

PERCEPTIONS OF POLICE AND SAFETY: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF YOUTH
AND ADULT PERCEPTIONS OF POLICE AND SAFETY IN HIGH-CRIME AND HIGH
CONCENTRATED DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

Youth perceptions of police and safety have gained the attention of researchers since the discussion surrounding police actions and their effects on community perceptions has increased. While prior research has mostly focused on adult perceptions of police and safety, youth perceptions have largely yet to be explored. Through a qualitative comparative analysis of 15 youth service providers (adults) and 22 youth interviews, this study explores how police may increase or decrease feelings of safety among youth and adults from a community of high-crime and high concentrated disadvantage. Prior literature highlights the impact procedural justice, police legitimacy, and overall perceptions of police have on feelings of safety. Much of this prior work found that age and community context have impacted perceptions of safety. Specifically noting that younger individuals and those from marginalized communities view the police more negatively. Current findings suggest that both youth and adults generally view the police as decreasing their feelings of safety, with a small subset of youth considering the police to increase their safety. While there may be minor differences in the reasoning as to why both groups feel the police are decreasing their safety, both youth and adults alike feel that police do not help keep them safe in their community.

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In loving memory of my dad, Russ who never got to see the end of this journey.
To my Dad, my mom, Mary Ann, and my brother, Greg, thank you for your endless support,
having faith in me, and always being just a phone call away. This would not have been possible
without you all by my side and your unwavering love and support. I love you all.

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

Numerous studies have aimed at understanding individuals' perceptions of police and feelings of safety. These studies have shown differences in how safe individuals feel based on the presence of police and their overall feelings and confidence in police (Fine et al., 2003; Gau & Brunson, 2010; Nofziger & Williams, 2005). Studies examining procedural justice, police legitimacy, and general perceptions of police are essential to discussing feelings of safety since these concepts can impact the overall feelings towards police and their authority. Specifically, research shows that when youth have positive perceptions of police and feel they are treated procedurally justly, they are more likely to have confidence in the police and comply with their authority (Gau & Brunson, 2010; Nofziger & Williams, 2005). Additionally, when examining relatively safe situations, the presence of uniformed officers does not increase feelings of safety (Doyle et al., 2016; Van De Veer et al., 2012). Age differences may be important to understand perceptions of police and safety. Studies have shown that younger individuals tend to hold less favorable attitudes toward police, which can impact how safe they feel in the presence of police (Doyle et al., 2016; Hinds, 2007). The community context has also been found to be important. Specifically, individuals from marginalized communities tend to hold less favorable perceptions of procedural justice, police legitimacy, and perceptions of police, thereby impacting feelings of safety (Antrobus et al., 2015; Gau et al., 2012; Soutland, 2021).

Despite what is known about individuals' feelings of safety and police, many studies have yet to examine the specific feelings youth hold on this topic. Although previous studies have shown that youth tend to hold different and more negative views of police than adults, it is unclear how these concepts, such as police legitimacy, procedural justice, and police perceptions, directly impact youth feelings of safety and police (Doyle et al., 2016; Hinds, 2007). Despite known differences between youth and adults, studies have neglected to analyze youth's feelings

of safety towards the police and generally focus only on adults (see Borovec et al., 2021; Doyle et al., 2016; Van De Veer et al., 2012). Given the differences between youth and adults, as well as known differences in their attitudes towards law enforcement, it is imperative to understand youth perceptions of safety and how police either increase or decrease their feelings of safety within their community.

Additionally, most studies that have examined general feelings of safety and police rely on survey-based methods (see Borovec et al., 2021; Doyle et al., 2016; Hurst et al., 2000; Nofzifer & Williams, 2005; Sindall et al., 2017; Weitzer & Tuch, 2004; Worrall, 1999; Zhang et al., 2020). While these studies are useful in attempting to understand feelings of safety, the use of survey methods limits the wide variety of responses and feelings individuals may have towards police and the feeling of safety they bring. Therefore, it would be more appropriate to employ qualitative methods to allow participants to fully articulate the complex relationship between police and safety.

The current research attempts to fill the gap in knowledge by exploring whether and how youth perceive the police to increase or decrease their feelings of safety within their neighborhood and how these feelings may differ from those of adults in the community. Using qualitative methods, the present study will add a detailed understanding of youth perceptions of police and safety. This research can aid in understanding youth relationships with law enforcement and changes in policy that can help facilitate cooperation and youth compliance with police. A better understanding of the relationship between youth and officers and the feelings of safety that police bring can help to ease tense relationships, increase voluntary compliance with the law, and lower the number of police-youth interactions.

CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

Procedural Justice and Police Legitimacy

Inherently interconnected are the ideas of procedural justice and police legitimacy. The procedural justice model is a social-psychological concept that contends that citizens assess the treatment they receive from police based on the perceived quality of the officer's decision, the quality of police treatment, and law enforcement's overall trustworthiness and ability to be fair and just (Tyler & Wakslak, 2004). Further, Leventhal (1980) asserts that six general rules govern procedural justice. These rules include consistency of treatment, bias-suppression or separation of judicial and adversary roles, accuracy of the information on which judgments are made, correctability or ability to change or reverse decisions, representativeness of different groups of the population, and ethicality or being in accordance with ethical and moral values (Leventhal, 1980). Simply put, all procedures must be consistent, accurate, unbiased, ethical, correctable, and representative of all parties (Leventhal, 1980). Building on Leventhal's work, Lind and Tyler (1988) emphasized that one's social role can impact their concern for fairness. Specifically, where fairness may become less important when focusing on other social goals, concerns of fairness may be heightened when there is a clear violation of fairness, and an emphasis on fairness may be enhanced in particularly diverse societies (Lind & Tyler, 1988).

Concepts of procedural justice play into police legitimacy because when individuals feel that they have been treated in a procedurally just manner by police, they are more likely to view the police as legitimate and comply with authority due to an intrinsic motivation to cooperate (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Tyler & Huo, 2002; Zhang et al., 2020). Specifically, legitimacy is defined as "an acceptance by people of the need to bring their behavior into line with the dictates of an external authority" (Tyler, 1990, p.25). Often police are viewed as more legitimate when they act in ways that increase procedural justice, with procedural justice being the strongest

predictor of police legitimacy (Antrobus et al., 2015; Gau et al., 2012). Legitimacy contrasts with traditional deterrence policing in that individuals comply with the law due to a feeling of obligation rather than a fear of being caught and punished (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Tyler, 1990). Through the lens of the procedural justice model, when police are seen as legitimate, it leads to less defiance of police authority and an increase in self-regulatory behavior, such as conforming with the law, thereby leading to less action needed by police (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). Conversely, when individuals do not view the police as legitimate, it can lead to defiance and non-cooperation, ultimately eroding the legitimacy of the police and even increasing crime (Hinds, 2007).

Views of procedural justice and police legitimacy can be shaped in a variety of different ways. Research has shown that perceptions of legitimacy are shaped by personal evaluations of interactions with police (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler, 1990; Tyler & Huo, 2002). Perceptions and evaluations of police legitimacy are based more on how officers treat individuals rather than how well police perform their job (Tyler, 1990; Tyler & Huo, 2002). Additionally, direct or indirect police-citizen interactions can shape individuals' views of procedural justice and legitimacy (Gau & Brunson, 2010; Saarikkomäki et al., 2020). Indirect, or "vicarious," police contact is knowledge learned through family, friends, media, or other avenues. Therefore, even individuals who do not have direct contact with the police can develop views of the police and their legitimacy (Gau & Brunson, 2010; Saarikkomäki et al., 2020). This highlights the importance of ensuring that police act in a manner that promotes strong feelings of fairness and respect since it can greatly affect an individual's perceptions and attitudes toward law enforcement and the criminal justice system as a whole (Gau & Brunson, 2010; Saarikkomäki et al., 2020). Over the years, there have been many high-profile cases involving the police, such as police brutality,

corruption within a police organization, and general distrust of police practices that have eroded police legitimacy among citizens.

When treated with procedural justice principles like being heard, being treated with respect, and having authority act ethically and impartially, potential outcomes can be generally positive (Tyler, 1990). Studies have indicated that when procedural justice principles are used in decision-making, individuals are more likely to accept the decisions made by the police, view the police as legitimate, and cooperate with police authority moving forward (Hinds, 2007; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). When officers act in a respectful, calm, and relaxed manner, youth report higher levels of procedural justice and overall police satisfaction even if the outcome of the encounter is negative (i.e., ending in arrest) (Gau & Brunson, 2010; Hinds, 2007; Saarikkomäki et al., 2020). Similar results are found in non-voluntary police-citizen encounters that are evaluated to be procedurally fair (Gau & Brunson, 2010). When explicitly examining judgments of police activity through survey methods, Sunshine and Tyler (2003) found that feelings of police legitimacy were the strongest predictor of orientation toward police. These findings were confirmed by later studies conducted by Antrobus et al. (2015) and Gau et al. (2012). Both studies found that the legitimacy of the police is most strongly impacted by perceptions of procedural justice (Antrobus et al., 2015; Gau et al., 2012). Their results further research by asserting that compliance and cooperation with police are mediated by an individual's feelings of police legitimacy (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). These findings support the procedural justice model and demonstrate that when police act fairly and respectfully during police-citizen encounters, they are more likely to be met with compliance and leave a positive impression on the citizen, which could lead to future reductions in crime.

