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Police Officers' Fear of Crime: An Analysis of Interviews with Officers in Trinidad and Tobago

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Abstract

Research on fear of crime usually examines perceptions of civilians. Little has been said about police officers' fear of crime, particularly in developing countries of the Global South, despite their occupational high risk of victimisation. The current study is an analysis of qualitative interview data collected from 12 male senior police officers in Trinidad and Tobago, with a focus on how they are affected by crime and navigate their roles as officers. The goal here is to contribute to Southern criminological dialogue about subjective appraisals of, and reactions to, crime by emphasising the experiences of civil servants mandated to address crime in the context of a postcolonial developing country. Analyses found that officers perceived that they and their family members were at high risk of criminal victimisation, were significantly worried or fearful about themselves or family members becoming victimised and often engaged in avoidance behavioural strategies to reduce risk of victimisation.

Keywords

Fear of crime; risk of victimisation; police, Trinidad and Tobago.

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Introduction

This paper presents an initial investigation into police officers' realities as they navigate an occupational hazard—the heightened risk of being criminally victimised—in a context necessitating the constant maintenance of a professional self, utilising interview data on a sample of senior officers in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. To gain insight into how potential victimisation affects police officers, the current study examined officers' experiences with *fear of crime*, the sense of dread or worry a person feels in response to the threat of being victimised by crime (Lane et al. 2014), as well as how they may respond to this fear.

Recent criminological dialogues about the Caribbean address both objective and subjective assessments of effects of crime on the region. Debates consider the effects of crime on civilian victims, strategies for limiting risk factors, crime-fighting initiatives and crime as a manifestation of societal dysfunction (Kerrigan 2015; Watson and Kerrigan 2018). However, the effects of the threat of criminal victimisation upon police officers are rarely studied. This may be surprising given that police officers are exposed to crime threats more than the average citizen, especially officers in Caribbean countries that have a legacy of colonialism, problematic police–civilian relations and normalised civil lawlessness (Kerrigan 2015). Studies tend to focus on officers' roles in responding to crime and their power as agents of the state, ignoring their perceptions of personal lack of power. For example, much attention is given to officers' roles in the ongoing 'war on crime' and strategic shifts intended to prepare them to deal more effectively with crime (Mastrofski and Lum 2008). These discussions ignore the 'humanness' of officers and their positions as products of the same society they are expected to police.

Officer perceptions of crime threats take on special significance in Trinidad and Tobago (T&T). Ranked among countries with the highest crime rates (Harriott 2002), the twin island republic continues to gain attention for its increasing murder rate (Sookram 2010), high levels of violence against women and children (de Albuquerque and McElroy 1999), gang activity (Katz and Choate 2006), transshipment of narcotics and illegal firearms (Ayres 1998), general sense of lawlessness among the citizenry (Greenberg and Agozino 2011) and unsuccessful policing initiatives (Crichlow 2016; Pino 2009; Watson and Kerrigan 2018). Concern about crime is underscored by poor police–civilian relations (Watson 2016a, 2016b), low arrest and conviction rates (United States Department of State Bureau of Diplomatic Security 2016), unsuccessful police investigations (Adams 2012; Greenberg and Agozino 2011) and high turnover in Minister of National Security and Commissioner of Police positions (Watson and Kerrigan 2018).

Against this backdrop, new crime reduction initiatives continue to be implemented (Mastrofski and Lum 2008), much of which can be described as inapplicable foreign adaptations (Pino 2009), unsuccessful quick-fix solutions and forced-to-fit policing initiatives implemented by the ruling government and overturned or abandoned in political crossfire (Watson and Kerrigan 2018). Despite the country's other arms of defence and civil bodies charged with maintaining law and order, the primary responsibility is placed on police officers (Job 2004; Kerrigan 2015; Mastrofski and Lum 2008). Obstacles to officers' abilities to perform efficiently include but are not limited to unavailable resources, officer reshuffle within divisions, understaffing (Job 2004; Deosaran 2002, 2007) and insufficient qualified recruits for the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service (TTPS) (Kowlessar 2012). Considering these problems, serving as an officer in T&T transcends accepted occupational hazards associated with policing.

Much research has explored the role of gender, age, race/ethnicity and social class differences in fear of crime (Lane et al., 2014), but lacking are studies on occupational differences. The current study examines an understudied population: police officers. Perhaps police officers are excluded from discussions of personal concerns about victimisation because they make conscious choices to work in an occupation known to be hazardous, and hiring procedures and training presumably create a body of individuals less prone to fear. However, these do not make officers' beliefs and

feelings about crime inconsequential—their civilian-ness beyond their mandate as officers warrants their inclusion in research on perceptions of potential victimisation. Also, the effects of these perceptions upon officers' performance duties have implications for policies on policing. Rather than relying on assumptions, empirical studies must examine how police officers' fear of crime is similar or different from the general public or other populations. The current study is a step in this direction.

