



Joyriding Among Young First Nations Australians: Assessing Police Trust and Confidence Through the Lens of Youth and Key Stakeholders

Youth Justice

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Abstract

Young First Nations Australians typically distrust and are reluctant to cooperate with the police. This article discusses data from a pilot intervention programme regarding First Nations young people's involvement in car theft and joyriding. We conducted seven in-depth interviews with young Australians – most of whom identified as First Nations Australians – and six key community stakeholders who helped to deliver the programme. Our findings indicate that both sample groups held negative and distrusting perceptions of the police which, for the young people, were often precipitated by perceived discriminatory and procedurally unjust encounters with the police. We argue that heavy-handed and discriminatory policing of young First Nations Australians may perpetuate youth offending and joyriding behaviours among this group. The article argues that the police should adopt more community-oriented policing approaches to build trust with young First Nations Australians.

Keywords

communication, indigeneity, policing, procedural justice, youth justice

Introduction

Public trust in the police is critical for shaping public perceptions of police legitimacy and predicting cooperation with the police (Miles-Johnson and Pickering, 2018). Without public support to report suspicious activities and crime, and to assist with the identification of offenders, the role of the police is significantly limited. Yet, diverse groups – such as young people and/or racial and ethnic minorities – typically express lower levels of trust and confidence in the police than mainstream groups, often due to disproportionate and stigmatising police treatment (Morgan and Higginson, 2023; Sunshine and Tyler,

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2003). How diverse groups perceive trust and legitimacy in policing is important given such groups are significantly more likely to encounter the police than groups whose identity does not mark them as different (Jones-Brown and Williams, 2021; Sunshine and Tyler, 2003; Van Craen and Skogan, 2015).

Young First Nations Australians and the Police

Encounters between young people and the police have generally been characterised by conflict and low levels of trust (Hinds, 2007; Murphy, 2015; Thureau, 2009). The intersectionality between youth and Indigeneity compounds this problem further. Due to ongoing systemic racism and racial profiling by the police, young First Nations Australians tend to have exceptionally lower levels of trust for the police than their non-Indigenous counterparts (McCalman et al., 2022; Penal Reform International, 2021). First Nations children are far more likely to be arrested and less likely to be given police cautions than non-Indigenous children (Allard et al., 2010; Commission for Children and Young People, 2021). Having contact with the police early in life correlates with a range of long-term difficulties for young people, such as negatively impacting their physical and mental health, engagement in schooling, occupational outcomes and increasing their risk of further involvement with the criminal justice system (Craig et al., 2017; Rivenbark et al., 2018).

Since the police act as gatekeepers to the criminal justice system, First Nations youth are disproportionately criminalised and significantly overrepresented in detention centres and throughout judicial proceedings (Allard et al., 2010; Penal Reform International, 2021). For example, in the Northern Territory of Australia, First Nations youth are incarcerated at a rate of 30 times higher than other young people in Australia (Sentencing Advisory Council, 2022). Therefore, mass incarceration of First Nations youth further compounds negative and distrusting perceptions of the police among this cohort (Commission for Children and Young People, 2021; Mazerolle et al., 2003).

Vicarious experiences with the police also perpetuate distrusting perceptions among young diverse groups (Harris and Jones, 2020; Morgan and Higginson, 2023). Witnessing or sharing stories about police misconduct with family and other First Nations community members is likely to compound distrusting perceptions of the police (Commission for Children and Young People, 2021). Since First Nations Australians have historically not been policed by consent, the consistent use of police terror and violence to marginalise First Nation communities is likely to perpetuate negative vicarious experiences of the police (Cuneen, 2007; Yang, 2015). Due to fear and distrust of the police, First Nations Australians are reluctant to report instances of crime and disorder in their communities to the police and other public services (Prentice et al., 2017; Willis, 2011).

Procedural (In)justice

How the police and First Nations youth perceive one another is important given they are likely to shape the way these groups interact (Harris and Jones, 2020; Morgan and Higginson, 2023). Procedural justice is a theoretical framework that argues that a police officer's demeanour matters when encountering the public, as it shapes public perceptions

of trust and legitimacy in policing and increases voluntary compliance with police directives (Sunshine and Tyler, 2003; Tyler, 2007). Procedurally just policing requires that the police engage with citizens with dignity and respect, allow citizens a voice, make neutral decisions and demonstrate trustworthy motives (Mazerolle et al., 2013a). According to the large body of procedural justice scholarship, procedurally just policing has the capacity to increase public perceptions of police legitimacy, which in turn, increases satisfaction with police procedures, trust of police, cooperative relationships with police and in some cases, voluntary compliance (Mazerolle et al., 2013a; Murphy and Tyler, 2017).