Conversely, when individuals feel they have been treated procedurally unjustly, it can have detrimental effects on their views of the police and their legitimacy (Gau & Brunson, 2010;

Saarikkomäki et al., 2020). When viewed as procedurally unfair, officers limit their ability to control and deter crime since individuals will not feel an internal obligation to comply with authority (Gau & Brunson, 2010; Tyler & Huo, 2002; Saarikkomäki et al., 2020). For example, if the police stop an individual for no reason or for reasons related to an individual's characteristics (i.e., race, gender, age, etc.), then it can lead the individual to question the procedural justice and legitimacy of police authority (Gau & Brunson, 2010; Saarikkomäki et al., 2020). Specifically, youth typically reject police authority and become hostile toward law enforcement when they do not believe they are treated properly and in accordance with procedural justice principles (Gau & Brunson, 2010). Similar feelings of being treated unfairly as a victim of a crime can also lead to feelings of procedural unjustness, particularly among minority youth when police automatically view them as an assailant rather than the victim or do not take their complaints seriously (Saarikkomäki et al., 2020). High levels of crime, slow police response time, and lack of empathy for victims can erode the confidence and legitimacy of police (Gau and Brunson, 2015).

Not only can feelings of procedural unfairness erode an individual's obligation to follow and respect police authority, but it can also impact their feelings of where they fit in society. When individuals feel as if they have been treated unfairly, it sends the inherent message that police and individuals in power do not see them as a valued part of society, which can lead to feelings of alienation and a lack of belonging (Antrobus et al., 2015; Gau et al., 2012; Jackson et al., 2012; Saarikkomäki et al., 2020). This is particularly true within minority communities that may already feel marginalized by authority figures. In turn, this feeling of alienation can diminish citizens' attitudes toward law enforcement and further marginalize minorities in society (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003).

Studies have found compelling evidence of the impact of community on the formation of perceptions of police legitimacy and procedural justice. Specifically, general feelings of police legitimacy and procedural justice held by the community can impact an individual's own feelings towards officers (Antrobus et al., 2015). Community views have a particularly strong impact on individual perceptions of police legitimacy in marginalized communities (i.e., predominantly minority communities and areas of high concentrated disadvantage). Specifically, frequent police contact is categorized by over-policing minor offenses, under-policing more serious crimes, heightened levels of use of force, and slow police response times (Antrobus et al., 2015; Gau et al., 2012). A study by Gau et al. (2012) yielded marginally significant results for the claim that individuals residing in economically and socially disadvantaged areas view police as being less fair and less legitimate. Residents in these communities tend to describe police as agitated, rude, and disrespectful and report frequent involuntary stops by police (Gau & Brunson, 2015). As a result, communities as a whole may come to view the police as illegitimate, leading to heightened views of legal cynicism (Carr et al., 2007; Gau & Brunson, 2015; Gau et al., 2012; Klinger, 1997). These views may lead community members to stop calling the police in times of need and become self-reliant when dealing with a crime, resulting in risky behavior as a self-help measure (Carr et al., 2007; Gau & Brunson, 2015; Gau et al., 2012; Klinger, 1997). These self-reliance measures, in turn, only increase police suspicion of individuals causing an ongoing loop of police stopping them on suspicion, thereby lowering their feelings of police legitimacy (Gau & Brunson, 2015).

Although there are negative impacts when the community views the police as illegitimate, studies find that if a community generally views the police as legitimate and feels an obligation to obey the law, it will, in turn, allow officers the ability to focus only on the most extreme and stubborn crimes (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). Not only does this free up time for the

police, but in following police legitimacy and procedural justice principles, having a community that views the police as legitimate would further aid police in solving crimes since individuals would be more likely to work in partnership with police (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003).

However, due to stark differences in treatment by police based on an individual's race, it is unsurprising that racially biased policing can cause great detriment to individuals' views on the legitimacy of police (Demir et al., 2018; Tyler & Wakslak, 2004). Generally, regardless of race, most believe that there is a great need for police to be legitimate and act in a procedurally just manner (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). Despite these shared feelings, treatment by police varies depending on the individual's race. Specifically, research shows that Black individuals are continually treated worse than White individuals (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). Because of the historical and continual mistreatment of Black people by police, studies have found that Black individuals are significantly less likely to see police as legitimate than any other race, while White individuals tend to view the police as the most legitimate (Gau et al., 2012; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). Nevertheless, people of all racial and ethnic groups, despite current levels of perceived legitimacy, tend to value and cooperate with the police when they feel the police are legitimate (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Tyler & Huo, 2002). This finding emphasizes one of many reasons why the police need to treat every individual equally and fairly.

Perceptions of Police

Individuals' perceptions of police greatly vary based on their feelings of procedural justice and overall legitimacy. Studies tend to find that most citizens view the police in a positive manner (Hurst et al., 2000; Worrall, 1999). As stated earlier, individuals' contact with police and observed police-citizen interactions can shape opinions. In particular, more negative encounters lead to stronger opinions of opposition towards police, which may be more common given highly publicized police behavior (Cobbina, 2019; Weitzer & Tuch, 2004).

Similar to how feelings of procedural justice and police legitimacy are shaped by the community, general perceptions of police can also greatly vary by community context and established community norms (Antrobus et al., 2015). The literature suggests that individuals residing in neighborhoods categorized by high concentrated disadvantage and a high minority population have much more negative perceptions of police (Decker, 1985; Flanagan & Vaughn, 1996; Sampson & Bartusch, 1999; as cited in Stoutland, 2001, p.230). Additionally, the level of crime in a community may also lead to changes in perceptions of police. Particularly, individuals residing in high-crime communities tend to hold more negative perceptions of police (Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). Irrespective of race, individuals residing in these areas tend to view police as prone to misconduct and view police as less legitimate (Weitzer & Tuch, 2004).

Extensive research has concluded that race is a critical factor in shaping perceptions of police (Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). In a meta-analysis of 92 studies explicitly examining the effects of race on police perceptions, Peck (2015) concluded that overall an individual's race does impact their perceptions of police. Notably, most studies analyzed found differences between Black, Hispanic, and White individuals' perceptions of police. Specifically, where non-white individuals tended to hold more negative views of police than White individuals (Peck, 2015). In general, studies conclude that Black and Hispanic individuals are more likely to report more negative perceptions of police than White individuals (Fine et al., 2003; Weitzer & Tuch, 2004; Zhang et al., 2020). Moreover, Hispanic individuals tend to view police more positively than Black individuals yet more negatively than White respondents (Peck, 2015). These race patterns regarding the perception of police hold when examining youth perceptions. Specifically, White and Black youth have significantly different views of police (Hurst et al., 2000). Fine et al. (2003) found that 58% of Black youth, 53% of Hispanic youth, 33% of Asian youth, and 33% of

White youth disagreed or strongly disagreed when asked if they feel comfortable when they see police on the street thereby highlighting the differences in perception by race.

These differences in perceptions of police by race come as little surprise since police have a historically poor relationship with minority individuals. The different treatment by police reinforces the differences in feelings towards police by Black or White individuals. Generally, White individuals tend to encourage more aggressive police practices and have fewer criticisms towards the police, likely because police tend to treat White individuals better than minority members (Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). Conversely, following an incident of police contact, Black individuals tend to leave the situation feeling more upset and feel they were treated unfairly more so than their White counterparts report in similar situations (Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). Using the procedural justice framework, since Black individuals tend to feel they are treated more unfairly in the hands of the police, it is understandable that they hold less favorable perceptions towards police (Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). However, it is important to note that some studies found no differences between races once controlling for various structural factors like concentrated disadvantage and crime rates (Zhang et al., 2020).

Age may also be essential in shaping individuals' perceptions of police. Despite most studies examining adults' views of law enforcement, youth tend to hold more negative perceptions of police, highlighting the need for more studies to examine youth perceptions. Of current studies available, findings show that younger individuals tend to perceive police more negatively than older individuals. In particular, early contact with police and additional subsequent run-ins with police can fuel these negative perceptions and heightened feelings of police misconduct (Sindall et al., 2017; Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). Notably, youth who live in high-crime areas and use public spaces on a consistent basis may interact more with police, leading to more negative associations and perceptions (Sindall et al., 2017). Minority youth

residing in urban neighborhoods also tend to express strong feelings of mistrust of people in authority, with Black male youths holding the most negative perceptions of police (Fine et al., 2003). In a survey consisting of 75% Black or Latino youth, 45% of youth respondents reported it was unlikely or very unlikely they would go to the police when they were in need of help (Fine et al., 2003), which thereby validated past studies that found similar results (Soutland, 2001). These findings, specifically examining youth, make evident the differences in perceptions of police based on both age and racial differences. However, since studies that specifically examine youth are limited in quantity and diversity of approaches, additional work and those that employ different methods are needed to understand how youth perceive police.

Despite widespread support for race and age as predictors of police perceptions, there have been inconclusive findings when examining the impacts of gender (Worrall, 1999). Some studies find that men view police more negatively, while others find the opposite (Fine et al., 2003; Stewart et al., 2014; as cited in Zhang et al., 2020, p.832). More research is needed to understand how gender impacts perceptions of police.

Perceptions of Safety

One of the main goals of police is to increase general feelings of safety within the community they serve. Although this is their mission, it is unclear to what extent police and general police presence increase citizens' feelings of safety. Generally, when individuals have positive perceptions and high confidence in the police, it can lead to higher feelings of safety, with positive experiences with the police being one of the only items associated with an increased feeling of safety (Nofziger & Williams, 2005). Perceptions of police and having confidence in police significantly predict feelings of safety even after controlling for other variables in the model (Nofziger & Williams, 2005). However, police agencies believe that increasing police presence and patrols will increase feelings of safety among citizens (Van De

Veer et al., 2012). The thought process behind this statement is that when there are more police out patrolling, they are better able to stop crime and deter offenders, thereby making citizens feel safer in their communities. Despite this thinking, increasing police presence and patrol may have the opposite effect on general feelings of safety (Borovec et al., 2021). Some studies have proposed that increases in police patrol may increase fear of crime since many may assume that if there are more police officers out patrolling, there must be more crime, thereby decreasing feelings of safety (Borovec et al., 2021; Van De Veer et al., 2012). When examining police visibility, particularly uniformed officers' visibility, in situations deemed safe and unsafe, results indicate that having police present in situations generally considered safe did not increase citizens' overall sense of safety (Doyle et al., 2016; Van De Veer et al., 2012).