Literature review

A large body of literature exists on citizens' subjective appraisals of the threat of crime. In fact, *fear of crime*—a fluid concept socially constructed by academics, policymakers and private actors—has become an industry. For all practical purposes, reducing the fear of crime has become as important as reducing crime itself (Lee 2007). Fear of crime is often defined as the emotional sense of dread or worry a person feels in response to the danger or threat of being victimised in a criminal incident (Lane et al. 2014). Specifically, people may fear the loss or harm caused by criminal acts rather than simply the general existence of crime (Gabriel and Grieve 2003).

Some research suggests that fear of crime is a complex multidimensional perception that must be measured with multiple indicators and explored in qualitative research (Gabriel and Grieve 2003; Gray, Jackson and Farrall 2011; Jackson 2005). Further, people's fear of crime may reflect their perceptions of community, group cohesion and social efficacy (Jackson 2005; Scott, Carrington and McIntosh 2012). Crime is also perceived in other ways. For example, a person may think about the chances or risk that one, or significant others, will be victimised, or may be more generally concerned about crime as a problem that harms society or the community (Lane et al. 2014).

People may fear general or specific types of crime and the intensity of their fears may vary (Farrall and Gadd 2004; Lane et al. 2014). 'Fear' may refer to a situational (more temporary) state, for example, becoming frightened while walking alone in a poorly lit area at night, or it may refer to a trait or disposition towards experiencing situational fear. A disposition towards fearing crime is characterised by perceiving more situations fearfully and as seriously increasing the chances of victimisation. However, this disposition may develop from repeated experiences of situational fear (Gabriel and Grieve 2003). In general, people experience fear of crime as a discrete emotional state infrequently (Farrall and Gadd 2004).

The subjective appraisal of victimisation threats plausibly has three dimensions. Fear or worry is an emotional dimension. The cognitive dimension refers to how individuals conceptualise victimisation risk, for example, assessing one's chances of being victimised by certain crimes. The behavioural dimension refers to inactions or actions taken to reduce one's chances of being victimised.

Subjective reactions to crime can themselves be problems. Assessments of threats often, but not always, seem inconsistent with actual crime rates. Warranted or not, high levels of fear harm individual and collective quality of life and faith in authorities to prevent or reduce crime. Extremely worried about crime, people may overly restrict their daily lives, experience emotional distress and withhold support for crime-control agencies.

Thus, it is also essential to study how people react to their perceptions of crime (Lane et al. 2014). Research shows that the relationship between fear and taking precautionary measures is nuanced: a distinction is made between active collective responses to fear of crime and passive individual responses (Ferraro 1995; Reid, Roberts and Hilliard 1998). Persons who are more fearful are more likely reach out to community members for protection, and while this collective response does not necessarily reduce fear, it can reduce the effects of fear on individuals and the community (Reid et al. 1998).

Police officers are confronted by crime more often than most members of the public. Thus, they may perceive that their risk of criminal victimisation is high. Policing is known as a dangerous occupation. Officers may become more aware of these risks during hiring, training and then experiences on the job. Despite this awareness, officers have chosen policing as an occupation, which testifies to their bravery. A person significantly afraid of crime is not likely to become an officer. Officers' reactions to crime threats, then, may be different from most others.

However, this awareness of occupational risks does not mean that officers do not worry about being victimised by crime (again, they are human) or that their fear levels remain unchanged over time. Upon being hired, dangers may be abstract to the officer. After gaining experience and facing actual or near victimisation, threats may become more concrete, which may increase one's fear of victimisation. Further, working in very dangerous neighbourhoods under more stressful circumstances likely increases officers' fear (and perceived risk). For some officers, their fear of crime and reactions to it may resemble those of civilians (Nonnarong and Chokprajakchat 2018). The authors found only one peer-reviewed article on police officers' subjective appraisals of crime. Nonnarong and Chokprajakchat (2018) examined fear of violent crime using a survey of civilians and security force officers in southern Thailand, an area that experiences frequent politically motivated attacks. They found that officers' fear of violent crime was comparable to that of civilians, and their fear was higher when travelling or performing duties at times or in places when/where violent crimes occur frequently. Officers stressed the importance of being 'more careful about checking and following guidance about violent crime' when leaving their homes for work (Nonnarong and Chokprajakchat 2018: 404). Further, police officers had higher levels of fear than other types of officers, perhaps because they have a variety of duties that require them to travel to different places and tended to live in an area a long time, thereby increasing the likelihood of being targeted in the area.