While the voluntary compliance outcome of procedural justice has been contested recently (see Nagin and Telep, 2017), the other benefits of procedural justice policing have enjoyed significant empirical support over the years (Jackson et al., 2012; Murphy, 2009, 2017; Watson and Angell, 2007). Procedural justice policing has been found to be especially meaningful for vulnerable individuals in states of ‘self-uncertainty’, such as for diverse young people (Harris and Jones, 2020; Morgan and Higginson, 2023; Murphy, 2015). Self-uncertainty is an aversive state whereby marginalised individuals – such as First Nations youth – feel uncertain about their social status due to identifying as a stigmatised and vulnerable group (De Cremer and Sedikides, 2005; Murphy and Mazerolle, 2018). For these reasons, adolescents and ethnic minorities typically have greater levels of self-uncertainty than adults (Meilman, 1979; Murphy et al., 2020; Waterman, 1982).

Individuals in states of self-uncertainty are especially anxious of police contact, since they often anticipate being exploited by authority figures due to their vulnerable and marginalised status, especially given that the police are widely associated as a coercive agency that has the power to wield non-negotiable force and deprive liberty (Watson and Angell, 2013). Woolard et al. (2008) tested this concept in their research and found that adolescents, particularly those from ethnic minority groups, experience pronounced anticipatory injustice in relation to police encounters. As such, vulnerable, self-uncertain individuals are especially receptive to procedural justice policing through expectations of police misconduct (Morgan and Higginson, 2023; Watson and Angell, 2013). More specifically, there is a burgeoning body of research arguing the positive effects procedurally just policing has on young people’s perceptions of the police (Bates et al., 2022; Fagan and Tyler, 2005; Hinds, 2007, 2009; Piquero et al., 2005; Reisig and Lloyd, 2009).

Conversely, research has demonstrated that procedurally unjust treatment of vulnerable citizens – where the police engage with citizens using rude, disrespectful and heavy-handed tactics – is more likely to lead to low perceptions of police legitimacy and rebellious behaviour against the police (McCluskey, 2003; Watson et al., 2008). In Australia, this type of dominant and hostile policing aligns with traits akin to ‘paramilitary’ styles of policing, where policing is characterised by reactive, authoritarian and militaristic ideals (Morgan, 2022). Similarly, this style of policing may also be referred to as ‘legalistic’ policing whereby police agencies have a strong hierarchical, top-down structure and focus largely on law enforcement activities such as issuing arrests and tackling juvenile crime¹ (Wilson, 1968). While paramilitary police tactics have a long-standing history in Australia that originate from its violent frontier past, they contradict notions of policing through consent and can erode public perceptions of police legitimacy and trust (Bull and Stratta, 1995).

Youth Offending and Joyriding

Australia is currently experiencing a ‘moral panic’ around the issue of youth crime, which has been perpetuated by an excess of commodifiable journalistic content that creates ‘folk devils’ (Cohen, 1972) of young disadvantaged males (Koumouris and Blaustein, 2022). One key area of concern in some communities is the rise of car theft and ‘joyriding’ (the theft of cars for recreational driving) behaviours among young, disadvantaged males. For example, the state of Queensland experienced the largest increase in motor vehicle thefts in Australia, with a recorded 25 per cent increase in victims in 2021–2022 (ABS, 2023). In regional New South Wales, legal actions against young people, mostly males, for vehicle thefts increased to 179 per cent between 2019 and 2023 (Cook, 2023). Surges in youth crime and auto theft-related offences have grown in tandem with growing dissatisfaction among local residents, who have demanded tougher responses to address this issue (Smith, 2018).

