



Policing Vulnerable Children and Young People in the Caribbean: Considerations from a Trauma-Informed Perspective

Dylan de Gourville

University of Kent, United Kingdom

Abstract

Addressing the diverse needs of people who interact with police requires informed consideration of vulnerability. This is facilitated through the evolution of policing protocols in response to the expanding knowledge base on vulnerable populations. This paper examines the innate vulnerability of children and young people in the Caribbean, highlighting the need for changes to policing practices to incorporate a trauma-informed framework. Fifteen young people from Trinidad and Tobago were interviewed about their experiences in interacting with police as suspects and victims. A thematic analysis revealed insights into the lived experiences and perceptions of at-risk youth in Trinidad and Tobago regarding police interactions. The findings highlight the importance of considering the impacts of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) within policing paradigms. This study augments regional scholarship on vulnerability in island contexts and offers recommendations for effectively navigating effective law enforcement with an understanding of the vulnerability of young people.

Keywords: Young people; vulnerability; policing practices; Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs); trauma-informed framework; Caribbean.

Introduction

In recent years, the concept of vulnerability has garnered considerable academic attention, driving interdisciplinary empirical inquiry into its origins, consequences, and the diverse needs of vulnerable populations. Children and young people (specifically adolescents aged 12–18) represent a universally vulnerable demographic across cultures and contexts. Consequently, ongoing international dialogue has emphasized the need to integrate an awareness of their vulnerability into societal structures and institutions which safeguard their wellbeing. A critical area of this discussion is the intersection between young persons and law enforcement bodies globally (Dehaghani, 2017; Millar et al., 2022). This includes the measures employed to reconcile the effective maintenance of public safety and order with the promotion of healthy developmental trajectories for children and young people involved with the criminal justice system. However, this discourse remains relatively limited in the Caribbean region, where unique socio-cultural nuances and contextual factors necessitate region-specific considerations of children and young people and the policing practices that govern their treatment by law enforcement authorities. This paper aims to initiate such discourse in the region, drawing on data from a sample of at-risk youth in Trinidad and Tobago. It provides insights into their lived experiences and perceptions, while advocating for a trauma-informed approach to policing in accordance with current theory and empirical evidence in developmental, psychological, and criminological sciences. This comprehensive approach



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aims to foster a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between vulnerability, law enforcement interactions, and broader societal dynamics.

Vulnerability of Children and Young People: Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

The World Health Organization defines vulnerability as “the conditions determined by physical, social, economic, and environmental factors or processes which increase the susceptibility of an individual, a community, assets, or systems to the impacts of hazards” (n.d., para. 2). Conceptually, vulnerability implies a state of weakness and inadequate defences, leading to disproportionate exposure to risk (Arora et al., 2015; Brown, 2011). Some view the categorical nature of the terminology as paternalistic, oppressive, and stigmatizing. However, identifying groups as vulnerable can inspire autonomy, support social justice and is often conceptualized as a powerful tool underpinning service delivery to young persons (Brown, 2011, 2014).

Children and young people comprise approximately 30% of the Caribbean population (UNICEF, 2022). They represent a valuable yet delicate demographic with the potential to significantly influence the future trajectory of the region. However, this potential is accompanied by psychological and developmental sensitivities that necessitate protective measures. Factors such as limited emotional regulation (Silvers, 2022), unsophisticated cognitive resources and brain development (Ciccia et al., 2009), unresolved self-identity (Branje, 2022), and dependence on support structures heighten minors’ susceptibility to harm. Although some children face disproportionate conditions of physical and psychological risk due to chronic deprivation of basic material, emotional, and social needs, all children and young people arguably share vulnerability inherent to their developmental stage.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) refer collectively to traumatic events or stressors experienced during formative years (typically before age 18), with profound implications for development and wellbeing (Bellis et al., 2014; Felitti et al., 1998; Hughes et al., 2016; Thurston et al., 2023). These experiences include various forms of abuse (physical, sexual, emotional), neglect, and household dysfunction, such as parental incarceration, death, mental health issues, divorce, and domestic violence. Impacts of these experiences exhibit an additive or “dose–response relationship” (Thurston et al., 2023), whereby an increase in the number of ACEs encountered correlates with the intensity of negative health outcomes, such as early mortality, mental illness and physical health issues (Brown et al., 2009; Felitti et al., 1998). In the Caribbean, the multi-level nature of maltreatment is often discounted (Descartes et al., 2020), resulting in under-discussed trajectories for children and young people who are confronted with patterns of abuse and the co-occurrence of various forms of traumatic events.

Trauma, foundational to ACEs, refers to events or circumstances experienced as physically or psychologically damaging, with enduring negative consequences across physical, emotional, and psychological domains (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014). For clarity, it is necessary to differentiate between the traumatic events or actual situations posing threats (e.g., physical abuse), the individual’s subjective experience of these events (e.g., the personal significance attributed to instances of physical abuse), and the effects of such. These include adverse consequences with either immediate or delayed onset (e.g., impaired trust resulting from physical abuse). While ACEs represent the event, the experiences and resulting effects can vary uniquely for each child. Trauma during sensitive developmental stages has been linked to numerous adverse individual outcomes, including impaired cognitive functioning, relational dysregulation, and poor behavioural control (Ford & Courtois, 2013). These effects are partly attributed to the ongoing structural and functional neurological maturation of children and adolescents, rendering them developmentally sensitive to the effects of toxic stress (Bick & Nelson, 2016). Disentangling the complexities of trauma and its sequelae is essential for understanding the linkage between exposure to ACEs and the behavioural antecedents that often result in negative police contact.