Correctional officers' concerns about criminal victimisation have received more attention, although this body of literature is small and predominantly quantitative. Predictors of correctional facility officers' fear and perceived likelihood of victimisation include factors such as job satisfaction (which may also be an outcome of fear and perceived risk), level of workplace disorganisation, and institutional characteristics such as security level, number of inmates and whether it is a female or male facility (Gordon and Baker 2017; Gordon, Moriarty and Grant 2003; Gordon, Proulx and Grant 2013; Stichman and Gordon 2015).

Stichman and Gordon (2015) also found that officers' fear and perceived risk of victimisation by inmates were influenced by the type of power they use to gain inmate compliance and to support institutional goals. Internal bases of power—those reflecting personal efficacy (expert, legitimate and referent)—were negatively associated with fear or perceived risk while external bases (reward and coercive) were not negatively associated. Reward power was positively related to perceived risk and coercive power was unrelated to either fear or perceived risk. The study also found that procedural justice (fair treatment of officers by their employer) reduced fear and perceived risk. Thus, how officers perform their duties, and how they are treated at work, are likely to affect their appraisals of crime threats.

While studies found that specific occupational work environments affect perceptions of crime threats, they also suggest that causes and facilitators, and potential consequences, of correctional officers' perceptions of crime threats are much like those of the public (Gordon and Baker 2017). Such a finding may apply to police officers as well. While correctional and police officers differ in their work (e.g., correctional officers are more often confined in small spaces with incarcerated individuals), they are similar in that they have dangerous occupations that increase exposure to victimisation. Further, just as work situations like prison overcrowding, potential contact with more dangerous offenders and low staff to inmate ratios may increase fear and perceived risk, so too may working in high-crime areas with an insufficient number of police officers on patrol.

Also relevant are studies examining the effects of job stress on police officers. They show that stress leads to emotional and behavioural problems in officers. For example, Gershon et al. (2009: 160) found that job dissatisfaction, workplace discrimination, lack of co-worker cooperation and 'exposure to critical incidents' (including vicarious and potential personal victimisation) were associated with perceived work stress among police officers, and that this stress was associated with a variety of psychological, behavioural and physical health problems. They further found that use of negative (e.g., substance use and yelling at others) or avoidant (e.g., acting like nothing is bothering them when they are actually stressed) coping mechanisms were associated with higher levels of work stress and health problems. Also, Kohan and Mazmanian (2003) found that negative work experiences (e.g., those having to do with organisational bureaucracy and problems while performing duties) were associated with police officer burnout (a combination of depleted energy, fatigue and cynicism towards ideals and accomplishments), although this association can be decreased through coping strategies. Plausibly, the threat of victimisation may also lead to distress and subsequent maladaptive coping behaviours.

Officers' emotions and perceived risk of harm have important implications for how they perform in the line of duty, including how they interact with the public or persons in custody. For example, officers must regulate their emotions during interactions with suspects, witnesses and bystanders to prevent tense situations from escalating (Makin et al. 2019). Also, perceived high risk of harm may adversely affect officers' professional philosophies, such as developing cynical and overly punitive orientations towards offenders, which may increase the likelihood of maltreating persons in their charge (Ferdik 2018). Thus, it is also important to study officers' responses to perceived threats to their wellbeing.

Methodology

Sample and data

The current study is an analysis of existing qualitative data collected by the second author in a pilot study on police perceptions of crime and effectiveness in contending with crime. In-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with 12 senior male members from one division of the TTPS. Of the nine policing divisions in T&T, the participants' division recorded the highest number of serious crimes in 2016. For example, 124 of the country's 463 murders occurred in this division along with 67 robberies and 129 illegal firearm seizures (Bruzual 2017). Thus, the officers have likely been heavily exposed to dangerous crimes during their careers.

One senior officer from each of the 12 police stations in the division was identified for the study. The rationale for this sampling procedure was that acquiring a sample of senior officers for a pilot would facilitate later access to other officers for a more extensive study on police perceptions of, and reactions to, crime. In all but one instance, the most senior officer in terms of rank was interviewed. At one station, the most senior ranked officer had only been appointed to oversee the station two weeks before the interview request. This officer suggested the most senior officer in terms of years of service, who at times occupied a command position at that station, be interviewed instead.

In terms of rank, the sample consists of one Senior Superintendent, one Acting Inspector, two Inspectors, three Corporals, three Sergeants and two Acting Sergeants. All officers had extensive prior experience as frontline officers but occupied administrative roles at the time of interviews. The officers have served an average of 22.83 years.