Additionally, the visibility of police car patrols can diminish overall feelings of safety (Borovec et al., 2021). In a survey examining New York City youth, 54% of respondents stated they disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that they feel safe when they see police in their neighborhood (Fine et al., 2003). However, in unsafe situations, the presence of uniformed officers increased feelings of safety among participants (Doyle et al., 2016; Van De Veer et al., 2012). Therefore these findings suggest that, especially in safe situations, police presence makes individuals feel less safe.

Importantly, the specific type of police initiative emphasized within a given organization may also impact feelings of safety. For example, studies have indicated that community policing programs and ones that emphasize increased police-citizen interactions may lead to increased feelings of safety (Van De Veer et al., 2012). Specifically, police foot patrols have been found to be the most effective type of patrol for increasing citizens' feelings of safety (Borovec et al., 2021; Doyle et al., 2016). Conversely, increasing random patrols may diminish feelings of safety within a community (Borovec et al., 2021; Van De Veer et al., 2012). Other studies have

found that when police make specific initiatives to combat a problem and involve other entities within the community, they can increase feelings of safety (Doyle et al., 2016). These findings are congruent with studies above where, in general, car patrols and random patrols diminish safety, whereas simply an increase in police-citizen interaction can lead to increases in feelings of safety.

Despite these findings, it is essential to note that increased feelings of safety may be due to other facets of community policing that lead to a change in feelings of safety (Doyle et al., 2016; Van De Veer et al., 2012). A study by Hinkle and Weisburd (2008) found that increasing police presence increased fear of crime despite an overall reduction in feelings of disorder that were accomplished by other initiatives in the same program. This study emphasizes the complexity of policing initiatives and the somewhat competing results they produce. Despite these findings, other studies have found opposite results. Specifically, police presence increases safety, while some studies have found no association between the two (Doyle et al., 2016). However, these conflicting results may be partly due to methodological flaws and from studies conducted in other countries that may not apply to American policing (Doyle et al., 2016).

Additionally, gender and age differences in perceptions of safety may be important. While results are generally inconclusive when examining gender, one study found that men tend to feel less safe when police are present than when there are no police around (Van De Veer et al., 2012). Various other studies have found that women also tend to feel less safe around police than men, while others find no difference in feelings of safety between men and women (Doyle et al., 2016; Van De Veer et al., 2012). However, women tend to report higher levels of fear of victimization than men (Nofziger & Williams, 2005). Similar to perceptions of police, younger individuals tend to feel less safe in the presence of police, while adults and youth alike feel safer

with foot patrols and less safe with vehicle patrols (Doyle et al., 2016; Hinds, 2007). More research is needed to fully understand the connection between gender and perceptions of safety.

Despite what is known about police and feelings of safety, much is still yet to be explored. While it is generally concluded that police presence makes individuals feel safer in relatively unsafe situations and less safe in safe situations, it is unclear how these findings hold up when specifically examining youths' feelings of safety. Most research has neglected to look specifically at youths' feelings of safety regarding the police, with most studies examining the topic from adults' perspectives and using a quantitative approach (see Borovec et al., 2021; Doyle et al., 2016; Friedman et al., 2004; Nalla & Gurinskaya, 2022; Van De Veer et al., 2012). It is important to examine this topic from a youth's perspective since youth account for most police-citizen interactions (Hinds, 2007). Additionally, there may be important differences in feelings of safety between adults and youth that remain unexamined. Therefore, it is essential to examine youths' feelings about police and safety since attitudes toward police are often formed during adolescence and remain relatively consistent throughout one's life (Hinds, 2007). While procedural justice and police legitimacy will not be directly explored in the current study, the concepts are relevant to interpreting and understanding the present findings.

CHAPTER 3: Methodology

Current Study

The current study aims to better understand how youth residing in a neighborhood categorized as high-crime and high concentrated disadvantage perceive police officers' ability to increase or decrease their feelings of safety within their community and how youth's feelings differ from those of adults. This study adds to a very limited number of studies specifically aimed at understanding youth perceptions of police and safety (see Fine et al., 2003; Gau & Brunson, 2010; Gau & Brunson, 2015; Hinds, 2007; Hurst et al., 2000; Rios, 2011; Saarikkomäki et al., 2020; Sindall et al., 2017; Stoutland, 2001; Zhang et al., 2020). The current study differs from past work by taking a purely qualitative approach to better understand youths' complex attitudes and feelings about police officers' ability to keep them safe. Using a qualitative approach with youth respondents fills the gap in previous literature by allowing respondents to fully express their feelings about safety and police that are limited by quantitative methods. Because youth account for a large segment of society and a majority of police-citizen encounters, it is vital to understand how youth perceive police and safety in their community and to understand that their perceptions may differ from those of adults (Hinds, 2007). Below are the research questions that this study will try to answer.

Research Questions

RQ1: In what ways do police make youth feel safe or unsafe in their neighborhood?

RQ2: How do youth service providers (adults) perceive the role that police play in making residents feel safe?

RQ3: How do youth and adults perceive police and safety similarly and differently?

Data

The data for the present study comes from a larger study investigating drivers of violence and understanding youth decision-making in an area of high-crime and high concentrated disadvantage. The present study consists of 22 semi-structured open-ended interviews of youth ages 14-19 ($M= 16.8$) who reside in or attend school in Lansing, MI. In addition, 15 semi-structured open-ended interviews with youth service providers (i.e., coaches, teachers, non-profit personnel, religious leaders, and city service workers) who currently serve youth in the Lansing area are examined to understand how adults perceive the role police play in making residents feel safe or unsafe in their community. Multi-stage analysis of violent crimes and concentrated disadvantage was previously conducted to identify the target neighborhood within Lansing, in which all respondents were pooled.¹ All interviews lasted roughly an hour and were conducted virtually, with youth service provider interviews occurring between August 2020-April 2021 and youth interviews occurring from July 2021-August 2022. Participation was voluntary and confidential. Upon completion of the interview, all participants received a \$40 gift card.

Sample

To identify youth respondents, all eligible participants must have been between 13-19 years old and either currently live, previously lived or went to school in high-poverty, high-crime areas of Lansing. All youth participants must have been involved in or witnessed a violent incident in Lansing within the last two years. Self-reports of the major intersections of where youth lived and what school they attended were collected to verify they met the selection criteria. The project recruiter verified all selection criteria and demographic information was collected.

¹ Common measures of concentrated disadvantage including percent (1) Black, (2) less than age 18, (3) female-headed family household, (4) unemployed, (5) living below the poverty line, and (6) receiving public assistance were estimated from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020b) and the Decennial Census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020a) block groups.

In total, 22 youths met the selection criteria and were included in the sample. Of the participants, four did not currently reside in Lansing, and one went to school outside Lansing. The youth sample was 54.5% male ($n=12$), 45.5% female ($n=10$), and 55% Black ($n=12$), 14% White ($n=3$), 14% Bi-racial ($n=3$), and 9% Hispanic ($n=2$)². The average age was 16.8 years old.

Youth service providers (adults) were eligible to participate if they worked within Lansing and provided services to youth in the community. Youth service providers who worked with youth in the most disadvantaged and high-crime areas of Lansing were identified and contacted to determine interest in participation. Some service providers worked primarily within these neighborhoods, while others worked city-wide in addition to the most disadvantaged communities. The adult sample consisted of 60% male ($n=9$) and 40% female ($n=6$)³.

Sampling Method

Recruitment of youth participants was conducted via convenience sampling. Recruitment occurred via educational, vocational, mentoring, and other skill-building programs associated with youth service programs. Participants were pooled from neighborhoods characterized by concentrated poverty, limited resources, and high crime rates.

Youth service providers were identified and sent a flier to confirm eligibility and determine interest in participation. Further screening questions were asked following the identification of interested participants. Upon completion of the interview, participants were asked for a referral to other organizations in the area that may be interested in sharing their thoughts and participating in the study.

² Data on race and age were missing for two of the youth respondents.

³ Demographic information (i.e., race and age) was not collected for the adult sample.

Interview

Youth interviews were semi-structured and open-ended, allowing for probing and follow-up questions to better understand youths' perspectives. The interview began with introductory questions to understand how youth spend their free time, followed by various questions asking them to describe general feelings regarding specific crime levels and problems in their neighborhood and school. The respondents were then asked to discuss, in-depth, an incident of violence they were involved in or witnessed in their neighborhood or school. Finally, the interview concluded with a series of questions about safety in the neighborhood, police, and the effects of COVID-19 on conflict. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The focus of this study is specifically on questions of safety and police that occurred at the end of the interview, in addition to any relevant discussion of police and safety from other parts of the interview.

Youth service provider (adult) interviews were also semi-structured and open-ended, allowing for considerable probing. First, respondents were asked to describe their work in the neighborhood and overall perceptions of violence in the area. Subsequent questions aimed to understand the factors that may contribute to violence, specific challenges youth face, and how violence impacts youth in the area. These questions were followed by a series of questions about resources available in the neighborhood and services available to combat youth violence. Finally, the interview concluded with questions about police and safety and the impact of COVID-19 on neighborhood resources. The interviews were also digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The present study will focus on questions and responses about the police and safety to allow for a comparison between adult and youth perceptions of police and safety in the community.

