Policing after Lockdown:
re-building relationships with the COVID Generation

SiPR | Scottish Institute for Policing Research

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Executive Summary

This report presents the independent findings of a small-scale qualitative research project, funded by the Scottish Institute for Policing Research (SIPR), that explored the perceptions of young people living in marginalised communities regarding the police. This was particularly focused on the post-pandemic period as it was felt that there was an urgent need to understand the impact of the extension of police powers during that period for all young people, but especially for individuals and communities where relationships with police (and other authority figures) were most fragile in the past. Recent research suggests that young people in such communities have seen pre-existing inequalities exacerbated and magnified by the pandemic (McCluskey et al. 2023).

Young people's experiences of the resultant restrictions were distinctive in terms of their ability and willingness to comply, particularly in relation to their use of public space and the respective police responses. The Scotland's Children and Young People's Commissioner reported that Fixed Penalty Notices (FPNs) issued during lockdown 'created a large number of first-time offenders, many, or most of whom, are younger people' (SPA, 2021, p 11). Evidence indicates that proactive partnership working between police (for example campus officers), youth work and schools offer an effective approach to increasing trust and a sense of legitimacy in authority overall (Black et al. 2010; Nivette et al. 2021).

This proposed project set out to examine the experiences of young people, youth and community work practitioners and police officers alike, with the overall objective of supporting the future direction of policing and building partnerships between police officers, young people, educators and youth and community work practitioners. While this report is framed within the context of COVID-19, reflected in both its title and the funding call we applied to, it does not primarily focus on the immediate or proximal impacts of the pandemic on young people. Instead, it explores the broader and ongoing relational dynamics between young people and policing in the post-lockdown period, recognising that many young people appear to have rebounded from the more acute effects of lockdown – certainly as they themselves relate to that period. Through three stages of research, involving young people, school staff, youth work practitioners and the police, we explored the context within which the young people live and their relationship and perceptions of the police.

Our findings cut across three themes with corresponding sub themes. These are:

- **Theme One: Challenges in and for the community**
  - Families in the communities selected are experiencing the complex manifestations of increasing levels of poverty.
  - Whilst local agencies are doing what they can, limited and reducing resources is an ongoing challenge to sustaining meaningful intervention and support to young people and families with complex needs.

  - Young people's disengagement and exclusion from school leads to a greater risk of criminal behaviour and isolation from their peers and families.
  - The potential rewards for young people engaging in some forms of criminal activity appear to outweigh the benefits of low paid and insecure employment.
- **Theme Two: Relationships between young people and local police officers:**
  - Levels of trust of the local police in the communities we investigated is low.
  - The police are seen with fear by some young people.
  - Police officers are not known to the young people and there's a disconnect as a result. This is in contrast to their connection to other community-based practitioners e.g. teachers, youth workers and anti-social behaviour officers.
- **Theme Three: Reflections on the purpose, role and operation of local police officers:**
  - Young people see police officers in and around their communities, but for some this does not impact on their feelings of safety.
  - There is a need for different community-based practitioners to understand their contrasting objectives, interventions, methods, and desired outcomes.

The overarching message from practitioners in this study is that both communities are significantly affected by poverty, and that young people are growing up in increasingly challenging economic conditions. This is supported by both local data and existing research, which consistently highlight the strong and enduring connection between poverty, inequality, and young people's involvement in the criminal justice system. Understanding this relationship is essential for developing effective interventions and for framing youth behaviour within its broader socio-economic context.

The lack of trust in the police, combined with some young people seeing the police with fear, indicates that there is work to be done to build relationships with young people growing up in communities such as those in this study. This challenge is compounded by the presence of criminal exploitation, which can make it more difficult for officers to engage safely and meaningfully with young people. It appears that diminishing resources may be impeding the ability of various practitioners, including the police, having the necessary capacity to build these relationships – we know that these take time and consistency of staff to build. This challenge is compounded by shrinking real-terms budgets and rising inequality, yet it remains a critical priority for fostering legitimacy and community safety. Collaborative working may offer a route forward for police officers to combine their expertise, resources, and relational capacities in ways that support sustained engagement with young people in marginalised communities. Campus officers have the potential to serve as a valuable pathway for relationship-building with young people who are attending school. However, this potential can only be realised if officers actively commit to engaging with young people in those settings in a relational, consistent, and youth-centred manner. However, this again requires adequate resourcing, and collaboration is rarely straightforward.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF OUR FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Engage young people proactively, especially in marginalised communities, to build mutual understanding and relevance.
- Monitor trauma-informed policing, ensuring everyday practice aligns with policy and supports compassionate approaches.
- Provide poverty awareness training for officers to deepen understanding of inequality's impact on youth-police relations.
- Strengthen strategic partnerships across police, youth work, schools, and other services to support preventative work.
- Replicate multi-agency forums locally to foster shared learning and improve collaboration.
- Develop neighbourhood-specific plans alongside relevant organisations, and alongside the community, focused on local issues.
- Involve young people directly in designing initiatives, supported by youth and community workers.

We hope this report offers some insight and interesting points of reflection for all stakeholders working in communities such as those we worked within.

Our sincere thanks and gratitude to all who participated in this study. Our particular thanks go to the youth workers in each area who supported this research – we would not have been able to do it without you. And, of course, to the young people for their time and valuable insight.

Policing after Lockdown: re-building relationships with the COVID Generation

1. THIS STUDY

Much of the current media and political debate about the role of the police focuses on public confidence, consent, trust and legitimacy. In this project we have focused attention on young people, the so-called 'COVID Generation' (Bristow, 2024); and explored the early actions needed to enhance relationships and promote confidence and trust between the police and young people. The sudden and unexpected closures of schools to most pupils due to COVID-19 had huge impact, especially on young people. We were keen to hear directly from professionals working with young people and to learn lessons about how best to build relationships between police and young people in local neighbourhood areas.

A key driver for this project is building police capabilities in this changing context. The overall aim of the study was to explore the actions needed to enhance relationships and promote confidence and trust between the police, young people and other community-based service providers with a focus on young people growing up in 'marginalised' communities.

This collaborative project set out to record and analyse the experiences of young people, police officers, education staff, and youth workers with the overall objective of shaping the future direction of policing and building partnerships between police officers and other practitioners engaged with young people in our communities.

Our investigation has examined the experiences and perspectives of young people and practitioners in selected communities where relationships with police and authority have historically been viewed as fragile. We have engaged with young people and local youth work practitioners within two neighbourhoods in two localities; Dundee and Edinburgh. This is a qualitative study that has utilised a focus group method. Over 30 young people have participated, recruited and supported by local youth projects and agencies providing discrete neighbourhood services.

