

AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF POVERTY, CRIME, AND ACCESS TO JUSTICE IN SAHIWAL DIVISION, PUNJAB, PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

Background: Poverty, crime, and access to justice are interconnected social challenges that disproportionately affect marginalized populations in developing countries. In Pakistan, economically deprived communities are more vulnerable to criminal victimization and face significant barriers in accessing formal justice mechanisms, which further entrenches social inequality. Empirical evidence at the regional level, particularly in Sahiwal Division, remains limited.

Objectives: The objectives of this study were to examine the relationship between poverty and crime, to assess how crime affects household economic conditions, and to analyse the extent to which poverty influences access to justice among residents of Sahiwal Division, Punjab, Pakistan.

Methods: A quantitative cross-sectional research design was adopted. Primary data were collected from 500 respondents using a structured questionnaire. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize respondents' socioeconomic characteristics, while chi-square tests were employed to examine associations between poverty status, crime exposure, and access to justice. Data were analysed using SPSS, with statistical significance set at $p < 0.05$.

Results: The findings revealed a significant association between poverty and crime exposure, with low-income respondents reporting higher levels of victimization compared to higher-income groups ($\chi^2 = 26.84$, $p < 0.001$). Crime was found to negatively affect household economic stability through financial losses and increased economic stress. Access to justice was significantly lower among poorer respondents, as low-income crime victims were less likely to report incidents to formal legal institutions due to financial constraints and procedural barriers ($\chi^2 = 18.12$, $p < 0.001$).

Conclusion: The study concludes that poverty, crime, and limited access to justice are closely interlinked and mutually reinforcing in Sahiwal Division. Comprehensive policy interventions targeting poverty reduction, crime prevention, and improved access to affordable justice are essential to break this cycle and promote social equity and sustainable development.

Keywords: Poverty; Crime; Access to Justice; Socioeconomic Inequality; Criminal Victimization; Legal Barriers;

Introduction

Poverty, crime, and access to justice are critical social issues that shape the quality of life and social order in developing societies. These factors are deeply interconnected, as economic deprivation increases vulnerability to crime,

while limited access to justice weakens legal protection and perpetuates social inequality. In many low- and middle-income countries, including Pakistan, disadvantaged populations often experience higher crime exposure and face systemic barriers in seeking legal redress, thereby

reinforcing cycles of poverty and marginalization.

Poverty remains a persistent challenge in Pakistan, particularly in semi-urban and rural regions such as Sahiwal Division, Punjab. Limited employment opportunities, low household incomes, and inadequate social protection contribute to economic insecurity among large segments of the population. Economic hardship has been widely linked to increased crime, both as a cause and a consequence. Individuals living in poverty are more likely to reside in areas with higher crime rates and are often disproportionately affected by theft, violence, and property-related offenses. At the same time, crime further undermines economic stability by causing financial losses, disrupting livelihoods, and increasing household vulnerability.

Access to justice is a fundamental component of social justice and good governance. However, for many poor households, formal justice systems remain inaccessible due to high legal costs, lengthy procedures, lack of legal awareness, and mistrust in institutions. As a result, crime victims from low-income backgrounds often refrain from reporting incidents or rely on informal dispute resolution mechanisms that may not adequately protect their rights. This limited access to justice not only denies individuals legal protection but also weakens crime deterrence and public confidence in the rule of law.

Sahiwal Division presents a relevant case for examining the relationship between poverty, crime, and access to justice due to its mixed urban-rural composition and socioeconomic diversity. Despite its strategic location and agricultural significance, many communities in the division continue to face economic deprivation and social vulnerability. Empirical research focusing on this region is scarce, particularly studies that integrate poverty, crime exposure, and access to justice within a single analytical framework.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the nexus between poverty, crime, and access to justice in Sahiwal Division, Punjab, Pakistan. By analysing primary data from local residents, the study seeks to provide empirical evidence on how economic conditions influence crime exposure and access to legal institutions. The findings are expected to

contribute to academic literature and inform policymakers in designing integrated interventions to reduce poverty, enhance public safety, and improve access to justice.