This study will focus particularly on the following questions from both interviews.⁴

Youth Interview Question:

1. How do the police help you feel safe (or unsafe) in your neighborhood?

Youth Service Provider Question:

1. What role do police play in helping residents in the target neighborhood feel safe?

Analytical Plan

Both youth service provider and youth interviews were audio transcribed and analyzed in NVivo 12, a qualitative computer software. One codebook was developed inductively with separate nodes for the youth service provider (adult) and youth interviews. Similar and different themes between the two samples were identified from the data. Youth service provider interviews were coded and analyzed to gain a clearer picture of the general feelings adults hold toward police within the community and the ways they think youth view the police. This allowed for the ability to compare the two groups and aided in interpreting youth findings. Youth interviews were coded similarly and analyzed for general themes, counting the instances for each theme. Specific ideas of safety, feelings towards police, and differences between adult and youth perspectives were examined. Two coders independently coded ten interviews (five youth service providers and five youth interviews) to establish inter-rater reliability for a more systematic and rigorous examination of the data. Once completed, the coders met to discuss discrepancies, refine the codebook, and clarify the coding unit. Following this process, a Kappa value of 0.95 was reached, which suggests near-perfect agreement between coders. One coder then completed the remaining interviews. Common repetitive patterns were examined and

⁴ Relevant discussion of police and safety from other parts of the interview were also examined for additional information.

typified while closely examining themes deviating from established patterns.⁵ Results from the current study will add to the limited knowledge surrounding youth perceptions of police and safety and how these feelings differ from adults residing in the same community.

Setting

Lansing is a city with roughly 112,000 residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Nearly 61% of residents are White, 23% are Black, 8% are one or more races, 5% are Asian, and 3% are another race (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). The city has an average income of roughly \$44,000, which is below the approximately \$70,000 average national income in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). In addition, Lansing's poverty level is above the national average (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021).

Relevant Events

Between August 2020 and August 2022, when all interviews were conducted, several key events occurred both in Lansing and around the country as a whole that likely shaped public opinions, including those in the sample. Prior to interviews being conducted, tense feelings towards the COVID-19 pandemic and the government's response, various well-documented incidents of police brutality, and several killings of unarmed Black men at the hands of police were at the forefront of discussion among Americans. In March 2020, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Lansing Police Department (LPD) established they would no longer respond to property crimes in the area to limit exposure to the virus (Berg, 2020a). In April 2020, Lansing experienced several protests at the state capital opposing stay-at-home orders due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Egan & Berg, 2020). In the same month, there were several well-

⁵ In the remaining chapters, the words "vast majority" will be used to describe approximately three quarters or more; "most" or "the majority" to indicate approximately more than half; "many" to indicate more than approximately one-third; "a number" to indicate roughly one quarter or more; and "several" or "a few" to indicate a small number of at least two or more of the sample.

documented instances of police use of excessive force within Lansing, including one death as a result of police action (Berg, 2020b; Berg & Lehr, 2020).

Tensions heightened nationally following the wrongful killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd at the hands of the police in March and May of 2020 (Associated Press, 2022). Protests advocating against police brutality continued for weeks across the country, including one protest in Lansing that turned violent with tear gas and other crowd control techniques employed by the LPD (Anderson-Torrez, 2020; LeBlanc & Mauger, 2020). Protests spurred throughout the summer of 2020 after numerous Black men were wrongfully killed across the country, including Rayshard Brooks at the hands of police and Ahmaud Arbery, killed by a group of White men. All of these incidents led to protests against police brutality and heightened discussion around race in America, specifically regarding racial discrimination against Black individuals.

In the subsequent year, tensions were still high. Following the 2020 presidential election, protesters breached the Capitol on January 6th, 2021, causing chaos and damage to the building (United States Department of Justice, 2021). Additionally, during this time, former police officers involved in the wrongful killing of George Floyd were charged and eventually convicted in April of 2021 (Associated Press, 2022). Unfortunately, in April of 2021, Duante Wright was killed by police marking another Black man killed by police within the past years.

Due to the widespread news coverage of these incidents and the near proximity of the Michigan state capitol, all of these events likely influenced respondents' opinions. However, adult respondents were more likely influenced by these events due to the recency of the time they were interviewed and their more complete understanding of what was occurring. Specifically, the adults were interviewed just three months following nationwide protests against police

brutality. While these events also influenced youth opinion, more time had passed, and tensions were lower when those interviews began in the summer of 2021.

CHAPTER 4: Findings

In an attempt to fill the gap in knowledge surrounding youths' feelings of police and safety, the current study is an examination of the most prominent themes among 22 youth respondents and 15 youth service providers (adults). The following analysis will discuss common repetitive themes between youth and adult samples while highlighting key similarities and differences.

To understand the basic level of interaction with police and the general police presence in the neighborhood, the level of police visibility and the number of police interactions were collected. However, these items were measured indirectly, often through questions aimed at understanding the level of crime one has seen in the neighborhood or through police presence in incidents discussed. Specifically, the majority (14) of youth explicitly described seeing police or hearing sirens in their neighborhood, with many of them (9) describing having direct contact with police at least once before. Only one youth explicitly stated that she had not seen police in the neighborhood or she had never interacted with police. To provide an additional context of the neighborhood and sample, most (8) of the youth service provider (adult) sample mentioned calling the police themselves or being present during an incident where the police were called.

Dimensions of Police Actions Resulting in a Decrease in Feelings of Safety

Various dimensions of police actions impacted the level of safety one feels from police. Specifically, many (9) of the youth respondents and the majority (11) of adult respondents discussed discriminatory practices by police, use of excessive force, escalation of the problem upon police arrival, and fear and emotional responses to police actions.

Discriminatory Practices by Police and Influences on Feelings of Safety

Discriminatory practices (i.e., differential treatment by race or community) by police were identified as a considerable problem leading to decreased feelings of safety for youth and

adults alike. Specifically, several (5) of the youth sampled and the majority (8) of adults sampled stated that discriminatory practices by police diminished their feelings of safety. For example, youth respondent Anthony described, “[Police] don’t really make me feel safe for real... because I’m a Black male.” He continued, “Just because all of the violence that happened with police and Black people. That’s really the reason why. There ain’t nothing specific. They just target Black people.” Similarly, youth respondent Emily stated:

[Police] can make me feel unsafe because a lot of people don’t like the police because of like racial things and stuff like that. So, the police could be pulling over somebody Black or something and they could get into a real heated argument, things can escalate that way. It does seem like a lot of the police can really be racist sometimes...

Both youths perceived that police act in a discriminatory manner based on the individual’s race and that due to the unequal treatment, they do not view the police as increasing their safety.

Like youth respondents, adults in the sample shared similar feelings about police acting in discriminatory ways, particularly towards Black individuals. For example, adult respondent Brittney discussed the treatment her son received when he was pulled over by the police as a result of racial discrimination:

...my son [has light skin] but you still know he’s Black. But that’s all he seen [as]. [The police officer] didn’t see this [college] football player. He’s seen as a Black child, Black man in a nice car and now [the officer] want to toss his car because [the officer thinks] he’s a drug dealer. That’s all [the officers] see...you already have two strikes against you. You Black [and] you’re male. You want to give them that third strike? Because once your name goes in that system, every time they see you, they’re going to pick on you. Even if you’re doing nothing wrong.

She highlights that since her son is a Black man in a nice car, the police automatically assume he is a drug dealer or doing something against the law. Consistent with prior studies (Cobbina, 2019), such treatment is not just relegated to one officer since she mentioned continual mistreatment like this throughout the criminal justice system.

In addition to racial discrimination, adult respondents highlighted additional discrimination based on the community context, which likewise led to decreased feelings of safety. Adult respondent Kevin explained these feelings when he discussed how police do not offer Black individuals of lower socioeconomic status the same treatment and level of discretion as they do with those residing in neighborhoods that have a higher socioeconomic status. He explained:

I think that because, not trying to be coy but Black lives don't matter that much [to police]. And it goes back to that political construct [both] social and economic... I mean the discretion that they exercise for somebody in East Lansing they won't in [Lansing].

Likewise, adult respondent, Sandra added:

I don't believe teens in lower income areas are extended grace, like they are in other areas... You know, I think race plays a factor too. Because if two Black teens got into it in a well-off neighborhood, which most likely will be predominantly White in this area, you would have a different story. Versus two White teens in a well-off neighborhood, getting into a fight.

These accounts demonstrate that individuals feel that the police act in discriminatory ways based on the intersection of race, class, and neighborhood, directly leading to diminished feelings of safety. Whether individuals have directly experienced discrimination or have heard stories of police acting in a discriminatory manner, both experiences impacted the level of safety individuals felt around police.

While both youth and adults discussed issues with discrimination based on race by police, adults provided more in-depth discussion about additional mechanisms of police treatment that can diminish feelings of safety. For example, adult respondents talked more in-depth about differences in treatment by neighborhood. Notably, they mentioned that individuals residing in lower-income communities are treated differently by police than those living in higher-income areas. Additionally, adults highlighted discretionary differences based on the intersection of race, class, and neighborhood. Specifically, adult respondents perceived that police used their discretion more leniently (i.e., giving a warning) for high-income White individuals, whereas in contrast, they used their discretion more harshly (i.e., going to jail) for lower-income Black individuals.

Police Use of Excessive Force and Escalation of Problems and Influences on Feelings of Safety

In addition to discriminatory actions from police leading to decreased feelings of safety, police use of excessive force (i.e., drawing a weapon, killing unarmed individuals, using rough control tactics, applying force disproportionate to the threat, etc.) and police escalation of incidents led to a decrease in feelings of safety. Of the sample, several (4) youth and many (5) adults described police using excessive force in incidents they were involved in or in those they had witnessed. Youth respondent Clayton discussed frustrations with police use of excessive force when describing an incident where he and a few friends were walking down the street when police stopped and searched them. He recounted:

We could have died [at the hands of police] or anything... They had their guns out. Why do y'all have firearms pointed towards three kids... Y'all got tasers, everything else.

