulted but poverty and living in an urban area are strong predictors of assault. For example, living in an urban area increases the risk of assault by 3.3%, which is large relative to the mean of 9.4%. Interestingly, living in or near an area with a police station is insignificant. Finally, education plays only a weak role. We only find strong evidence that those with a university degree (or more) face an increased risk relative to those with no less than full primary education. While we control for lived poverty and deprivation, this education effect could represent a wealth effect.

Turning to our main concerns, Column 2 shows that, conditional on own experience of paying a bribe, a greater incidence of police corruption in the respondent's region is a statistically significant predictor of an increase in the probability that they report that they or someone in their family has been physically attacked. As noted above, one's own status as the victim of a crime is likely to be endogenous with whether one has paid a bribe to the police. We therefore omit the respondent's own experience of bribery in Column 3. This leads to a somewhat larger estimated marginal effect of the incidence of police corruption, which remains statistically significant.

The magnitude of the association between police corruption and whether the respondent or someone in their family has been the victim of assault is meaningful. For example, the estimate marginal effect from the model presented in Column 2 implies that a one standard deviation increase in police corruption (0.0815) predicts a 1.4% increase in the chances of assault. This is large relative to the mean. Table 1 tells us that 9.4% of the sample report assault to the enumerators. Moreover, the observed range of the police corruption incidence variable runs from 0% to 75% - thus for some people, police corruption poses a very significant threat to their safety.

While the surveys are nationally representative, we are interested in sub-national averages. To address concerns as to whether the surveys are representative at this level of aggregation, we show in Table A3 in the appendix that our results are robust to using the survey weights provided by the Afrobarometer and to weighting the individual observations when calculating the regional incidence of police corruption. We can also calculate the incidence of corruption at the primary enumeration unit level. These are much smaller subnational divisions with an average of 21 respondents. Table A4 shows that results at this level of aggregation are similar. The main difference is that the test of the association between the incidence of police corruption and the respondent's experience of being assaulted yields a  $p$ -value of 0.057 when we include the incidence of non-police corruption. The magnitude of the marginal effect of police corruption is also smaller for both types of crime.

TABLE 2 Police corruption and assault.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Attacked	Attacked	Attacked	Attacked	Attacked
Policebribe	0.0444*** (0.0039)	0.0388*** (0.0040)		0.0391*** (0.0040)	0.0390*** (0.0040)
Policebribe Incidence		0.1707*** (0.0232)	0.2034*** (0.0226)	0.0686** (0.0290)	0.0689** (0.0291)
Otherbribe Incidence				0.1348*** (0.0243)	0.1349*** (0.0243)
Female	-0.0108*** (0.0028)	-0.0112*** (0.0027)	-0.0138*** (0.0027)	-0.0111*** (0.0027)	-0.0112*** (0.0027)
Age	-0.0006*** (0.0001)	-0.0006*** (0.0001)	-0.0006*** (0.0001)	-0.0006*** (0.0001)	-0.0006*** (0.0001)
Poverty	0.0352*** (0.0016)	0.0346*** (0.0016)	0.0356*** (0.0016)	0.0340*** (0.0016)	0.0340*** (0.0016)
Urban	0.0334*** (0.0031)	0.0330*** (0.0031)	0.0335*** (0.0031)	0.0319*** (0.0031)	0.0319*** (0.0031)
Station	0.0049 (0.0031)	0.0040 (0.0031)	0.0045 (0.0031)	0.0033 (0.0031)	0.0033 (0.0031)
Level of education:					
Less than full primary	REF	REF	REF	REF	REF
Primary or Some Secondary	0.0059 (0.0037)	0.0058 (0.0037)	0.0064* (0.0037)	0.0055 (0.0037)	0.0055 (0.0037)
Secondary	0.0064 (0.0045)	0.0057 (0.0045)	0.0071 (0.0045)	0.0053 (0.0045)	0.0053 (0.0045)
Some University	0.0099* (0.0054)	0.0099* (0.0054)	0.0116** (0.0053)	0.0091* (0.0053)	0.0090* (0.0053)
Complete University	0.0164** (0.0063)	0.0153** (0.0063)	0.0181*** (0.0063)	0.0144** (0.0063)	0.0144** (0.0063)
(female*policebribe incidence) included	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES
Difference in average marginal effect of <i>policebribe incidence</i> for women versus men					-0.0300 (0.0301)
Country fixed effects	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Pseudo $R^2$	0.0701	0.0721	0.0684	0.0731	0.0731
Observations	44,384	44,384	44,550	44,384	44,384

Note: Main entries are average marginal effects obtained from Probit models. Standard errors are clustered by region and reported in parentheses.