2. SETTING THE SCENE

Prior research on relationships between marginalised youth and police officers in Scotland is relatively scant. The evidence that does exist points to feelings of, in the best cases, ambivalence, to feelings of mistrust and in extreme cases – hatred (Deuchar et al, 2014; Deuchar and Bhopal, 2017). Many young people growing up in marginalised communities report feeling that the focus on them is often unfair and that they are disproportionately targeted by police officers, often when they are not doing anything other than hanging around (McAra and McVie, 2005; McAra and McVie, 2012; Deuchar et al, 2014). This is important given the centrality of legitimacy in how the public (including young people) view and work with the police:

> Legitimacy is a relatively strong positive predictor of people's willingness to cooperate, work with and defer to the police…[…]…there is much to suggest that police legitimacy is linked to compliance with the law…[…]… research suggests that the police, and indeed society, have much to gain from efforts to enhance legitimacy (Bradford et al, 2021: 645)

Research by Clayman and Skinns (2011) suggests that if citizens, including young people, see the police as 'procedurally unfair' then they are less likely to see them as legitimate and consequently less likely to co-operate with them. As Deuchar and Bhopal (2017) note, 'unfairness in the exercise of authority will lead to alienation, defiance, and non-cooperation' (p88). Therefore, understanding the dynamics between young people and police in marginalised communities is an important area to focus upon.

Evidence suggests that police may have a history of targeting young working-class people – what McAra and McVie (2005) call the 'usual suspects' or the 'unrespectables.' There has been a focus on those young (typically working-class) people who are deemed problematic in society within youth sociology for a

number of decades (Nayak, 2006; Blackman and Rogers, 2017). This in line with regular moral panics concerning the presence of young people congregating in numbers in urban environments (Aldridge and Cross, 2008). Young working-class people can find themselves the target of police intervention due to the way they dress (McAra and McVie, 2012), their presence in public space (Law et al, 2010) or previous encounters with officers amongst other gratuitous factors (Deuchar and Bhopal, 2017). On the flip side, police officers would rightly suggest that the bulk of reported crime occurs in poorer neighbourhoods (Posey et al, 2024). However, others would point to the evidence that suggests that young people growing up in these neighbourhoods are significantly disadvantaged in terms of their opportunities in life and by dint of their exposure to multiple and intersecting forms of trauma (McAra and McVie, 2025). These have been shown to be strong predictors of involvement with the criminal justice system, raising questions of equity in terms of their treatment by those in positions of authority, such as the police.

Scotland has a rich tradition of taking a more holistic approach to young people involved in crime. The Kilbrandon approach remains a cornerstone of Scotland's response to children and young people who come into contact with the criminal justice system, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds. Rooted in the principle that young people who offend are often in need of care and protection, it advocates for a welfare-based, child-centred model rather than a punitive one, or 'meeting their needs rather than responding to their deeds' as Deuchar and Bhopal (2017, p. 22) pithily put it. This perspective is especially important for police interactions, as it encourages early intervention, holistic assessment, and partnership working with social services and communities. By recognising the broader social and structural factors that contribute to offending behaviour, the Kilbrandon approach can ensure that responses are proportionate, supportive, and focused on rehabilitation rather than criminalisation. However, previous work highlights a tension in this regard in social policy, as:

> …when governments consider it to their electoral advantage to politicise youth crime, there is a tendency to embrace a sharper, more punitive, policy narrative and ignore even the most robust research evidence. (McAra and McVie, 2024: 403)

McAra and McVie (2005) make the point that this can be counterproductive, as a more punitive approach may in fact contribute to further reproduce the very behaviour that the young person has been sanctioned for. Indeed, much evidence points to the issue that rather than curbing long-term involvement in offending behaviour, early experience of involvement with the criminal justice system may actually have a criminogenic effect, creating a 'downward spiral' of repeated involvement with the law. This can then result in young people experiencing negative impacts in various aspects of their life – further offending and adverse impact on education and future opportunities, for example (Jackson et al, 2022).

Our research focus is made more important, as the period of childhood and early youth are crucial as their experiences in this phase lays the foundations of their future life chances (Cattan et al, 2022). Research tells us that the adverse effects of poverty and forms of inequality play a significant role in shaping whether or not young people go on to be involved in various aspects of offending (McAra and McVie, 2025). The role of the police is critical as they are often the first contact with children and young people in situations of trauma and significant risk. Indeed, as McAra and McVie (2012) point out:

> …young people involved in the most serious and persistent offending are amongst the most victimised, vulnerable, and traumatised groups in society and are not responsible for the many structural deficits (including poverty) which suffuse their lives. (p387)

As such, formulating a way forward in which young people and police can work together in a way that is fair, legitimate, proportionate and supportive of young people living in challenging circumstances is crucial. We hope that this report can contribute in some small way towards that.

3. RESEARCHING YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE POST-COVID ERA: TRANSITIONS, GENERATIONS AND CULTURE

The initial goal for this project was to assess the impact of the respective restrictions during the COVID-19 period; specifically, the effects on young people's relationships with practitioners with whom they had contact, including police officers. At the point of engaging with young people, we quickly realised that for them, the experiences of the pandemic were very much in the past. Put more simply, they had moved on, and the pandemic was history. As researchers we acknowledged this, however we were aware from existing and emergent research evidence that the current generation of young people were in fact facing some ongoing challenges in the wake of COVID-19 (e.g. McCluskey et al., 2023; Learning and Work Institute, 2023). It was therefore important for us to be cognisant of the contrasting features of continuity and change that are shaping the lives and lifestyles of young people both currently, and in the years ahead.

To frame the key issues that have informed our investigation we have drawn on the earlier work of the British Academy (2021) setting out nine areas of long-term impact of COVID-19, with one supplementary section of our own. These areas are further considered and updated with reference to wider literature on the respective issues. The ten areas outlined are interconnected and taken together provide a backdrop for this research project, the communities involved and the local practitioners working to support young people. The respective areas of long-term societal impact are:

a. Increased importance of local communities

Looking forward, the existing evidence suggests a need to recognise the infrastructure and resources that have supported effective community-led responses to the pandemic. Evidence confirms that those neighbourhoods with more community infrastructure and social capital have fared better. A focus on community also points to existing financial risks, specifically in terms of reduced funding for charities and related challenges arising from the instability of local government finances.

b. Low and unstable levels of trust

Trust, in this ongoing period of economic recovery following COVID-19 and the subsequent economic crisis, can be interpreted in two contrasting ways. First, levels of trust in national and local government have impacted on the broad sense of community. The increasing gap between young people's aspirations and reality could lead to lower trust in government and further disengagement by the current generation of youth in a political process that is seen to be failing them (Nat Cen, 2024). Second, at neighbourhood level, trust has also become a common focus when considering young people's lives and lifestyles. Often, young people's (criminal) behaviour is blamed for undermining trust between local residents. Negative media coverage of young people has also contributed to inter-generational tensions. A contributing factor was young people's perceived lack of compliance with the lockdown restrictions. Gorton et al (2025) report that young people's adherence had 'waned over time' and there was 'a greater incidence of individuals interpreting the rules to suit their own ends' (p.5). This lack of adherence to the lockdown restrictions on movement and social contact was evidenced in the data related to the issuing of Fixed Penalty Notices, with young people being overrepresented in the statistics. As highlighted in the executive summary, Scotland's Children and Young People's Commissioner reported that Fixed Penalty Notices (FPNs) issued during lockdown 'created a large number of first-time offenders, many, or most of whom, are younger people' (SPA, 2021, p 11). The work of McVie and Matthews (2021) also notes that young people were more likely to be issued FPNs than older people, and also that those living in the most deprived communities were most likely to be issued an FPN.

c. Widening geographic (and generational) inequalities

According to the British Academy (2021), there exists strong evidence of place-based vulnerability that arose during the pandemic period. The disease hit the most deprived communities hardest. In the period that followed, levels of inequality increased, with more people falling into poverty and existing trends in inequalities pre-COVID being exacerbated and accelerated. Our own earlier research suggests that young people in such communities have seen pre-existing inequalities magnified by the pandemic (McCluskey et al. 2023).