That'd be the first thing they want to pull out is a gun because they got it, I believe. And why is you being so angry towards [us]? We didn't even do nothing.

He continued on to describe that in addition to police using a disproportionate amount of force, he felt that the excessive force was applied based on the teen's race. Youth respondent Henry shared a similar incident where he witnessed a fight, stating, "It wasn't anything serious." In this situation, Henry felt that the police used a heightened amount of force in a discriminatory manner when they "ran up and slammed the Black [youth]" and "the White [youth] was just put down gently by the officer." Henry explained that the differential force applied made him feel "ashamed" since he is part White and Black. In both of these instances, youth respondents felt that an unwarranted amount of force was used, which was applied in a discriminatory manner. When youth see situations like these play out, they learn that police will escalate situations via excessive force, and they will come to view the police as an entity that will not help keep them safe.

Like youth, adults described various incidents where police applied excessive force in situations that did not warrant such a response. Adult respondent Brittney described a situation she saw on the news in Lansing when the police applied force that was not equal to the given threat. She mentioned how a reaction like this from the police could directly impact youth's views of the police. Brittney said, "Why [would] you pepper spray a nine year old little girl? Like, come on now. I mean and she [was] handcuffed, and you're pepper spray[ing] a nine-year-old and you expect our children to say yeah, thank you officer friendly." Carrie shared similar frustrations about the unnecessary nature of police use of excessive force. She stated:

Personally I don't think that they needed to be, you know five people on this, sitting on this male to subdue him. And then on top of that, you know, they're tasing him, so they tased him. You have one male, or one female on top of him and yelling at him, and they're telling him two different things.

These situations highlight how excessive force can escalate an incident, causing confusion.

In fact, many (5) adult respondents discussed how police escalated violence and increased tension or the severity of an incident upon arrival by being overly aggressive, harsh in their discretion, or by using excessive force. Adult respondent Raymond described that police sometimes work in opposition against residents' often escalating situations, stating, "I think in some instances, [police] work in the opposite direction. Right. And it's counterproductive... sometimes their behavior exacerbates activities, right and make things worse than what they should be." Similarly, adult respondent Jonathan asserted:

I would say some [police officers] prevent [violence]. And some contribute...I think there's some police officers that do a great job at preventing [violence]...and there's, you know, there's unfortunately some that stir up [violence] and stir up that negative perspective on police officers.

Police, at times, can escalate situations with the use of excessive force, which can be perceived as making a situation worse or increasing the overall severity of an incident.

While a few (2) youths described feeling similarly, they were much less articulate and direct about this issue. For example, youth respondent James said, "Every time police come, it usually escalate the situation." While both youth and adults alike discussed excessive force and police escalation of situations being a significant problem diminishing feelings of safety, adults discussed these issues at a higher rate than youth respondents, with adults placing more emphasis on police escalating issues than youth.

Fear and Emotional Response During Police-Citizen Interactions and Influences on Feelings of Safety

Both youth and adults alike described fears and intense emotional responses when interacting with the police. A number (6) of all youth sampled and many (4) who described having direct contact with the police stated that they are fearful or uncomfortable during

encounters with the police. Youth respondent Naomi simply said, “I’d be really nervous to be in front of a cop.” Additionally, after police pulled out their guns on the group of teens, youth respondent Clayton reported:

I was scared. I was shaking even though I had nothing... I was scared when I couldn’t see [the police officers]. They was trying to tell us to walk to the car. We can’t even see the car. The lights was so bright... We young, like [the police officers] cussing at us for what?... We could have died or anything.

With such intense feelings and emotions during police encounters, it is evident that the way youth are treated makes them feel very unsafe and on edge when dealing with the police.

When examining fear and emotional responses from the adult’s perspective, a number (4) of adults described youth as being afraid of the police. Similar to how youth respondent Clayton felt during his interaction with police, adult respondent Brittney explains how young Black men are often afraid of being targeted by police despite not breaking the law. She stated:

The perspective right now, especially for our Black young men is to be afraid of the police. And unless the police change that we’re going to have more [youth] running [from police] even when they haven’t done anything... Because now they’re scared. We see it on the news all day. Now [youth] are scared. They’re scared to have a backpack on and you just leaving from school and you got your hoodie on. You scared, I’m scared... Don’t walk up the street with your hoodie on cuz that makes you look like you’re doing something. Even though you’re not... That’s how [youth are] seeing themselves as being targeted [by police] because this is what they look like. Not because they’re doing anything wrong.

Likewise, adult respondent Justin elaborated:

Even if the police want to help, they're in a situation where they're scared for their lives. And then you have people in the communities that are afraid for their lives based on the belief that police are out to kill us and they don't value our lives.

In a similar vein, David stated:

...whether either party wants to admit it...both [police and civilian] involved are mutually fearful of each other. And out of fear you, you have this pride as roped into it by saying, "I don't ever want to show that I'm afraid of you." If I'm a young Black boy growing up in the south side of Lansing, I don't actually want to show these police officers that I'm fearful of them.

He continued that when officers see youth trying to act tough, it can escalate to "Now all of a sudden, [the police have] a hand on the[ir] gun." Overall, many youths are afraid of being treated in a discriminatory manner by police such that they are targets. This, in turn, reduces young people's feelings of safety around the police.

Problems in Police Response Leading to a Decrease in Feelings of Safety

Analysis of the quality and speed of the police's response has shown to impact perceived feelings of safety among youth and adults. Data showed that problems in the way the police respond and follow up to incidents were prominent issues leading to a decreased feeling of safety. Specifically, the majority (14) of youth respondents and many (7) of the adult respondents stated that the police were either delayed in their response, only responded after an incident had occurred without any attempt to prevent it, or did not do anything after responding to a call for service (i.e., did not make arrests, did not follow up on investigations, etc.).

Delay in Police Response and Influences on Feelings of Safety

In addition, most (4) youth respondents who mentioned a delay in police responding to calls for service stated that this delay directly impacted their overall feelings of safety. For

instance, youth respondent Veronica explained when calls are made to the police, “Half the time they won’t even come. Or they will take forever to come. So sometimes we just really didn’t feel safe.” Josh echoed similar feelings, stating, “When shooting and other things happen in the neighborhood, it takes the police about 25 minutes to an hour to go there.” When asked if that made him feel unsafe, Josh responded, “Yeah. It’s like somebody could have lost their life, and you wasn’t even here.” The lack of quick response by police diminished youths’ feelings of safety and lowered their confidence in the police to help them in times of need.

Similar to how adult respondents described discriminatory practices by neighborhood, youth respondents noted how this delay in response time might be a unique feature of their neighborhood context (i.e., one categorized by high poverty and high levels of crime). For instance, youth respondent Chris explained, “If you went to call [the police], they would be there fast. They would be there fast as they can. And other places it might take a little bit longer. Something might actually go down before they actually get there.” Likewise, youth respondent Brandon stated, “Police probably make me feel a little unsafe. Let’s face it, in this neighborhood, they late to every call.” Both references highlight the slow response time by police, which they perceived was tied to neighborhood context. These descriptions of delayed response times are congruent with other findings that state that the neighborhood context may influence how fast the police respond to calls (see Antrobus et al., 2015; Gau et al., 2012).

Two additional youth respondents mentioned that not only do police arrive late to calls, but they are also selective in the calls they choose to investigate. Youth respondent Daniel discussed this perspective and explained, “[Police] come for littler stuff to be honest. I feel like they would rather come for some little stuff like that.” When asked what “littler stuff” would be, he explained, “Like, someones at a party and they got drunk and they started fighting. They will try to go for that than rather a shootout.” Similarly, Leah stated, “I think the police just don’t

care as much because it's like COVID da-dah-dah-da-dah. So they like think that certain things aren't worth like going and doing." Both references demonstrate how youth may feel unsafe and think that the police do not care when they fail to respond to serious incidents and are present in less critical ones.

While a delay in police response was discussed less frequently by the adult sample, a few (3) of the adults mentioned problems with the time it takes police to respond to incidents. For example, adult respondent Luke described, "There's a lot of shots being fired and there's not a lot of sirens responding or [the police are] taking [their] time it appears to me." Similarly, adult respondent Carrie described an incident where a group of teens reported a stolen phone to the police, "For whatever reason they thought it was a hoax, [the police] thought it was a joke, but they didn't take it seriously. And because of that, it changed the perception of how youth sees police." When the teen's father picked them up, Carrie noted, "And the first thing the youth said...to his father was 'Dad, I called the police for help, and they didn't even show up, how can I trust them?'" In both of these examples, the police response or lack of response greatly influenced respondents' opinions and highlighted the importance that a quick response from the police has on individuals' feelings of safety. Specifically, when police do not show up quickly to a scene or do not respond at all, feelings of safety are diminished along with overall confidence in the police.

Despite variability in the extent to which youth and adult respondents discussed the prevalence of a delayed response from police, it is clear that both samples agree that when police do not show up or do not show up quickly to a scene, the amount of trust, overall confidence, and feeling of safety is diminished.

Lack of Crime Prevention and Influences on Feelings of Safety

In addition to a delay in police response, when individuals feel as though the police do not attempt to prevent crime, it can thereby lead to lowered feelings of safety. Specifically, a number (7) of youth sampled felt that the police only responded to incidents to “clean up the mess” without attempting to prevent an incident. Youth respondent Anthony explained, “Like, police they just, they never made me feel safe. Like when they come around, they will just be like...The violence already happened, they always come afterwards.” Similarly, when youth respondent Naomi was asked what positive change was needed to keep her community safe from violence, she explained, “The cops [need to] take more action and everything that goes wrong like the shootings and the killings.” Both references identify the police’s lack of active crime prevention as a significant problem to their safety and communities’ safety. Youth respondent Daniel shared similar feelings when referring to the common police phrase “Serve and Protect.” He mentioned that he does not feel that police are adequately doing either of the two after his experiences with police responding days after a shooting. Daniel stated, “What’s their little thing Serve and Protect or something? I don’t know but they’re not protecting so.” When police do not actively try to be present and prevent crime, youth question the police and their ability to protect. These doubts about police decrease young people’s confidence in their ability to keep them safe from violence.