Interview procedure

Interviews were conducted between July and August 2016. Seven officers were previously known to the second author (three from a previous study and four from casual encounters) and five were referred by junior officers interviewed for another study. Since as a group, police officers in T&T

are not easily accessible and tend to be very distrustful of outsiders, an established rapport is necessary for research studies of an academic nature. All officers were approached to be interviewed for a pilot study on police perceptions of crime and effectiveness in contending with crime. Oral permission to include their responses in academic inquiry intended for publication was acquired. The nature of policing work and staff shortages within the division presented challenges to scheduling interviews. Officers were thus allowed an alternative to face-to-face interviews using WhatsApp Messenger. The seven previously known officers agreed to be interviewed via WhatsApp while the remaining five agreed to face-to-face interviews. Face-to-face interviews had to be rescheduled on several occasions.

Officers interviewed using WhatsApp were sent the research questions using the text message feature and given the option to respond using text or recorded voice notes. For questions requiring shorter responses, officers opted to use the text feature. These questions required 'yes' or 'no' answers and asked about the number of years of service; answers were copied to a clipboard. For questions requiring more extended responses, officers opted to send recorded voice notes.

Officers interviewed in person preferred not to be recorded; notes were taken to document their responses. All officers were offered an opportunity to verify that the transcriptions accurately reflected their positions, but only two chose to do so. Interview responses were transcribed and sorted according to questions using a Microsoft Word table.

Analytic strategy

Open coding consistent with grounded theory methodology was used (Esterberg 2002; Strauss and Corbin 1997). Data were examined for emergent themes relating to officers' fears or worries about the threat of criminal victimisation to themselves and family members, as well as how these concerns may affect their behaviour including in the line of duty. To guide analyses, three general sensitising concepts regarding the subjective appraisal of victimisation threats were used. Data were examined for evidence of emotional responses (fear or worry), cognitive responses (conceptualisation of victimisation) and behavioural responses (intended to reduce chances of being victimised) (Lane et al. 2014).

Most analyses of the data were based on answers to four questions that asked officers if 1) they are able to protect their families from criminal activities, 2) they are well equipped to deal with crime and criminality, 3) their views on crime affect how they respond in the line of duty and 4) they have ever been afraid or uncomfortable to perform in the line of duty. Answers to two short-answer questions about personal and family member victimisation were also examined. Each author analysed the data separately and interpreted identified themes similarly, reflecting inter-coder reliability.

Results

During analyses, three general themes emerged. *Victimisation* experiences will be discussed first. Next are *concerns about being victimised*, which contain two sub-themes: fear and perceived risk of victimisation. Discussed last are *behavioural reactions* to crime, which also contain two sub-themes: protection and avoidance. As the following quotations¹ show, in addition to experiences on duty, officers sometimes discussed perceptions of, and responses to, crime threats while at home or in the community.

Victimisation

Officers' concerns about being victimised are understandable: nine (75%) had been victims of a crime, with most of these crimes being violent. Three experienced assault, five experienced robbery and one experienced vandalism. One officer described an experience:

A spranger [one who will sell everything he owns cheaply in order to obtain drugs] rob me right in my backyard. I was bawling for help saying call the police and not a neighbour come out. Imagine police calling for help. I fight and fight him till I tired and he ain't backing down eh. When I realise is no help coming I had to let him go. I ain't from Krypton I from ... [stated his neighbourhood].

Clearly, the officer was hoping for a more active collective response from the community to his predicament, but the community did not respond, and the resulting threat of victimisation compelled the officer to let the suspect go.

The threat of victimisation to officers' family members was also quite real: nine officers had family members who were victimised. These victimisations included one murder, three assaults, two robberies, one robbery with an assault, one burglary and one hit-and-run automobile accident. One officer recounted the victimisation experienced by his son: 'They stick him up, ok! They rob him, alright! Armed robbery! ... They strip him and beat him! Them is not thief them is animals.'

Concerns about being victimised

Most officers indicated they had experienced feeling fearful and thought that there was a high likelihood of themselves or a family member being victimised. Another prominent concept in the subjective appraisal of crime literature is *perceived risk of crime*—a person's estimation of the probability or likelihood that one will experience an incident of criminal victimisation (in general or a specific type). As this construct is similar to, and may even overlap with, fear of crime, it is difficult to measure the two separately (Jackson 2005). Further, the two constructs are often positively correlated. However, much research suggests that they are different (Lane et al. 2014). Fear of crime is an emotional reaction—how afraid one is of being *harmed* by crime—while perceived risk of crime is a cognitive assessment of, or belief about, one's chances of being a victim. Conceivably, if a person thinks that one has a high chance of being victimised by crime, one would be more afraid of it, especially violent crime (Lane et al. 2014).

