YOUTH PERCEPTION OF THE POLICE:
A STUDY OF MERSEYSIDE, UNITED KINGDOM

Michael Mathura[i]

School of Criminology, Investigations and Policing,
Leeds Trinity University,
Horsforth, Leeds, LS18 5HD,
United Kingdom

Abstract:

This study examines young people's perceptions of the police in Merseyside, United Kingdom, a topic that has received limited empirical attention. Based on interpretivist philosophy, the research used a qualitative approach, conducting semi-structured interviews with 20 young people aged 16–25 from Liverpool and Wirral. The study looked into how socioeconomic status, parental influence, police contact, community environment, and ethnicity influence attitudes towards law enforcement. Thematic analysis identified six main themes: socio-economic status, parental influence, ethnicity, perceptions of justice, nature of police contact, and gang involvement. Results show that young people from less advantaged communities experience more involuntary police contact, often viewing officers as biased or overly strict, while those from wealthier backgrounds report more voluntary and positive interactions. Parental influence and community culture were found to reinforce intergenerational attitudes towards policing. Notably, ethnicity was not identified as a major factor affecting police perception, indicating context-specific dynamics in Merseyside. This research offers an original contribution to understanding youth and police relations in a UK regional setting, emphasising the need to address socio-economic inequalities, promote procedural fairness, and encourage positive, community-focused policing strategies. Policy, practice, and future research implications are discussed, with suggestions for broadening both the geographic and methodological scope of future studies.

Keywords: youths, perceptions, police, Merseyside

1. Introduction

As children transition into adulthood, they are influenced by the social environments in which they live. These environments are shaped by cultural attributes, societal norms, and expectations that affect individual development and identity formation (Brown,

[i] Correspondence: email m.mathura@leedstrinity.ac.uk

2005). According to Smith and Johnson (2020), young people's social expectations are largely influenced by family values and the broader societal standards of contemporary life, such as educational attainment, career aspirations, community participation, and personal growth. Collectively, these factors play a central role in shaping young people's attitudes, behaviours, and perceptions within their social worlds (Smith & Johnson, 2020). In the United Kingdom, policing operates under the principle of policing by consent, which means that citizens comply with and support the police because they perceive officers as legitimate authorities acting in the public's best interest (Home Office, 2012; Hanway & Hambly, 2023). Effective and efficient policing, therefore, relies heavily on the cooperation and trust of citizens, including young people. When such collaboration weakens, crime rates may increase, community safety can deteriorate, and policing tactics become more coercive and less effective (Hanway & Hambly, 2023). Consequently, the public's perception of the police plays a crucial role in determining the nature and quality of police–citizen relationships (Smith & Jones, 2019; Hanway & Hambly, 2023).

Evidence suggests that relationships between young people and the police are often more fragile and conflictual compared to those between adults and the police (Brown & Taylor, 2019; Davies, 2022). McAra and McVie (2010) note that this tension stems from young people's desire for independence and freedom, coupled with the fact that they spend a significant amount of their time outside their homes. Studies by Sindall et al. (2016) and Davies (2022) found that young people's social activities sometimes result in antisocial behaviour or minor criminal offences, leading to increased contact with the police and reluctance to comply with officers' instructions. Such encounters can contribute to mutual mistrust and strained relations.

Despite the extensive literature on policing and community relations, a nascent body of research has emerged, focusing specifically on young people's perceptions of the police in Merseyside, UK (Wainwright et al., 2020; Merseyside Youth Commission, 2024). Understanding this relationship is vital, as youth perceptions can directly influence cooperation, trust, and compliance with the law. A positive and sustainable relationship between young people and the police can help reduce crime, enhance police legitimacy, and promote safer communities (Smith & Jones, 2019; Hanway & Hambly, 2023). Conversely, weak or negative relationships may lead to higher crime rates, lower law compliance, and greater strain on policing resources. To explore and understand the factors that influence young people's perceptions of the police in Merseyside, United Kingdom.

2. Research Questions

1) What are young people's general perceptions and attitudes toward the police in Merseyside?
2) How do demographic factors (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background) influence these perceptions?
3) What measures could be taken to improve trust and relationships between the police and young people in Merseyside?

3. A Review of the Literature

Young people's perceptions of the police are shaped by personal and vicarious experiences, media portrayals, and broader community narratives (Piquero et al., 2005; Mazerolle et al., 2019). Negative encounters, such as being stopped or unfair treatment, can reinforce distrust, diminish compliance, and weaken perceptions of police legitimacy (Sindall et al., 2016; Fine, 2022). Conversely, positive interactions can promote cooperation and enhance public support for law enforcement initiatives. Ultimately, these perceptions play a critical role in determining the overall effectiveness and efficiency of policing.