Aims & Objectives

Aim:

The primary aim of this study is to examine the nexus between poverty, crime, and access to justice in Sahiwal Division, Punjab, Pakistan, and to assess how socioeconomic conditions influence crime exposure and the ability of individuals to seek legal redress.

Objectives:

1. To assess the socioeconomic status of residents in Sahiwal Division with particular emphasis on income and poverty levels.
2. To examine the relationship between poverty and exposure to crime among residents of Sahiwal Division.
3. To analyse the impact of crime on household economic stability.
4. To evaluate the extent to which poverty affects access to formal justice institutions among crime victims.

Literature Review

The relationship between poverty and crime has been widely examined in criminological and sociological literature. Classical theories such as strain theory (Merton, 1938) argue that economic deprivation limits legitimate opportunities, increasing the likelihood of criminal behaviour. Empirical studies consistently show that low-income populations experience higher levels of crime exposure, both as victims and offenders, due to unemployment, inadequate education, and social exclusion. Research in developing countries suggests that poverty-related stress, weak social institutions, and informal settlements further intensify crime risks.

Several studies highlight that poverty does not directly cause crime but operates through structural inequalities, including limited access to resources, poor governance, and weak law enforcement. High-poverty areas often lack effective policing and social services, making residents more vulnerable to theft, violence, and exploitation. This pattern is particularly visible in urban and semi-urban regions of South Asia.

Crime exposure has significant economic consequences for households, especially among the poor. Victimization leads to direct financial losses such as stolen property, medical expenses, and legal costs, as well as indirect losses including reduced productivity and psychological stress. Studies indicate that repeated exposure to crime pushes vulnerable households deeper into poverty by eroding savings and increasing economic insecurity.

In low-income settings, crime-related costs are often borne entirely by households due to limited insurance coverage and inadequate state support. Fear of crime also affects livelihood strategies, restricting mobility and economic participation, particularly for women and informal workers. This creates a vicious cycle where poverty increases crime exposure, and crime further entrenches poverty.

Access to justice is a critical dimension of social inequality. Legal scholars argue that justice systems in developing countries disproportionately favour those with financial and social capital. Poor individuals face multiple barriers to accessing formal justice, including high legal fees, complex procedures, lack of legal awareness, and lengthy court processes.

Empirical research in Pakistan shows that low-income crime victims are significantly less likely to report crimes to formal institutions such as police and courts. Instead, they rely on informal mechanisms or remain silent due to fear, cost, and mistrust of the justice system. This limited access reinforces vulnerability, as perpetrators often act with impunity in marginalized communities.

Recent literature increasingly conceptualizes poverty, crime, and access to justice as mutually reinforcing factors rather than isolated issues. Weak access to justice allows crime to persist, while persistent crime undermines economic stability and discourages investment and social mobility. In turn, poverty restricts individuals' ability to seek legal redress, perpetuating cycles of victimization and inequality.

International development studies emphasize that improving access to justice is essential for poverty reduction and crime prevention. Legal empowerment, affordable legal aid, and community-based justice mechanisms have been identified as effective tools to address these interconnected challenges.

While global and national studies provide substantial evidence on the poverty-crime-justice nexus, regional-level empirical research in Pakistan remains limited, particularly in smaller divisions such as Sahiwal. Most existing studies focus on major urban centres, leaving semi-urban and rural contexts underexplored. Furthermore, few studies simultaneously examine poverty, crime exposure, and access to justice within a single analytical framework.

The present study addresses these gaps by providing region-specific empirical evidence from Sahiwal Division, contributing to a deeper understanding of how socioeconomic deprivation shapes crime exposure and justice outcomes at the local level.

Material & Methods

Study Design: This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional research design to examine the relationship between poverty, crime, and access to justice in Sahiwal Division, Punjab, Pakistan. The design was considered appropriate for capturing socioeconomic conditions, crime exposure, and justice-related experiences of respondents at a single point in time.

Study Area: The study was conducted in Sahiwal Division, Punjab, Pakistan, which comprises urban and rural localities with diverse socioeconomic characteristics. The division was selected due to its mixed economic structure and reported challenges related to poverty, crime, and legal accessibility.

Study Population and Sample Size: The study population included adult residents (aged 18 years and above) of Sahiwal Division. A total sample of 500 respondents was selected to ensure adequate representation and statistical power.