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.1$ .



TABLE 3 Ordered probit models.

Respondent reports that they or someone in their family has been physically attacked				
<i>N</i> = 44,384	<i>Never</i>	<i>Once</i>	<i>Twice</i>	<i>Three or more Times</i>
Policebribe incidence	-0.1469*** (0.0204)	0.0856*** (0.0120)	0.0331*** (0.0047)	0.0283*** (0.0040)
Respondent reports that they or someone in their family has had something stolen from their house				
<i>N</i> = 44,378	<i>Never</i>	<i>Once</i>	<i>Twice</i>	<i>Three or more Times</i>
Policebribe incidence	-0.1725*** (0.0356)	0.0601*** (0.0124)	0.0460*** (0.0095)	0.0664*** (0.0137)

Note: Ordered Probit marginal effects reported. The models include controls for gender, age, poverty, urban location, the presence of a police station in or near the sampling unit, education and country fixed effects. The corresponding standard errors are clustered at the regional level and reported in parentheses.

\*, \*\*, and \*\*\* indicates significance at the 10%, 5% and 1% levels respectively.

In Table 3, we further confirm these findings using an ordered probit model.<sup>3</sup> A greater incidence of police corruption reduces the probability that the respondent will report that they or their family have never been assaulted in the past year and increases the probability that they respond once, twice, or three or more times. The magnitudes of these marginal effects are again sizable relative to the mean. A one standard deviation increase in police corruption reduces the likelihood of a “never” response by 1.2%.

Corruption that does not include the police can also change crime outcomes through effects on economic growth and development, tax collection and resources, mental health, trust, and attitudes to violence. Therefore, it is important to test if police corruption has an effect on crime, controlling for non-police corruption. Column 4 of Table 2 includes the regional incidence of bribery in other contexts (*otherbribe incidence*), specifically in relation to schooling, medical care, utilities, and documents and permits. While this variable is a significant and meaningful predictor of *attacked*, our police corruption variable is still a significant factor. Though the magnitude of the association falls appreciably, a one standard deviation increase in police corruption still predicts an increase in the chance of suffering from an assault of 0.6%, which is meaningful relative to the mean of 9.4%. We discuss the implications of the finding that non-police corruption is an important correlate of crime in the concluding section.

The type of assault that men and women face can be very different. Moreover, women are often found to be, on average, less tolerant of corruption (e.g., Chaudhuri, 2012; Jha, 2022). Women might therefore be more at risk than men in a context of high police corruption. The data do not allow us to distinguish between sexual and non-sexual assault or armed versus unarmed assaults. In addition, the question allows for respondents to answer with reference to their family's experiences rather than their own direct experience. Nevertheless, it is important to test for gender differences in the threat posed by police corruption. The model presented in Column 5 includes an interaction term between gender and the regional incidence of police corruption. We find that the average marginal effects for women are 3% lower, but this difference is not statistically significant. Given the limitations of the data, we would suggest that future work should further explore the possibility of gendered effects of police corruption and explore whether women are more deterred from reporting crime than men by police corruption.

As we have information on two types of police corruption, “transactional policing” and “predatory policing”, we can explore which type of corruption is driving our results. In Table 4, we unpack police corruption by using the regional incidence of bribery “to get help” and “to

TABLE 4 Transactional and predatory policing.

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	attacked	attacked	attacked
Helpbribe	0.0542*** (0.0061)		0.0431*** (0.0063)
Helpbribe Incidence	0.1043** (0.0494)		0.0896* (0.0513)
Problembribe		0.0374*** (0.0043)	0.0303*** (0.0045)
Problembribe Incidence		0.0527* (0.0313)	0.0395 (0.0327)
Otherbribe Incidence	0.1454*** (0.0240)	0.1513*** (0.0236)	0.1243*** (0.0261)
Country fixed effects	YES	YES	YES
Controls	YES	YES	YES
Pseudo $R^2$	0.0722	0.0722	0.0743
Observations	44,478	44,391	44,364

Note: Main entries are average marginal effects obtained from Probit models. All models include the control variables from Table 2. Standard errors are clustered by region and reported in parentheses.