3.1 Youth Perceptions of the Police in the Liverpool Context

Understanding young people's perceptions of the police in Merseyside requires engagement with a body of sociological and criminological research that has examined police and youth relations in the region over the past decades. Much of this literature highlights a long-standing pattern of tension, mistrust, and conflict, rooted in class and racial inequalities and reinforced by discriminatory policing practices (Scarman, 1981; Frost & Phillip, 2011; Merseyside Youth Commission, 2024). However, to understand the persistence of these adversarial relations, it is also necessary to interpret this history through theoretical lenses that explain how young people form, internalise, and reproduce attitudes toward the police. The *Strain Theory* (Merton, 1938), *Social Learning Theory* (Bandura, 1977), *Attachment Theory* (Bowlby, 1988), and *Legitimacy Theory* (Tyler, 2006) together offer a multi-layered framework for explaining how structural disadvantage, social learning, emotional bonds, and perceptions of fairness collectively shape youth and police relations in Merseyside.

Liverpool's social and economic history has profoundly influenced young people's experiences and their interactions with the police. The city's industrial expansion during the 19th century fostered densely populated working-class neighbourhoods that, over time, suffered from economic decline, high unemployment, and social marginalisation (Parker, 1974; Belcham, 2006). These conditions can be interpreted through Merton's (1938) *Strain Theory*, which suggests that when legitimate avenues to success are blocked by structural inequalities, individuals, particularly young people, may experience frustration or "strain." This strain can manifest in oppositional attitudes towards authority figures such as the police, who are often perceived as enforcers of a system that denies them opportunity. Consequently, social and economic marginalisation in Liverpool not only produced poverty but also laid the foundation for alienation and mistrust towards the police as an institution representing state authority.

As a major port city, Liverpool's global trade links also brought diverse communities, including ethnic minorities, many of whom faced systemic inequalities and exclusion (Davies, 1998). These communities experienced both economic disadvantage and racial discrimination, which were often reinforced by unequal policing practices. From Bandura's (1977) *Social Learning Theory* perspectives, the experiences of discrimination and over-policing were transmitted intergenerationally, which young

people observed, internalised, and reproduced the distrust and defensive behaviours modelled by their families and peers in response to negative police encounters (Scarman, 1981). Over time, this collective learning process entrenched a cultural narrative in which the police were viewed not as protectors but as antagonists, reinforcing an "us versus them" mentality between working-class and minority youth and law enforcement (Frost & Phillip, 2011).

The economic crises of the 1970s and 1980s, compounded by deindustrialisation, disproportionately affected young people, with youth unemployment rates exceeding 40% in some areas, leading to social unrest and strained community–police relations (Fitzgerald, 1985; Power, 1997). These conditions deepened the *strain* described by Merton (1938), while the absence of meaningful engagement or emotional connection with authority figures can also be interpreted through *Attachment Theory* (Bowlby, 1988). When institutions such as the police fail to form consistent, supportive, and respectful relationships with young people, attachment insecurity may develop, manifesting as withdrawal, hostility, or resistance to authority. Thus, police and youth conflict in Merseyside can also be seen as a symptom of ruptured attachment bonds between young people and the police.

From the perspective of Tyler (2006), *Legitimacy Theory*, the historical policing of working-class and racially minoritised communities in Liverpool undermined perceptions of procedural fairness, thereby eroding the police's legitimacy in the eyes of young people (Scarman, 1981; Frost & Phillip, 2011). When law enforcement is perceived as biased, heavy-handed, or unaccountable, compliance and cooperation decline, giving way to cynicism and resistance. These theoretical insights illuminate how Merseyside's unique social history, marked by economic deprivation, racial inequality, and aggressive policing, produced both structural and psychological conditions that have long shaped youth perceptions of the police.

The work of Parker (1974) represents a foundational study in understanding the relationship between young people and the police in Liverpool. Through ethnographic research with working-class boys, Parker (1974) highlighted how frequent police encounters, including stop-and-search practices, were a routine part of young people's everyday experiences. These interactions were often characterised by harassment and a perceived lack of respect, contributing to feelings of resentment and alienation. When understood through Bandura's (1977) *Social Learning Theory,* Parker's (1974) findings illustrate how repeated exposure to hostile police behaviour leads young people to internalise and reproduce anti-police attitudes, as they observe peers modelling resistance and mistrust in response to perceived injustice. Police encounters thus became social moments where young people learned what it meant to be positioned as "suspects" or "troublemakers," reinforcing oppositional identities (Parker, 1974).

In addition, the antagonistic nature of these police and youth exchanges can be understood through Bowlby's (1988) *Attachment Theory*. In the absence of consistent, supportive, and respectful relationships with authority figures, young people may develop emotional insecurity and defensive behaviours. Parker's (1974) findings suggest that police officers were not seen as protective figures but rather as punitive and

emotionally distant agents of control, failing to foster secure attachment or trust. As a result, some young people responded with resistance, such as a defence mechanism against what they perceived as unjust treatment.

Similarly, Jefferson (1976) explored how police and youth encounters in Merseyside helped construct an enduring sense of division between young people and the police. He identified that frequent, often aggressive, police interventions contributed to the formation of an "us versus them" mentality among working-class and Black youth. From Merton's (1938) *Strain Theory* perspective, this oppositional stance can be seen as a response to blocked opportunities and social exclusion; when legitimate success pathways are perceived as unattainable, resistance toward authority becomes a means of expressing frustration. Jefferson's (1976) work also aligns with Tyler's (2006) *Legitimacy Theory*, demonstrating that when police authority is perceived as procedurally unjust or excessively forceful, it undermines perceptions of legitimacy, resulting in decreased cooperation and heightened hostility.