While joyriding has been a recreational activity for young males internationally for many years (Anderson and Linden, 2014; Kellett and Gross, 2006; Rush et al., 2006), in Australia, First Nations youth have historically been disproportionately involved in car theft and joyriding behaviours (Atkinson, 1993). Despite limited research to explain this phenomenon, scholars have argued that First Nations youth may engage in joyriding behaviours as a means of provoking the police into high-speed pursuits and as an act of resistance for their feelings of powerlessness in society and as an act of revenge against an oppressive state (Atkinson, 1993). For example, Dawes’ (2002) research of First Nations youth in Townsville, Queensland, found that joyriding among First Nations youth could be understood as a distinct culture that allows youth to resist police harassment and wider systemic oppression.

Similar findings have been reported elsewhere. In Ireland, Cadhla (2001) found that young people often use joyriding to provoke and incite the police. While other crimes are conducted inconspicuously, joyriding is at times enacted openly and deliberately in order to attract and defy the police (Cadhla, 2001). In Canada, researchers have also found that young males often steal cars and joyride them at high speeds through cities to deliberately taunt the police to engage in high-speed pursuits and, at times, in an attempt to injure the police with their stolen vehicles (Anderson and Linden, 2014). Other Canadian researchers concur, arguing that joyriders have little moral authority for the police and that a key motivation for joyriding is to defy the police via high-speed pursuits and evading capture (Benesh, 2003). It is clear from these studies that young, often disadvantaged males, lack respect and legitimacy for the police, and use joyriding as a means of demonstrating their discontent for the police.

It is therefore the aim of this research to assess the perceptions of Young First Nations Australians and associated key stakeholders regarding their perceptions of the police to determine whether such perceptions may further incite joyriding behaviours. Procedural justice is applied as a lens to understand trust and confidence in the police among these sample groups and aims to identify problems and solutions regarding police responses to marginalised young people at risk of, or engaged with, joyriding behaviours.

Methods

Data for this study were drawn from in-depth semi-structured interviews that were conducted as part of a pilot joyriding intervention programme aimed at First Nations youth who were engaged, or identified as being at risk of engaging, in car theft and joyriding behaviours. For 6 consecutive weeks, the intervention programme delivered 1-day weekly sessions comprising advisor talks delivered by experts in medicine, psychology and law enforcement as well as including educational and adrenaline-based activities such as participation in a high-ropes course, a golf driving range and panel beating workshops. The aim of the programme was to educate the young participants regarding the dangers of joyriding, provide a safe bonding experience to tackle any feelings of loneliness and isolation, and to connect the young participants with prosocial peers. It also aimed to better understand other motivations (aside from police-related issues) and potential deterrents for engaging in joyriding. More specifically for this research, the programme also aimed to understand the participants' general perceptions of the police as young minority groups members, and more specifically, in relation to joyriding behaviours.

The research site was a small regional city in Australia that has a high First Nations population and is a low socio-economic area. While car theft and joyriding have been increasing across other rural and regional areas of Australia, the research site has seen unprecedented surges in car theft and joyriding. For example, in 2022–2023, there were 1378 recorded unlawful use of motor vehicle offences in the area, representing a 129 per cent increase compared with the previous year.

The sample consisted of seven young male participants of the joyriding intervention programme, who were aged between 13 and 16 years and mostly identified as being First Nations Australians.² We conducted 11 interviews with these seven young people, seven of which took place at the programme's outset and four as exit interviews. These interviews were mostly held in person, with some exit interviews held via Zoom. We also interviewed six community stakeholders who were involved with the delivery of the programme. Those interviews were held in person on the last day of the programme or shortly afterwards via Zoom. Community stakeholders included caseworkers, First Nations Cultural Capability Officers, and other local support staff or volunteers who engaged with the young participants over the 6-week period of the programme. The young participants were referred to the intervention programme from youth justice organisations, First Nations' community health providers and special 'flexible' schools designed for young people who did not thrive in traditional education environments. All the young participants were referred by virtue of their past, present or potential future involvement in car theft and joyriding behaviours. Given the overrepresentation of disadvantaged young First Nations Australians in joyriding behaviours in Australia (Atkinson, 1993; Dawes, 2002) and in this local community, participants 'at-risk' of engaging in joyriding behaviours were identified by the welfare organisations listed above who referred the participants to the programme.