Empirical data suggest that ACEs exposure yields long-term behavioural and psychological issues. These may include alcoholism, drug use, school disengagement, delinquency, and criminal variety observed across sexes and countries (Baiden et al., 2020; Basto-Pereira et al., 2022; Felitti et al., 1998; Jones & Pierce, 2021), as well as recidivism once criminal history has been established (Van Duin et al., 2021). These findings indicate a strong association between childhood trauma and subsequent engagement in criminal behaviours. Indeed, this relationship may be mediated by behavioural variables. The psychobiological implications of ACE trauma can foster externalizing behaviour patterns among children and young people, including functional impairments in brain development which undermine self-regulation (Bellis et al., 2014), long-term alterations in the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis (Waite-Jones & Rodriguez, 2022), disruptions in the central nervous system (Heim et al., 2010), and heightened impulsivity and recklessness (Jebraeli et al., 2022). This interplay between vulnerability and problematic behaviour, known as the vulnerability-transgression nexus (Brown, 2014), elevates the likelihood of police interactions (Fagan & Geller, 2019; Jackson et al., 2022). Such problematic behaviours include, but are not limited to, sexual deviancy, alcohol and drug misuse, and various forms of violence (Broekhof et al., 2023; Burke et al., 2023; Chopin et al., 2023). Additionally, ACEs can predispose individuals to victimization across their lifespan (Brodie et al., 2023), broadening

the scope of negative police interactions to include both victims and perpetrators. Given the paucity of research addressing this issue in the Caribbean, it is reasonable to infer that numerous negative interactions between law enforcement and individuals with histories of childhood adversity occur regularly without due consideration of underlying trauma. As such, exploring the experiences and perceptions of minors regarding law enforcement in the Caribbean is crucial.

Guided by this notion of vulnerability and the imperative to protect youth, Caribbean nations have aligned their objectives with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outlined by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2022). These objectives include a resolute commitment to eliminating violence against children. Despite these efforts, high incidences of child maltreatment, including sexual and physical abuse and neglect, persist (Descartes et al., 2020; James et al., 2016; Reid et al., 2014). In some cases, this maltreatment occurs at the hands of law enforcement (The Jamaica Gleaner, 2024). In aggregate, an estimated 58% of children in the region experience various forms of abuse (Hillis et al., 2016). Recent data from UNICEF (2022) reveal that the rate of homicide-related deaths for children and young people in the region is four times higher than the global average. Moreover, the incidence of childhood sexual abuse of girls ranges from 1% in the Dominican Republic to as high as 25% in Trinidad and Tobago (UNICEF, 2022). This persistent adversity underscores a regional inadequacy in safeguarding the fundamental rights of children. Furthermore, children in developing countries experience higher prevalence and co-occurrence of ACEs than those in developed countries (Solberg & Peters, 2020). These alarming statistics highlight the acute vulnerability of Caribbean children due to regional contextualities, which elevate their risk of ACEs. Thus, robust intervention methods are necessary across various societal sectors to proactively mitigate against child mistreatment and advocate for child protection.

Law Enforcement and Minors

Effective crime control hinges on establishing harmonious relationships between the police force and the general populace (Chenane et al., 2022). This entails bidirectional trust, where the public feels safe approaching law enforcement to report crimes and assist in investigations, while law enforcement values public cooperation and information in crime management. Respect and fairness are central to these relationships. The absence of such, or feelings of mistrust toward and marginalization from law enforcement, can result in negative emotional reactions and behavioural issues (Gau, 2015). Procedural justice, entailing fairness and transparency in procedures and processes within law enforcement activities, is particularly important to young people, partially shaping their perceptions of, and attitudes towards, police legitimacy (Hinds, 2007). Despite established protocols for police–public interactions, reports of deviations from standard procedures and unjust behaviours by officers when handling minors, such as improper use of invasive strategies like frisks and searches, have emerged globally (Jackson et al., 2022). In the Caribbean, instances of sexual harassment and rape (Mundle, 2023), brutalization and excessive force (Forde, 2023; The Jamaica Gleaner, 2023), and discrimination (Forde, 2023) involving youth have been reported, sparking criticism from local communities. As young people in the region already tend to hold negative views towards the police which strain their relationship (Stamatakis, 2019), engagements of this kind foster an ongoing cycle of mutual police–citizen antagonism (Pino & Johnson, 2011).

As Small Island Developing States (SIDS), many Caribbean countries face unique developmental challenges (Selwyn, 1978) which distinguish them from larger nations, such as the United States and United Kingdom, where much of the research on ACEs and police contact has been conducted (Jackson et al., 2022; Testa & Jackson, 2022). Despite their heterogeneity in the formulation of economies, systems of government, and geography (Robinson, 2020), shared challenges for Caribbean territories include income inequality, youth unemployment, and poverty rates (Wong & Ramakrishnan, 2017; Pino, 2009), which create fertile ground for heightened levels of youth delinquency and crime. Political corruption and resource inadequacies exacerbate these challenges, hindering Caribbean islands in their ability to revamp modes of public service delivery. The inherent characteristic of smallness is often a constraining factor regarding public service initiatives, with governance perceived as ineffective due to political landscapes, economic circumstances, and colonial histories (Everest-Phillips, 2014). Therefore, law enforcement and other public service domains may rely on antiquated methods of engagement, warranting contemporary criticisms, recommendations, and calls for more progressive approaches to policing.