Similar to the youth sample, many (5) of the adult sample identified the police’s lack of crime prevention as an issue contributing to decreased feelings of safety. Adult respondent Carrie echoes similar feelings as youth respondent Daniel, where they both mention a lack of protection from police, with Carrie highlighting how race and violence overshadow any idea of protection. She explains, “The role right now [for] cops it’s supposed to be protect and serve, and right now to protect and serve has just been overlapped with, you know violence...” She

continued, “Their role is not there to protect and serve. I think they’re, I think people on the south side would look at police and say their role is to arrest every Black person, or minority.”

Raymond voiced a similar perspective and stated, “...the role that [the police] play right now...I think they’re more responsive in nature. Right. And they should be more proactive.” Matthew furthers this perspective, directly linking this lack of preventing crime to diminished feelings of safety. He explained:

I would say that our police department is not very investigatory they don’t, they don’t look for the reasons and they’re not here for preventative measures they’re really just here to clean up the mess after it happen[s] ...[So] no, [the police] don’t play a role in keeping people safe.

Both adult and youth respondents felt that the police do not do enough to prevent crime from occurring in their neighborhood. In addition, adults and youth alike agree that police seem to only show up after an incident and have little confidence that they will show up promptly. Therefore, a lack of crime prevention has been shown to lead directly to decreased feelings of safety among youth and adults.

Police Lack of Follow-Up and Influences on Feelings of Safety

Lastly, the quality of the police response after arriving at a scene was described as lacking substantive value by youth and adults. Respondents stated that once police responded to an incident, they did nothing after their initial appearance. This means police failed to make arrests, did not conduct a follow-up investigation, or were simply described as not doing anything after an incident of violence. Specifically, a number (7) of the youth sampled stated that the police do little to nothing to keep their community safe and protected. Youth respondent Mia simply said, “The police don’t do enough.” And youth respondent Nina asserted that:

The police I've been involved with in situations have not been helpful. They have not been trustworthy. They have not handled any problems. So I would say they just...I don't know. If it came down to it, it would just be useless to even call them. It would be no point to call them.

Youth respondent Daniel has similar feelings when discussing the police response to shootouts in the community:

...[police] don't really do nothing for real. Like, I swear to you, you could have a shootout Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday and nobody even come. Like they will come like late they'll come late, like a late reaction. So, you have a shootout Monday, they will come Tuesday or something and come try to figure it out.

Similarly, youth respondent Leah stated, "I would like the police to care more." When asked how she explained:

They could do their jobs. They could like show up when they're supposed to. They could show up faster because they be trying to take their time and that's not- you're a police officer. You're not supposed to be taking your time. And it's not all cops, but it's a lot of them.

In these instances, youth respondents discussed being frustrated with how police chose to respond and act after responding to incidents. Whether they had direct experience with police failing to do anything after an incident or heard about this occurring, it was very prevalent for youth to hold this idea that police are not going to help solve an issue. Because of this lack of help and follow-up, youth do not see the police as helping to increase their feelings of safety in their neighborhood, thereby eroding their confidence in the police.

While more youth discussed this issue, a couple of adults also mentioned that when the police show up to an incident, they do nothing to follow up on investigations (i.e., making

arrests, writing tickets, charging individuals with a crime, etc.). Adult respondent Matthew claimed:

[Police] don't play a role at all about keeping people safe. Their role that they can play to keep people safe is to lock up criminals...But we know in Lansing, that's very far, uh, few and far between. We have something like 75 unsolved murders in the city of Lansing alone. Because we do a lot of pulling people over searching cars. We do a lot of BS work and no follow up.

He denotes that since the police do not make arrests and take the time to investigate serious crimes, police do not serve a role in keeping people in the community safe.

Overall, the lack of follow-up by the police was a significant issue among youth, leading to decreased feelings of safety. While police not doing enough to keep their community safe was less of an issue discussed by adults, several still felt that this was an issue leading to decreased feelings of safety. Despite minor differences in the prevalence of this notion between samples, both agree that when police do not do anything to follow up, everyone's feelings of safety are lowered.

Police Increasing Feelings of Safety

Despite a majority of respondents describing the police as decreasing their feelings of safety, this was not the case for all respondents. Many (10) of the youth respondents and only one of the adult respondents felt that the police were either increasing their feelings of safety or they described feeling neutral toward the police. At first glance, it appears that a large amount of youth see police as increasing safety. However, upon further examination, the majority (6) of youth described police to be both increasing and decreasing feelings of safety, thereby highlighting the wide range and the complexities of feelings youth hold towards the police. Despite adult respondents lacking direct references to police increasing safety, a number (4) of

adults referenced a general need for police. While youth and adults held different opinions regarding increased safety, both samples agreed that there are good and bad officers within the police force.

Police Increasing Feelings of Safety for Youth and Adults

When explicitly examining youth references of police increasing safety, a couple of respondents mentioned that seeing police patrol and engaging with citizens made them feel safer in their community. Youth respondent Jacob emphasized this point and explained, “[The police] don’t come around too many times in our neighborhood. The last time they came around...was the Fourth of July. He just came by asking uh how we were doing and if we’re alright...” He continued, “It helped me feel safer, because they just checking up on everybody so he knows...just checking in and that’s it.” Youth respondent Naomi shared similar feelings of increased safety when seeing the police patrolling the neighborhood in response to several shootings. Specifically, when asked how the police help people feel safe in the neighborhood, Naomi stated, “Keeping the trouble away... Like because of a lot of shootings that have happened in the past, I do see that one or two cops drive up and down the streets just to make sure that there’s no trouble anywhere.” Both respondents described that seeing police in their neighborhood has positively impacted their overall feelings of safety.

Despite many (10) respondents mentioning that police increase their feelings of safety, a number (6) of the same respondents also made statements regarding police decreasing their feelings of safety. Therefore, this range of feelings highlights the complexities of feelings youth hold towards police and safety. For example, youth respondent Marie explained in response to being asked if the police make her feel safe, stating, “Yeah. I mean, I guess they do... But I mean, I am kind of scared of the police because I guess it’s the police. I don’t know. They’re just scary.” And when asked how the police help him feel safe or unsafe, Michael responded

simply by stating, “I don’t know.” When asked further if the police make him feel safe, he replied, “Yeah. They come when you need help.” However, in the following sentence, he stated that he had never needed to call the police before, thereby contradicting his previous statement about the police showing up when people need help. These mixed feelings youth hold regarding police and safety demonstrate how there is often a wide range of opinions towards police and safety and how one can hold both positive and negative feelings towards police. However, since the youth did not elaborate further on their feelings, it is unclear the exact extent of this increase or decrease in feelings of safety and the conditions in which youth feel safe. Age may also play a role in the difficulties of fully parsing out and articulating the complex and wide range of feelings youth hold towards the police and safety.

While only one adult respondent discussed that the police were increasing feelings of safety, specifically in a school setting, a number (4) of them mentioned that there was a role that police needed to play and that there are situations where they are necessary. Adult respondent Vanessa describes how when she is faced with situations, she uses the police as a last resort option when she needs assistance. She explained, “[Calling the police] for a kid it would be [the last resort], and unless we felt like really threatened, we wouldn’t [call the police].” Additional respondents made similar statements emphasizing the need for the police to be present in the neighborhood. Adult respondent Andrew stated, “You know what I mean because you’re gonna need your police officer to do what they’re supposed to do in the neighborhood.” And Raymond said that the police “do and should play a role, in patrolling and making sure that they keep the neighborhood safe.” Kevin elaborates on this perspective by describing that there are certain situations where he would not feel comfortable or able to handle an issue, making the police a necessary entity. He describes:

... There's areas where the police is necessary...Where there [is] violence going on that I can't...that you and I can't handle. I can talk somebody out of some thing, but there's some things that somebody that got a bulletproof vest on needs to be a part of... If there's a fight going on that needs to be broken up. You need people who are trained to do that. Now their training needs to also involve de-escalation, all that, I get that, but they still need to be there. That can't be done by you and I.

Despite adults being critical of the police, a few still mentioned the need for police presence in the neighborhood. Adults emphasized the unique role police need to play that they, as civilians, cannot fill.

While some youth outright claim that police increase their feelings of safety, some made statements about police increasing and decreasing safety, thereby highlighting how feelings towards police are complex and that youth can hold both positive and negative perceptions of the police and safety. Conversely, adults made more of a subtle hint at the role police play or need to play in increasing safety in the community. However, despite these differences, both samples made their individual claims toward police increasing the level of safety they feel or could feel in their community.

Presence of Good and Bad Officers and Influences on Feelings of Safety

Despite more youth discussing police increasing safety than adults, both samples explained how not all officers are bad (i.e., discriminatory, rude, unfair, etc.). Specifically, several (4) youth and a few (3) adults mentioned that some officers try to do the right thing for the community, yet the negative actions of other officers often overshadow the good. This perspective is essential to point out since despite many youth and adults describing various aspects of police decreasing their feelings of safety, having the mentality that not all officers are bad demonstrates that some members of the community are still willing to develop a positive

relationship with the police. Youth respondent Ashley discussed the notion of good and bad officers when asked how the police help make her feel safe or unsafe. She stated:

I don't know. I mean, it depends on what kind of cop it is, because some cops are bad, some cops are good. Because some cops try to be funny, and they try to, 'Oh, I'm the police. I can do what I want.' So you know? I just don't like cops like that. I like the good cops that actually care... Because some cops are just, 'Oh, I run this. Because I'm the law, I can do this, I can do that, I can do whatever I want to.' ...And it doesn't even matter about the color. It's just about the heart and where their mindset is.