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.1$ .

avoid problems” as separate variables. In Column 1, we find that in regions in which more people have had the experience of having to bribe the police to help them, respondents, or their families, are more likely to have been assaulted. We find weaker evidence of an effect of the other form of police corruption in Column 2, though the effect is still significant at the 10% level. In Column 3, both forms of corruption are included. While the incidence of bribery to avoid problems is insignificant, the incidence of “transactional policing” bribery is significant, albeit at the 10% level. Given that there is a somewhat strong correlation between the three corruption variables included in these models (0.58 between the two forms of police corruption, and 0.67 between the other corruption variable and both of the police corruption variables), we cautiously interpret these results as pointing to transactional rather than predatory policing as the greater threat to the physical safety of people.

### 3.2 | Theft

We next examine the relationship between police corruption and theft. Table 5 presents the results. Column 1 demonstrates a significant relationship between a direct experience of police corruption experience and the probability of the respondent answer that they or someone in their family has had something stolen from their house. Women are again less at risk of this type of crime, as are older people. Poverty and being an urban resident predict a great risk of theft. We again find that education predicts a greater risk, perhaps reflecting a wealth effect. Living near a police station predicts a greater risk of crime, but we cannot discount the potential for this to be artifact of police stations being placed in areas of high crime.

Column 2 includes the regional incidence of police corruption, which is a statistically significant and meaningful predictor of having been a victim of theft. A one standard deviation increase

**TABLE 5** Police corruption and property crime.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Stolen	Stolen	Stolen	Stolen	Stolen	Stolen
Policebribe	0.0950*** (0.0066)	0.0874*** (0.0067)		0.0877*** (0.0067)	0.0878*** (0.0067)	
Policebribe Incidence		0.2539*** (0.0385)	0.3156*** (0.0376)	0.1237** (0.0485)	0.1235** (0.0485)	
Otherbribe Incidence				0.1776*** (0.0406)	0.1776*** (0.0406)	0.1638*** (0.0428)
Helpbribe						0.1109*** (0.0113)
Helpbribe Incidence						0.1758* (0.0917)
Problembribe						0.0574*** (0.0076)
Problembribe Incidence						0.0700 (0.0537)
Female	-0.0093** (0.0043)	-0.0098*** (0.0042)	-0.0156*** (0.0043)	-0.0098*** (0.0043)	-0.0098*** (0.0043)	-0.0099*** (0.0043)
Age	-0.0004*** (0.0002)	-0.0004*** (0.0002)	-0.0005*** (0.0002)	-0.0004*** (0.0002)	-0.0004*** (0.0002)	-0.0004*** (0.0002)
Poverty	0.0650*** (0.0026)	0.0642*** (0.0026)	0.0657*** (0.0026)	0.0636*** (0.0026)	0.0636*** (0.0026)	0.0635*** (0.0026)
Urban	0.0496*** (0.0049)	0.0490*** (0.0049)	0.0495*** (0.0049)	0.0473*** (0.0049)	0.0473*** (0.0049)	0.0467*** (0.0049)
Station	0.0161*** (0.0049)	0.0148*** (0.0049)	0.0157*** (0.0049)	0.0141*** (0.0049)	0.0141*** (0.0049)	0.0136*** (0.0049)
Level of education:						
Less than full primary	REF	REF	REF	REF	REF	REF
Primary or Some Secondary	0.0235*** (0.0056)	0.0232*** (0.0056)	0.024*** (0.0056)	0.0229*** (0.0056)	0.0230*** (0.0056)	0.0223*** (0.0056)
Secondary	0.0491*** (0.0071)	0.0480*** (0.0070)	0.0509*** (0.0071)	0.0476*** (0.0071)	0.0477*** (0.0071)	0.0469*** (0.0071)
Some University	0.0680*** (0.0084)	0.0680*** (0.0084)	0.0718*** (0.0084)	0.0672*** (0.0084)	0.0673*** (0.0084)	0.0661*** (0.0084)
Complete University	0.0558*** (0.0101)	0.0542*** (0.0101)	0.0603*** (0.0101)	0.0532*** (0.0101)	0.0533*** (0.0101)	0.0528*** (0.0101)
(female*policebribe incidence) included	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO

(Continues)

TABLE 5 (Continued)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Stolen	Stolen	Stolen	Stolen	Stolen	Stolen
Difference in average marginal effect of <i>policebribe incidence</i> for women versus men					0.0180 (0.0504)	
Country fixed effects	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Pseudo $R^2$	0.0564	0.0572	0.0537	0.0575	0.0575	0.0582
Observations	44,378	44,378	44,544	44,378	44,378	44,358

Note: Main entries are average marginal effects obtained from Probit models. Standard errors are clustered by region and reported in parentheses.

