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Why Do People Trust the Police? A Case Study of Thailand

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Abstract: Trust in the police is considered vitally important in ensuring that citizens obey the law and cooperate with police officers. However, in recent times, the Royal Thai Police has been facing difficulties with the image of the organization, including lack of public trust resulting from the actions of some police officers. Therefore, this study investigated the level of trust in the police, as well as the factors that cause the public to trust the police. The samples used in this study were 971 residents in eastern Thailand. A questionnaire was used as a tool to collect data that were subjected to ordinary multiple regression analysis to test the hypotheses. The findings showed police effectiveness and fairness had a positive relationship with trust in the police. Age, corruption, and fear of crime had negative relationships with trust in the police. However, victimization had no association with trust in the police. Hence, the Royal Thai Police should place great importance on increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of police officers and treating people equally and fairly. In addition, corruption issues and the solving of crimes should be addressed to provide people with peace of mind and greater trust in the police.

Keywords: trust in police; police effectiveness; fear of crime; fairness; corruption

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1. Introduction

The efficient and effective implementation of the judicial process requires cooperation from various sectors, especially from the public sector that includes the police, which enforce much of the justice system, which requires liaising and directly relating to the people. The police's ability to maintain peace and order effectively requires the cooperation of the people. If police officers perform their duties without concerning the needs of the people and treat them unequally, this will inevitably lead to a lack of consistency in performing their duties and a lack of trust in police officers and police organizations. In contrast, if police officers perform their duties in a fair and honest manner, being professional and actively performing legal duties without discrimination, they will earn the trust of the public. The public's trust in the police will enable the police to operate effectively and with legitimacy [1–3]. In addition, the public's trust and confidence in the police will encourage people living in the community to engage with the police. In addition, this makes the police more accountable and responsive to the needs of the public, while people become more law-abiding [4].

In the United States, studies on police trust issues have been conducted since the second half of the 1960s [2,5–10]. Since then, research on police trust has become increasingly appealing to criminologists and sociologists, including the studies by Flexon et al. [11], Lai and Zhao [12], Skogan [13], Skogan [14], Taylor and Lawton [15], and Warren [16]. In Australia, there have been several studies on the issue, including by Goldsmith [17], Lee and McGovern [18], Murphy [19], Murphy and Cherney [20], and Sargeant et al. [21]. In some countries, for example Turkey, studies have shown that people have moderate trust in the police with a mean of 3.89/5, where an average of 4.00 or more indicates a high level of trust in the police [22]. A study conducted in Thailand by Suwan et al. [23] found that

71.2% of people who were victims and visitors to police stations had confidence in the overall performance of investigators in the Royal Thai Police, which was considered not very high.

Various factors affect trust in the police, such as age [21,24–29],police performance [21,22,28,30–34], fairness [10,35–37], perception of corruption [30,33,38–41], fear of crime [24,33,42,43], 9and victimization [43–45].

In Thailand, research related to trust in the police has focused primarily on measuring the level of public trust in police while study of the factors affecting police trust has focused primarily on demographic attributes. For example, Sahapattana and Cheurprakobkit [28] conducted a study in Thailand focusing on variables including demographic, contact with the police, and attitudes toward police performance. Most studies on this topic in Thailand have been descriptive and have been carried out only as part of the organization's annual reports, according to Sahapattana and Cheurprakobkit [28]. The current study draws on survey data collected in the eastern region of Thailand regarding two major areas discussed in other works: the level of trust in the police and the antecedents of trust in the police. This study answers two research questions: (1) what are the levels of trust in police? and (2) what are factors influencing trust in the police? The results of this study offer suggestions to police at various levels on how to implement police programs more effectively to gain greater public trust.

McShane and Von Glinow [46] explain that trust is related to a mental state in which the intention is to accept the behavior of another person, or a group of other people, based on positive expectations, and that for a person to gain the trust of another person he/she must also show that trust on him or her. Robbins [47] added that trust refers to positive expectations toward another person, whether it is words, acts, or decisions to act reasonably depending on the situation and the occasion. Whether a police force is trusted by the public is determined by the force's effectiveness, its shared values, and its interests with the people in the community. In addition, there must be a genuine commitment to working for the community [48]. Hence, police officers will obtain trust from the people if the officers perform their duties effectively, understand the needs of the community, treat people equally with the dignity, provide important information to the public, and listen to the voices of the public on various important issues arising in the area of responsibility [4]. According to Suwan et al. [23], trust or confidence in the police refers to the perception of an individual who believes in the ability of an individual or organization to satisfy themselves. This includes the belief that a particular person or organization will be able to help themselves. The public's trust in the police involves the public believing that the police can fulfill the public's hopes and are able to help and be a refuge for the people. Therefore, the public's trust in the police is a demonstration of public acceptance and trust in the police, and vice versa. The mentioned public beliefs will reflect the image of the police in the eyes of the public. In this study, trust in the police was defined as public beliefs and expectations of the police performing their duties in accordance with society's rules and not carrying out any arbitrary acts, which can be determined by properly performing their duties. This level of trust enables people to satisfy with the police in maintaining order in a society.