Fear of victimisation

When asked if they have been afraid or uncomfortable to perform in the line of duty, all 12 officers said that they have been apprehensive. As may be expected, officers were concerned about the immediate dangers of performing daily duties:

You see when you serving warrants, that does have me uneasy. You know what it is to tell a man you here to take away his freedom. Nobody in they right mind can't just accept that whether they guilty or innocent. That is thing to make man malfunction. You know how much bad hand I get in the days serving warrants. That is the one part of the job I could do without.

...

You see dealing with them hoodlums, it different. They have this way of crowding you so you can't see who have what or who doing what. So basically if something is to go down you have no line of vision. And plenty times is ah set ah women and children in the front blocking for some waste ah time man. No police can't be comfortable in them kinda situation.

...

What you would do if you make ah arrest and a mob circle your vehicle and start to mash it up? I mean like break up windscreen and the works. You know what I do? Drive! Like normal, I just mash gas and drive. If I didn't do that they would have kill us up there. The uncomfortable part is some of the hard calls we have to make but all that in it.

Other officers discussed vulnerability to retaliation by arrestees. One officer commented that without warning, in public, an officer could come across a dangerous offender whom one has arrested in the past, including while out with one's family:

These is dangerous fellars. More than once that happen to me. Ah time it had one use to drive and park in front my house and just watch the house and when I come out he drive off ... These fellars have contacts and the resources to make your life hell. This is not no walk in the park, [the] work we do.

Another officer stated:

I remember arresting a known drug man and feeling like a boss. You know how good I feel and real take chain up from my team. Less than two weeks after, the man get off on a technicality. You know what happen after that? I was at my daughter football match and see him. He and his crew walk up to me and the man tell me if he wanted, he could out my lights right there ... I nearly shit myself. After that I transfer to mounted branch. I rather deal with horse and put on uniform only for Independence and Republic Day. I admire them officers with the belly to deal with that. Even now, I not so sure I could go back out there cause it 100 times worse now.

Further, danger exists in the adversarial relationship between citizens and police. Two officers stated that:

Plenty of the people in this community we deal with [are] illiterate so they don't even understand half the time why they [are] getting lock up. That is a danger in itself because they always feel you advantaging them and them is victim of police. So they retaliate. They against us. Is never a case where it could be a peaceful interaction. Is always a confrontation. That is not a healthy situation for anybody because the slightest move, things does kick off between them and us.

...

In we culture is a natural dislike for police or no respect at all. Any police tell you they don't be nervous from time to time, lie. I could get shoot just for having on my uniform and being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

However, lack of reliance upon fellow officers was again brought up. Regarding his fellow officers, one officer stated:

My biggest fear is them pipsqueak they does not want to send you out there with. Imagine we up in the ghetto and shots start to fire. Before the lil' asshole and them shoot back, them lil' fuckers run and leave my ass right there. I take one in this hand and on desk since then.

Officers may also be concerned about the crime problem in general. One officer stated:

Some of the things I hear and see in my 19 years make me question why we do it sometimes. Trinidad frightening. Sometimes you listen to these youth men talk and is no kinda conscience, no upbringing, no values nothing. They like savages. So even if you get them off the street for ah lil' while, when they come back out here, they ten times worse and know ten times more bout crime than before they went in.

Another officer may have referred to actual victimisation experiences:

Imagine I'm an inspector, I get rob, my wife get rob, my child get rob, they thief the dog chain out my yard and gone with the bird and leave the bird cage! It might sound like thing to laugh to you but that is thing to cry.

Finally, one officer confirmed what would seem to be true about police officers and fear of crime: since they understand that high risk of victimisation is part of the job they have chosen to do anyway, they tend to be less fearful of it. However, interestingly, this officer stated that he feels safer at his home in the ghetto than at the police station:

If we go to live in fear then we can't really be police. Plenty time I get cut ass when I now join the force and feel I could make some kinda change. The faster you realise Trinidad is how it is cause we like it so, the easier this work does get. It have times when you in some kinda situations and you ask yourself if it making sense but I going home just now so I not killing out myself. I from the ghetto too so unless you could change the mentality ah the ghetto youths, it just going and be a cycle really. I feel safer in the ghetto than in this station. Home I know when something going and go down.