The growing body of research linking ACEs to law enforcement involvement stresses the importance of addressing and considering trauma in children and young people affected by policing practices. This is especially significant given that arrests and warnings involving these groups are more likely to occur as the number of traumatic events experienced increases (Jackson et al., 2022). Police officers routinely handle cases involving trauma in children and young people, such as abuse, parental incarceration, and other incidents where they are involved either as primary subjects or secondary individuals. However, without adequate training, their actions may inadvertently intensify or induce trauma among this vulnerable population. It should be noted that this risk extends beyond the possibility of aggravating existing trauma to potentially initiating the onset of new trauma through improper treatment, whether deliberate or accidental. Therefore, there is a growing need for enhanced

training and education initiatives within law enforcement to mitigate this risk and ensure appropriate handling of children and young people.

A Trauma-Informed Approach

Integrating a trauma-informed operational framework into law enforcement and embedding trauma sensitivity into protocols equips officers to effectively engage with children and young people. Trauma-informed approaches constitute a structural change process emphasizing principles of trauma sensitivity and healing to mitigate the risk of re-traumatizing vulnerable individuals (Wolf et al., 2013). Driven by trauma research, practice-generated knowledge, and documented survivor experiences, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has developed a robust framework for behavioural health sectors which have the capacity to ease or exacerbate clients' experiences with trauma (2014). This approach hinges on four fundamental assumptions, termed the "4 Rs": Realize, Recognize, Respond, and Resist Re-traumatization. To this end, a trauma-informed approach is effective to the extent it first *realizes* trauma and understands its impact on individuals, groups, and communities. This includes acknowledging trauma's role in individual, collective, and systemic dysfunction; the barrier it presents to effective outcomes; and the requirement for systemic intervention. Secondly, it *recognizes* the signs and symptoms of trauma, often specific to settings or demographics (e.g., age group). This assumption supports the use of trauma screening and workforce development as a tool in the effective identification of trauma. Thirdly, it *responds* functionally by incorporating trauma-informed principles and knowledge at a systemic level, involving budgeting, training, and effective leadership that appreciates the role of trauma. Lastly, it *resists re-traumatization*, which involves reactivating traumatic stress via mentally stimulating or emotionally engaging with a past trauma (Figley, 2012). Effective frameworks thus aim to avoid re-triggering painful memories and traumatic histories (SAMHSA, 2014). Guided by this framework, it is essential to cultivate a profound understanding of trauma and its consequences among police officers, aiding in identifying trauma indicators in minors. Additionally, trauma knowledge must be embedded into structural policies and action procedures. Given the central role of trauma, particularly linked to ACEs, in shaping pathways to criminality, victimization, and other forms of police contact (Brodie et al., 2023; Van Duin et al., 2021), law enforcement agencies should incorporate trauma considerations to ensure effective responsiveness to the vulnerable populations.

Some research suggests that certain trauma-informed interventions have limited effectiveness, with the impact of trauma-awareness sessions on police officers' attitudes varying as a function of gender, age, and experience (Brodie et al., 2023). However, alternative reports demonstrate that trauma-informed approaches to policing can be effective, offering key benefits such as enhancing officers' "root-cause" understanding of criminality (Ramessur-Williams et al., 2019). Generally, a robust and recurring training programme may be required to yield significant front-line improvements. Drawing on SAMHSA's (2014) framework, such an approach should align with six fundamental principles: *safety*, ensuring psychological and physical security; *trustworthiness*, conducting operations to foster trust between police officers and youth; *peer support*, leveraging peer assistance and mutual self-help to establish safety and hope; *collaboration*, prioritizing partnerships and bridging power divides between law enforcement and minors; *empowerment*, fostering autonomy and self-efficacy for traumatized individuals; and *cultural, historical, and gender issues*, acknowledging historical trauma, appreciating contextual differences, eliminating biases, and using methodologies responsive to unique needs (e.g., ethnicities, gender).

A practical example is the implementation of a trauma-informed lens in Wales to identify ACE markers, understand their role and impact on presenting behaviour, and assess resilience and protective factors. Initially conceived as a localized effort, its proven effectiveness prompted expansion to a country-wide initiative to address vulnerability through developing cross-sector systems, processes, and proactive preventative strategies to bolster police effectiveness (Ramessur-Williams et al., 2019). This initiative, aligning with SAMHSA's (2014) recommendation for the development and deployment of a comprehensive training and workforce development program, presents a promising model for the initial steps toward trauma-informed policing in the Caribbean region.

It is crucial to note that a trauma-informed framework of managing children and young people within the criminal justice system does not endorse absolving them of accountability for criminal action. Instead, guided by SAMSHA's (2014) framework, it proposes a systemic shift toward recognizing trauma, and handling minors in a manner that avoids further compromising their mental and physical wellbeing.

Developmental Cascade Perspective

Understanding ACEs and their impacts, as well as the utility of trauma-informed approaches to police-youth interactions, is best supported by adopting a developmental cascade perspective. This perspective acknowledges the dynamic interplay among various factors and contexts that cumulatively influence developmental systems, resulting in a spreading effect across levels,

domains, and systems, ultimately altering developmental trajectories (Masten & Cicchetti, 2010). Multiple developmental processes, spanning different modes and levels, interact and accumulate over time to shape children's developmental pathways (Ahmed et al., 2023). When considering trauma-informed police–youth interactions, it is essential to recognize that trauma has a cascading effect throughout the lifespan, accumulating and manifesting in various ways across time.