A strong indicator of the emergent challenges is the resultant impact on young people's transitional experiences. For example, young people from the most-deprived areas are two-and-a-half times less likely to leave their family home than their more affluent peers due to a lack of affordable housing (The Resolution Foundation and Centre for Economic Performance, 2023). Such geographical inequalities are further exaggerated when we look at generational comparisons, with young people less than half as likely to own a home at age 30 and more than twice as likely to rent privately, compared to their parents' generation. For

Roberts (2025), we are now witnessing an inter-generation slide in life prospects. Many of today's school leavers looking to move into employment face the prospect of low paid, part-time, temporary jobs and the insecurity of zero hours contracts. According to the Poverty Alliance (2021) school leavers in the most deprived areas were more likely to be unemployed (10%) than those in the least deprived areas (2.6%). Our study focused on young people's experiences of life in their respective communities, where levels of poverty have been historically high.

d. Exacerbated structural inequalities: deep poverty and deprivation

Recent research data pertaining to the impact of the COVID-19 period confirms an amplification of existing structural and socio-economic inequalities (Catalano et al, 2025; Francis-Devine, 2025). Discrete examples related to young people include: educational attainment, skills development, and intergenerational inequalities. Within these domains those particularly affected are vulnerable children and families with children and young people.

Looking ahead, and depending on how the post-COVID economy recovers, young people entering the labour market may see reduced earnings and opportunities, alongside significant impact on generational inequalities as the ripple effects are seen in housing, security, health, social opportunities and relationships. The theme of poverty became a dominant focus for this study in terms of the manifestations for the young people and their families as well as the shifting priorities for the local agencies and organisations supporting them. Statistics from the Scottish Government (2025a) confirm that between 2021 and 2024, the youngest households (household heads aged 16-24) have been consistently more likely to be in relative poverty compared to older households (25-64).

e. Worsened health outcomes and growing health inequalities

In the longer term, there are likely to be unequal indirect impacts on health and wellbeing, and disadvantaged groups may continue to be disproportionately impacted. We know pre-COVID that health inequalities were already relatively stark, with those living and growing up in impoverished households at higher risk of poor physical and mental health (Catalano et al, 2025; Metsis et al, 2024). The Learning and Work Institute (2023) report that:

> Young people from lower socioeconomic groups have been disproportionately likely to experience negative impacts on their mental health and wellbeing during the pandemic and…[…]…there is evidence that levels of wellbeing have continued to decline during the pandemic, with later lockdowns having a greater impact than the initial lockdown. (p7-8)

In short, the evidence points to the pandemic, and the period thereafter, deepening already existing inequalities (Public Health Scotland, 2021; Bynner, 2022; Finch and Tinson, 2022)

: Evidence suggests that the pandemic, and its aftermath, have also exacerbated pre-existing mental health inequalities, with young people residing in the most socioeconomically deprived areas experiencing disproportionately higher rates of referral to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), for example (Marini, 2022).

g. Pressure on revenue streams across the economy

There are likely to be additional pressures on government spending in the medium to long term, as a result of increasing levels of debt and possible falling tax revenues due to risks around unemployment, failing businesses, decreased consumption and significant shifts in the structure of the economy. Scottish councils are under severe financial pressure due to inflation, wage increases, and rising demand and there exists a growing expectation gap between what communities need and what councils can deliver (Audit Scotland, 2025). As a result, projections for third sector and charitable organisations, many of whom provide essential support to young and marginalised populations, indicate that these groups may face increasing financial constraints. This is particularly likely as public services compete for limited resources within a context of fiscal uncertainty and tightening government budgets. Police Scotland have seen a slight real term increase in budget but initial analysis suggests that this will likely largely be absorbed by inflation, pay pressures, and legislative costs. The funding uplift is said to not fully offset the operational and strategic challenges facing Police Scotland, particularly in relation to workforce sustainability, capital investment, and service transformation (SPA, 2025a). As such, support for operational capacity is likely to be limited at best.

h. Rising unemployment and changing labour markets

Those leaving education over the next few years may be hard hit if economic recovery is slow, as entering the labour market in times of economic flux and uncertainty restricts earnings and opportunities. Previous research with young people, principally those growing up in more marginalised communities and those with relatively lower educational credentials, suggests they can find the transition into further or higher education, training and employment (particularly stable and decently paid employment) far more challenging. This was the case prior to the pandemic with processes of deindustrialisation and the shift to the

service and knowledge economy meaning stable and secure employment had all but disappeared for young people from traditional working-class communities (Crowley, 2024). Young people growing up in these communities face a landscape shaped by poverty and insecurity. Many are pushed into what is often referred to as the 'secondary labour market' - a space marked by instability and limited career prospects. Their trajectories are frequently characterised by a cycle or 'churn' between unemployment, low-quality training and employability schemes, zero-hour and other casualised contracts, and low-paid, low-skilled jobs (MacDonald and Giazitzoglu, 2019). Data post-COVID highlights that little in this regard has changed and that young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds feel less control over their future trajectories than their contemporaries from more privileged households (ONS, 2023).

i. Renewed awareness of education and skills

During the pandemic, the shift to online learning exposed and exacerbated digital inequalities. Many young people from disadvantaged backgrounds lacked reliable internet access, devices, or quiet spaces to study, leaving them further behind in educational attainment and skill development (Anders et al, 2021). Added to this, the pandemic brought renewed attention to the importance of education and skills, particularly as labour markets rapidly adapted to digital and remote forms of work. However, for young people from marginalised backgrounds and especially those with fewer educational credentials, this shift deepens existing inequalities. While policy discourse emphasises the need for upskilling and lifelong learning, access to these opportunities remain uneven.

j. Renewed awareness of educational inequality in Scotland

We wanted to add one supplementary section to this part of the report and add a focus on educational inequality in the Scottish Context as it pertains to our geographic focus in this report. Using Scottish Government data (2024a; 2024b; 2024c), we examined persistent absence, school exclusions, and positive destinations across Dundee, Edinburgh, and Scotland, with a focus on socioeconomic disparities via the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD). Persistent absenteeism - defined as missing 10% or more school sessions - rose sharply post-COVID, with the national average reaching 40.6% in 2023/24 (see appendix 1). Dundee recorded one of the highest rates at 45.8%, while Edinburgh, though lower, still saw nearly a third of pupils persistently absent. Exclusion rates, which had been declining (McCluskey et al, 2019), also rose after the pandemic, particularly among pupils from the most deprived areas (see appendix 2). In Dundee, the gap in exclusion rates between the most and least deprived more than doubled from 17.9 to 39.6 percentage points between 2020/21 and 2022/23, while Edinburgh saw a similar pattern, with the gap increasing from 27.8 to 46.1 percentage points (see appendix 3). Although the gap in positive destinations has narrowed over time in both cities, concerns remain about the nature of these destinations and whether pupils from deprived backgrounds are disproportionately entering employment (and the quality of that employment can also be questioned) rather than further education (see appendix 4). These patterns of disengagement - persistent absence, exclusion, and unequal post-school outcomes - highlight entrenched inequalities and the potential long-term consequences for young people's wellbeing, educational attainment, and risk of involvement in anti-social behaviour.