Perceived risk of victimisation

Overall, officers believed that no one can be safe from crime in T&T. None gave responses that indicated a low risk of victimisation. Most appeared to think that their family members are at significant risk of being victimised. When asked if they felt that they could protect their families from crime, seven responded that they could not sufficiently do so. Four pointed out that dangerous circumstances, namely the overwhelming amount of crime and the unchecked power and capabilities of criminals, stood in the way of protecting them. One felt that criminals were present just about anywhere—'in the schools from kindergarten to university', 'in the church' and 'in the community I live', while the government is too corrupt to intervene. The officer rhetorically asked: 'What you think?' Three other officers stated:

Protect them from cobra and rattlesnake? You can't even protect yourself from mosquito, how I protecting my family from crime? Not in Trinidad.

...

Crime reaching you no matter where you is or who you be here. Nobody don't care about nobody again. Is every man for he self. I could try to protect my family but that it is. All I could really do is try.

...

Long ago I would have said yes off the bat but now I ain't so sure again. Police is moving targets now and if they can't get you they ride for your family.

Further, two identified lack of support and resources in comparison to criminals:

If I say yes I'd be lying to myself. This place gone mad. Trinidad not how it was long time. Now is everything they could think of to distress you and criminal don't have no special look again. When I leave this station, I ain't have no fire and every little youth man on the block packing so is really them running things.

...

The criminals have bigger and better guns, they well educated and well funded with expensive lawyer to get them out. I could barely make ends meet on this salary far less to feel I could take them on.

One officer stated that he could only protect his family from petty criminals:

If is them lil' wannabe bad boys then yeah I could handle my scene. But yuh see them criminals in shirt and ties, them is the worse and most dangerous kinds. Yes, the ones with money brutal. We ain't ready for them yet.

Officers also discussed the risk to themselves. One indicated that officers are at higher risk of victimisation than family members: 'The way how everybody hate police and criminals have more rights than we ... nah? We need protection more than them out there'. Another stated:

I at risk like everybody else and have to call police same way. The only difference between me and civilians is when I call for help, they have to answer and I could tell them what to do and how to do it.

When asked if they are well equipped to deal with crime, officers included observations about their risk of victimisation in their responses. Some risks stem from interfering with criminal enterprise. According to one officer, 'really and truly crime is a business. If police really work they messing with people business so is we [our] life at risk.' Another stated, 'Trinis have a culture of lawlessness and entitlement. That is ah dangerous combination because police could never be anything but the enemy.'

Two officers attributed risk to lack of ability to rely upon fellow officers. One stated that 'these new police they hiring just in it for fame and ranks. They not serious about the job' and expressed discomfort in conducting operations with them because 'special forces is a team thing'. Another stated:

Them police now have no kinda belly to deal with monsters out there. If shots start to fire is every man for they self. Long time [ago], police was police. Them new recruits now you could take them ... I telling you straight they can't pay me for what they does want we to deal with and I not putting my life in them jokey police hands.

Another two identified overwhelming crime and lack of resources to counter it:

We get over 100 calls daily. That phone never stops ringing. Is fight, family disputes, shooting, chopping, you name it, we have to deal with it every day. Is one working vehicle in this station. Sometimes I have to use my personal vehicle depending on the situation. We don't have firearm for all officers on duty at any time ... If this station came under attack we couldn't last one hour, sad but is true.
...

We deal with what you would call dangerous criminals with resources. You know how many time I see things going down and have to run and hide because I have no firearm. That is nonsense! If I can't even defend me how I supposed to defend you?

Behavioural reactions

The officers' comments resemble two types of reactions, protection and avoidance, which are major concepts related to fear of crime. Behavioural reactions such as these are linked to cognitive and emotional responses to crime threats (Lane et al. 2014).

When engaging in *protection*, one does something to interfere with an offender's ability to commit crime; one prepares to defend oneself, others or property against offenders. Protection is intended to make one less vulnerable to crime; examples include taking self-defence courses, installing alarm systems or extra lighting, using locks, obtaining weapons and keeping guard dogs. When engaging in *avoidance*, one restricts one's own (or significant others') choices and actions in ways that prevent risky situations from occurring; one tries to not give offenders opportunities to attempt crime. Avoidance is intended to make one less exposed to crime; examples include avoiding certain places or events, travelling only at certain times (e.g., day instead of night), staying home and choosing not to associate with certain people (Lane et al. 2014).

Protection

Most officers expressed doubts about their abilities to protect their families from crime. Three indicated that they could protect their families by being highly protective. One stated that 'People say I over-protective' but justified this by pointing out the dangers he witnessed as an officer, and the other two stated:

That is my job. I can't be protecting John public and my house not in order' and 'I out here too long to allow anybody to distress my wife and children. Anything could happen to me but I don't make joke with them.

Referring to his home, another officer stated that 'I have cameras round this whole house.' After pointing out that a dangerous offender he once arrested was parking outside and 'watching his house', one officer stated an interest in obtaining a personal firearm for protection: 'Is more than four years I requesting personal firearm and nothing'.