This perspective suggests that adversity during childhood and adolescence can lead to negative behavioural and psychological outcomes, increasing the likelihood of interactions with law enforcement. These interactions can then reinforce trajectories along adaptive and maladaptive pathways by either exacerbating existing adversities or initiating new traumas. Therefore, trauma-informed policing offers a major bifunctional advantage in influencing the trajectories of children and young people. On one hand, it seeks to prevent negative police–minor interactions that can traumatize and re-traumatize, inhibiting the reinforcement of negative and maladaptive developmental pathways. Simultaneously, it emphasizes the wellbeing of children and young people, supporting them through referral systems and promoting adaptive pathways and positive developmental outcomes. In this way, trauma-informed policing may effectively impede the formation of negative developmental cascades resulting from unfavourable law enforcement interactions. This approach is akin to preventing the ripple effects caused by a stone striking a pond: by averting the stone's entrance into the water in the first place. It underscores the importance of proactive measures in identifying and addressing trauma in policing to preserve the developmental pathways of minors, preventing initial negative encounters, and fostering positive police–youth relations.

Method

Design and Sample

The research utilized interview transcripts from a sample of Trinidadian youth with prior police contact. Data collection was conducted by the Anatol Institute for Research and Social Sciences (TAIRAS) as part of a larger study focused on gang violence. A convenience sample was drawn from economically depressed areas in the country, with participation being completely voluntary and no financial incentive offered. This qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews, focusing on three major themes: ACEs encountered, interactions with and perceptions of law enforcement in Trinidad and Tobago, and personal needs from the Trinidad and Tobago police service. There were no narrative constraints and participants were allowed to share their views, experiences, and any pertinent insights freely. Additionally, short multiple choice survey questions were used to capture demographic information related to age, education level, gender, and ethnicity.

Respondent Demographics

The study involved a convenience sample of 15 Trinidadian adolescents and young adults with a history of encounters with law enforcement. Participants' ages ranged from 15 to 21 years. The sample had a disproportionate gender composition, with 11 (73%) males and four (27%) females, reflecting the prevalence of gang involvement and criminal activity among poor, young, urban males in Trinidad and Tobago (Baird et al., 2022). Ethnically, eight (53%) respondents identified as Afro-Trinidadian, four (27%) as Indo-Trinidadian, and three (20%) as mixed ethnicity. All participants had a secondary school education, with three reporting any tertiary level education. All respondents had interacted with police either as victims or suspects in minor criminal offences.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the interview data, with the aid of Atlas.ti qualitative analysis software. Initially, the data were explored to facilitate familiarization, identify keywords, and note preliminary trends. Data were coded, assigning labels to salient patterns of meaning, which aided in the construction of themes. The main themes regarding young people's experiences with law enforcement were profiling and stigmatization, harassment and abuse, humiliation and disrespect, and lack of compassion and understanding. Regarding the consequences of these interactions, two themes emerged: loss of trust and mental health impacts. In discussing youth needs related to law enforcement, responses centred around two main themes: respectful treatment and understanding youth. All instances of ACEs in participant narratives were coded, and each participant was given a score reflecting the number of ACEs encountered. Participants were assigned a number (e.g., R1 for Respondent 1), and quotations in the analysis refer to the respondent's number and gender.

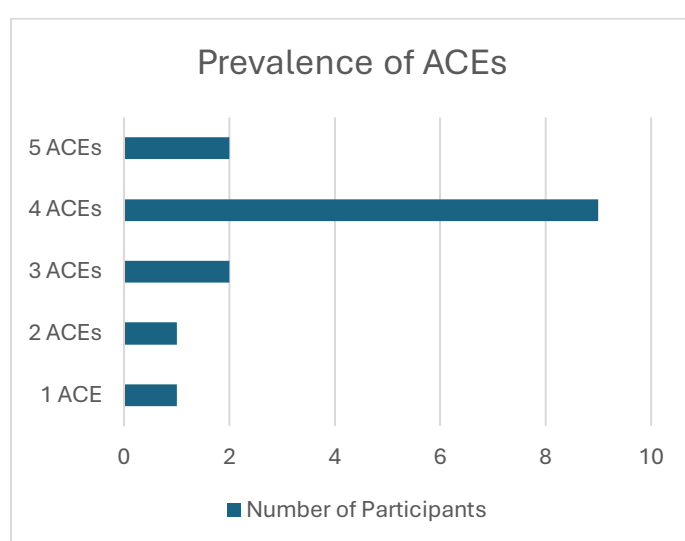
Findings

Adverse Childhood Experiences

Among the 15 respondents, one experienced one ACE, one experienced two ACEs, two experienced three ACEs, and 11 experienced four or more ACEs during childhood and adolescence. This is significant, as approximately 50% of the general population are regarded to have experienced at least one ACE (Felitti et al., 1998). However, the risk seriousness increases with the cumulative experience of traumatic events in childhood and adolescence, with current research regarding an ACE score of 4 as the threshold for intervention (Bateson et al., 2020). As shown in Figure 1, about 73% of respondents surpassed this threshold, signalling heightened risk and a critical need for intervention. Reported ACEs included physical, emotional, and sexual abuse; primary caregiver incarceration; parental death; parental substance abuse; parental mental illness; and exposure to domestic violence.