To bring this section to a close, the overriding message from the British Academy (2021) report suggests that:

> COVID-19 has generated a series of social, economic and cultural effects which will have long-term impacts. In particular, the pandemic has exposed, exacerbated and solidified existing inequalities in society. It has also made some individuals and groups living in particular places and communities even more vulnerable than before. (p10)

While this section has foregrounded the more challenging aspects of long-term poverty, inequality, and the impact of the pandemic, it is important to recognise that young people continue to demonstrate significant agency, resilience, and creativity in navigating these structural barriers. Our aim is not to be overly fatalistic, but rather to provide a contextual backdrop to the lives of young people living in more straitened circumstances such as those featured in this study. With this context in place, we now turn to the research study we have undertaken.

4. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To understand how young people feel about life in their local area – the positive aspects, the negative aspects and the opportunities that they have available to them

2. To understand how young people growing up and living in marginalised communities feel about the police

3. Identify the opportunities and challenges arising from the changed approaches to professional work with young people during and beyond the pandemic.

Additional objectives resulting from undertaking the research:

4. Enable those involved to benefit from cross-disciplinary comparison through participation in the seminars and its disseminated outcomes.

5. Form a joint strategy (police, youth work and schools) for continuing theoretical and methodological discourse about early actions needed to support and promote trust and build resilience of relationships between the police and young people as we emerge from the pandemic.

5. METHODOLOGY

This project was primarily concerned with capturing the knowledge, understanding and experience of the young people and professionals working with young people during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. As a consequence, the research team made the decision to foreground an interpretive research design to give the participants the platform to share that knowledge and experience (Bhattacharya, 2008).

5.1 Location

The first decision to make at the outset of this study was to determine the location(s) within which the study would focus and be conducted. Initially, the research team had three locations in mind. However, after initial challenges securing buy-in with one location, this was narrowed down to two communities. These communities were specifically chosen as the team had knowledge of particular issues that were historic as well as ongoing within them. In both cases it was known that there had been challenges for local police with young people. There were also annual incidents that were circumvented by issues of poverty and inequality, with both communities existing within the bottom decile of the SIMD (SIMD, 2020). As research suggests, it is communities such as these that most commonly provide the backdrop for instances of young people having altercations with the police (Croall, 2012). Though not an explicitly comparative study, bringing these two sites together, we posited, would allow us to reveal similarities and differences that young people and police have in two different communities within Scotland. As we will go on to explore and analyse in the next section, this was the case and outlined some interesting and useful similarities and distinctions.

5.2 Sampling

We made the decision to foreground the voices of the young people in this study, as this was the primary focus of the funding call and the objectives that we posited in response. The research team made the decision to focus on young people who had experience of interacting with police officers in the communities under scrutiny – either as perpetrators of crime, those who had been observers of crime or those who had been victims of crime. Despite the small-scale qualitative approach, we wanted to capture the range of experience of contact with the police as well as locating some of the dynamics that exist in the communities between young people themselves.

We took a pragmatic approach in terms of age range, due to the challenges anticipated in engaging young people who experience interactions with police officers. Through our engagement with the youth workers, the young participants in the study ranged in age from 13 years old to 19 years old. Most of the participants were aged between 15 and 17. In terms of gender balance, one of the Edinburgh groups was a mix of young women and young men and the other exclusively young women. The mixed group in Edinburgh was also exclusively young men from minority ethnic backgrounds. In Dundee the majority of participants were female, with only two young men agreeing to participate. A group of young men had agreed to participate but were evidently under the heavy influence of cannabis upon entering the youth club. The decision was made to not proceed with the interview due to the degree of intoxication. It was communicated to the researcher that many of the young people are regularly (daily, in some cases) under the influence of cannabis. There are interesting tensions here for researchers seeking to involve marginalised young people in research activity and potentially excluding them if smoking is part of their everyday experience and reality. However, due to the extent of the intoxication the researcher reflected that there would have been little purpose in proceeding and potentially unethical to do so (Aldridge and Charles, 2008).

It has long been noted that engaging marginalised young people in research can be challenging (Sanders and Munford, 2017; Girling et al, 2022; Barker et al, 2024) and we similarly found this to be the case. As the two researchers involved in gathering the qualitative data had significant experience as youth work practitioners prior to working in academia, we had anticipated that locating young people involved in the two communities and engaging with them would pose a challenge. Therefore, we took the decision to contact youth work practitioners who were known to the team in the respective communities to act as gatekeepers to the young people. Not only would this aid our research, but we know that trusted practitioners (from the perspective of the young people) can bridge credibility and trustworthiness barriers for researchers who are new to the young people (Fry et al, 2023). This obviously brings sensitive ethical issues to the research endeavour to ensure that we handled the process of engaging with the young people with care so as not to damage the credibility of the practitioners in their eyes. This will be discussed in more detail later in this section.

For stage one and stage three, discussed next, we wished to recruit those practitioners that work with young people in the two localities. This involved contacting police officers in a range of roles, youth work practitioners and local high school staff. We approached Police Scotland to gather officers operating in the respective areas, and in differing roles, to attend stages one and three in order to provide that important police perspective on their interactions with young people. Across the two sessions, we engaged with police officers occupying a diverse range of roles and operating at various levels— including local area commanders, police constables, school liaison officers, and those involved in strategic oversight and reform initiatives. This was important in terms of bringing a range of perspectives from the police to the different interactions they have with young people, in different settings.

As well as acting as gatekeepers, the youth workers who supported our contact with young people also formed part of our sample. Youth work is committed to supporting all young people across Scotland, though as YouthLink (2023) note, the majority of youth work takes place in disadvantaged communities, such as those in this study. Youth workers are in a relatively privileged position in that they are committed to a practice that is rooted in building more equitable relationships with young people, giving the necessary time for this to develop naturally (Fyfe and Mackie, 2022). It is from this point that they can then build work from the expressed needs and interests of the young person. This can mean that youth workers can potentially engage with marginalised young people in a way that other professionals cannot, such as teachers, social workers and police officers (Fyfe et al, 2018). As such, we were confident that youth workers operating in the communities would offer a useful, and perhaps contrasting, viewpoint with the other professionals working alongside the young people. In addition, and on this basis, as already stated, we approached the youth workers to support us recruit young people.

School guidance staff were also approached to participate in stages one and three. Guidance staff operate in a relatively unique position in schools, as they are tasked to support young people with the more personal, social and vocational elements of pupil's lives and as such, can have a more holistic view of young people's lives than teachers of discrete subjects (Robertson et al, 2025). Unfortunately, they were only able to attend in stage one of the research process. However, they were able to offer useful contextual information on issues pertinent to the lives of the young people in relationship to school that the team were able to bring into the interviews with the young people in stage two and subsequently into the world café session with the youth workers and police staff in stage three.