Interviews were guided by a set of predetermined questions, including whether the young person had participated in car theft and joyriding, the circumstances around their involvement, and their perceptions and experiences of the police in general and more

specifically in relation to joyriding. For example, participants were asked whether they trusted the police and whether they believed the police acted fairly during interactions with them and other members of their community. On average, interviews with the young people lasted for 17 minutes and stakeholder interviews for 22 minutes. Participants were not provided payment or any other incentive for their involvement in this study. In accordance with the Human Research Ethics Committee approval (approval number 2022-2756HI), all interviews were entirely voluntary, audio-recorded with the participants' consent, and transcribed.

A 'modified grounded theory approach' was used as a systematic method to analyse the data (Kinoshita, 2003), and to determine the presence of elements of police trust and procedural (in)justice within each of the interviewee's responses. NVivo software was used as an analysis worksheet to identify apparent themes from within the text. The modified grounded theory approach uses a two-stage coding process whereby an *open coding* method forms key concepts from the data and a *selective coding* method categorises key themes (Kinoshita, 2003). Coding was conducted collaboratively among two researchers to include interrater reliability in the methods. Four core themes were identified from the data analysis: racial discrimination and police harassment, distrust of police, inciting and defying police, and ways forward. These key themes are discussed in relation to how they may affect the participants' trust and perceptions of police legitimacy and potentially further incite youth offending and joyriding behaviours. To enhance meaning and form, quotes are provided from both the young participants (referred to as 'Participant') and the key stakeholders (referred to as 'Stakeholder').

Findings

Racial discrimination and police harassment

When asked for their general thoughts on the police in their community, several of the young people and the key stakeholders expressed their concerns of racial discrimination in the police service. These concerns were largely in relation to differential policing of young people identified as First Nations Australians:

Most of the encounters with cops . . . have a racial opinion on you. If you're white, they'll think differently of you than darker-skinned people. I'm white-skinned but I'm still Aboriginal and that's on the system, so they treat a lot of us Aboriginal kids differently. (Participant 3)

Some participants expressed how their negative perceptions of the police stemmed from being routinely and disproportionately stopped for questioning, and harassed and assaulted by them based on their First Nations' identity:

. . . every time when I go to [public park] or into a shopping centre they pull me up and say, 'do you got money?'. They're racists . . . (Participant 7)

They can get a bit harassing. I could be riding a bike, or I could be walking, they'd be pulling me over . . . And it's like, officer, I'm just walking my bike or I'm just riding my bike. It gets to the point every day where it's like, you can't be doing this. (Participant 1)

Several interviewees also expressed their concerns of police brutality in relation to arresting young First Nations Australians and criminalising treatment:

It's disgusting the way the police treat, physically, these young people and the way they speak to them . . . these police talk to these young people like they're criminals, not just young people making bad decisions . . . and on top of that, there's minor police brutality. They're putting handcuffs on this kid, and they're not going on gently. Or they're putting this kid in the back [of the patrol car], and they're not moving their head down so that they don't hit their head. (Stakeholder 2)

Some of [the police] swear. At [family member's] place, when we was sleeping outside, one of them cops would kick us in the ribs. (Participant 7)

I hate them because you know how boys have a boys night, and how boys like to play games and that? We all slept outside, in our garage, we were playing games, we put the TV there, my cousin's TV and the games. And we were all sitting there on the couch, and we put all our beds in there and all our cans of drink and Coke and that, bottles of Coke, lollies, and everything and chips. But they came around there just looking for one person, that stole a car last night, and they chucked all our cans of [energy drink] and then they booted us. (Participant 5)

One key stakeholder spoke of the vicarious trauma many young First Nations Australians experience by consistently witnessing police brutality and criminalising treatment of their family members and friends. This stakeholder argued that over-policing and police brutality of First Nations Australians led to a lack of trust and respect for the police among young First Nations Australians:

. . . who's going to trust the police? Do you know what I mean? When you look at it as a child, I'm watching a raid pull up and come and run through my house, slam my mother to the ground while they're looking for my brother or my cousin at the back here. And then arresting our elders when they're trying to stand up and tell them that the kid's not home, or that this person's not here . . . nine times out of ten we've got little Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children that are watching their fathers and mothers being dragged, or abused, or physically assaulted. And we can't do anything about it. (Stakeholder 3)