Figure 1

Number of ACEs Self-Reported by the Sample



Profiling and Stigmatization

A predominant theme within participant narratives was perceptions of unjust profiling and stigmatization by law enforcement personnel. Respondents consistently expressed the belief that officers harboured preconceived notions based on factors beyond their control. The concept of individuality was raised, with participants feeling that they were perceived negatively as part of a collective, rather than as unique individuals with their own characteristics and morality. Several respondents expressed this sentiment:

They don't see us as humans, just as rubbish they can disrespect because of where we come from and how we look. (R1-M)

Law enforcement only profile negro men and think they are criminals. They have a stigma of everyone being the same. So, because I black, I's a criminal? (R9-M)

As youths from rough areas no one does take you seriously. They don't respect your rights, they does advantage [take advantage of] you. ... every interaction with police I does always feel looked down on. As if I am a nobody. (R10-M)

Police will never treat them white boys from west the way they does treat us. Just because I from here and look the way I do – I am automatically an enemy to them. (R14-M)

These accounts highlight how factors such as race, background, appearance, and area of residence are perceived to influence law enforcement conduct and treatment toward specific young people. This sheds light on the disproportionate vulnerability of young people further marginalized by the intersectionality of vulnerability factors, such as socioeconomic class and ethnicity.

Racial profiling has been extensively discussed in countries like the United States, where the “Black criminal” stereotype contributes to disproportionate criminalization of African Americans, fostering a unique psychological experience of policing for this group (Najdowski, 2023). However, its nuances in the racially and ethnically diverse Caribbean context are often overlooked. These shared experiences and perspectives align with regional scholarship, which outlines police officers’ inconsistent treatment of individuals from certain communities. Individuals from at-risk or crime “hotspot” areas, such as Beetham and Laventille in Trinidad, are often discriminated against, labelled, and stigmatized (Forde, 2023; Watson, 2016). These results echo and extend prior reports of police stigmatization and indicate the need for intervention.

Harassment and Abuse

A recurring theme in the interview records is the experience of abuse and harassment by law enforcement. Participants recounted instances of excessive force and aggressive handling by police, including physical apprehension and aggressive conduct toward young people. This is consistent with other regional reports of physical violence between law enforcement and minors (Forde, 2023; The Jamaica Gleaner, 2023), suggesting a trend in child and adolescent experiences with police personnel. Such experiences were recounted by respondents:

We was 16 and forcibly had our bras checked for weed, they made us squat over a toilet and cough. I know they was just doing their job but the way they did it felt violating and aggressive. We did not even have any [weed] on us. They were very rough with us and we were basically kids. (R2-F)

They used way too much force for a little youth. Slammed me into the front of a vehicle because I ain’t want them to check through my bag for no reason. (R7-M)

Instances of verbal and sexual harassment were also reported:

I get caught smoking with a couple [of] friends in the park. The officers kept making perverted comments and sexually harassing me. At one point one of them put their hand on my thigh and was rubbing it while telling me about what he want to do to me even when I asked multiple times of him to stop. (R8-F)

Another time – a male officer pat me down and squeezed my breast then laughed. He kept getting closer to the point where his crotch kept touching my hand I was only 17. (R2-F)

These narratives were predominantly recounted by female participants, underscoring broader regional issues where women remain disproportionately vulnerable to victimization (Joseph & Jones, 2023). These accounts not only underscore the issue of gender-based violence (GBV) in the Caribbean but also consider it at the intersection of law enforcement and interactions with minors. Beyond harassment, the abuse of power and subversion of established protocol were central to interview discussions:

The police flew [jumped] over the wall into our liming [hang-out] area and knocked out the cameras because they didn’t have no warrant. They had a drone in the sky because they figure we are teens so they don’t have to care ’bout our privacy. (R3-M)

After they asked me for a bribe they refused to give me their badge number. They abuse their authority on a daily [basis] and have no one to correct them. The government have bigger things to worry about than police corruption. (R5-M)

I tried to report a robbery where a fella thief my phone out my hand and run off after pushing me to the ground. When I tried to make a report, they just laughed at me. I had to call a link [someone with connections to the police department] just for them to call the station and make them take my report. (R6-M)

These first-hand experiences suggest a tendency for police officers to circumvent protocol, particularly when dealing with minors, further contributing to a perception of diminished rights for the demographic. This pattern is evident in instances where the young person is a victim, as in R6’s case, where he faced mockery while attempting to report a robbery. It is also evident when they are a suspected perpetrator, as in the case of R3, who was part of a group suspected of criminal activity. Congruent with the theoretical challenges associated with smallness and “islandness”, often linked to notions of underdevelopment and inadequate public services (Everest-Phillips, 2014), one respondent noted the perceived oversight of government agendas regarding police corruption. As police officers are generally perceived as corrupt and untrustworthy in Caribbean nations (Beuermann & Pecha, 2018), young people’s insights of this nature emphasize the crucial role of accountability in addressing these issues, and forefront feelings of helplessness previously documented (Ford, 2023). Respondents’ perceptions highlight a broader challenge in the Caribbean, where accountability in public service may not be sufficiently emphasized. This was evidenced by statements such as:

This is Trini [Trinidad], ain't nobody ever accountable for nothing. Officers know they can do whatever they want because they never gonna be pulled up on it. (R1-M)

Humiliation and Disrespect

Participants recounted instances where law enforcement officers employed tactics that humiliated them, resulting in feelings of embarrassment. This is indicative of an overarching systemic disrespect that minors face from law enforcement based on their developmental stage, regardless of whether they are interacting with officers as victims or perpetrators. This was evident in participants' comments:

We get pulled over and they made me and my bredrins [friends] take off our pants, with us just in briefs on the side of the road. They made derogatory comments about our bodies in front of the females that was with us and when they found our weed they just took it and left. Taking the weed was fine but all the other stuff was too embarrassing especially since they do it in-front the females to try to make us look small. (R4-M)