5.3 Method

To respond to the research objectives, the team debated whether to bring young people and police into the same room to engage in dialogue around the questions. However, it was decided that this may silence the voice of the young people due to the power differential between young person and police officer (Hopkins, 2007). Added to this, and as already mentioned, we knew that it would be a challenge to engage young people without asking them to join with officers. Adding an additional layer of risk to the process was therefore avoided.

We formulated a three-step strategy to structure the data collection of the study. We took the decision to engage with a range of practitioners working with young people in the two communities separate to the young people and engaged with the young people on their own, to give us the best opportunity to have their voices be heard. The research focus was centred on how young people growing up and living in marginalised communities, such as the two under scrutiny here, feel about the Police and their relationships with officers. As such, their voice was crucial to centre in the study, and we took the decision to engage in a process which would best allow them to engage with the research team in as timely a fashion as possible.

5.3.1 Stage One

The first stage saw us bring together a range of professionals working alongside young people in the two geographic areas to provide background information, contextual knowledge, professional experience as well as professional values, ethics and insights to inform the subsequent stages of our programme of research. This involved police officers, school guidance staff and youth work practitioners from both of the research sites. The session provided the research team with a range of perspectives into the practitioner's relationships with young people, the values that they brought to work with young people and the aims of their respective professions.

This stage was initially positioned as a kind of 'fact-finding' session, rather than a data collection exercise and we did not seek ethical clearance to capture data from the practitioners that joined us. On reflection, the research team have regretted not incorporating a data collection component to this stage as we gathered useful insights from the range of practitioners on the context of the young people's lives within the respective communities, as well as the young people's relationships to the institutions within which the practitioners worked – school, youth work and law. However, we subsequently captured a significant amount of similar data that was discussed in this stage from the latter two stages of the research project. The session was invaluable in terms of supporting the process of informing the research team about the context of the young people's lives in the respective communities as well as the nuances of life within them – the particularities of the issues relating to criminal activity, anti-social behaviour as well as the economic, social and cultural dynamics that existed. We used the insights from this session to inform the questions that we took forward to stage two with the young people and ensure that our line of inquiry would be relevant to them and their lived experience in the two communities.

5.3.2 Stage Two

In stage two, data was collected through focus groups with young people in the localities. Site A (n=16) and Site B (n = 15); and with practitioners sampled from both localities (n=6). We hosted two in-person focus group with young people in Site A and four in Site B. One focus group was conducted in each locality with the youth work practitioners. The focus groups engaging young people were co-facilitated with local youth work practitioners who had an existing relationship with young people, and the sessions were held in a dedicated space within the local youth agency that young people attended.

The selection criteria for the young people was; age 12+ and participating in community-based youth work services in each of the target localities. Recruitment was done with the assistance of practitioner colleagues from local youth work agencies, with whom we have existing working relationships. The young people participating in the focus group sessions were offered a £20 retail voucher to thank them for their participation.

In the case of the young people, we felt that the focus group approach would support engagement as they were less familiar with the research team and they would feel more comfortable engaging with friends present (Highet, 2003). In the case of both young people and practitioners, group interviews lend themselves well to cross-pollination of experience, knowledge and ideas. These group interviews required careful and sensitive handling to ensure that young people felt comfortable and able to share (Adler et al, 2019). Again, the researchers had experience in conducting these interactions and were able to handle them with care, though they were not without challenge (Honkatukia et al, 2023). As the research was focused on discrete geographical areas, we believed that participants, both young people and practitioners, would have a shared knowledge and understanding of issues relevant to the scope of the study that a group interview may enable to come to the fore. The outcome was that this did in fact occur and participants were able to build on each other's responses, share experience and corroborate one another when recollecting particular incidents.

One of the research team focused on the community in Dundee and another on the community in Edinburgh. As the researcher working in Dundee was unfamiliar with the area, as well as the practitioners and young people within it – they embedded themselves in the locale for two months to familiarise themselves with the area and the people in order to support the research activity. This involved the researcher working alongside youth work practitioners in two sites with young people both from and familiar with Site B. Like Barker et al (2024), the researcher 'hung out' with the young people in the youth clubs – played pool, video games, card games, cooked and ate with them and engaged in conversation. From the outset the researcher was open about their role and the research activity they wished the young people to engage with. When the time was right, the young people were invited to participate. Through building these relationships with the young people four group interviews were held with young people in Dundee.

The researcher in Edinburgh was familiar with the area, having previously worked there himself as a youth work practitioner and who remained in touch with activity in the locale. He also had existing relationships with youth work staff in the area. As such, he took the decision to work with a practitioner in the area to conduct two group interviews with young people, rather than immersing himself in the community. Though this meant less familiarity with the young people, relative to the approach with Dundee, the researcher was able to effectively gather impactful data through the trust given through the youth work practitioner who helped to facilitate initial introductions. Again, it is perhaps worth repeating, both researchers who conducted the fieldwork have rich practice experience of youth work and were able to draw on this in terms of building relationships with the young people, putting them at ease and engaging in conversation and dialogue with them about the research process, aims and expectations – as well as the conduct of the group interviews themselves.

The questions for the young people revolved around three key themes; life in their community; views of the police and their purpose, and; relationships and interactions with the police. We were interested in finding out about their day-to-day life, the activities they did, how safe (or not) they felt in the local area and how they spent their time, generally. This also included finding out about their educational and employment participation, if this applied.

For the youth work practitioners, the interviews took place after the data collection with the young people were completed. This enabled the team to ask the practitioners to reflect on some of the 'headlines' from the young people. The questions were focused on the challenges and opportunities within the local areas; relationships between young people and police; their relationships with police; young people's relationships with education, as well as; specific questions for each area that emerged from stages one and the group interviews with the young people.

5.3.3 Stage Three

The third stage involved taking the findings from stage two and, much like stage one, bringing these findings back to an inter-disciplinary group of practitioners (police officers and youth workers) to gather the practitioner viewpoint on the issues presented by the young people as well as draw out their experiences of working alongside young people in the locales, share knowledge and understanding and share viewpoints, values and experiences.

The officers and youth workers were those that work in the two locales under scrutiny. This was conducted through a World Café session. The World Café method is noted for its strength in bringing together a range of people to 'discuss shared problems within academic, organizational, and community settings' (Kitzie et al, 2020: 2). As Brown and Isaacs (2005) note, it is particularly useful when bringing people together with different perspectives (such as youth workers and police officers) to share knowledge and experience, as well as contributing (as an added benefit to the research process itself) to a greater shared understanding between professionals who come at a 'wicked problem' (in our case that of youth crime) from different perspectives with different objectives.

Following the protocols for World Café research (Steier et al, 2015) we arranged the room into five tables, with large sheets of paper in the middle for the participants to write responses on. Participants were mixed around the tables with different practitioners able to work alongside one another. Rather than the participants moving as is typical in a World Café setting, we asked participants to remain seated whilst sheets of paper with provocations moved round.

The provocations were designed in response to the findings from stage two of the research process and captured the main themes that were drawn from the group interviews with the youth work practitioners and the young people (discussed later). The provocations were:

- We need to prioritise and redirect resources to meaningfully support our work with young people.
- Until we effectively address the impact of poverty, we will not meet the needs of young people living in these communities.
- The police need to do a better job on building relationships with young people.
- The key to improving the lives of young people is through partnership working
- As community-based practitioners we need to have a better understanding and appreciation of our respective purpose and role in working with young people.