Officers did not explicitly identify protective behavioural strategies that they use on duty, perhaps because these strategies are assumed to be part of the job; officers are supposed to protect themselves and the public. However, one officer stated: 'I tell these officers do what they have to do to protect they self cause at the end of the day, everybody hate police unless they need police.'

Avoidance

Some officers used avoidance strategies to try to prevent family members from being victimised. When asked if he felt he could protect his family from crime, one officer stated: 'Honestly, I ain't feel so, so I ain't putting myself in no position to find out. Things get too grimy out here.' In some cases, they imposed avoidance upon family members. The three officers who believed that they could protect their families stated that 'I don't let my children mix with the masses' and:

I don't let them travel to go nowhere. If I can't drop them or pick them up, they not going, simple.

...

My kids don't get to play outside if me or their mother not around. My big daughter does vex because she find she in university and she want freedom. But the things I see out here, she ain't ready for no freedom.

Also, in response to another question, an officer observed that 'I get to a point where I don't want none of my family living here. Let them stay out in foreign [countries].'

Officers also engaged in avoidance themselves. They often felt that it was futile and too dangerous to pursue justice diligently because criminals will come after them once they get back out on the street, there is too much corruption and/or one cannot rely on fellow officers or the community.

When asked if their views on crime affect how they respond in the line of duty, only one officer said no and with a caveat: 'I wouldn't really say so because at the end of the day I sign up for this. But you have to remember I'm a paper pusher now.' Another officer stated: 'You realise is beheading taking place here now. I like my head on my shoulder. They could put me on a desk indefinitely.' Others stated:

I not putting myself in danger to prove no stupid point. Anything happen to me all I have to get is a fruit basket full of rotten fruits and a get-well card with my rank, not even my name. These well-connected criminals does tell you straight up you wasting your time cause they going ah walk. They letting you know ... they could get all your information ... I want to live to see my grandchildren.

...

I is officer quick draw. Is ghetto youths I dealing with round here. Them uneducated, arrogant and have nothing but time on they hand to terrorise people. I not fighting up with them. Look the biggest drug dealer in here is a politician brother. He know and we know we can't touch him. So what that saying bout the police round here? Exactly! We just a bunch of cunts in uniform so when I went on patrol up in Hell Yard and the youth man watch me in my face and call me officer cunt I ask him how are you today sir. Yeah! Cause he right! If I had rest level and steel tip on him I would be on the front page out of ah job for police brutality.

...

Police can't do shit bout crime in Trinidad. When I leave here, is me and God. I born and grow in the ghetto round more guns than they have in this station on ah good day. You feel I so stupid to play I going up in them hills to lock up man for weed and cook when is my lil' one gun and the old jeep them don't even service?

...

I try to not let my personal experiences affect my decisions but as a leader sometimes I really just want to tell my officers move in and do what they have to do. I tell them don't go out there and play hero.

Discussion

Severe crime threats are a daily reality for police officers in T&T. The nature of crime and justice in the country shapes their lived experiences and how they adapt to their work (Travers 2019). Violent crime and corruption, rooted in T&T's colonial history and location as a drug transshipment hub, present a unique context—one that differs from policing in Western countries—within which to examine police reactions to crime threats.

In the current study, officers' discourses may be understood to reflect their paradoxical positions of power (Fairclough 2013). In one context, officers are in positions of power as upholders of the law, with a portfolio that confers responsibilities of them as protectors. Yet, in another sense, they can also be powerless victims of the same structures they are charged to uphold (Carrington et al. 2018; Travers 2019).

The current study contributes to the fear of crime research by examining fear among police officers, an understudied population in this regard. The analysis revealed that four variables frequently identified in fear of crime literature were present in the lived experiences of officers: *fear of*, *perceived risk of*, and *protection* and *avoidance* as behavioural responses to, victimisation. While it is beyond the scope of this exploratory analysis to test for differences in fear of crime between officers and civilians, the data suggest that officers may experience fear of crime and

react to it in ways similar to civilians. However, the officers in the sample worked under unusually dangerous and stressful circumstances. More research is needed to examine fear of victimisation among officers in a variety of contexts, along with their strategies for reducing risk. The current study is generally similar to Nonnarong and Chokprajakchat's (2018) survey study in that officers' fear of violent crime was found to be comparable to that of civilians.

The officers generally perceived a high risk of criminal victimisation, for themselves and their families. This is no surprise given that eight of the 12 officers reported violent victimisation and nine reported serious victimisation of family members. Officers attributed risk to being ill-equipped to deal with crime, citing an overwhelming amount of crime in T&T in general, unchecked power and capabilities of criminals, retaliation from interfering with criminal enterprise, lack of support and resources from the public and government, and lack of reliance upon other officers, especially junior officers.