Distrust of police

Most participants expressed a general lack of trust for the police, stemming from negative first-hand and/or vicarious experiences with the police where First Nations youth have not been treated with dignity and respect. These mistrusting perceptions correspond with the body of literature to suggest that First Nations Australians typically hold mistrusting perceptions of the police (Cuneen, 2007):

Fuck the police. They're dogs . . . they call us mutts and shit. A few months ago, when I was hanging out with my mates, I didn't do anything, and we were walking through [shopping centre]. And one of my mates wasn't allowed there. And none of us knew. He didn't even really know . . . he fucked up in there and he was stealing. But he didn't know he was banned. And when [the police] rocked up, they pinned me to the ground, and they pushed my head into the floor. (Participant 3)

I've heard stories that paint our cops in a very bad light, and I would think, God, no wonder they're not trusted, from some things that I've heard. (Stakeholder 1)

One young participant spoke of a lack of trust, due to the police lying about them and the circumstances that led to their arrest for joyriding:

I just hate them. They [police] lie. They lied and put me on the news. [They said] that I was on drugs when I really wasn't, and they said that I was in [another Australian state]. They said that I told them that I was in [state], and that I didn't know where I was when legit I remember that thing full fucking clear as day. (Participant 6)

Some key stakeholders expressed how young First Nations Australians lacked trust in the police due to issues relating to intergenerational trauma:

There is no respect for police at all. There's just no respect. But also, that comes back into intergenerational trauma as well. (Stakeholder 3)

Intergenerational trauma is described as the 'production, reproduction and continuance of traumas brought into being over time by the violence of colonisers and colonising practices in the past and present' (McCallum, 2022: 166). The over-policing and criminalisation of First Nations Australians is a long-standing issue and originates from Australia's violent frontier past (McCulloch, 2001; Morris, 2018). While the role of the police has evolved over time, the consistent use of terror and violence to marginalise and criminalise First Nations Australians has remained consistent (Yang, 2015). Stakeholder 3 further described how intergenerational trauma has led to a lack of trust for the police among First Nations youth:

. . . when you're sitting around talking to your family as non-Indigenous people you'll say, 'if you're in trouble, ring [the emergency phone number], the police will come and help you'. Now you've got to imagine that conversation being had in a First Nations house. We're telling our children not to ring the police, 'because . . . if you're in trouble, you ring me as your father, and I'll come and get you, or you ring your uncle. Don't ring the police because when the police come, guess who's getting arrested?' The only time we see [the police] is when they're arresting our mobs, or when they're coming to do crowd control. (Stakeholder 3)

Some key stakeholders also described the lack of trust stemming from an evident 'Us v Them' narrative in relation to policing of First Nations youth, whereby dualist attitudes prevail among the police and citizens:

There's a level of lack of trust and just understanding of police and their role in the community. It's them versus us. [But] It really depends on the demographic that you are speaking to. I would say, again, from my own experiences in talking with youth here in Townsville, [opinions on police are] very mixed. (Stakeholder 6)

An 'Us v Them' mindset is often espoused in paramilitary subcultures of policing where the police 'other' diverse citizens as a means to aggregate and dichotomise themselves by

differentially policing minority groups (Chappell and Lanza-Kaduce, 2010; Nilsen et al., 2017). This mindset can create dualist attitudes between the police and diverse groups leading to an erosion of public perceptions of procedural justice and police legitimacy (Chappell and Lanza-Kaduce, 2010; Cochran and Bromley, 2003).

One key stakeholder described how the presence of the police uniform perpetuates dualist attitudes and mistrust among young First Nations Australians and the police:

. . . it's not who you are as a person, as an individual person, it's what you represent. You represent a police uniform, but a uniform that has arrested fathers, brothers, sisters, cousins. And yet you think that that young person's just going to walk up and respect you? If I walked into your house and skull dragged your child out of your house, are you going to respect me the next day you see me? Or are you going to want to fight me? (Stakeholder 3)

The traditional police uniform and its symbolic representation of power have created stress between the police and citizens, and can influence the attitude and behaviour of citizens when interacting with the police (Bell, 1982). Differences in perceived intent can lead to differences in perceived behaviour towards a police officer (Simpson, 2020). For example, the police uniform complete with weaponry accoutrements may provide signals of aggressive and predatory intentions, thus leading to distrust of the police (Simpson, 2020).