Participants were asked to reflect upon, discuss and write down their perspectives on each of the provocations as they circulated. Each provocation remained at each table for ten minutes. Each table was also asked to nominate a scribe who was tasked with noting any collective response garnered from the discussion. The final step was to bring the groups together for a collective reflection on the provocations and to share the collected responses for a final round of responses from the group.

5.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted collectively by the research team. These sessions involved transcripts of the group interviews and the other data being projected onto a large screen and the team engaging in dialogue to code and thematise it (Richards and Hemphill, 2018). This took multiple sessions to undertake. The findings and discussion section, to follow, are structured around the main themes emerging from the large amount of data we gathered in this project.

5.5 Ethics

This research went through strict ethical approval at the University of Edinburgh. This included the typical considerations of confidentiality, anonymity and considerations of data protection. One of the thornier ethical issues the team faced when interviewing the young people was the possibility of them disclosing criminal activity. The team had to ensure the young people were aware that should they disclose any activity that revealed someone was at risk, then we would have a duty to report this. Otherwise, the team made the decision that any 'routine' criminality would be kept confidential. This was not only to respect the confidentiality of the young people but also to protect the professional relationship between the youth workers (who had vouched for the researchers) and the young people (Williams, 2006). As we were tasked with discussing relationships between young people and the police, we anticipated that such disclosures may arise, though we encouraged the young people at the outset of the group interviews to not share such activity as this was not the focus of the research per se.

6. INTRODUCING THE CONTEXT OF THIS STUDY

It is perhaps useful to articulate the contextual factors that frame the distinct characteristics of the two locales in which these young people are situated. This contextual information, gathered by the research team throughout the three phases of the study, is considered integral to interpreting the data and understanding the nuances within participants' responses.

First, in the case of the Edinburgh locale, it was communicated to the research team that many of the young people growing up there, particularly the young men, are enmeshed in gang activity – in part driven by their social and economic marginalisation. Many of them, it was suggested, are being exploited by the leaders of these gangs to conduct drug dealing activity. In addition to this, it was suggested that they were constantly being 'observed' in the community by members of these gangs to intimidate them and to ensure compliance. A youth worker there stated that:

Youth Worker 1 (Edinburgh): *'I think currently they're getting into this crime and, you know, exploited really, let's face it. That is a tough road and I think it's, we've seen that probably more so in the last couple of years in our groups. Particularly in groups of young men getting involved in much more anti-social behaviour and also getting involved in bigger gang type stuff through criminal exploitation, I would say. And that's because they're getting given money for doing lots of high-risk things.'*

It is perhaps unsurprising that against this backdrop, it can prove challenging for researchers, such as ourselves, to engage with these young people and for the young people to be open in their responses. As it was, the researcher found the young men in the Edinburgh group reluctant to be expansive in responding to certain questions.

In the case of Dundee, it was raised time and again by young people and practitioners that annual disturbances were undertaken in 'honour' of a young man from the area who had passed away several years previously. It was communicated to us that the young man had had a strained relationship with the police prior to his death:

Young Person, Group 1 (Dundee): *'I'm not going to say names, but somebody, somebody that passed away and is now dead, they riot because of that, because he was the, like, the big guy of the community. Like, he's the one that knew everyone in that community. That's why the riots always start.'*

Young Person, Group 3 (Dundee): *'He was my mum's pal and he died. So, everyone just goes about setting fires and throwing fireworks at the police because he called them piggy bastards and hated the police.'*

This was featured in media coverage of disturbances where scenes were compared to active war zones by a leader of the local council with young people involved described in pejorative terms (Anonymised Citation (to protect geographic anonymity), 2022). The counter to the framing of the disturbance in such terms, and to move away from the disturbances as some form of memorialisation, is to understand them in terms of poverty, trauma and a lack of trust in authority. Though the young man's death may act as some form of catalyst, it is hard to imagine the disturbances occurring without a backdrop of structural disadvantage. Framing the disturbances through imagery drawn from a battlefield may serve to obscure the underlying structural conditions that contribute to such unrest, namely poverty, social exclusion, and strained relationships with police. This is not to excuse the behaviour, but rather to situate it within a broader socio-political context that demands critical understanding rather than moral condemnation. This is of significant importance, if the aim is to build positive relationships between young people and authority figures, such as the police.

7. UNDERSTANDING THE EVIDENCE

Detailed below are the three primary themes to emerge from our data – and their corresponding sub-themes. These are illustrated with examples of our data. The data marked 'world cafe session' was data written on sheets of paper during stage three. Otherwise, the data is from the interviews in stage two. We have taken the decision to combine the findings and the analysis of these for ease of synthesis for the reader in this report.

7.1: Theme One: Challenges in and for the community

7.1.1: Families in the communities selected are experiencing the complex manifestations of increasing levels of poverty.

In both communities it was apparent from the youth work practitioners that for many of the young people they come into contact with, poverty is the primary issue impacting on their life circumstances:

Youth Worker 1 (Edinburgh): *'We've set up a young people's foodbank, we've also got our own foodbank which five years ago we didn't have. There's always been poverty but it's maybe more explicit now because we're seeing more families come to us and more young people turning up to the clubs and groups looking, you know, dirty clothes, dirty shoes, particularly under twelves.'*

Youth Worker 3 (Dundee): *'But we know that though don't we - that as everybody gets poorer, it's people who have the least that are affected the most. What I don't think is that in terms of professionals, and that includes the police, that we're doing anything different. We can't just keep doing the same thing and expecting…a different outcome.'*

Whilst disagreement still persists around the specific relationship between poverty and youth offending, systemic inequalities remain significant indicators influencing a young person's likelihood to become involved in crime (McAra and McVie, 2025). It is worth repeating that both neighbourhoods in this study are in the most impoverished 10% of all communities in Scotland. Poverty in our case study areas remains persistently high and, in some indicators, has worsened over time (SIMD, 2020; Anonymised Citation (to protect geographic anonymity), 2021; City of Edinburgh Council, 2024; DCC, 2024). This is consistent with national trends in Scotland, where child and working-age poverty have either plateaued at high levels or increased slightly in recent years, particularly in the wake of the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis. It is worth repeating that young people are not responsible for the circumstances into which they are born.