These dynamics are further developed in Scraton's (1987) analysis of authoritarian policing in Merseyside during the late twentieth century. He documented how discriminatory practices, including the routine targeting of young people through stop-and-search operations, disproportionately affected working-class and Black communities. Scraton (1987) argued that such policing strategies were often justified by moral panics surrounding youth disorder and criminality, yet they served to deepen mistrust between youth and the police. When considered through Tyler's (2006) *Legitimacy Theory*, such practices eroded trust in law enforcement, as young people experienced policing as arbitrary, racialised, and lacking procedural fairness. Furthermore, Scraton's (1987) findings align with Bandura's (1977) *Social Learning Theory*, illustrating how repeated criminalising interactions teach young people to see police contact as an inevitable confrontation, thus normalising resistance and collective mistrust.

Parker (1974), Jefferson (1976), and Scraton (1987) collectively demonstrate that youth and police conflict in Merseyside was not incidental but socially and structurally produced. Working-class and racialised youths did not simply react to police pressure; over time, they developed a shared oppositional identity shaped by lived experience, peer reinforcement, emotional detachment from law enforcement authority, and perceptions of injustice. The interaction between structural strain (Merton, 1938), learned mistrust (Bandura, 1977), weakened attachment (Bowlby, 1988), and declining legitimacy (Tyler, 2006) began to form a durable historical pattern that would later be reinforced by major socio-political flashpoints, particularly the Toxteth riots.

The 1981 Toxteth riots marked a critical moment in the history of youth-police relations in Merseyside, prompting widespread scrutiny of policing practices and their impact on Black and working-class communities. The Scarman Report (1981), commissioned following the riots, stands as a significant official acknowledgement of strained relations between the police and young people in Liverpool. The report documented youth perceptions of racism, provocation, and excessively forceful policing tactics, particularly in predominantly black neighbourhoods such as Toxteth. While

Scarman (1981) fell short of labelling policing as institutionally racist, it recognised that existing practices had contributed to deep mistrust, confirming that young people felt unfairly targeted and excluded from legitimate participation in civic life (Frost & Phillip, 2011). This breakdown in trust can be interpreted through Tyler's (2006) *Legitimacy Theory*, which posits that compliance with authority depends on perceptions of fairness, neutrality, and respect. In Toxteth, young people perceived policing practices as racially biased and procedurally unjust, leading to a crisis of legitimacy in which the police were no longer viewed as a credible or morally authoritative institution (Scarman, 1981; Frost & Phillip, 2011). Without perceived legitimacy, policing became experienced not as protective but as coercive, which increased non-compliance and resistance.

Additionally, the social and economic inequalities highlighted during this period can again be linked to Merton's (1938) *Strain Theory.* High unemployment, racial exclusion, and a lack of opportunities left many young people in Merseyside feeling alienated and blocked from socially approved means of success (Scarman, 1981; Frost & Phillip, 2011). The frustration born from this structural strain manifested in collective rebellion against perceived agents of injustice, with the police acting as visible symbols of state authority and inequality. In this sense, the riots represented a form of strain-induced collective adaptation to systemic deprivation (Scarman, 1981; Frost & Phillip, 2011).

Keith (1993) developed a critical understanding of policing in Merseyside by situating the Liverpool experience within broader debates on race, institutional racism, and policing across Britain. Keith (1993) argued that discriminatory policing practices could not be viewed as isolated incidents but were deeply embedded in wider structural inequalities. His work demonstrated that Black youth in particular were subject to forms of criminalisation that reflected deeper social marginalisation and stereotyping. Using Bandura's (1977) *Social Learning Theory,* Keith's (1993) findings can be interpreted as showing how repeated exposure to criminalising narratives and over-policing contributes to young people internalising a sense of being seen as inherently deviant, which in turn shapes behavioural responses to police encounters (Scarman, 1981; Frost & Phillip, 2011). Hostility towards police is not only reactive but also becomes culturally reinforced through peer networks and community narratives. The emotional implications of these dynamics can also be read through Bowlby's (1988) Attachment *Theory.* Historically marginalised young people often experience a lack of emotional security and trust in state institutions that are expected to protect them (Scarman, 1981). Policing that is perceived as aggressive, discriminatory, or indifferent can exacerbate emotional detachment from authority figures, resulting in insecure attachment patterns that manifest in avoidance, resistance, or confrontation during police interactions (Tyler, 2006).

Scholarship from Frost and Phillips (2011) focused on how memories of the Toxteth riots persisted within communities and were transmitted across generations through oral histories and local narratives. This research revealed that young people who grew up long after the riots inherited collective memories of mistrust grounded in stories of racial injustice, violent policing, and community resistance. When interpreted through

Bandura's (1977) *Social Learning Theory*, this demonstrates how negative perceptions of police are not only formed through personal experience but also socially transmitted as part of a wider community identity. Young people, even without direct involvement in past conflicts, learn from parents, peers, and community elders how police are to be understood and responded to. Furthermore, the intergenerational persistence of mistrust reflects a long-term failure of policing institutions to establish *legitimacy* (Tyler, 2006) through the use of procedural justice, transparency, and relationship-building. Without efforts to rebuild trust, legitimacy remains eroded, and young people continue to engage with police from a position of scepticism or fear. These findings reinforce that negative youth and police relations in Merseyside are rooted not only in immediate interactions but also in historical memory, social learning, and structural inequalities (Frost and Phillips, 2011).