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.1$ .

in police corruption increases the likelihood of suffering theft by approximately 2%. As approximately 30% of the sample report that they or someone in their family has been a victim of this type of crime, this is a relatively smaller effect than in the case of assault, but still reflects an appreciable cost of police corruption. In Column 3 we omit the respondent's own experience of paying bribes to the police. As was the case with assault, this change yields a larger marginal effect of the incidence of police corruption, which remains statistically significant. Table 3 reports the results of an ordered probit model and confirms that police corruption increases the risk of crime. A one standard deviation increase in police corruption reduces the probability that the respondent or their family has never had something stolen from their home in the past year by 1.4% and increases the probability of reporting having endured theft once, twice, or three or more times.

Column 4 includes the incidence of corruption in other settings. As was the case with the assault outcome, the general level of corruption in a region does significantly predict theft outcomes. However, police corruption remains a statistically significant factor with a substantive impact of a 1% increase in theft for a one standard deviation increase in police corruption. Column 5 includes an interaction term between gender and police corruption. Again, we find no significant differences in the average marginal effects for men and women. Finally, Column 6 presents evidence that it is transactional police corruption that is driving our result, while predatory policing is insignificant.

### 3.3 | Robustness: Including other regional factors

While all of our models include country fixed effects, a concern is that observed correlation between crime and police corruption arises due to omitted variable bias from regional characteristics. To address this, Table 6 includes additional regional characteristics that capture regional economic and social factors.<sup>4</sup> We include the regional average of the lived poverty index, the average level of education, and a variable capturing the share of respondents in the region who report that they have been discriminated against based on their ethnicity in the past year. These variables therefore reflect local economic conditions, human capital, and ethnic discrimination, all of which are likely associated with both crime and corruption.

Table 6 presents the results of this exercise. We present models for each variable excluding and including the incidence of corruption in other domains. Living in a region in which ethnic

TABLE 6 Other regional factors.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Attacked	Attacked	Stolen	Stolen
Policebribe	0.0396*** (0.0040)	0.0397*** (0.0040)	0.0882*** (0.0067)	0.0883*** (0.0067)
Policebribe Incidence	0.1103*** (0.0243)	0.0520* (0.0292)	0.1779*** (0.0406)	0.1013** (0.0487)
Otherbribe Incidence		0.0878*** (0.0254)		0.1186*** (0.0423)
Female	-0.0115*** (0.0027)	-0.0114*** (0.0027)	-0.0102** (0.0043)	-0.0102** (0.0043)
Age	-0.006*** (0.001)	-0.006*** (0.001)	-0.0004*** (0.002)	-0.0004*** (0.002)
Poverty	0.0339*** (0.0017)	0.0339*** (0.0017)	0.0628*** (0.0027)	0.0628*** (0.0027)
Regional Poverty	0.0011 (0.0070)	-0.0032 (0.0071)	0.0099 (0.0109)	0.0047 (0.0110)
Urban	0.0274*** (0.0032)	0.0270*** (0.0032)	0.0436*** (0.0051)	0.0429*** (0.0051)
Station	0.0028 (0.0031)	0.0025 (0.0031)	0.0137*** (0.0049)	0.0133*** (0.0049)
Level of education:				
Less than full primary	REF	REF	REF	REF
Primary or Some Secondary	0.0033 (0.0037)	0.0034 (0.0037)	0.0208*** (0.0057)	0.0209*** (0.0057)
Secondary	0.0005 (0.0046)	0.0007 (0.0046)	0.0429*** (0.0072)	0.0433*** (0.0072)
Some University	0.0038 (0.0054)	0.0039 (0.0054)	0.0620*** (0.0085)	0.0621*** (0.0085)
Complete University	0.0084 (0.0064)	0.0085 (0.0064)	0.0471*** (0.0102)	0.0472*** (0.0102)
Regional education	0.0298*** (0.0049)	0.0266*** (0.0050)	0.0333*** (0.0082)	0.0291*** (0.0083)
Ethnic discrimination incidence	0.1042*** (0.0169)	0.0953*** (0.0172)	0.1300*** (0.0290)	0.1181*** (0.0295)
Country fixed effects	YES	YES	YES	YES
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.0751	0.0755	0.0580	0.0581
Observations	44,384	44,384	44,378	44,378

Note: Main entries are average marginal effects obtained from Probit models. Standard errors are clustered by region and reported in parentheses.