The young people themselves, it should be noted, did not at any point in this study refer to themselves as growing up in poverty. This is little surprise, given research evidence that people themselves will not self-identify as being poor due to two primary factors. First, poverty stigma - both interpersonal and structural – can lead individuals to distance themselves from the label of poverty to avoid shame and discrimination. Second, relative comparison, whereby people may compare themselves to others in similar situations within the community, or perhaps who are perceived as even worse off than themselves. and conclude they are 'getting by' (Shildrick and Rucell, 2015; Edmiston, 2021). There was only one mention of the word itself, but the young person immediately distanced their locale from the word to some extent:

Young Person, Group 1 (Dundee): *'It is filled with drugs and stuff. Quite, I wouldn't say poverty but a wee bit run down I would say, not enough to do for younger people and that. Poverty, drug users, I don't even know what else…[…]…like vandalism, there's a lot of vandalism. There's just a lot more run-down places in Dundee where more crime tends to happen.'*

What is perhaps useful and interesting to note is that although both communities can be seen by outsiders as undesirable and even places of danger, for those who live in these communities they can be familial, social and cultural anchors and provide a sense of belonging in the face of precarity and marginalisation (Habib and Ward, 2019). This was evident in some of the testimony from the young people:

Young Person, Group 1 (Edinburgh): *'I think it's actually quite nice living here because our community's so like small. Everyone kind of knows each other and it's like if you're out in the streets and you see someone you know them basically because it is, like, that small.'*

Young Person, Group 1 (Dundee): *'Yeah, in [neighbourhood] when, when you're in [neighbourhood], you know everyone, so you know everyone that's going to help you if you were needing to have help. The more you stay in the community, the more the people get to know you, and then once in a while you've got a safe place just in case.'*

As other research has highlighted (Mackie, 2019; McBride, 2024), and was replicated by some young people here, there was a more ambivalent view on the locales – young people holding contrary viewpoints at the same time – recognising more challenging aspects of the communities whilst highlighting that the areas offered a sense of safety and familiarity:

Young Person, Group 1 (Edinburgh): *I mean it's bad but it's also good like sometimes. It's good because all my friends live close. Like [friend] lives across the road from me and then I can get a bus to [family] quickly. But it's also bad because it's just bad…[…]…the people are nasty?*

These insights are relevant when considering trauma-informed approaches in policing and youth work, which we will come to later in this section, as it underscores the importance of recognising and respecting the emotional and symbolic significance of place in young people's lives. Rather than viewing these communities as problems to be solved, practitioners including the police might instead engage with them as complex social ecosystems where resilience and relational ties are deeply embedded. Understanding and respecting the importance of these areas, even if from outside perspectives they may appear problematic in some ways, could be a crucial plank in building relationships with the young people growing up in communities such as those in this study.

In response to critiques that practitioners may not be altering their approaches in meaningful ways, it is noteworthy that Police Scotland is actively seeking to evolve its engagement with structural inequalities. This is evidenced by its collaboration with the Edinburgh Futures Institute and Public Health Scotland (EFI, 2025). The trajectory of this partnership warrants close attention, particularly in terms of its potential to influence how police interact with young people in marginalised communities - such as those represented in this study.

Having said that, there exists a substantial body of literature on the challenges of collaborative and partnership working, which are frequently positioned as the preferred strategy for addressing complex, or 'wicked', social problems such as poverty (Bryson et al., 2006; Dickinson & Glasby, 2010). When professionals operate from divergent value systems, expectations, or modes of engagement - as is often the case between youth workers and police, for example - misunderstandings or even conflict may be inevitable. Ambivalent opinions of the police were voiced by the youth work practitioners in this study and this will be analysed later – but these are important if partnership working between police and other organisations and professionals is posited as part of the solution to working with young people in impoverished areas. Strategies that can support collaborative practices are worth pursuing to enable better outcomes and it is encouraging that the police are working with the Edinburgh Futures Institute where expertise in this area appears strong (Docherty, 2024).

Alongside this development, Police Scotland continue to embed trauma-informed principles into its work with both victims and perpetrators of crime (SPA, 2025b). The Scottish Government (2022) Vision for Justice in Scotland has made a clear commitment to embedding trauma-informed approaches across the justice system, presenting both a contextual backdrop and an operational challenge for policing. The Vision for Justice in Scotland outlines a shift toward a modern, person-centred justice system that recognises the impact of trauma on individuals and communities. Given the well-established relationship between poverty and trauma outlined towards the beginning of this report, this shift may support the development of more proportionate, empathetic, and supportive practices in working with young people experiencing forms of disadvantage, such as those experiencing poverty and/or discrimination. The practitioners in both research sites discussed regularly engaging with young people who have experience of, or are experiencing, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs):

Youth Worker 1 (Dundee): '*Poverty, and addiction, and drug dealing. I suppose difficulties around, you know, parenting and stuff like that. You know, I mean lack of parents, parents, you know, in jail. Single parents and also ones that are in the kinship care and stuff like that, you know?*'

Youth Worker 1 (Edinburgh): *'Poverty is huge in the area. It seems to be getting worse or we're just maybe seeing more. I think family breakdown for a lot of the young people and relationships at home are often not maybe as stable or as great as they hope. A lot of the young people, maybe quite lost, I think, in terms of what they want to do, sort of direction, where they want to go. Low in confidence, I'd say a lot of young people lack in confidence and self-esteem which then has a knock-on effect on how they behave?'*

It is worth repeating the earlier quote from McAra and McVie (2012) that:

…young people involved in the most serious and persistent offending are amongst the most victimised, vulnerable, and traumatised groups in society and are not responsible for the many structural deficits (including poverty) which suffuse their lives. (p387)

It is perhaps unsurprising that this pattern is evident among the young people encountered by youth workers in the two localities under consideration. The extent to which trauma-informed practice is embedded within frontline policing merits sustained scrutiny, particularly in relation to its potential impact on young people growing up in these, and similar, communities. While trauma-informed training continues to be integrated into policing frameworks, its efficacy is contingent upon the degree to which its principles are meaningfully operationalised in routine interactions. For young people growing up in socioeconomically disadvantaged and marginalised communities, it would doubtless contribute towards improved relations between police and young people if this contextual reality informs the responses of practitioners - including police officers - when addressing behaviours that may be perceived as challenging.

7.1.2: Whilst local agencies are doing what they can, limited and reducing resources is an ongoing challenge to sustaining meaningful intervention and support to young people and families with complex needs.

In addition to finance being a significant issue for the families, it was also conveyed to the team that a lack of resources was an issue for all of the practitioners who took part in the study – police, youth work and education staff.

Police Staff (World Café Session Table One): *Investment in resources – provides more visibility in communities – results in positive relationship building.*

Police Staff (World Café Session Table Two): *The [poverty] gap is getting bigger but funding is being cut.*

Youth Worker 2 (Dundee): '*We do have regular community safety meetings…[…]… they've been going on for so long but it's the same issues that there's not enough staff. There's not enough staff, we're too stretched. It's the same, you're having the same meetings over and over again addressing the same issues but like there's just not enough money, there's not enough staff.*'

We know that building relationships with young people in marginalised communities takes time (Deuchar et al, 2017) but real term budget cuts to services across Scotland, including youth work and police, mean that the resources to enable this can be challenging. As such, strategic decisions require to be made about the way in which working with young people should be approached.