Recent youth-led evidence from the Merseyside Youth Commission (2024) provides important contemporary insights that can be compared with broader criminological and sociological research on youth and police relations in Merseyside. Conducted using peer-led workshops, surveys, and consultations with young people aged 14–25 from diverse backgrounds, the report identifies five priority themes: (1) gang and knife crime; (2) youth protection and domestic violence; (3) night-time safety; (4) crime prevention and education; and (5) relationships with the police (Merseyside Youth Commission, 2024). Among these themes, the Commission's reflections on policing provide continuity with earlier literature, confirming the persistence of mistrust, perceived detachment, and negative experiences, while also highlighting emerging aspirations for youth-informed engagement. Young participants reported low levels of trust, describing police presence as reactive rather than proactive or community-centred. Many participants expressed that policing lacked empathy, respect, and meaningful communication, which synchronises with Tyler's (2006) Legitimacy Theory, and argued that fair, respectful, and procedurally just treatment is essential for fostering compliance and cooperation. When young people perceive police actions as inconsistent, biased, or distant, legitimacy is eroded, reinforcing scepticism and detachment similar to that documented by Parker (1974), Scraton (1987), and Keith (1993). Conversely, the Commission's call for more visible, approachable police officers suggests a desire for legitimacy rooted in relational trust rather than coercive authority.

The findings from the Merseyside Youth Commission (2024) also reflect elements of Bowlby's (1988) Attachment Theory, as many young respondents expressed a desire for positive, stable, and supportive connections with police that go beyond enforcement. The absence of emotionally secure interactions with law enforcement fosters feelings of alienation, reinforcing earlier patterns of defensive responses. By calling for police involvement in educational spaces, youth outreach, and preventative initiatives, respondents signal a desire for attachment-based relational policing that builds trust before conflict arises. Furthermore, through the lens of Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory, the report's findings suggest that perceptions of the police are shaped not only by personal encounters but also through peer discussions, family influence, and media representations. The Commission indicates that negative encounters, whether

experienced or observed, reinforce distrust, while positive interactions are more likely to shift perceptions when they are consistent, respectful, and community-centred. The persistence of negative views suggests that adversarial police and youth dynamics in Merseyside remain socially reproduced across generations, consistent with observations made by Frost and Phillips (2011). Additionally, Merton's (1938) Strain Theory continues to help contextualise the Merseyside Youth Commission (2024) findings, particularly where discussions of gang involvement, knife crime, and exclusion overlap with broader socio-economic marginalisation. Young people expressed concerns that policing strategies often target symptoms of strain (e.g., youth involvement in street crime) rather than addressing underlying structural inequalities such as unemployment, poverty, educational exclusion, and housing insecurity. When police responses are perceived as punitive rather than supportive, they risk reinforcing the perception that enforcement is prioritised over care, which can lead to further alienation or non-compliance, especially among marginalised youth facing structural strain (Mathura, 2019).

Despite this continuity with historical patterns of mistrust, the Merseyside Youth Commission (2024) also highlights new opportunities for transforming police and youth relations. Young people demonstrated a willingness to engage constructively with police when given a voice in shaping policing strategies and when officers engage proactively through youth-centric approaches, school-based initiatives, and preventative education. These aspirations suggest a potential shift towards relational policing that rebuilds legitimacy by demonstrating procedural fairness, inclusion, and empathy. Across historical, sociological, and contemporary studies, youth perceptions of the police in Liverpool are shaped by complex interactions between structural inequality, learned behaviours, emotional security, and perceived legitimacy. Merton's (1938) Strain Theory explains how economic deprivation and blocked opportunities fuel frustration and resistance toward authority. Bandura's (1977) *Social Learning Theory* highlights how anti-police attitudes are transmitted through peer and community networks in response to persistent discriminatory practices. Bowlby's (1988) Attachment Theory reveals how emotionally distant and punitive policing erodes trust and inhibits the formation of secure authority relationships. Tyler's (2006) Legitimacy Theory demonstrates that youth's willingness to cooperate with police depends on perceptions of fairness, respect, and procedural justice. Historically rooted inequalities and authoritarian policing documented by Parker (1974), Jefferson (1976), Scraton (1987), Scarman (1981), and Keith (1993) continue to shape contemporary youth mistrust, as evidenced by Frost and Phillips (2011) and reaffirmed in the Merseyside Youth Commission (2024). However, the most recent evidence also signals young people's desire not for a retreat from policing but for a reimagining of it grounded in legitimacy, emotional connection, prevention, and mutual respect. The challenge for Merseyside policing lies in addressing not only immediate youth concerns but also the deeper socio-historical legacies that underpin them.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Philosophy

This study adopts an interpretivist philosophical paradigm, which emphasises understanding social reality through the subjective meanings and lived experiences of individuals (Bryman, 2016). Interpretivism assumes that reality is socially constructed, multiple, and context-dependent rather than objective and measurable (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). Given that this research seeks to explore "*young people's perceptions of the police in Merseyside"*, an interpretivist approach is appropriate, as it enables an in-depth understanding of how participants construct meanings around policing, authority, fairness, and justice through their personal experiences.