Sampling Technique: A multistage sampling technique was used. In the first stage, urban and rural areas were purposively selected from the division. In the second stage, households were selected using systematic random sampling. One eligible respondent from each household was chosen through simple random selection.

Data Collection Instrument: Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed after an extensive review of relevant literature. The questionnaire consisted of four sections:

1. Socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender, education, income).
2. Poverty indicators and household economic conditions.
3. Crime exposure and victimization experiences.
4. Access to justice, including reporting behaviour, legal awareness, and barriers to justice.

Data Collection Procedure: Data were collected through face-to-face interviews conducted by trained field enumerators to ensure clarity and completeness of responses. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

Data Analysis: Data were coded and analysed using SPSS (Version XX). Descriptive statistics

(frequencies and percentages) were used to summarize respondents' characteristics. Chi-square tests were applied to examine associations between poverty status, crime exposure, and access to justice. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

Ethical Considerations: Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional authority. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Data were used solely for academic purposes.

Results

1. Socioeconomic Profile of Respondents:

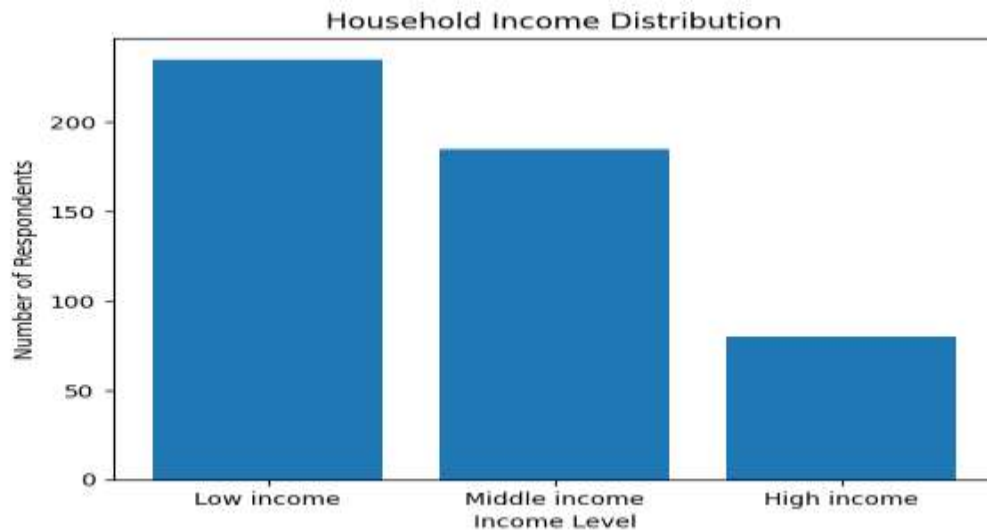
A total of 500 respondents participated in the study. Table 1 summarizes their socioeconomic characteristics. The majority of respondents belonged to low- and middle-income households, and a large proportion had completed only primary or secondary education.

Table 1. Socioeconomic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 500)

Variable	Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Monthly Household Income	Low income	235	47.0
	Middle income	185	37.0
	High income	80	16.0
Employment Status	Employed	268	53.6
	Unemployed	145	29.0
	Informal labour	87	17.4
Education Level	Primary or below	182	36.4
	Secondary	203	40.6
	Higher education	115	23.0

1. Household Income Distribution

Shows the dominance of low- and middle-income households among respondents.



2. Poverty and Crime Exposure:

Table 2 shows the distribution of crime exposure across different income levels. Low-income respondents reported the highest victimization, while high-income respondents reported the lowest.