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.1$ .

discrimination is more common is associated with a greater risk of both types of crime, as is living in an area with a greater average level of human capital. The latter result may reflect that higher average regional human capital is associated with higher average income. Richer areas are likely to be more attractive for muggers and thieves. However, the average poverty rate in the region is not associated with the respondent's experience of crime. While the inclusion of these additional regional variables reduces the estimated marginal effects somewhat, the incidence of police corruption remains a statistically significant predictor of both assault and property crime.

### 3.4 | Fear of crime

The results thus far point to police corruption as imposing a significant cost on the residents of a region through an increased risk of crime. We next examine another mechanism through which police corruption can harm the population they are employed to protect – the fear of crime. A fear of crime and feeling unsafe can impose a significant disutility on people. For example, both Moore and Shepherd (2006) and Moore (2006) estimate sizable shadow prices of the fear of crime.

The Afrobarometer asks respondents how often they or someone in their family have felt unsafe walking in their own neighborhood or feared crime in their own home over the past year. From this, we create two variables, *feltunsafe* and *fearcrime*, that allow us to examine how corruption influences fear of assault and crime. Table 1 demonstrates that these fears are relatively common in our sample.

Table 7 presents our results. In addition to the controls used in our earlier analysis, we control for *attacked* and *stolen*. We thus look at the relationship between police corruption and fear holding victimhood constant. The effects of the control variables indicate that being a victim of assault or theft increases fear, as does being a woman, age, poverty, education, and living in an urban area. Living near a police station does not predict more or less fear of crime in our sample.

Column 1 and 2 examine the sense of feeling unsafe. Police corruption strongly predicts that respondents will state that they feel unsafe walking in their neighborhood. A one standard deviation increase in police corruption increases the probability of expressing this view by 0.8%. Once again it is important to note that the range of our police corruption incidence variable spans 0%–75% and so those living in moderately to extremely corrupt regions will feel much less safe on account of police misconduct. Column 2 suggests that, as was the case with experienced assault, it is transactional police corruption that drives the relationship. Columns 3 and 4 examine fear of crime in the home. We find no evidence that the incidence of police corruption drives such fears. The general level of corruption does, however, have a significant effect on both measures of fear. Overall, these results point to corruption in general imposing significant costs on people in terms of fearing crime, even if they have not been a victim themselves.

## 4 | CONCLUSIONS

Using data from the Afrobarometer, we have shown that police corruption is meaningfully associated with increased crime. Those living in regions in which police bribery is more common are more likely to have been victims of assault and are more likely to have had something stolen from their homes. The prevalence of having to pay bribes to get help from the police drives this relationship whereas predatory policing was insignificant. While we failed to find any evidence



TABLE 7 Police corruption and fear.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Feltunsafe	Feltunsafe	Fearcrime	Fearcrime
Policebribe	0.0256*** (0.0063)		0.0264*** (0.0057)	
Policebribe Incidence	0.1006** (0.0449)		0.0621 (0.0413)	
Otherbribe Incidence	0.1476*** (0.0370)	0.1347*** (0.0391)	0.1375*** (0.0338)	0.1614*** (0.0356)
Helpbribe		0.0378*** (0.0106)		0.0236** (0.0095)
Helpbribe Incidence		0.2028** (0.0812)		-0.0913 (0.0727)
Problembribe		0.0138* (0.0071)		0.0217*** (0.0064)
Problembribe Incidence		0.0281 (0.0497)		0.0711 (0.0454)
Attacked	0.1381*** (0.0063)	0.1375*** (0.0063)	0.1140*** (0.0056)	0.1140*** (0.0056)
Stolen	0.1271*** (0.0042)	0.1267*** (0.0042)	0.1260*** (0.0037)	0.1258*** (0.0037)
Female	0.0222*** (0.0039)	0.0220*** (0.0039)	0.0213*** (0.0036)	0.0212*** (0.0036)
Age	0.0003** (0.0001)	0.0002* (0.0001)	0.0004*** (0.0001)	0.0004*** (0.0001)
Poverty	0.0801*** (0.0023)	0.0801*** (0.0023)	0.0650*** (0.0021)	0.0650*** (0.0021)
Urban	0.0674*** (0.0045)	0.0669*** (0.0045)	0.0441*** (0.0041)	0.0443*** (0.0041)
Station	0.0054 (0.0045)	0.0050 (0.0045)	0.0012 (0.0041)	0.0012 (0.0041)
Level of education:				
Less than full primary	REF	REF	REF	REF
Primary or Some Secondary	0.0109** (0.0052)	0.0104** (0.0052)	0.0065 (0.0047)	0.0064 (0.0047)
Secondary	0.0264*** (0.0066)	0.0260*** (0.0066)	0.0203*** (0.0060)	0.0201*** (0.0060)
Some University	0.0387*** (0.0077)	0.0379*** (0.0077)	0.0317*** (0.0071)	0.0312*** (0.0071)