A social constructivist lens further underpins the study, recognising that participants' views are shaped by their backgrounds, socio-economic contexts, ethnicity, interactions with the criminal justice system, and wider societal narratives (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Within this paradigm, young people are not treated as passive respondents but as active meaning-makers whose perspectives are essential in understanding broader police and youth relations. This aligns with existing criminological research, which highlights the importance of exploring trust, legitimacy, and procedural fairness from the subjective standpoint of young people (Hinds, 2009; Bradford, 2017).

4.2 Justification for Qualitative Approach

Given the study's aim to explore *perceptions, attitudes, and subjective interpretations*, a qualitative research design was deemed the most appropriate. Qualitative research enables the exploration of complex feelings, beliefs, and social interactions that cannot be adequately captured through numerical or structured surveys (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018; Clark et al., 2021). As argued by Braun and Clarke (2013), qualitative methods are particularly effective in uncovering nuanced insights about social phenomena and providing rich, contextualised accounts of participants' experiences.

In the context of policing, perceptions are often shaped by emotions, community narratives, lived experiences, and broader discourses around trust and legitimacy (Tyler, 2006). These elements require open, flexible inquiry methods that allow participants to express themselves freely and elaborate on their experiences. Therefore, open-ended, semi-structured interviews were selected to enable participants to discuss their perceptions in depth, while allowing the researcher to probe further when necessary (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015). This method aligns with the interpretivist framework, as it centres the voices and experiences of young people and encourages co-construction of meaning through dialogue.

4.3 Sample Size and Sampling Strategy

The research utilised a non-probability snowball sampling technique, which is appropriate in studies involving specific social groups whose perceptions and experiences may not be easily accessible through random sampling (Clark et al., 2021).

Snowball sampling is particularly useful when targeting younger demographics across diverse socio-economic areas, especially when trust and rapport are key to gaining honest insights (Bryman, 2016; Clarke et al., 2121). This sampling method also facilitates access to subgroups that may have had varied interactions with the police, including those who may be reluctant to engage in more formal recruitment methods.

A total of 20 participants aged 16 to 25 were included. In qualitative research, sample adequacy is determined not by statistical generalisability but by the depth of insights generated and the point of data saturation, where no new themes emerge (Guest et al., 2006). According to Guest et al. (2006), saturation often occurs within 12 interviews, particularly in studies exploring common experiences or perceptions, while Braun and Clarke (2013) note that a sample size of 15–30 is typical for thematic analysis. Therefore, the sample of 20 participants is considered sufficient, allowing for a broad range of perspectives while still enabling in-depth qualitative exploration. Furthermore, recruiting participants from varied socio-economic backgrounds across Liverpool and Wirral ensured a diverse range of experiences, contributing to richer, more representative themes regarding police and youth interactions.

4.4 Data Collection Procedures

Data for this study were collected using semi-structured, open-ended interviews, which are well-suited to interpretivist research as they enable participants to articulate personal perceptions, meanings, and lived experiences in their own words (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015; Bryman, 2016). This approach provided flexibility for both interviewer and respondents, allowing questions to be adapted based on participants' responses and enabling deeper probing into emerging themes (Bryman, 2016). Given the sensitive nature of police and youth relations, the conversational format of semi-structured interviews fostered a more relaxed environment that encouraged openness and trust.

Participants were recruited through a snowball sampling technique, initiated by contacting initial acquaintances based in Liverpool and Wirral. These individuals acted as gatekeepers, facilitating access to potential participants who met the inclusion criteria (aged 16–25 and residing in Merseyside). Once interest was established, potential participants were provided with an information sheet outlining the aims of the study, ethical assurances, and their rights regarding participation. Written informed consent was obtained before the commencement of each interview. For participants aged 16–17, parental or guardian consent was also secured in accordance with ethical guidelines related to involving young people in research.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face in mutually agreed safe and neutral locations such as libraries, community centres, and private rooms in youth-oriented public spaces. This setting aimed to ensure confidentiality, minimise external distractions, and promote participant comfort. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes, with flexibility offered if participants required more time to elaborate on their experiences. An interview guide was used to ensure consistency while still allowing for conversational flexibility. The guide included open-ended questions related to participants' views on police presence in their communities, personal or observed

interactions with officers, perceptions of fairness and justice, trust and legitimacy, media representations of policing, and influences such as family, peers, and socio-economic background. Follow-up prompts were used to clarify responses and explore emerging insights in greater depth.

With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded using a digital voice recorder to ensure accuracy of data capture. In cases where participants preferred not to be recorded, detailed field notes were taken. All audio recordings were transcribed verbatim shortly after each interview to preserve nuances in language, tone, and expression, which are critical for thematic interpretation (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Transcripts were anonymised immediately upon transcription, with pseudonyms assigned to participants and any identifying details removed.