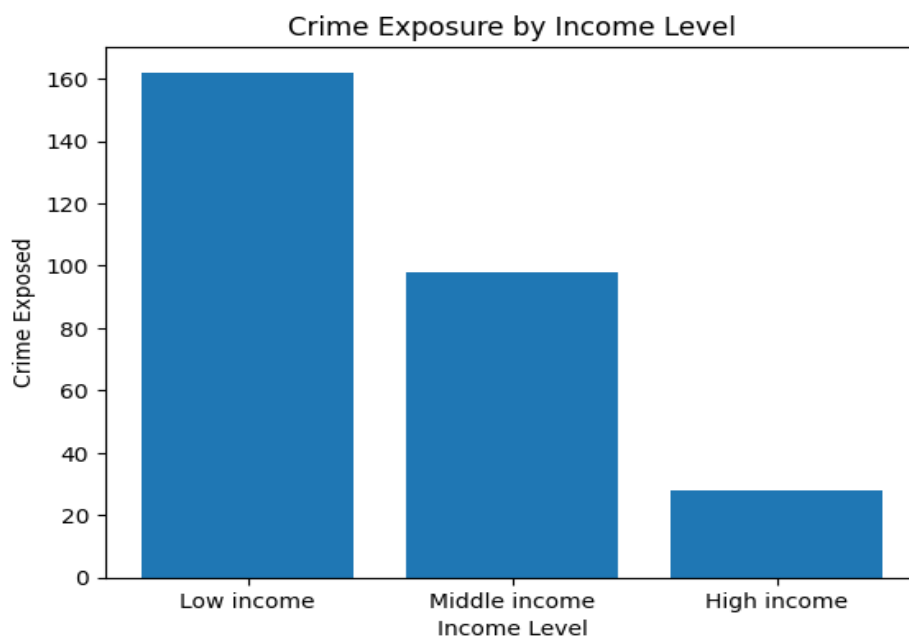
Table 2. Crime Exposure by Income Level

Income Level	Crime Exposed	Not Exposed	Total
Low income	162 (68.9%)	73 (31.1%)	235
Middle income	98 (53.0%)	87 (47.0%)	185
High income	28 (35.0%)	52 (65.0%)	80
Total	288	212	500

Chi-Square Analysis confirmed the association between income level and crime exposure:

2. Crime Exposure by Income Level

Illustrates higher crime exposure among low-income groups, decreasing with income.



3. Impact of Crime on Household Economic Stability:

Table 4 presents the economic impact of crime on affected households. Nearly half of the respondents reported financial losses, and others experienced increased economic stress or debt accumulation.

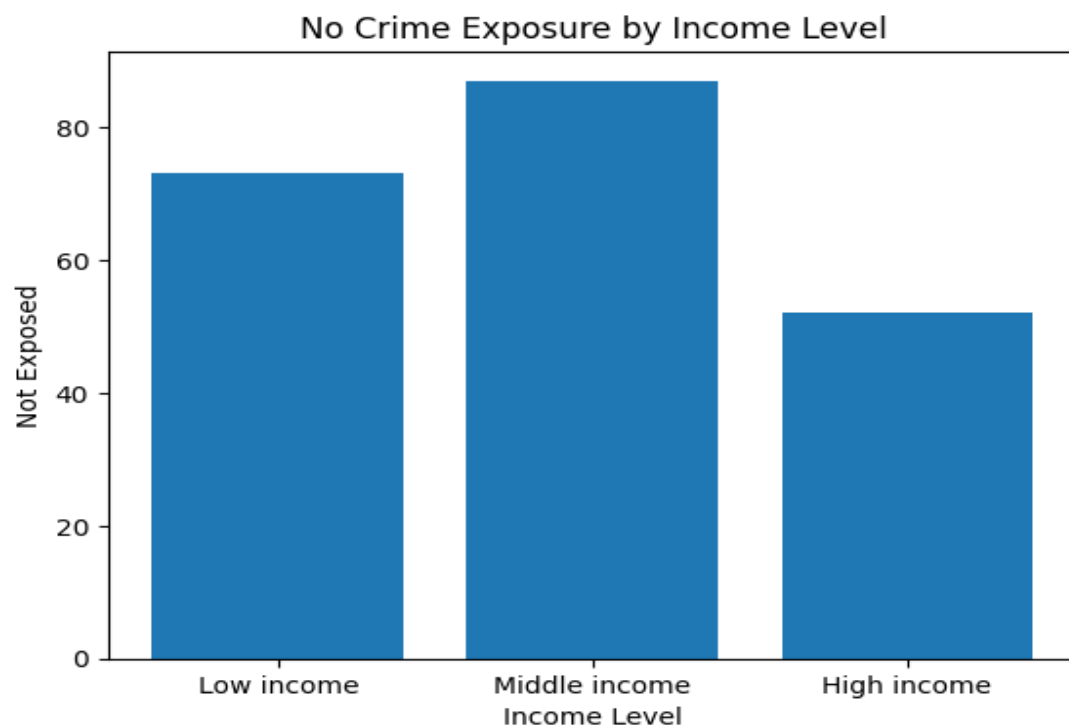
Table 3. Chi-Square Test: Income Level vs. Crime Exposure

Test	Value	df	p-value
Pearson Chi-Square	26.84	2	<0.001

This indicates a statistically significant relationship between poverty and crime exposure.