Further perpetuating this problem was the notion that the police are a service that is only reactive and not proactive in their interactions with First Nations youth:

I do know there's obviously with the police, you've got a different role. You have to just be reactive to every situation. There's not a lot of proactiveness you can do given the role of a police officer. (Stakeholder 3)

. . . their approach is often very reactive. I think that there is so much happening that the police do such a great job at. But at the same time, I think if this is something that continues to be an issue within our community, how do we move from just reacting to the issue, to be preventative in the issue? I think that if you're only interaction is being told off or being limited, and that's where your relationship is being established, I think that there's definitely a lack of trust that would be there. (Stakeholder 5)

A proactive policing approach (e.g. Neighbourhood Watch and beat policing) is closely associated with community-oriented policing models where dialogue between the police and citizens is encouraged, and thus contains elements of procedural justice that potentially enhance public perceptions of police legitimacy (Mazerolle et al., 2013b). Yet a more reactive approach to policing is closely related to paramilitary styles of policing, where the police do not engage with the community to preemptively address community concerns and only react to crime and disorder once they have occurred (Morgan, 2022).

One key stakeholder also expressed how they believed that the police were not working to build trust with young First Nations Australians due to issues with burnout and 'compassionate fatigue' in the service or the wrong types of personnel being recruited into the police:

I believe the right people aren't doing the job. You've got people that are burnt out because officers have been dealing with this stuff for years. Of course, there's going to be some burnout. Unfortunately, it's just not handled great. Don't get me wrong, there's some good police officers . . . [but] there's not a lot of trust and respect for the police because the police haven't really treated young people respectfully. I know you can't expect them to be like social workers, but at the end of the day, I really put it down to [police] just don't give a shit. I hear all the time, from kids, I work with clients, and I go to their houses, and I meet their friends, their cousins, their aunties, their uncles, and the stories you hear and the things you see in my line of work. (Stakeholder 2)

Compassion fatigue in policing relates to an adverse condition whereby empathy and compassion for others are weakened due to overexposure of working in states of vulnerability and tension (Grant et al., 2019). Police burnout, or emotional exhaustion, is intrinsically linked to compassion fatigue since it describes feelings of hopelessness and a reduced sense of accomplishment due to long-term exposure to work-related stress (Turgoose et al., 2017). Given the perpetual problem of youth offending and joyriding in First Nations communities, it is likely that the police may disrespect young offenders due to issues with compassion fatigue and burnout on the job.

Inciting and defying police

Many of the key stakeholders and the young participants discussed how young people may use joyriding as a means of defying and inciting the police, particularly given their negative past experiences and distrust of police. These findings correspond with previous research to suggest that joyriding may be used by young, disadvantaged males to provoke the police into high-speed chases and as an act of defiance to resist police oppression (Anderson and Linden, 2014; Atkinson, 1993; Cadhla, 2001):

They don't respect the police at all. If you look at what they're doing here, they're actually encouraging the police to chase them. We've literally had the kids pull in front of a police car, smash the windows, throw rocks at them, and literally want the police to chase them because it's the thrill of that. There is no respect for police at all. There's just no respect. (Stakeholder 3)

Some of the young participants described how potentially being apprehended by the police did not act as a deterrent for joyriding, but instead was a leading motivation for engaging in such behaviours:

. . . it's because you get to go at high-speed limits. And the thrill, the adrenaline rush by the cops chasing you and you're in the car over the speed limit, doing 100 kilometres over the speed limit or whatever. And there's a cop behind you chasing you trying to get you. (Participant 1)

For the thrill. The thrill of stealing the car, taking it, getting caught. (Participant 3)

One young participant described joyriding as a 'game' they played with the police, where they would encourage the police to pursue them at high speeds for the thrill and excitement of the chase:

. . . it's the adrenaline rush that you've got to get away and if you crash, you've got to run. And then that's the more adrenaline and more of the thrill [of police] chasing you and you've got to hide. It's pretty much hide and go seek. It works pretty much like tiggly. If you get tagged, you're in. (Participant 1)

Despite the police apparently engaging in high-speed chases with some of the joyriders in this study, the findings also demonstrated a lack of confidence in the police for being able to effectively address the prevalence of joyriding behaviours in the community. When asked whether they thought the police were effective in combatting joyriding behaviours, all the participants in the sample disagreed. Most of the participants discussed that joyriding happened frequently, but felt the police are powerless to address it:

. . . a stolen car will come around the corner, run the 'Give way' sign and not even look what's there, and the police will, sort of, tug along behind them following from a distance because they can't really do anything . . . the more they intervene when cars are stolen, the more they're going to get hurt. (Stakeholder 2)

Well, [police] can't really be [effective]. I live in [suburb], and . . . we'll see a stolen car drive past once a week. (Stakeholder 3)

In addition to procedural justice, perceptions of police legitimacy are also shaped by policing strategies that nurture effectiveness by effectively controlling crime and disorder (Sunshine and Tyler, 2003). As such, perceptions of police incompetence for stemming joyriding behaviours are likely to further diminish public perceptions of trust and police legitimacy.

For example, one young participant argued how current policing and criminal justice approaches to joyriding were not effective in negating perpetual joyriding behaviours:

It's the same thing. Go back into a house, steal a car, and drive around for a couple of hours. Get arrested, go to [youth detention centre]. Then you get out, do the same thing. There's no point. (Participant 6)

Recidivism rates are high for youth offenders in Australia. For example, in one youth detention centre in Queensland, 95 per cent of young people reoffend within a year of their release (Peak Care Queensland, 2022). This issue resonates with the compassion fatigue and burnout of police discussed above, whereby the police are despondent at over-policing young offenders who frequently joyride.

Ways forward

While most participants in the sample argued that the police often fail to use procedural justice to build trust with young First Nations Australians, some participants described instances where the police have attempted to build trust and confidence in the police or areas that could be improved. For example, several of the stakeholders praised the efforts of the police co-responders in attempting to build trust with young First Nations

Australians. Police co-responders are an example of interagency collaboration where the police and youth justice workers patrol the streets together to address youth offending proactively and preemptively (Farmer, 2023). Co-responders often patrol in an unmarked police car and do not wear a police uniform to lessen the criminalising stigma that police responses to young people can imply. Co-responders often opt for less criminalising responses such as taking children home instead of arrest (Smail, 2023):

. . . there's definitely efforts being made with the co-responders, which from what I hear, they're doing quite well. I haven't had a lot of interaction with them because they're in the after-hours space, and they do a lot of work with our diversionary service. But from what I'm seeing is there's a combination of YJ [youth justice] and police, there's YJ caseworkers and youth workers, and then they've got police officers and PLOs [police liaison officers] as well. (Stakeholder 2)

. . . with the co-responders now, if you look at how the police are working with co-responders . . . we've got police officers now that will assist families to get to court. We've got police officers now that will actually work with youth justice officers and go and provide food for families if they don't have that. These are the stuff that our police officers need to be doing. Because there's so much mistrust for them. (Stakeholder 3)

Interagency collaboration between the police and other relevant stakeholders is an example of procedural justice given its potential to enhance trustworthy motives by the police in demonstrating their willingness to collaborate with other agencies to utilise the skills of other professionals and the wider community when responding to diverse community members (Mazerolle et al., 2014). While the efficacy of youth co-responders working in tandem with the police is yet to be sufficiently evaluated, some participants drew upon the co-responder model as an example of community-oriented policing whereby the police work directly with members of the public to be more proactive and less reactive in relation to youth offending.

For example, several participants argued that policing should adopt more of a community-oriented model akin to the co-responder model, so that joyriding and other youth offending can be effectively addressed:

I think if [joyriding] is something that continues to be an issue within our community, how do we move from just reacting to the issue, to be preventative in the issue? I would love to see the police engage in more of the prevention side of things, because we saw the significance of having even them here for one of the [pilot intervention program] sessions and being able to talk to the young people as humans, not just an authority figure. And that really changed things. I think seeing more police there to be, 'we want to help you', as well as discipline, I think is huge . . . and I think that will really change people's mindsets. (Stakeholder 5)

The only other thing that I could suggest was that police have to be more active within our community. And be visible doing great things with our community. (Stakeholder 3)

Although poorly defined, community-oriented policing approaches are more proactive in their approach to crime and disorder, since they recognise that public support is critical to

police effectiveness (Segrave and Ratcliffe, 2004). Therefore, proactive, community-oriented policing approaches – where police–community partnerships are formed – have been associated with building trust and legitimacy in policing as well as increasing informal social control and a reduction in crime and disorder (Tyler et al., 2015).