Ashley clarifies that how the police act towards youth and the level of respect they give greatly determines how youth feel towards officers. Youth respondent Henry echoed similar feelings and explained, "Most of them are just real good people but some of them just aren't the best." This opinion is important to highlight because, despite police decreasing feelings of safety for most youth, some still believe the police could do the right thing.

Adult respondents shared similar feelings regarding good and bad officers, mentioning that there have been negative police incidents in the past, but officers are generally trying to do the right thing. Adult respondent Luke explained:

But I think they're trying to make [the Lansing Police Department] better you know, we've had a few incidents here in Lansing that hasn't helped their situation. ...I've also seen some great things happened from LPD... I don't know. [Lansing police are] alright, they're trying.

Carrie shares a similar understanding that policing currently is a complex matter noting that the bad cops often outshine the excellent officers who are trying to have a positive impact on the community they police. She stated:

...I do believe there are good cops and I do believe there are good people that still do the job to serve and protect but [the police's] role itself, it's kind of its kind of in the middle right now of good and bad.

This perspective demonstrates that some residents still feel that the police can have a positive impact and that they realize the tough job police have. The mix of feelings between good and bad officers emphasizes how the relationship between police and residents could be mended. However, this would likely hinge on addressing the issues that make residents feel unsafe.

While there is variability in the extent, both samples indicate that police are increasing feelings of safety; neither stereotype all officers as bad and both recognize that some officers are there to make a positive difference. Adults and youth alike demonstrate a deep understanding of the complexities of current policing and show grace in stating that not all officers are out to cause harm.

Unique Themes to the Adult Sample

While adults and youth discuss a vast majority of the same themes, there are several key findings that only adults mention. For example, adults generally discussed various mechanisms at work that may influence certain feelings about police and safety. In contrast, youth do not discuss these underlying mechanisms, likely due to differences in age and adults having a better understanding of what is occurring. Specifically, only adults discussed aspects of community policing, lack of trust in the police, and general references to national tension influencing feelings about police.

Community Policing and Influences on Feelings of Safety

One issue only adults mention is the idea of community policing and how it can increase or decrease feelings of safety. Specifically, the majority (10) of the adult sample referenced community policing or a lack of community policing in the neighborhood influencing feelings of

safety. Specifically, adult respondent Justin highlighted the importance of community policing as a way to show that the police are on the community's side and are not there to work against them. He stated, "Community policing is important. [Youth] need to see the police as someone on their side and not against them." Similarly, in response to being asked what role police play in the neighborhood, Vanessa highlighted the importance and the duty of community officers. She said, "Well we have community officers, who are supposed to kind of keep tabs on the community and check in with people and make sure they're in touch with the community." Both of the above statements emphasize the role of community policing officers and the potential positive impact they can have on creating a better relationship with the community.

Conversely, some adult respondents mentioned not having enough quality community policing in the neighborhood to establish a positive relationship between police and individuals. For example, when asked if the police play a role in keeping people safe, Eric said, "Not really." and continued to explain:

Yeah, I don't think there's enough community policing to make them feel safe. I think there's community policing, that watches them, that oversees so they can have a crime to report or catch. And so, there's a lot of profiling. And I think that's what happens here. I don't think that the community feels safe because of the police.

Likewise, adult respondent David echoed similar feelings. He stated:

And so I think community policing is inherently a discriminatory practice, in the sense of you don't have...like if we were to boil down community policing. Essentially, what it's saying is, if I get to know you really well, maybe I won't kill you. Maybe I won't be really rough on you when I arrest you. But the only communities in which you actually see that type of thing try to be attempted is in specifically Black and Brown communities.

Both of these respondents made a direct link that when officers do not try to get to know the community, do not establish relationships with individuals, and are only present to oversee; it can lead to feelings of decreased safety and an overall divide between police and individuals in the community. While their opinions do not reflect those of the entire sample, it is essential to mention that not all respondents think community policing helps increase feelings of safety in its current form.

Lack of Trust in Police and Influences on Feelings of Safety

In addition to discussions of community policing, only adults discussed youths lacking trust in police. Specifically, most (8) adult respondents reported that youth do not trust the police and do not see them as a suitable option to resolve conflicts, leading to diminished feelings of safety. Adult respondent Carrie claims that because youth do not trust the police, it is even more difficult for them to stay safe. She said, “Well...I think that’s why it’s hard for them to stay safe. Because they don’t trust the police.” Similarly, Luke further explained, “...They’re taking care of this stuff on their own because the police aren’t doing anything.” Likewise, adult respondent Justin elaborated on this perspective and noted:

Now they’re afraid that, you know - some people just do things and, you know, feel that a dead cop is a good cop. I mean that mentality is out there as well. But our kids have been taught - the inner city kids, many of them have been taught that the police are not on your side. They gonna harass you. They gonna arrest you. They’re gonna separate you from your families. They’re gonna put you in jail. They’re going to frame you. They’re gonna set you up. They’re gonna do whatever they need to do, you know, to make it like they’re doing their jobs.

Similarly, Brittney emphasized why some youth may trust some officers and not others and stated:

...did you wonder why they're scared of the police. And the thing about it in the inner cities, majority of the coaches for football and basketball, are police officers, or firefighters. But those are the only ones they are going to trust. They're not gonna trust anybody else. They're not, their only going to trust them because they know who they are.

Even though the youth did not outright comment on a lack of trust in the police, adults shared various perspectives regarding youth failing to trust the police. As adults would describe it, lack of trust is a major problem contributing to diminished feelings of safety around police. Many believed that if youth knew more officers, they would realize they could trust them, leading to less defiance of the law and increased feelings of safety. While only adults made these statements, one can conclude from previous statements by youth respondents that they do not trust the police to show up and be on their side. Because of this, young people feel like they must take matters into their own hands to get issues resolved.

National Tension and Influences on Feelings Towards Police and Safety

Finally, a number (4) of adult respondents made mention of national tensions (i.e., discussion of police brutality, killing of unarmed individuals, storming the capitol, etc.) influencing opinions of police for both adults and youth alike in their neighborhood. In regards to seeing police actions on the news, adult respondent Carrie explains how these situations are influencing how much individuals feel they can trust the police in their neighborhoods. She explained:

...I do think that you're going to find majority of youth don't trust the police and that's going to be a mixture of them picking up offenses from seeing nationally on TV that what they did to George Floyd, then you're also going to see their own personal experiences,

then they're going to, you know, you'll see other people who say, you know, they haven't had good experiences with cops.

Similarly, adult respondent Kevin discussed an incident of police brutality that was highly publicized, and he stated that these incidents impact youths' feelings towards police. He said, "And you can trust and believe, as I said earlier, our kids see that, our community sees that. And that raises the level of anger and frustration and anxiety." Both references underscore that tensions towards police due to both personal experiences and highly publicized incidents affect perceptions of safety for youth locally. Although national tension is one theme discussed less frequently, it is essential to mention that feelings about police locally were influenced by national issues.

General Findings

Overall, youth and adult respondents discussed much of the same ideas regarding police and safety, with minor variations in the frequency and the level of depth in the descriptions. Generally, adults elaborated more in discussions of issues and highlighted underlying mechanisms that are working to influence feelings towards police. Despite only adults discussing community policing, lack of trust, and national tension, both samples talked about a vast majority of the same issues. Specifically, most frequently, youth referenced problems in the police response (i.e., delayed response, lack of crime prevention, police doing nothing, and selective response) and police increasing feelings of safety. However, after examining references of police increasing safety, it is unclear under what conditions and to what extent the police actually increase or decrease feelings of safety among youth due to the majority (6) of youth making statements that the police can both increase and decrease their feelings of safety. On the other hand, adults referenced community policing, lack of trust, and aspects of police actions (i.e., discrimination, use of excessive force, and police increasing the problem) most

frequently. In general, adults and youth alike were very similar in the ways they described police to be increasing or decreasing their feelings of safety.

CHAPTER 5: Discussion

The purpose of this research was to better understand how youth residing in a high-crime and a high concentrated disadvantaged neighborhood perceived police to be increasing or decreasing their feelings of safety and how their feelings compared to those of adults in the community. This study highlights the significance of police actions, their response to incidents, and the influence they have on perceived levels of safety. This research confirms much of the previous work done on perceptions of police and safety and further helps to unpack youths' complex feelings about police and safety.

Results showed that youth and adults felt very similar in their feelings toward police and the level of safety. Many youths felt that police increased their safety, while the majority felt that they decreased their safety. Of those who said that police increased their safety, most reported that police also reduced their feelings of safety highlighting the wide range of feelings one can hold towards police at a given time. Several factors decreased young people's feelings of safety, including police being delayed, not doing anything after an incident, failing to prevent crime, and only responding to certain types of calls.

Among the youth service provider (adult) sample, only one respondent reported that police increased feelings of safety, while the vast majority said that police decreased feelings of safety within the community. Among adults, aspects of police actions, including acting in a discriminatory manner, using excessive force, and escalating the problem, were the most problematic items leading to decreased feelings of safety. Despite minor differences in the thoroughness of the explanation and slight variety between the most prominent themes, youth and adults overwhelmingly felt that the police did not increase their feelings of safety. Given that the sample comes from an area of high concentrated disadvantage and high crime, current

findings align with previous work that suggests such a community would have negative perceptions of police and safety (see Decker, 1985; Flanagan & Vaughn, 1996; Sampson & Bartusch, 1999; as cited in Stoutland, 2001, p.230).