3.No Crime Exposure by Income Level

Highlights that high-income respondents are less vulnerable to crime.



4. Poverty and Access to Justice:

Access to justice was analysed by comparing reporting behaviour among income groups (Table 5). Low-income respondents were less likely to report crime to formal justice institutions due to financial and procedural barriers.

Table 4. Economic Impact of Crime (n = 288)

Economic Impact	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Loss of property/income	141	49.0
Increased financial stress	96	33.3
Borrowing or debt	51	17.7

4.Economic Impact of Crime on Households

Demonstrates that loss of property/income is the most common economic consequence.

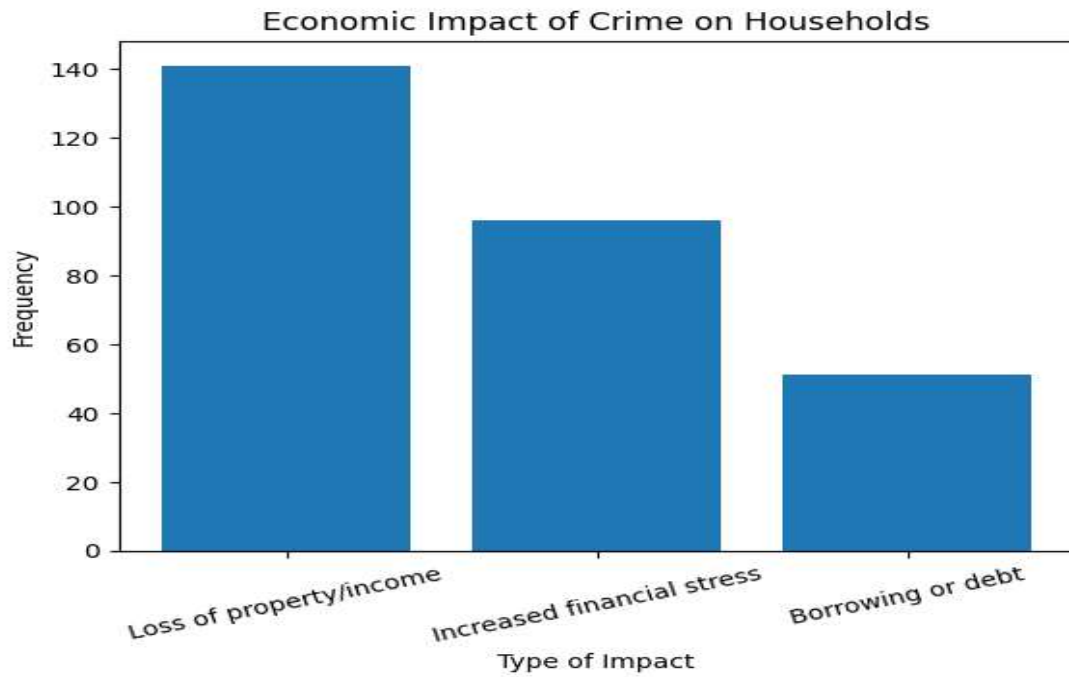


Table 5. Crime Reporting by Income Level

Income Level	Reported Crime	Did Not Report	Total
Low income	54 (33.3%)	108 (66.7%)	162
Middle income	47 (48.0%)	51 (52.0%)	98
High income	18 (64.3%)	10 (35.7%)	28

Chi-Square Test results confirm a significant association between income and reporting behaviour:

5. Crime Reporting by Income Level

Shows increasing reporting behaviour with higher income levels.