Discussion

The findings indicate that young First Nations Australians and key community stakeholders lack trust and confidence in the police. These distrusting perceptions are precipitated by perceptions of racial biases within the police where young First Nations Australians are differentially policed or not given the benefit of procedurally just policing practices. According to the wealth of procedural justice scholarship, these distrusting perceptions of the police are likely to lead to a lack of cooperation and rebellious behaviour when disadvantaged young people encounter the police (see Murphy, 2015). As such, we argue that current police responses to young offenders involved in car theft and joyriding behaviours are unlikely to be effective and may instead be inciting further crimes of this nature. Furthermore, our findings correspond with previous research to suggest that First Nations youth may use joyriding as a means of resisting and defying systemic police oppression of First Nations Australians (Atkinson, 1993; Dawes, 2002). While our data cannot definitively confirm this link, it is clear that distrusting perceptions of the police are strongly linked to diminished perceptions of police legitimacy and, in turn, a lack of cooperation with the police. If the police cannot effectively work with the community to address common community concerns such as joyriding, such problems will continue to prevail.

Governments in Australia are currently embarking upon more punitive responses to youth offending with increases in tougher sentences and funding for the construction of additional juvenile detention centres (Smee, 2023). These responses are informed by popular punitive narratives about youth offenders that are perpetuated in mainstream media outlets (O'Brien and Fitz-Gibbon, 2018; Smee, 2023). However, a 'tough on youth crime' approach is likely to fail given such policies will inevitably target disadvantaged young people, particularly young First Nations Australians, and further drive disenfranchisement and resentment in communities that are already over-policed and criminalised. Our findings indicate that the police are already over-involved in the lives of many vulnerable and marginalised group members who express discontent for the system they continually fall into.

The over-policing of diverse groups criminalises society's most vulnerable and is an expensive misappropriation of public funds which fails to address the systemic social and economic forces that drive crime and disorder (Vitale, 2017). Problematic police responses to First Nations youth form part of a broader social crisis in policing, where criticisms of police conduct are rising in all Australian states and territories, especially in relation to individuals whose identity marks them as different or diverse from mainstream groups (Miles-Johnson, 2020). While all the participants in this study expressed their concerns for how First Nations youth are treated by the police, several participants implicitly discussed procedural justice policing as a potential way forward in repairing community–police relations. Our findings indicate that a shift from reactive, paramilitary policing ideals, towards a more community-oriented, proactive approach, could help instil trust

and perceptions of police legitimacy in First Nations communities where the police and communities can work together to solve complex criminal and social problems.

The co-responder model is a good example of an interagency collaborative scheme that may help to build trust and rapport with young, disadvantaged people in the community. Co-responder models have previously been used by the police in other situations involving vulnerable persons in states of ‘self-uncertainty’, such as people experiencing mental health crises (Puntis et al., 2018). Evaluations of these schemes elicit encouraging results in relation to enhanced perceptions of procedural justice policing and can lead to greater cooperative outcomes when the police engage with vulnerable citizens with the expertise of welfare-based professionals (Furness et al., 2016). As such, it is important that such schemes are encouraged and adequately funded by governments so that they can replace a criminalising ‘police-only’ response that is often reactive and abusive of First Nations youth.

Limitations

Given the relatively small sample size of seven young males, it is recommended that further research should be conducted with larger and more diverse sample sizes encompassing both male and female joyriders from different states across Australia. Despite these limitations, this study provides important insights into this hitherto under-researched area regarding key stakeholder and young joyriders identified as First Nations Australians and their perceptions of the police.

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Notes

1. The term ‘paramilitary policing’ is widely used within the Australian and US literature to describe police organisations that are characterised by values and appearance akin to the military (Bull and Stratta, 1995; Chappell and Lanza-Kaduce, 2010; Morgan, 2022). While legalistic policing and paramilitary policing share similar qualities, the term paramilitary policing will be used in this article to be consistent with other Australasian policing studies.
2. While specific data on participants’ cultural backgrounds were not collected, five of the young participants self-identified as being First Nations Australians. Given the programme was designed specifically for First Nations Australians, and participants were referred to the programme from First Nations Australian organisations, it is likely that all the young participants were First Nations Australians.

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