(Continues)

TABLE 7 (Continued)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Feltunsafe	Feltunsafe	Fearcrime	Fearcrime
Complete University	0.0538*** (0.0092)	0.0533*** (0.0092)	0.0432*** (0.0085)	0.0430*** (0.0085)
Country fixed effects	YES	YES	YES	YES
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.1346	0.1348	0.1403	0.1404
Observations	44,295	44,275	44,316	44,297

Note: Main entries are marginal effects obtained from Probit models. Standard errors are clustered by region and reported in parentheses.

of gender differences in the effects of police corruption on crime outcomes, it could be the case that the data we used mask such differences as the surveys do not ask about the nature or severity of the assault. Future work should explore this possibility. We believe that our results are novel in that they offer an estimate of the harm done by corrupt police in terms of increased risk to the people that they are meant to protect.

It is also important to note that we also found consistent evidence that non-police corruption increases the risk of crime. Mechanically, the reduction in the size of the police corruption coefficient arises as police corruption is correlated with other forms of corruption. The large estimated association between non-police corruption and crime can be understood with reference to studies that have found that corruption has significant effects on the economy (Mauro, 1995), poverty (Gupta et al., 2002), entrepreneurship (Dutta & Sobel, 2016), pro-social norms (Beekman et al., 2014), and mental health (Gillanders, 2016; Sharma et al., 2021). Through all of these mechanisms, corruption in spheres other than policing can, by reducing opportunities and welfare, facilitate and incentivize crime. Police corruption, however, emerges as a significant correlate of crime even when we allow for other forms of corruption. While “other corruption” had the largest marginal effect in our model, it must be remembered that this was an aggregate of several contexts in which corruption can occur, all of which touched on basic functions of the economy and society. Police corruption emerged as a strong predictor of crime in its own right, over and above the effect of the general level of administrative corruption.

We also presented evidence that police corruption leads to people feeling unsafe in their own neighbourhoods, holding constant whether they have been victims of crime themselves. Corruption more generally was also found to be strongly correlated with fear of crime and a sense of safety. This is another way in which corruption imposes significant indirect costs on the wellbeing of others.

While we have endeavored to address omitted variable bias by including a rich set of individual level controls and shown that our results are robust to the inclusion of other regional level variables, a limitation of our study is that as it is based on cross sectional data, we cannot include individual fixed effects. Therefore, we cannot fully discount the possibility that certain unobserved traits may lead some people to choose to live in corrupt regions and that people with these traits may also face a different exposure to crime. Individual level panel data drawn from large countries may allow for future work to examine if moving to a more corrupt area changes the crime experience of individuals, all else equal. Randomised control trials that aim at curbing police corruption could also seek to assess the effect of the intervention on the crime experiences of the local population. Qualitative work should also be undertaken to understand the specific

mechanisms through which police corruption leads to increased crime risk and seek the views of all stakeholders on solutions.

Despite these limitations, we believe that our findings add to the significant body of evidence that finds that corruption does considerable damage to people's lives. Fighting corruption should be a high priority for those interested in improving the lives of people in fundamentally important regards.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Afrobarometer at <https://www.afrobarometer.org/>.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Table A1 in the appendix provides full definitions for all variable labels.
- <sup>2</sup> We show in Table A2 in the appendix that our results in relation to police corruption does not change if we calculate the average for each region omitting the respondent's own value. However, we do obtain somewhat smaller estimated marginal effects for the incidence of non-police corruption.
- <sup>3</sup> Table A5 in the appendix presents results from mixed effects probit models with random intercepts and random slopes. The results are in line with those of our probit and ordered probit models.
- <sup>4</sup> We are indebted to an anonymous referee for this suggestion.

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**SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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