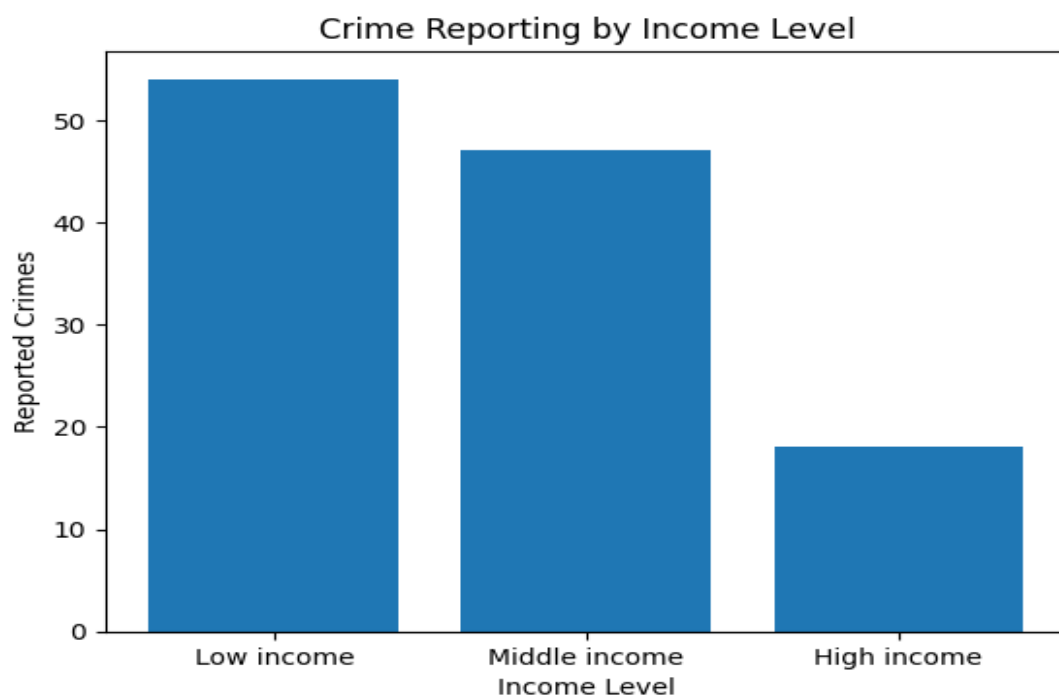
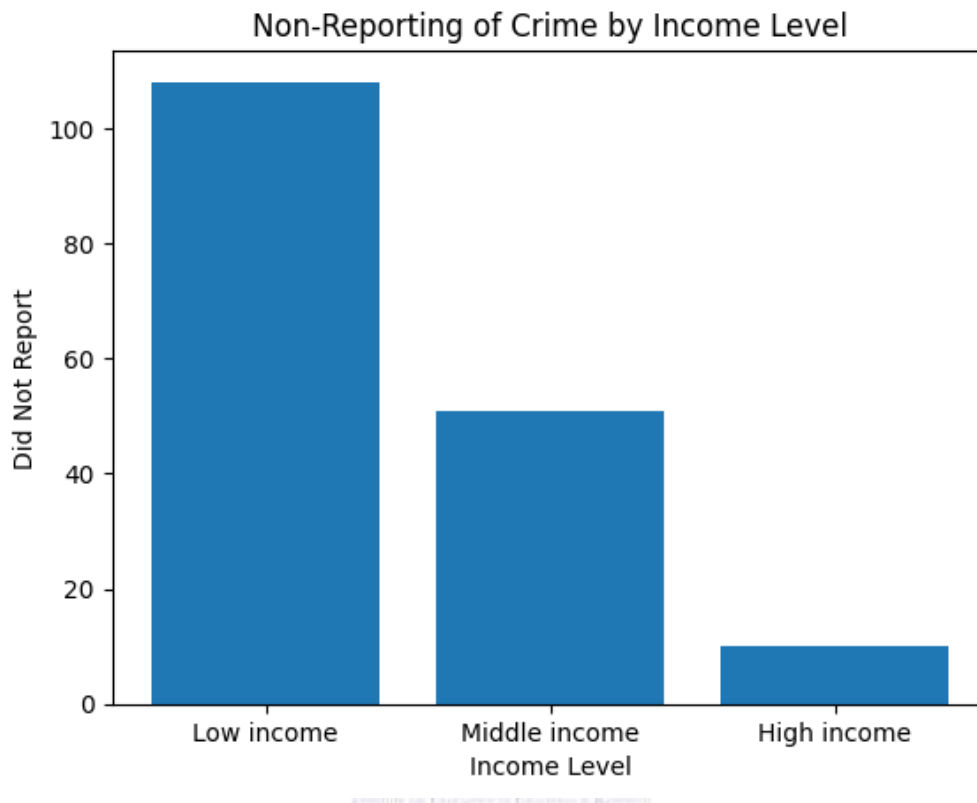