Based on a review of research papers related to trust in police, many factors can affect public confidence or trust in the police, such as person's age, police performance, fairness, corruption, fear of crime, and victimization.

1.1. Age and Trust in the Police

Recently, some studies have examined the relationships between demographic factors and trust in the police [49–52]. Some studies investigated and found an association between age and trust in the police [21,24–29]. Hence, the first hypothesis was proposed as:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): *Age has a relationship with public trust in the police.*

1.2. Police Performance and Trust in the Police

The performance of a police officer refers to the ability of that officer to make an impact while doing police work. It consists of a quick response to an incident or crime, a full commitment to tackling crime, promoting and supporting the creation of order in the community, having the full potential to enforce the law, expressing awareness and empathy for public safety, having sufficient police officers to solve crime, providing effective crime prevention measures, and ensuring that effective social order is maintained in accordance with the public's expectations. Several studies indicated that good police performance results in trust in the police [21,22,28,30–34]. Hence, the second hypothesis was:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): *Police performance has a positive relationship with public trust in the police.*

1.3. Fairness and Trust in the Police

The fairness of the police refers to objectivity, legitimacy, and justification of the performance of police duties as defenders of peace and social order. There should be no discrimination against people who differ in economic status, race, or nationality. Everyone is treated equally with courtesy and with human rights in mind. Other studies confirmed the association between fairness and trust in the police [10,35–37]. The third hypothesis was proposed as:

Hypothesis 3 (H3): *Fairness has a positive relationship with trust in the police.*

1.4. Corruption and Trust in the Police

Goldstein [8] defined police corruption as "acts involving the misuse of authority by a police officer for personal gain for himself or others". The corruption can occur in a variety of ways, such as intimidation or extortion of innocent people into a confession, falsification of evidence in a case before the court, providing information that is beneficial to the offender in exchange for the rewards they will receive, bribery to help offenders avoid prosecution, and embezzlement and defrauding government property or federal items in criminal cases. Nalla and Nam [33] conducted research to examine the role of citizens' contact with police and their assessments of officers' corruption in the police in India and to examine whether police procedural justice moderated the relationship between citizens' assessments of police corruption and trust. Their findings revealed that procedural justice moderated the relationship between corruption and trust in the police. Other studies confirmed that police corruption had a negative relationship with trust in the police [30,38–41]. Hence, the fourth hypothesis was proposed as:

Hypothesis 4 (H4): *Corruption has a negative relationship with trust in police.*

1.5. Fear of Crime and Trust in the Police

Furstenberg [7] describes fear of crime as the feeling of agitation or anxiety of human beings toward the insecurity of their own lives or property. This type of feeling occurs when the person is faced with an event that generates a phobia or the consequences that come after experiencing it. According to Warr [53], fear of crime refers to the human feelings toward the threat of crime. It is related to emotions of fear or paranoia, which often results in people panicking and responding to unexpected dangers. In the current study, fear of crime was defined as emotional reactions of people who are feeling anxious about potential harm to themselves, such as fear of theft, tampering with their homes, fear of being robbed, fear of assault or sexual molestation, fear of being attacked by people while walking in the streets or a public place, and fear of officers being impersonated leading to stealing of property. Wilk and Fibinger [54] found that fear of crime has a consequence on a loss of citizens' sense of security, increased aggressive attitudes, a loss of trust in law enforcement services, a reduction in the need for social contact, and a reduction in the willingness to

provide assistance. Other studies found a negative relationship between fear of crime and trust in the police [24,30,33,43]. The fifth hypothesis was proposed as:

Hypothesis 5 (H5): *Fear of crime has a negative relationship with trust in the police.*

1.6. Victimization and Trust in the Police

In the current study, victimization refers to a situation where a person or group of persons have experienced physical, mental, or property damage, or have been affected by any crime, or have lost the right to commit or omit any act under the Criminal Code, such as assault, intimidation, sexual assault and harassment, railing, trespassing for theft of property, and theft of bicycles/motorcycles. Singer et al. [43] examined fear of crime by collecting data from the United States, Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil. Their findings revealed that fear of crime consistently mediated the effects of victimization on trust in criminal justice institutions. In addition, some studies found a negative relationship between victimization and trust in the police [5,45]. Hence, the sixth hypothesis was proposed as:

Hypothesis 6 (H6): *Victimization has a negative relationship with trust in the police.*

2. Methods

2.1. Sample

The data for this study were collected from respondents in eastern Thailand. The researchers used a multi-stage sampling technique to draw samples from seven provinces in eastern Thailand (Chantaburi, Chonburi, Trad, Rayong, Chachoengsao, Prachinburi, and Srakaew). First, three provinces (Chonburi, Prachinburi, and Trad) were randomly chosen. Second, the researchers used the G*Power software application to calculate the sample size and power for statistical methods from the registered population of each of the three selected provinces [55]. The calculations employed a medium effect size of 0.3 and the power of test of 0.80 with an alpha of 0.05, resulting in the total sample size of 987 (630 samples from 11 districts in Chonburi, 233 from seven districts in Trad, and 124 from seven districts in Prachinburi). Third, a group of 30 research assistants (i.e., 10 3-person teams) was trained to properly administer the questionnaire to people in each district of the three provinces. The research assistants learned to inform each sample of (1) the research purposes, (2) the study's benefits and anonymity, (3) his/her right to refuse and/or withdraw from participating in the survey, and (4) the time frame for the survey. The researchers assigned five groups of research assistants that collected the data in Chonburi, three groups in Trad, and two groups in Prachinburi. The quota sample technique was used to administer the questionnaire to local members of each district. Chief executives of sub-district administrative organizations helped facilitate the administration process by connecting the research assistants to potential samples. Each participant also gave consent before completing the questionnaire. After three months of the data collection process (October and December in 2019), 971 people participated in the survey questionnaire (a response rate of 98.38%). The demographic characteristics of the sample are summarized in Table 1. This research proposal and the survey questions (Project Reference # HU 037/2563) were approved by the Research Ethics Review Committee for Research Involving Human Research Participants at Burapha University, Chonburi, Thailand.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of sample (*N* = 971).

Characteristic		Percentage	Frequency
Province	Chonburi	63.85	620
	Prachinburi	12.77	124
	Trat	23.38	227
Gender	Male	49.95	485
	Female	50.05	486
Marital status	Single	51.29	498
	Married	40.47	393
	Divorced	4.22	41
	Separated	4.02	39
Education	Secondary school or lower	21.32	207
	High school or equivalent	23.07	224
	High vocational school or equivalent	17.82	173
	Bachelors' degree	35.94	349
	Master's degree or higher	1.85	18
Occupation	Farmer	5.15	50
	Employee	41.19	400
	Business owner	17.51	170
	Labor	8.24	80
	Government official	12.98	126
	Others	14.93	145
Other characteristic		Mean	S.D.
Age		34.27	9.65
Income (Thai baht/month) *		17,261.58	10,210.47

* 1 THB = 0.028640165 USD.

2.2. Measurement

2.2.1. Dependent Variable

The dependent variable in this study was designed to measure how much people trusted the police. The respondents were asked to rate their level of trust in the police in each question using a rating from 1 to 5, with 1 representing the least trust and 5 representing the most trust. The questions regarding trust in the police were: (1) I believe police officers are doing their duty properly; (2) I am satisfied with police officers maintaining order; and (3) I feel police officers have credibility and trust. The measurement provided alpha reliability of 0.89.

2.2.2. Independent Variables

The independent variables consisted of six categories: age, police performance, fairness, corruption, fear of crime, and victimization. Age was measured based on a ratio scale. The participants were asked to fill in their age as of the date of answering the questionnaire.

Police performance was a composite variable composed of seven questions. The respondents were asked to rate their perception level of police performance in each question from 1 to 5, with 1 representing strongly disagree and 5 representing strongly agree. The questions regarding police performance were (1) police officers respond quickly to an incident or crime; (2) police officers are fully dedicated to preventing and tackling crime; (3) police officers are out there to promote and support the building of order in the community; (4) police officers have full potential to enforce the law; (5) police officers express awareness and empathy for public safety; (6) police officers have effective crime prevention measures; and (7) the police can maintain order effectively. The measurement provided alpha reliability of 0.90.

Fairness was a composite variable composed of four questions. The respondents were asked to rate their perception level of police fairness in each question from 1 to 5, with 1 representing strongly disagree and 5 representing strongly agree. The questions regarding fairness were (1) police officers act impartially in accordance with the law; (2) police officers treat Thai people, migrants, and tribal minorities equally; (3) police officers treat citizens with courtesy and with regard to human rights principles; and (4) police officers treat all citizens equally. The measurement provided alpha reliability of 0.95.