4.6 Data Analysis (Thematic Analysis Procedures)

This study adopted thematic analysis as the method of data analysis, following the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis was chosen due to its flexibility, accessibility, and suitability for exploring the meanings participants attach to their experiences. In line with the interpretivist and social constructivist paradigm underpinning this research, thematic analysis enabled the identification and interpretation of patterns within the data, reflecting how young people construct perceptions of the police in Merseyside (Braun and Clarke, 2013). An inductive approach was used, whereby themes were derived from the data rather than based on pre-existing theories or assumptions (Boyatzis, 1998). This allowed for a grounded understanding of participants' lived experiences and ensured that their perspectives remained at the centre of the analysis. The analytic process also incorporated a semantic level of coding, focusing on explicit meanings while also allowing for interpretive depth during theme development (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

5. Results

5.1 Socio-Economic Status and Perceptions of the Police

Participants widely associated socio-economic background with levels of education, employment opportunities, and behavioural outcomes among young people in Merseyside. Many believed that those from middle-class or affluent families were more likely to pursue tertiary education and secure stable employment, which in turn was linked to lower involvement in delinquent behaviour. In contrast, disadvantaged communities were described as having lower educational outcomes, higher unemployment, and increased exposure to social issues such as crime and substance misuse.

Employment was frequently cited as fostering responsibility, accountability, and a reduction in engagement in illegal activities. Participants felt that unemployment, particularly among young people and their parents, weakened social stability and contributed to increased police attention. Some participants observed that young people

from disadvantaged backgrounds "had no choice but to survive," which could lead to crime-related interactions with the police.

Participants also perceived that disadvantaged areas faced visible social decay, including graffiti, drug dealing, and theft, resulting in heightened police surveillance. Conversely, affluent communities were seen as more insulated from such issues, contributing to more positive or neutral perceptions of the police. Thus, socio-economic status emerged as a key factor shaping perceptions of policing, with young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds more likely to develop negative attitudes due to frequent involuntary encounters with the police.

5.2 Parental Influence and Intergenerational Attitudes

Participants widely recognised parental influence as a significant factor shaping young people's attitudes toward authority figures, including the police. Many described Merseyside as having closely-knit family structures where younger generations often replicate parental views and behaviours. Several participants expressed that family norms, values, and expectations were passed down over time, contributing to a "cycle" of attitudes toward law enforcement.

In households where parents harboured mistrust or negative views of the police, often based on their own prior encounters, young people were said to internalise similar perspectives. Conversely, participants suggested that young people from more stable family environments, where parents encouraged lawful behaviour and cooperation with authorities, tended to hold more neutral or positive perceptions of the police.

Although some participants acknowledged that modern societal changes have influenced youth behaviour, the perception remained that generational attitudes toward the police largely persist and continue to shape young people's interpretations of policing actions.

5.3 Ethnicity and Cultural Perceptions of Police Relations

Contrary to expectations often reflected in literature concerning policing and minority youth, ethnicity was not identified by most participants as a major factor influencing perceptions of the police in Merseyside. Both White and ethnic minority participants described their interactions with the police as generally fair and respectful. However, ethnic minority participants reported that they remained suspicious and concerned regarding racism or profiling due to the long history of police officers being racist towards ethnic minority citizens.

The majority of participants felt that some officers lacked cultural awareness or understanding of diverse backgrounds. While this was not framed as a source of discrimination, it was highlighted as an area where training in cultural competence might improve communication.

5.4 Perceptions of Justice and Fairness in Policing

Perceptions of justice and fairness in police conduct varied markedly between participants from disadvantaged and affluent areas. Those from disadvantaged

communities frequently described policing as heavy-handed, reactive, and disproportionately targeted at their neighbourhoods. They believed their communities were "over-policed," while white-collar crime in more affluent areas went ignored. Words such as "rude," "dominating," "profiling," and "unsupportive" were commonly used to describe negative police behaviour in deprived areas. Conversely, participants from middle-class and affluent backgrounds argued that the police were overly lenient toward young people from disadvantaged areas, who they believed were primarily responsible for crime and disorder. These participants expressed frustration that young offenders from less privileged backgrounds would travel into their neighbourhoods and create tension or commit crimes yet seemingly escape serious consequences.

This conflicting sense of injustice on both sides reflects deep socio-spatial divisions in perceptions of policing within Merseyside.

5.5 Contact with Police: Voluntary and Involuntary Experiences

The frequency and nature of police contact emerged as a significant influence on young people's attitudes. Participants from disadvantaged backgrounds reported excessive, involuntary encounters with police, often involving stop-and-search practices or surveillance-related interactions. These encounters were typically experienced as confrontational or intrusive, reinforcing negative perceptions of the police as aggressive and untrustworthy. Participants from disadvantaged communities believed that young people from more affluent areas were treated with greater leniency, often due to parental influence and assumptions of innocence. This perceived disparity further entrenched mistrust among young people who felt targeted due to their socio-economic background. In contrast, participants from middle-class and affluent areas reported limited contact with police, and when interactions did occur, they were typically voluntary and cooperative, such as providing information or seeking assistance. These interactions were perceived as respectful and professional.