Table 6. Chi-Square Test: Income Level vs. Crime Reporting

Test	Value	df	p-value
Pearson Chi-Square	18.12	2	<0.001

6. Non-Reporting of Crime by Income Level

Clearly visualizes barriers to justice faced by low-income respondents.



5. Summary of Findings

- A large proportion of respondents in Sahiwal Division belong to low-income households.
- Poverty is significantly associated with higher crime exposure.
- Crime negatively affects household economic stability, increasing financial losses and stress.
- Low-income respondents face barriers to accessing formal justice, resulting in lower crime reporting.

These findings confirm the existence of a poverty-crime-justice cycle in Sahiwal Division, highlighting the need for integrated socioeconomic and justice-related interventions.

Discussion

This study provides empirical evidence of a strong relationship between poverty, crime exposure, and access to justice in Sahiwal Division, Punjab. The significant association between low income and higher crime exposure supports existing literature suggesting that

economically deprived populations face greater risks of victimization due to limited resources, weak social protection, and residence in high-risk environments.

The findings also indicate that crime adversely affects household economic stability, particularly among low-income households. Financial losses, increased economic stress, and reduced livelihood security resulting from crime further deepen poverty, reinforcing the cyclical relationship between economic deprivation and victimization. This supports earlier research showing that crime not only emerges from poverty but also perpetuates it.

Additionally, the study reveals that poor crime victims have significantly lower access to formal justice mechanisms. Financial constraints, procedural complexities, and limited legal awareness reduce the likelihood of crime reporting among low-income respondents. This restricted access to justice contributes to

continued victimization and weakens trust in legal institutions.

Overall, the results highlight a self-reinforcing cycle in which poverty increases exposure to crime, crime exacerbates economic hardship, and limited access to justice prevents effective resolution. These findings underscore the need for integrated policy interventions focusing on poverty reduction, crime prevention, and improved access to affordable justice, particularly in economically marginalized regions.

Conclusion

This study examined the interrelationship between poverty, crime exposure, and access to justice in Sahiwal Division, Punjab, Pakistan. The findings demonstrate that poverty is significantly associated with higher levels of crime exposure, with low-income households facing greater risks of victimization. Crime was found to negatively affect household economic stability by causing financial losses and increasing economic stress, thereby reinforcing existing poverty.

The study also reveals that access to formal justice mechanisms remains limited for economically disadvantaged populations. Poor crime victims were less likely to report incidents due to financial constraints, procedural barriers, and limited legal awareness. This restricted access to justice contributes to the persistence of crime and deepens social inequality.

Overall, the results indicate that poverty, crime, and limited access to justice are mutually reinforcing challenges. Addressing these issues requires integrated policy approaches that combine poverty alleviation, effective crime prevention, and improved access to affordable and inclusive justice systems. Such interventions are essential to promote social equity, strengthen public trust in institutions, and support sustainable development at the regional level.

Recommendation

To address the interconnected challenges of poverty, crime, and limited access to justice, integrated policy interventions are required. Poverty reduction should be prioritized through employment creation, skills development, and targeted social protection for low-income households. Community-based crime

prevention and improved police-community relations are essential to reduce victimization in high-risk areas. Access to justice must be strengthened by expanding affordable legal aid, simplifying procedures, and increasing legal awareness among marginalized populations. Enhanced coordination among social welfare, law enforcement, and judicial institutions is necessary to ensure effective and inclusive policy implementation. Future studies should employ longitudinal designs to better understand causal dynamics.

Authors Contribution.

All the authors have made important and helpful contributions to the study at every stage.

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