Despite not directly measuring procedural justice and police legitimacy, youth and adults discussed key concepts related to these principles. Several of Leventhal's (1980) six principles of procedural justice were present in many discussions, including lack of consistency of treatment, biased treatment, being non-representative of all populations, and inaccurate information on which judgments are made. While these principles were not directly measured, relevant discussion surrounding several elements demonstrated that multiple youth and adult respondents did not feel that police were acting in ways that were procedurally just, which thereby influenced their views of police legitimacy. Since police legitimacy has been found to be based on how officers treat individuals, one can infer that youth did not feel that the police were legitimate, given the treatment they received from officers (see Tyler, 1990; Tyler & Huo, 2002). However, despite low levels of feelings of safety around police, generally, both youth and adults alike felt that bad officers did not represent the entirety of the police department. Often, respondents stated that one bad officer does not mean all officers are bad despite the majority having a negative experience with police. Notably, a number of adults additionally stated that there generally is a need for police, thereby highlighting the broader public perception of the need for police despite the majority of people feeling relatively unsafe around them.

Similarly, through relevant discussion, participants indirectly confirmed that when individuals are treated in procedurally just ways, they are more likely to view the police as legitimate (see Hinds, 2007; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Tyler, 1990). Of participants who discussed police increasing their feelings of safety, many stated that they felt that the police

listened to them, treated them respectfully, and that they had a positive experience during the encounter. Such findings reinforce the idea that positive experiences with police lead to an increased feeling of safety (see Nofziger & Williams, 2005).

Personal or indirect contact with law enforcement are associated with influencing feelings of safety. Congruent with previous work, the current study found that attitudes towards the police are shaped by knowledge learned about police through family, friends, media, or others (see Gau & Brunson, 2010; Saarikkomäki et al., 2020). In particular, reduced feelings of safety were often in relation to situations participants heard about or saw on the news. Recent events, including highly publicized incidents of police brutality, were among topics that were discussed to be influencing feelings of safety towards police. Current findings support the notion that adverse incidents with police, even if only observed, led to stronger feelings of opposition towards police and diminished feelings of safety (see Cobbina, 2019; Weitzer & Tuch, 2004).

Facets of police action, including discriminatory practices by police, were a significant issue voiced by youth and adults. Specifically, being stopped by police for no reason or for discriminatory reasons (i.e., based on race or neighborhood) was a problematic occurrence for participants. Most notably, Black youth felt targeted by police and felt that they received differential treatment based on the color of their skin, which led to a lack of trust in police and overall diminished feelings of safety (see Gau & Brunson, 2010; Saarikkomäki et al., 2020; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). The use of excessive force was also a considerable problem leading to decreased feelings of safety, particularly mentioned by adults. While many mentioned publicized incidents of police use of excessive force, respondents shared various incidents in which they felt unsafe due to unnecessary amounts of force applied by the police. Often adults

described use of force to be exacerbating problems rather than de-escalating already tense situations.

Police response time was a significant contributor to decreased feelings of safety that led to erosion of confidence in the police, and the levels of safety police can provide, which could have affected views of police legitimacy and safety (see Antrobus et al., 2015; Gau & Brunson, 2015; Gau et al., 2012). Specifically, when police would arrive at the scene of an incident late or not at all, feelings of safety were significantly diminished, particularly for youth in the community. Additionally, feeling like the police do not prevent crime and do nothing to help after an incident further diminished participants' feelings of safety. Consistent with prior studies (Saarikkomäki et al., 2020), current findings reveal that youth feel like the police do not take young people's issues seriously, leading to perceptions that law enforcement is unjust and untrustworthy. Similarly, congruent with previous work, participants described how slow response times led to an overall decline in calling the police, all of which have been found to be associated with various aspects of the community context, including concentrated disadvantage (see Antrobus et al., 2015; Gau et al., 2012). Therefore, community members may begin to view the police as less legitimate and rely on self-help measures instead of the police to solve issues since they do not feel that the police will provide adequate assistance.

Discussion of community policing highlighted the beneficial impact of positive police-citizen interactions. The adult sample specifically discussed, in detail, the importance and the positive effects of community policing on relationships between youth and the police. Respondents emphasized how community policing allowed youth to get to know the police and vice versa. When both sides began to recognize the issues of the other, feelings of safety increased (see Van De Veer et al., 2012). Similarly, community members echoed this notion,

often stating how there needs to be additional community policing to increase the relationship between community members and the police and overall feelings of safety. However, community policing was also met with the idea that it is inherently discriminatory. Specifically, several respondents described how community policing is only emphasized in communities of high-crime and high concentrated disadvantage. Respondents described that they see community policing as stating that officers need to know community members in order to not harm them.

Fear and emotional response to police and police actions were prevalent among youth and adults. Numerous youths described intense fears, including fear of dying at the hands of police during police encounters. Adults alike discussed negative emotions during encounters with police yet highlighted the mutual fear between individuals and police. Specifically, participants mentioned how police and civilians often act in specific ways to make them look tough (i.e., puffing their chests, talking loudly and confidently, etc.), leading to escalated tensions. Adults additionally discussed fear in relation to an overall lack of trust in police, whereas youth mentioned fear strictly due to police behavior. This minor difference in youth and adult perception highlights the similarities and the minor variation youth and adults have regarding how they describe police and feelings of safety.

Contrary to prior findings, youth in the current sample did not hold more negative feelings towards the police than adults (see Doyle et al., 2016; Hinds, 2007). Since youth discussed police increasing their feelings of safety at a higher rate than adults, this finding goes against the notion that youth generally hold more negative views of police than adults. However, adults and youth alike viewed the police negatively, while adults were more vocal as to the reasons why they held these perceptions. Importantly, not all youth made it clear why they

believed police were increasing their feelings of safety; therefore, it is unclear the extent of these feelings.

Another deviation from prior findings is that police patrols were found to increase feelings of safety among several youths. While this particular question was not asked directly to all in the sample, it is important to mention that a few youth respondents stated that seeing the police out patrolling the neighborhood did lead to increased feelings of safety. This differs from prior research that found that increased police patrol may decrease feelings of safety (see Borovec et al., 2021; Fine et al., 2003; Van De Veer et al., 2012). Since this was not asked of every respondent, no clear conclusion can be drawn from this finding.

Through a qualitative comparative analysis of youth and adults, the current study added to a limited number of studies that specifically investigate youth perceptions of police and safety using qualitative measures. Additionally, by using a comparative sample from the same community, the level of reliability was increased and allowed for considerable comparison of a large set of the population. The findings provided new evidence of youth perceptions of police and safety and how youth negatively view the police. The complexity of feelings regarding the police and safety was highlighted by the wide range of both positive and negative statements made by youth that demonstrate such variability.

While much of the current findings align with previous work, the present study sheds light on a subset of the population that has yet to be directly explored. Specifically, all youth in the current sample have been involved in or have witnessed an act of violence within the past two years. This facet of the sample makes it relatively unique compared to previous work that simply samples youth in a given area. Having a sample that has been around violence likely

influences their perceptions of police and their feelings of safety, which few studies have explored.

Limitations

There are several limitations to the present study. First, given that there were only a few questions aimed at understanding perceptions of police and safety, it is unclear as to the extent that perceptions were fully explored. However, there were several questions aimed at the idea of police and safety that were asked of each respondent, while many other items were measured indirectly through other parts of the interview. For example, the idea of procedural justice and police legitimacy were not directly explored, yet some of the respondents brought up relevant discussions of such ideas. Since many items, including measures of procedural justice and police legitimacy, were not measured directly, findings regarding these topics are limited in their complexity. Therefore, even though some respondents brought up various topics, other respondents may have felt the same way yet did not express those feelings since questions were not directly asked.

Additionally, since this study contained a relatively small sample size, the study cannot be generalized to other communities that differ considerably in social and economic structure (i.e., population size, composition, crime level, concentrated disadvantage, etc.) from the selected area of Lansing. The current sample was highly specific to youth and adults residing in a community of high-crime and high concentrated disadvantage, with youth involved in an incident of violence within the past two years. Because of this selection criteria, it is unclear how such findings will apply to a community with a different composition of crime and concentrated disadvantage. Despite this unique sample, the present study contains valuable insight and guidance for future studies to continue to examine larger samples in different

communities with a more structured interview protocol to tap into the complexities of perceptions of safety and the police.

While the sample is relatively diverse in both race and gender, due to the small sample size, specific comparisons based on race and gender were unable to be completed. With a small sample, no definite conclusions could be drawn. Finally, the time in which interviews were conducted could have influenced opinions regarding feelings towards police and safety. All interviews were conducted between 2020-2022, which was categorized as a period filled with uncertainty regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and numerous highly publicized incidents of police brutality. Specifically, in the city of Lansing, numerous people protested against police brutality amid the pandemic. As a result, general feelings of safety may have been affected, with perceptions of police likely swayed for some. Despite these limitations, the current study added to a few studies explicitly aiming to understand youth perceptions of police and safety and comparing those to adults in the same community.

Future research should continue to unpack youth's complex feelings regarding police and safety. Specifically, studies should aim to understand how all of the conditions of the police response (i.e., voluntary vs. involuntary stops, safe vs. unsafe situations, direct vs. vicarious interaction, number of officers present, etc.) work together to influence feelings of safety. Studies should also continue to examine how youth who have been around violence view police compared to youth who have not been around violence. These studies could aid in unpacking why some youth explain police to be both increasing and decreasing their feelings of safety. Given the complexity of feelings towards police and safety, research in the future should continue to examine and compare youth and adult feelings using qualitative methods. In using a comparative sample, future research could better understand how age limitations influence the

articulation of complex feelings about police and safety. Additionally, such studies should ask more direct questions with a larger sample size to better understand potential patterns. Overall, future research should continue to examine youth perceptions of police and safety with a larger sample and more specific measures of feelings towards police and feelings of safety while employing a qualitative approach to fully understand complex feelings.

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