5.6 Gang Involvement and Criminal Socialisation

Gang involvement was identified as a growing issue among some young people in Merseyside, particularly within disadvantaged communities. Participants cited financial hardship, lack of parental supervision, acceptance, and peer pressure as key drivers of gang affiliation. Gang involvement was seen as a pathway to belonging and financial gain, particularly in the absence of support and stability at home. Participants noted that some young people were recruited into gangs for drug-related activities, robberies, or as part of organised crime operations. Some referenced adult figures exploiting vulnerable youth under the guise of providing them with a sense of "family". While gang involvement was more commonly associated with deprived areas, participants acknowledged that it was not exclusive to these communities, as some young people from middle-class or affluent backgrounds were also drawn into criminal networks for excitement or social status. Once accepted into a gang, loyalty, status, and fear of exclusion often reinforced continued involvement, leading to increased contact with the police and further shaping negative perceptions of law enforcement.

6. Discussion

6.1 Socioeconomic Status and Youth Perceptions of Police

The findings of this study demonstrated that young people's socioeconomic status (SES) significantly influenced their perceptions of the police. Employment and education were identified as crucial factors in shaping responsible behaviour and promoting lawful lifestyles. Participants explained that stable employment fostered accountability and self-reliance, whereas unemployment was perceived to encourage delinquency and dependency on social assistance. These findings are consistent with Braithwaite and Chappell (1994) and Bessant (1995a), who argued that unemployed youth possess a higher propensity toward criminal involvement and anti-social conduct due to economic marginalisation and limited social mobility.

Participants associated social housing areas with higher crime rates, lower educational attainment, and limited opportunities. These neighbourhoods were described as being marked by visible disorder, such as graffiti, broken housing, and substance misuse, which in turn attracted greater police surveillance. This reflects findings by Brown and Benedict (2002), Skogan (2005), Eller et al. (2007), and Wentz and Schlimgen (2011), who similarly noted that residents of lower-status communities often view police more negatively, primarily due to constant exposure to visible policing and environmental decay.

Turk's (1969) Norm Resistance Theory helps explain these findings. The theory posits that individuals embedded within marginalised social groups may collectively develop resistant attitudes toward authority, reinforced through shared experiences of disadvantage. Within the context of Merseyside, young people from disadvantaged areas appeared to express such resistance through negative interpretations of policing behaviour. Lanza-Kaduce and Greenleaf (2000) extended this view by suggesting that social identity within group hierarchies amplifies perceptions of conflict with law enforcement. This was particularly relevant among participants who reported high levels of peer influence and group-based criminal involvement.

Moreover, the data revealed that some young people from disadvantaged backgrounds were drawn into gang activity. This finding aligns with McVie and McAra (2005), who found that young people spending extensive time in public with peers were more exposed to criminal environments and police encounters. Conversely, young people from affluent areas were often engaged in structured educational or recreational activities, leading to minimal police contact and more positive perceptions of officers (Mathura, 2019). Thus, socioeconomic position and associated lifestyle patterns appear to directly influence how young people interpret the role of the police, either as protectors or as agents of social control.

6.2 Parental Influence and Intergenerational Transmission of Perceptions

Parental influence emerged as a pivotal factor in shaping young people's perceptions of the police. The data indicated that Merseyside's close-knit communities fostered strong intergenerational continuity, where values and attitudes toward law enforcement were

transmitted from parents to children. Participants noted that families in which parents held distrust or resentment toward the police often raised children who internalised similar scepticism, while families with neutral or positive views cultivated greater respect for authority.

This finding is supported by Jennings and Niemi (1968), Moen et al. (1997), and Solomon et al. (2008), who collectively assert that adolescence is a critical stage in which social attitudes, particularly toward authority, are formed through familial and peer influence. Sindall et al. (2016) further argued that parental socialisation plays an integral role in determining how young people interpret institutional legitimacy. The Merseyside data thus reaffirmed that parental modelling and shared community culture remain powerful forces in shaping perceptions of the police.

6.3 Police Contact: Voluntary and Involuntary Experiences

The nature of police contact was a decisive factor influencing young people's attitudes toward law enforcement. The findings revealed two dominant types of interaction: voluntary contact, where young people-initiated engagement with police (e.g., reporting incidents), and involuntary contact, where police approached individuals, often in enforcement contexts. Young people from disadvantaged communities frequently described involuntary encounters such as stop-and-search operations or patrol confrontations, which they interpreted as invasive and intimidating. This is consistent with findings from Kusow et al. (1997) and Leiber et al. (1998), who observed that involuntary police contact fosters mistrust and hostility, especially among marginalised youth. By contrast, young people from middle-class and affluent backgrounds tended to experience voluntary contact characterised by cooperation and professionalism, thereby reinforcing perceptions of police legitimacy.

These contrasting experiences can be understood through Tyler's (2006) Procedural Justice Theory, which posits that public perceptions of fairness, respect, and impartiality in police interactions are more influential than outcomes themselves. In Merseyside, perceptions of bias and aggressive policing among disadvantaged youth undermined their sense of procedural fairness, while courteous treatment of affluent youth strengthened institutional trust. This demonstrates how structural inequality and life experiences converge to shape the moral legitimacy of policing.