We are not heard just because we aren't adults. They only have respect for who they want to have respect for. The way they spoke to me was so aggressive and disrespectful like I was a dog or something. I was trying to report an assault and when I hear that I just did not bother. (R11-F)

Lack of Compassion and Understanding

A notable concern highlighted by participants was the lack of compassion and understanding exhibited by officers toward youth. Arguably, the following comment by R15 which alludes to "things we had to endure" directly signifies ACEs in this context. These ACEs represent traumatic and heterogenous events encountered by minors, often instrumental in shaping their trajectory to criminality or influencing their general interactions with law enforcement (Jackson et al., 2022). The following excerpts underscore the critical need for law enforcement to develop a deeper understanding of the emotional and experiential complexities faced by youth:

They just do not have any compassion for how people feel. If they could've seen and understand the emotions, I was feeling in that moment they would've never treat me so. (R6-M)

They don't take a minute to understand us or even consider the things we had to endure to reach where we are. They does just spit on that. (R15-M)

Indeed, these experiences and chronic perceptions have significant short- and long-term consequences for minors, primarily manifesting in two main themes: loss of trust in law enforcement and mental health issues.

Loss of Trust

The negative experiences recounted by participants, often involving isolated incidents with certain officers, culminated in a pervasive scepticism generalized toward the entire police force, thereby diminishing trust in the institution. This is consistent with existing literature which underscores the profound influence personal interactions exert in shaping public perceptions of law enforcement (Bradford, 2010). Given that Caribbean youth are known to hold negative views of law enforcement (Stamatakis, 2019) and that effective policing hinges on public compliance and collaboration (Chenane et al., 2022), the further attenuation of youth trust poses a threat to public safety. Past research indicates Caribbean youth are unwilling to work collaboratively with police due to lack of institutional trust (Adams, 2020). This diminished trust was expressed by participants:

I don't want anything to do with the police. (R11-15)

We [are] really just alone cause the people who supposed to be watching out for us do not respect us. (R6-M)

Imagine getting hit in your face by a big hard-back officer as a youth and then expected to trust them after that? Na. (R7-M)

I cannot trust them. From the time they come to arrest my father and start treating me as though I was a criminal just because I live in the same house with him – they lost me. (R14-M)

Conversely, one respondent (R12) who conveyed a positive encounter with a police officer reported greater trust in the institution:

I have faith in them. I feel like most of them care and [are] trying to make the country safer for people like me. They have their corruption, but I think they are trying their best. (R12-F)

This supports the idea that both negative and positive personal interactions play a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions of the entire force. Negative encounters can substantially erode public trust, whereas more compassionate and kind engagements, as described by R12, foster trust and engender a sense of public safety. These results suggest that integrating SAMHSA's (2014) principle of building and maintaining trust into policies and practices guiding interactions between police and young people is essential for effective policing of this cohort in the Caribbean.

Mental Health Issues

The psychological and emotional ramifications of these interactions were intense for both male and female respondents. The range of impacts encompassed the destabilization of identity; internalization of prejudices propagated by law enforcement; feelings of helplessness; and manifestations of anxiety, stress, and depressive symptoms, irrespective of gender. Noteworthy also is the onset of the effects, which manifested both in the short term (as experienced by R2 over a few days) and the long term (as narrated by R8 spanning years). While there is an established link between negative police contact and mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety, and stress (Geller et al., 2014), these findings extend the literature in a Caribbean context. Several participants' comments illustrated this theme:

It is something that plays in your mind. It makes you question yourself and if you are really this worthless person they treat you as. (R9-M)

After they touched me up looking for weed, I felt sick to my stomach and could not sleep properly for days. (R2-F)

That stayed with me the rest of my teens, I remember feeling so powerless. (R7-M)

You does have to live with the constant anxiety of knowing they view you as nothing. They don't feel like they need to protect you. (R13-M)

deeply sad. It was a reality check that I was not safe or protected. After he touched me like that, I was depressed for a really long time ... it lasted years. (R8-F)

While the narratives converge on the creation of new trauma, they also emphasize the imperative to integrate SAMHSA's (2014) goal of resisting re-traumatization into policies and practices governing police–youth interactions. This integration is crucial to avoid the re-triggering of painful memories and emotions harboured by youth, as detailed by participants. In closing, respondents were probed about their aspirations for changes in law enforcement behaviours concerning children and adolescents. Two salient needs emerged: the desire for respect and a deeper understanding.

Respectful Treatment

Participants consistently emphasized the urgent requirement for a paradigm shift toward respectful and just treatment of children and young people by law enforcement officers. This call for change transcended individual preferences, representing a foundational requirement for fostering trust and ensuring justice is served equitably across all social strata. This was conveyed through the following participant reflections:

Officers need to use more compassion in dealing with people, both children and adults. Trini [is] not supposed to be like this, it [is] supposed to be more close-knit and respectful. (R6-M)

Respect hadda be common across the board. Black, white, Indian. Adult, child. It should not matter. Everyone supposed to have rights to respect. (R9-M)

It normal if they want to pull us up and say aye that is wrong. That is their job, it's not a scene if they just doing their job and following the rules. If I in the wrong, I in the wrong, but I supposed to be able to be confident they going to correct me the right way. They should be more respectful - not mean and condescending. (R11-F)

Understanding Youth

The sentiment of feeling misunderstood and antagonized by law enforcement was pervasive in the interview records. This aligns with previous work on the area highlighting negative feelings toward police officers, which can provoke feelings of retaliation (Ford, 2023). One participant exemplified this sentiment:

They just want to kill the youths – they don't help us find jobs or nothing and then wonder why it have crime When youth start to fight back, they go know [they will understand]. (R13-M)