Most officers then had significant fears or worries regarding the prospect of themselves or family members becoming victims of crime. Officers felt the need to become overly protective of family members but feared they might not be able to do so sufficiently, especially when faced with threats from serious or powerful criminals. The sources of fear/worry are like those of perceived high risk: immediate dangers of performing daily duties, vulnerability to retaliation by arrestees, adversarial relations between citizens and police, severe crime in general and lack of reliance upon other officers. The overall impression given is that officers and their families are unprotected and 'on their own' facing crime threats.

In terms of behavioural reactions to potential victimisation, officers referenced avoidance more than protection strategies. Some mentioned being highly protective of their families, but few mentioned specific techniques such as having cameras or guns in the home. More references were made to limiting activities of family members, for example, not taking children out in public, disallowing children to play outside or travel unsupervised and having family members live outside the area. Many officers also discussed using avoidance approaches on duty. They often felt that diligently policing the community was excessively dangerous and ineffective, citing again the same circumstances underlying their perceived risk and fear of crime: retaliation by arrestees after they are released, political corruption, lack of community support and lack of reliance upon other officers.

Evidence that police officers are not as unafraid of victimisation as assumed suggests that policies providing officers with emotional support services, stress management training and protective resources may be beneficial. In the case of T&T, officers must be given more material and social support to be able to disrupt criminal behaviour and protect themselves and their families, potent third-party agencies must become involved to improve police-community relations and government processes must be carried out more effectively and with integrity, perhaps with more external oversight.

The question then becomes: where will the resources for such strategies come from? Answering this is beyond the scope of the current study. However, it can be argued that macro-level changes—at the level of national and global law and policy, economic viability and public beliefs and values, for example—are needed before micro-level initiatives can be sustained. Further, the difficult task of building social capital between police and citizens must take place (Pino 2009; Pino and Johnson 2011). With a high likelihood of violence in the country, it is more challenging to uphold the rule of law and officers are more likely to resort to extrajudicial or work avoidance strategies when they have limited responses to fear and the threat of victimisation.

Regarding the study's limitations, findings of such an in-depth qualitative study are not highly generalisable and cannot be assumed to reflect the views of other police officers in T&T and the Caribbean. Further, much like other pilot studies of a similar nature (Chui and Regin 2005;

Nieuwenhuys and Oudejans 2010), the data collection protocol was purposeful, containing questions specifically intended to collect information about police perceptions of crime.

The sample is restricted to senior officers from one division of TTPS that happens to have the highest recorded crime rate in the country. While younger, less experienced officers may currently have more direct contact with crime, senior officers may have experienced more of it. Also, officers in other, presumably less dangerous TTPS divisions may perceive less fear and risk and thus, hold views that are less extreme. The sample is also limited in that all participants were male because there were no female senior officers at the selected locations during the time of the study. Future research should examine the fear of victimisation among non-male officers. Past research suggests that women are more fearful of crime and differ from men in their perceptions of risk (Lane et al. 2014). It would be interesting to see if being a police officer affects these gender differences.

Also, officers were asked if they were 'afraid or uncomfortable to perform in the line of duty'. If the question about their fear of victimisation was posed differently, for example, if they were asked to rate their level of fear, they may have given different responses. Jackson (2005) suggests that responses may vary according to how fear of crime questions are framed. This study is an initial exploration into the effects of crime threats upon police officers in the Caribbean, so its limitations underscore the need for further research on other officers in T&T and the Caribbean in general that more broadly addresses subjective appraisals of crime threats and emotional and behavioural reactions to them.

Despite these limitations, this study makes an initial contribution to the literature on subjective appraisals of crime by discussing how police officers from a postcolonial, non-Western, high-crime context in the Global South express concerns about crime and how said concerns manifest in family life and professional practice (Carrington, Hogg and Sozzo 2016). One reason to include officers in the subjective appraisal of crime research is that the negative consequences of police concerns and reactive behaviours have important implications for police deviance, effectiveness, commitment to the rule of law and relationships with communities. Future research informed by this study is particularly needed in the Global South, where studies on how crime threats affect police officers are lacking. While space limitations prevented an in-depth discussion in this paper, such future research should be informed by Southern perspectives, as Western criminological perspectives still dominate the academic discourse in criminology (Carrington, Hogg and Sozzo 2016). If the negative consequences of police perceptions of crime threats in the Global South are not addressed adequately, reform efforts intended to improve police capacity and police-community relations are likely to be ineffective.

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¹ It is important to note that the spelling in direct quotations reflect local English dialect and colloquialisms.

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