6.4 Justice, Bias, and Fairness Across Social Hierarchies

The data highlighted divergent views on police fairness between young people from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Participants from disadvantaged areas felt "over-policed," citing high officer presence, profiling, and lack of responsiveness to local concerns. They perceived that while their communities faced constant scrutiny, white-collar crime and antisocial behaviour in wealthier neighbourhoods went largely unchecked. This sentiment reflects literature on over-policing and under-protection (Loader, 2006), which suggests that enforcement practices are often concentrated in areas of poverty, reinforcing perceptions of inequality and bias. Conversely, participants from middle-class and affluent areas expressed frustration that police appeared lenient toward

young people from poorer backgrounds, whom they regarded as the main perpetrators of crime in their communities. This tension highlights an important socio-spatial divide within Merseyside, where both groups feel unfairly treated by law enforcement, albeit in different ways.

These findings align with Waddington et al. (2004) and Skogan (2005), who observed that police legitimacy is fragile when perceptions of justice are unequal across class lines. The results, therefore, point toward a cyclical dynamic in which perceptions of unfairness perpetuate distrust and reinforce the social distance between police and the communities they serve.

6.5 Ethnicity and Cultural Perceptions

A striking finding of this research was the limited role ethnicity played in shaping young people's perceptions of the police in Merseyside. Participants from ethnic minority backgrounds generally reported neutral experiences with officers. However, they expressed concerns over potential racial profiling or discrimination. While some acknowledged that certain officers lacked familiarity with diverse cultures, this was not perceived as a source of tension or conflict. This finding contrasts with broader scholarship that often identifies ethnicity as a central determinant of police perception (Skogan, 2005; Flexon et al., 2009; Bowling et al., 2015). Bowling et al. (2015) argued that officers operate under competing pressures of enforcing laws that may reproduce discrimination while simultaneously striving to maintain fairness and equality. The Merseyside data, however, suggest that effective community engagement and the relative diversity of the region may have mitigated some ethnic disparities in police relations.

While this outcome challenges conventional assumptions, it reinforces the notion that the relationship between ethnicity and policing is highly contextual. It may be that Merseyside's multicultural fabric, combined with visible community policing efforts, has fostered more equitable relationships across ethnic groups over time. This finding contributes to a nuanced understanding of police and youth relations by demonstrating that ethnicity does not uniformly predict perceptions of the police.

The discussion has illustrated that young people's perceptions of the police in Merseyside are influenced by a complex interplay of socioeconomic, familial, and experiential factors. Disadvantaged youth perceive policing through a lens of inequality and frequent involuntary contact, while more affluent youth associate police with protection and fairness. Parental influence and community culture reinforce these orientations, perpetuating long-standing patterns of perception. Interestingly, ethnicity did not emerge as a significant determinant, highlighting the importance of contextualised, region-specific analysis. Collectively, these findings underscore that building trust between young people and the police requires addressing social inequality, promoting procedural fairness, and fostering positive, voluntary interactions across all communities.

7. Conclusion

This study explored young people's perceptions of the police in Merseyside, UK, a topic where there is a nascent body of scholarly attention. By drawing on existing theoretical concepts and debates surrounding youth and police relations, this research examined the specific factors shaping young people's perceptions in the Merseyside context. This study makes an original contribution to knowledge, extending both empirical and theoretical understanding. The findings provide a foundation for future research, as well as practical insights for police institutions, academics, practitioners, and stakeholders seeking to improve relationships between police officers and young people in Merseyside.

The research revealed that perceptions of the police are shaped by multiple intersecting factors, including socioeconomic status, parental influence, frequency and nature of police contact, and community context. These findings highlight the nuanced and context-dependent nature of youth attitudes toward policing, underscoring the importance of considering local social, cultural, and economic conditions when designing interventions or policies.

7.1 Theoretical Implications

This study underscores the importance of incorporating socioeconomic variables such as education, housing, community composition, and employment into theoretical models of youth and police relations. Participants emphasised the significance of these variables in shaping perceptions, with effects varying across different communities. The findings suggest that existing theoretical frameworks should remain flexible and context-sensitive, avoiding a "one-size-fits-all" approach. Future research should continue to refine these models to account for emergent variables and localised social dynamics, as identified in this study.

7.2 Future Research Directions

While this research employed a qualitative methodology with semi-structured interviews conducted in Liverpool and Wirral, future studies could expand the geographic scope to include additional areas across Merseyside, capturing a wider spectrum of youth experiences. Moreover, quantitative approaches could complement qualitative findings, allowing for the collection of larger datasets suitable for generalisation. Such research could provide further insights into the patterns observed here and support the development of evidence-based strategies to improve youth–police relations, promote procedural fairness, and contribute to crime prevention initiatives through collaborative community engagement.

Acknowledgements

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

Michael Mathura is a Senior Lecturer in Criminology and Policing within the School of Criminology, Investigations and Policing (CIP) at Leeds Trinity University in the United Kingdom.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4398-5343

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