Rooted in this sentiment, the needs of the respondents coalesce around a central idea: the imperative for law enforcement to make a concerted effort to understand young people and cultivate a more empathetic and informed approach. Their responses suggest that equipping law enforcement officers with a deeper understanding of psychological dynamics will enable them to better navigate complex situations involving vulnerable minors with greater empathy and expertise. Participant comments regarding this theme included:

If they take some time to talk with us, they will understand that we are not all bad people. (R1-M)

All they have to do is learn to treat us with respect. Especially young girls. If they [are] treating us this way, who [are] we supposed to call when our boyfriends [are] abusing us? (R2-F)

I wish they would try listening to children from a young age and tried pairing them with social workers so they don't end up reaching police in the first place. (R8-F)

If officers take some psychology and social work classes before dealing with us, I think that will help. They just do not understand us at all. (R15-M)

These findings elucidate the strained dynamics between youth and police. They underscore that certain behaviour patterns within law enforcement directed at children and adolescents combine to inflict enduring consequences on youth's mental health and contribute to the erosion of trust in the system. They provide valuable insight into the utility of a trauma-informed approach for law enforcement, guided by the assumptions of SAMHSA's (2014) framework. Given the historical context between youth and police, specifically aligning this initiative to the principles of safety, trust, and collaboration (SAMHSA, 2014) appears crucial. While all principles are important, interview transcripts note a desire from young people for heightened trust and feelings of physical and mental security when interacting with law enforcement. This may be best achieved when healthy modes of collaboration and interaction between officers and young people is made a core systemic target.

Discussion

This study valuably contributes to Caribbean literature by qualitatively investigating the lived experiences of at-risk youth in Trinidad and Tobago, providing insights into their ACEs, interactions with law enforcement, and perceptions of the police force. By exploring the intricate dynamics of police–minor engagement, the research calls for critical consideration of the impact of ACEs and advocates for the evolution of policing practices in the Caribbean in line with SAMHSA's (2014) trauma-informed framework. This approach not only systemically considers the ubiquitous concept of trauma but also sensitizes officers to the vulnerability of minors through targeted trauma-awareness initiatives. Such perspectives resonate with global discussions on the utility of integrating trauma-informed care into law enforcement protocols (Ramessur-Williams et al., 2019) and augment regional discourse on policing and community relations by considering Caribbean voices.

The findings echo existing evidence indicating a correlation between elevated levels of ACEs and encounters with the criminal justice system (Fleming & Nurius, 2020). Participant narratives spotlight prevalent issues, such as profiling, stigmatization, and abuse by law enforcement, aggravating existing trauma among children and young people and undermining the potential for positive police–community relations. These reports corroborate previous regional studies among adult populations in Trinidad and Tobago (Forde, 2023) and reflect enduring patterns of police discrimination across age groups. They also resonate with international literature documenting negative interactions between law enforcement and youth, particularly those with histories of trauma (Jackson et al., 2022), emphasizing the urgency of adopting a trauma-informed approach to policing. Anecdotal evidence provided by participants reflects experiences consistent with global and regional reports of unfavourable police conduct, including instances of sexual misconduct involving vulnerable victims (Sweeting et al., 2021), and incidents of aggression (Forde, 2023; The Jamaica Gleaner, 2023). These accounts underscore the need for trauma-informed training anchored in empirical evidence and contextually relevant data from the Caribbean region.

Adopting a trauma-informed framework for policing in the Caribbean offers copious potential benefits for both the welfare of children and young people, and the wellbeing and operational outcomes of law enforcement. Establishing the assumptions of “realize”, “recognize”, “respond”, and “resist re-traumatization” (SAMHSA, 2014, p. 9) as the bedrock of this transformation, while prioritizing principles of safety, trust, and collaboration as key objectives, can fundamentally address the expressed needs of minors for understanding and respect. This model offers a promising avenue to mitigate adverse outcomes and enhance trust in law enforcement among youth. The study highlights a broader societal need for policing practices that not only prevent crime

effectively but also build trust and community relationships. These trauma-informed principles may serve as pillars for broader community policing strategies that prioritize the wellbeing of children and adolescents, supporting more adaptive pathways to becoming healthy, productive adults who trust societal institutions. Adopting community policing practices, which prioritize the establishment of collaborative relationships between the police and community members through non-enforcement interactions (Peyton et al., 2019), therefore appears promising for building police–youth relationships in the Caribbean. This may be particularly effective when deployed in a trauma-informed approach.

Transitioning to a trauma-informed framework requires a holistic, multi-pronged, multi-agency approach to sustainably embed trauma-informed care (SAMHSA, 2014). This echoes Crawford's (2024) position on policing which asserts the conceptual difference between policing—a holistic process and public good—and the police as a state agency. Effective policing is therefore a plural enterprise requiring cooperation across diverse systems, leveraging heterogeneous knowledge, capacities, and resources (Crawford, 2024). As this transformative whole-system approach unfolds gradually and is resource intensive, initial low-cost trauma-awareness training is a pragmatic starting point. Such training has demonstrated sufficient efficacy in shifting police officer trauma-informed attitudes (Brodie et al., 2023), offering a compelling model for Caribbean police services. Successful initiatives, like Scotland's National Trauma Training Program (NTTP) and Wales's Early Action Together (E.A.T) program, serve as models for tailored evidence-based training strategies aimed at improving police interactions with vulnerable populations in the region (Goodall et al., 2023; Ramessur-Williams et al., 2019). However, these reports stress the need for a dynamic, ongoing, and evolving trauma-informed training strategy, acknowledging efficacy limitations of one-time training sessions which limit the enhancement of practical skills.