Corruption was a composite variable composed of four questions. The respondents were asked to rate their perception level of corruption among the police in each question from 1 to 5, with 1 representing strongly disagree and 5 representing strongly agree. The questions regarding corruption were (1) police officers falsify evidence in cases before submitting them to the court; (2) police officers provide information that is beneficial to the offender in exchange for money or something in return; (3) police officers accept bribes to help offenders avoid prosecution; and (4) police officers have embezzled and defrauded government property, including in criminal cases. The measurement provided alpha reliability of 0.94.

Fear of crime was a composite variable composed of four questions. The respondents were asked to rate their level of fear of crime in each question from 1 to 5, with 1 representing the least fearful and 5 representing the most fearful. The questions regarding fear of crime included (1) I feel terrified of being robbed; (2) I feel terrified of being physically assaulted or sexually molested; (3) I am terrified of being attacked by people while walking on the streets or in public places; and (4) I am terrified of criminals impersonating government officials to steal my property. The measurement provided alpha reliability of 0.92.

Victimization was a composite variable composed of five questions. The respondents were asked to rate their level of perception of being victimized in each question from 1 to 5, with 1 representing very unlikely and 5 representing very likely. The questions regarding victimization were (1) I have been physically abused by a stranger or other person; (2) I have been intimidated and harassed.; (3) I have been sexually harassed; (4) I have experienced robbery; and (5) I have experienced an auto theft. The measurement provided alpha reliability of 0.86.

3. Results

3.1. Level of Trust in the Police

Descriptive statistical analysis revealed that the respondents had a high level of trust in the police with an average mean of 3.72, as revealed in Table 2.

Table 2. Level of trust in police (*N* = 971).

Dependent Variable	Mean Score
I believe police officers are doing their duty properly	3.70
I am satisfied with police officers maintaining order	3.71
I feel police officers have credibility and trust	3.74
Average mean	3.72

Note: The score ranged from 1 to 5, with a higher number meaning more agreement.

3.2. Antecedents of Trust in the Police

Multiple regression analysis was used to test whether age, police performance, fairness, corruption, fear of crime, and victimization could significantly predict the level of public trust in the police. As shown in Table 3, the results of the regression indicated the five predictors explained 39.6% of the variance (R^2 = 0.396, F (6964) = 105.53, $p < 0.001$). It was found that age, police performance, and fairness were significantly and positively related to trust in the police. The older the respondents, the more they had trust in the police. The respondents who believed the police performed their job effectively and in a fair manner were more likely to have trust in the police, compared to the respondents who thought otherwise. The findings revealed that corruption and fear of crime had a negative

relationship with trust in the police. The more the respondents thought that the police were corrupt, the less they would trust the police. Similarly, when the respondents were more fearful of crime, their level of trust in the police would subside. However, victimization did not significantly predict trust in the police.

Table 3. Results of ordinary multiple regression between trust in police and independent. variables (N = 971).

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	0.769	0.199		3.856	0.000
Age	−0.009	0.002	−0.110	−4.373	0.000
Police Performance	0.452	0.035	0.387	12.960	0.000
Fairness	0.192	0.023	0.247	8.193	0.000
Corruption	−0.052	0.020	−0.071	−2.607	0.009
Fear of crime	−0.188	0.031	−0.168	−6.070	0.000
Victimization	0.009	0.059	0.004	0.147	0.883
R^2 = 0.396, F(6, 964) = 105.534, p < 0.001					

4. Discussion

Regarding the level of trust in the police, the finding shows that the respondents have 'high' levels of trust in the police. This finding is consistent with that of Teesuka [56] who found that people in the provincial areas were confident in the operation of the police at the 'high' level. However, Srisuwan and Issaro [57] found that people in Bangkok had only a 'moderate' level of public confidence in police officers. The differences in these findings could be explained that the context of society, either urban or provincial, is an important factor influencing the level of public trust in the police.

The second main finding is that police performance can significantly predict trust in the police. This finding echoes the results of many studies [21,22,28,30–34]. People's trust in police seems to increase if they believe the police will respond to a call for service quickly, dedicate themselves to preventing crimes and tracking offenders, implement effective crime prevention measures, and are aware of public safety. On the other hand, if the police perform ineffectively, people's trust in the police seems to diminish. The current study reveals that police performance had the most impact on trust in the police.