Furthermore, recognizing vulnerability in suspects or perpetrators can potentially improve investigative outcomes through enhanced cooperation, and offer an opportunity for earlier intervention via appropriate referral routes for minors (Brodie et al., 2023). In line with the SAMHSA (2014) framework and the model implemented by Ramessur-Williams et al. (2019), achieving this requires coordinated cross-sector efforts, especially through collaboration with mental health facilities. Notably, encounters with trauma-informed officers may warrant referrals for treatment, thereby aiding in preventing future offences or problematic behaviour recurrence, particularly given the established link between ACE and recidivism (Van Duin et al., 2021). While the perspectives of police officers were beyond the scope of this study, previous reports detail the challenges they face in handling sensitive and volatile cases like sexual abuse due to inadequate training in sensitive investigative areas (Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2023). In the Caribbean context specifically, police services have outlined deficiencies in handling mental health issues (Khan, 2023).

Therefore, trauma-informed training emerges as a useful tool for enhancing collective competencies in managing sensitive situations and supporting vulnerable individuals. A key goal of this training for past initiatives has been the enhancement of trauma knowledge and a shift in attitudes (Brodie et al., 2023). This may yield a dualistic positive effect, wherein officers also stand to benefit personally from training. Central to trauma-informed care is the recognition of the pervasive impact of trauma, not only on clients, but also on organizational members affected by trauma (SAMHSA, 2014). Policing, an occupation involving direct and indirect exposure to traumatic incidents, is linked to critical levels of mental health issues and stress (Gullon-Scott & Longstaff, 2024). Applying a trauma-informed framework to policing provides officers therapeutic benefits, fostering personal understanding of trauma and providing tools for building resilience and strategies for coping, resulting in greater empowerment (Ramessur-Williams et al., 2019). As officers typically exhibit more favourably disposed attitudes toward victims and witnesses, compared to perpetrators and suspects (Brodie et al., 2023), these trauma-informed attitudinal shifts could potentially humanize perpetrators—a necessary precursor to enhanced handling of these individuals. Holistically, given the role attitudes generally play in behaviour change (Sheeran et al., 2016), these shifts in attitudes through trauma-informed training may indeed be instrumental in facilitating lasting changes in law enforcement's treatment of minors.

Implementing trauma-informed policing in the Caribbean must be considered amid regional idiosyncrasies which pose unique challenges. High rates of crime and youth delinquency, particularly involving violence (Foss et al, 2013; Katz et al., 2022), and strained police–youth dynamics (Stamatakis, 2019) indicate the need for a revamped approach to regional policing. Yet, the effectiveness of transitioning to a trauma-informed approach may be hindered by several factors. The region struggles with the limited implementation of adequate mental health services due to lack of funds and staff shortages (Walker et al., 2022). This poses a challenge in erecting effective cross-sector referral networks for children and young people in need. Additionally, the practicality and affordability of conducting ongoing, service-wide training within police forces may be constrained by resource scarcity across Caribbean nations (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [ECLAC], 2019). Compounding these challenges, the historical aftermath of colonialism has left lasting impacts on perceptions of authority which may further complicate the establishment of trauma-informed and community policing strategies aimed at building trust. To ensure a successful transition, it is crucial to engage communities actively and gradually rebuild trust, a task demanding concerted efforts, given youth's pervasive lack of institutional trust in the police (Adams, 2020). These barriers do not negate

the potential benefits of trauma-informed policing in the region. Rather, they highlight the importance of law enforcement and policy makers carefully navigating these complexities by adapting existing trauma-informed strategies to local contexts. In confronting and considering the unique needs of Caribbean societies, regional leadership can forge a path forward to a more compassionate and effective policing paradigm focused on community wellbeing and safety.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study is not without limitations. The sample size was relatively small, consisting of 15 interviewees. However, saturation in qualitative research is often achieved with between nine and 17 interviews (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). The sample was predominantly male and drawn from a convenience sample in a particular geographic context (Trinidad and Tobago). Additionally, all perpetrator respondents were involved in minor legal infractions, such as marijuana possession, physical altercations, and theft. This narrows the scope of discussion and excludes narratives from young people involved in more serious offenses (e.g., murder, rape, gun violence). While the study contributes to research on the Caribbean context, the region has varying law enforcement practices, policies, and societal conditions. Despite these constraints, it provides foundational dialogue on ACEs and their impacts on youth–law enforcement engagements in the Caribbean, to initiate further research and discussion on this underexplored issue, encouraging the implementation of a trauma-informed framework to policing.

Future research should further explore the complex dynamics of police–youth relations and the role of ACEs within the Caribbean context. Qualitative investigations should be conducted within other Caribbean contexts to compare similarities and differences across regional territories. This will provide more comprehensive insights into the challenges and opportunities for protecting child and adolescent vulnerability within policing paradigms. Furthermore, the effectiveness of various trauma-informed interventions should be tested with Caribbean police samples to assess their efficacy. Quantitative research is also required to establish statistically robust linkages between ACEs, negative police encounters, and their consequences in the Caribbean. The study’s focus on the perspectives of young people highlights a gap in the literature, underscoring the necessity of incorporating law enforcement viewpoints in future research. This holistic approach will engender a more comprehensive understanding of these interactions and help devise informed strategies to mitigate negative outcomes.

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Correspondence: Dylan de Gourville, PhD Researcher, University of Kent, United Kingdom. dd470@kent.ac.uk

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