The third main finding is that fairness is positively related to public trust in the police. The more the public think the police do their job fairly and without bias, the more likely they will trust the police. This finding corresponds with many studies [9,10,35–37], which suggested that the public would consider a trustworthy police force as effective, fair, and having shared values, interests, and a strong commitment to the local community. The current study reveals that fairness is the second-most important factor influencing trust in the police. Therefore, besides increasing police performance, the police should also treat people with fairness, equality, and justice.

Fear of crime is the third influential factor affecting public trust. It has a negative relationship with trust in the police, which supports the findings of several studies [24,30,33,43]. This means that the more people feel terrified of being robbed, physically assaulted, or sexually molested, attacked by people while walking on the streets or public places, the less likely they are to have trust in the police. Some people with "moderate" levels of fear of crime have responded by purchasing insurance to minimize the cost of victimization or to alter the personal consequences of victimization [58].

Age has a negative relationship with trust in the police. A similar finding is found in many studies [21,24–29,59]. As people get older, their confidence in police tend to subside. The present study did not examine other demographic variables, such as gender, education level, occupation, income, and minorities. Hence, future research should place importance on these variables.

Corruption is significantly and negatively associated with the level of trust in the police. The more people believe that the police are corrupt, the less likely they will trust the police, which is consistent with the findings of other studies [30,38–41]. study conducted in Thailand by Narongsak, Piam-Waree, and Jit-Swang [60] reports six causes of violating professional ethics of the police, including (1) low pay and exploitative powers; (2) unfair appointments and promotion; (3) interference from influential people and politicians; (4) values and systems in police circles; (5) lack of effective monitoring and punishment measures; and (6) lack of mentality for social service. These causes of unethical violation may explain why police corruption remains a pervasive and persisting problem in police organizations, resulting in a low level of public trust in the police.

Finally, victimization does not significantly predict trust in the police. Interestingly, this finding is inconsistent with the results of other studies [44,45]. According to the study by Corbacho, Philipp, and Ruiz-Vega [45] which was conducted in a Latin American context, victimization had a substantial negative effect on public trust in the local police but no robust effect on informal institutions. The difference in these findings could possibly be explained in the Thai context. Based on the philosophy of community policing, police should be proactive and work with people in the community, not sit and wait at the police station to learn about problems. Without police visibility and police–public collaborative and cooperative activities in the communities, criminals would feel more comfortable expanding their influence. Moreover, in many cases when the police are notified of incidents by the community's members, they fail to respond and address the issues. Therefore, when people become victims of crime, they do not expect the police to help because many believe they cannot rely on the police. In other words, people have trust issues with the police from the beginning. As the finding of this study is inconsistent with previous findings, future research should identify the relationship between these two variables in other parts of the country.

The findings of this study can lead to recommendations for informed police policies. First, the Royal Thai Police should emphasize the effectiveness and efficiency of police performance. The police's ability to addressing the needs of citizens and communities must be their priority. Such enhancement can be clearly achieved through the provision of effective police training, which is currently lacking in many police agencies, including the Royal Thai Police [61–64]. Second, the Royal Thai Police should have an effective monitoring system to prevent any undesired and unfair practices by police officers. Third, to prevent or guard against potential corruption, the Royal Thai Police should improve its human resource management system, particularly the promoting and appointing of police officers to various positions through the merit system instead of favoritism or political influence.

This research is not without limitations. First, this research used quota sampling to gather data from participants in each district. Although such a technique is a non-probability sampling one, it was an effort to earn representativeness. Second, only six factors influencing public trust (age, police performance, fairness, fear of crime, corruption, and victimization) were taken into account in this study. Since several other factors still exist (for example, income, past experience with the police, and having a family member being police), a lot more can be learned about increasing trust in the police. Third, the study's findings are based on a cross-sectional sample of Thai people from one region. A future study on the perceived trust in the police should include data from representatives at a national level and other trust-related factors that were not included in this study.

5. Conclusions

In sum, this research aims to examine the factors that impact the level of trust in the police. Based on the study's findings, it is evident that public trust in the police will positively and significantly increase with effective police performance and fairness of the police. Although this study is conducted in the Thai context, such findings mirror precisely what David Bayley [65], one of the most prolific and internationally renowned

researchers in criminal justice and policing, considers three goals of police for the future: (1) effectiveness (whether the police are achieving what they have planned for), (2) efficiency (whether the police can minimize the costs to achieve their objectives), and (3) rectitude (whether the police are treating people properly, legally, and fairly). Therefore, the police as the first gate-keepers of the criminal justice system must not only be performance-oriented, but also focus on fairness for policy and practice if they are to gain and maintain a high level of public trust. If police executives want to increase the level of trust in the police, they should also effectively resolve the issues of police corruption and fear of crime.

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