Young people and practitioners in both Edinburgh and Dundee made the point that they did not know police staff in the locality and that they had no consistent relationships with any officers:

Young Person, Group 1 (Edinburgh): *'I'd rather go to anyone else, because I don't know the police. So, I'd prefer to go to someone who I know personally.'*

Youth Worker 1 (Dundee): *'I mean to be honest I've been in this community centre for, I don't know how many years now, six or seven years, whatever it is. I'm trying to think how many times we've actually seen the police in here, they've maybe been here to, you know, like defuse a situation but there's never been any, you know, like engagement with the police. They don't, they don't seem to engage.'*

As outlined in the first set of quotes in this section, resourcing challenges, it is assumed, mean that the type of activity being promoted by the youth worker above may be a challenge for officers to commit to. But without engaging proactively with young people in these communities, it could be extremely challenging to build the types of relationships that could make a difference. We know from other research that building familiarity with young people, in a consistent manner, can lead to more positive relations (Loader, 1996; Clayman and Skinns, 2012; Deuchar et al, 2014). It was perhaps telling, within the current

context, that the one young person who did have a consistent relationship with an officer (due to being on an anti-social behaviour order) made the point that it did make a difference. Though his opinion on police was generally hostile, he spoke highly of an individual officer:

Young Person, Group 1 (Dundee): *He's the one that knows me the best. Knows me by heart…[…]…he's always saying hi, he's a good guy. When you look at the police and think go away, fuck you all, but when you see, like, actually they can be sound. You just need to treat them with respect and the more you treat them with respect, the more you'll have the police's trust about that community.*

This may be an important point and is something that is raised in the literature where consistent contact with individual officers could make a significant difference in terms of building relationships with young people in marginalised communities (Clayman and Skinns, 2011). Again however, building relationships takes time and consistency of personnel – factors that may be challenging for police to commit to, due to issues related to resourcing?

7.1.3: Young people's disengagement and exclusion from school leads to a greater risk of criminal behaviour and isolation from their peers and families.

Consistent across the young people were challenges with education with the majority of the young people not attending consistently and some having disengaged altogether. Many of the young people in Dundee were no longer engaged in mainstream education and were attending offsite educational provision having been unable to participate fully in mainstream education. Whilst, as Taylor and McCluskey (2024) note, alternative educational provision can be beneficial in some cases, there are wider questions regarding the long-term equity that they provide, with less access to good progression routes and formal qualification. This can mean future life chances are significantly impacted, relative to their peers continuing in mainstream education.

Many of the young people in this study, and other young people that the youth workers were in regular contact with, were sometimes only at school for an hour per day (on part-time timetables) or were registering for the day (first thing in the morning) and then leaving, or remaining within school to walk the corridors and disrupt classes:

Youth Worker 1 (Edinburgh): *'They're going about the community when they're eleven, twelve on part time timetables, only in school for an hour a day or an hour and a half.'*

Youth Worker 4 (Dundee): *'When I worked in education myself, you maybe had the usual one or two young people that, you know, were hanging about corridors but they were ushered along in the class and, you know, but now, you know, in a situation where you have a, I'm not sure of numbers but I think you're maybe speaking about fifteen to twenty young people that are wandering about for the whole day in school.'*

Young Person, Group 2 (Dundee): *'Didn't go to class. I got made to come in. My mum dropped me off every day, I had no choice but to go in, I left and I went to go and get chips and cheese.'*

The prevalence of the use of part-time timetables to manage behavioural issues is unknown but has been pointed to as a form of 'hidden exclusion' (Daniels et al, 2022). The point raised by the Edinburgh youth worker above is mirrored in research, where concern is raised over the use of unstructured free-time that young people are suddenly presented with and the concomitant time that young people may have with older young people no longer at school (Mahon, 2022). Perry and Daniels (2016) also make the point that this potentially raises the likelihood of young people disengaging from school altogether, with profound implications for their immediate future (and greater exposure to engagement with the criminal justice system). It was highlighted, particularly in the Edinburgh group, that many of the young men in the area were no longer attending school and were a visible presence in the local community during the week, hanging out with older friends and potentially involved in drug dealing activity:

Youth Worker 1 (Edinburgh): *'I feel a big risk is a lot of them aren't in education, particularly the young people who are known to the police. Racking up charges*

as young as eleven, twelve. You know, the cycle and the pattern starts, we know it. When you've been in the area a long time you know that that's not a great downward spiral but I don't think there seems to be either enough resource or enough willingness or enough to say how can we keep these young men in school until they're sixteen?'

Whilst it is encouraging that formal and permanent exclusions have been almost entirely eradicated in Scotland in more recent times, and Timpson (2019) makes the point that temporary moves to part-time timetables can give young people the space to avoid exclusion, there remain questions about the alternative measures used:

Despite reduction in formal exclusions, disadvantaged groups, including those experiencing poverty, those with additional support needs, those who are care-experienced, and those from some ethnic groups, remain over-represented in temporary exclusion statistics. (Taylor and McCluskey, 2024: 798)

We know that outcomes for young people who are either moved from 'mainstream' education or placed onto reduced timetables remain poorer than their contemporaries who remain in mainstream education. They face multiple disadvantages – engagement with criminal justice chief amongst them:

In view of the large body of international evidence on the relationship between disciplinary exclusion and under-achievement, long-term unemployment, poverty and involvement with the criminal justice system, it seems evident that disciplinary exclusion has no place in the education system (McCluskey et al, 2016: 535)

This is the context within which many of the young people in this study are living within and the challenge that the police, for example, are facing, highlighting the need, perhaps, for greater collaboration with colleagues in education and youth work to understand the landscape of the young people's lives. The links between poverty, poor educational experience and engagement with the criminal justice system are well known and as such, it is perhaps little surprise that this was strongly prevalent in this study (McAra and McVie, 2016; Kurpiel and McVie, 2025; Scottish Government, 2025b). Poverty and educational disaffection form the persistent backdrop to the lives of the young people engaged in this study. While addressing these structural issues in the current socio-political context may appear challenging, a nuanced understanding of their impact is essential for professionals, including the police, who come into contact with the young people. Such insight can inform more effective strategies for professionals committed to mitigating the most harmful consequences and improving the life trajectories of those impacted.

7.1.4: The potential rewards for young people engaging in some forms of criminal activity appear to outweigh the benefits of low paid and insecure employment.

For the young people, the lack of money available to them and their families can mean that alternative means of finance can be attractive propositions:

Youth Worker 1 (Edinburgh): *'They're getting into this crime and, you know, exploited really, let's face it. We've seen that probably more so in the last couple of years in our groups. Particularly in groups of young men are getting involved bigger gang type stuff through criminal exploitation, I would say. And that's because they're getting given money for doing lots of high risk things.'*

Youth Worker 2 (Dundee): *'Yeah if there's a drug dealer next door, you can make fifty quid if you do that. And a sixteen-year-old that's maybe got nothing, they are going to probably take that risk.'*

The imbrication of poverty, poor educational participation and attainment can mean that young people have limited opportunities in the contemporary labour market. As such, this can put significant strain on young people, particularly in the context of a consumer culture that targets young people (Mooney et al, 2010). The combination of poverty and educational disadvantage mean that more 'legitimate' routes to earning enough money to alleviate the consequences of poverty and disadvantage can be challenging to imagine. Processes of deindustrialisation and changes in the modern economy have eroded pathways to stable, secure and meaningful employment for all young people but none more so than young people lacking educational credentials and/or growing up in traditional working-class urban communities (Cumbers et al, 2009; Law and Mooney, 2011; Szpakowicz, 2020). Without an economic stake in society and excluded from the processes of production and consumption, it is perhaps unsurprising that some young people feel detached from society and lack a sense of belonging (Sealey, 2014; Formby, 2023). As a consequence, young people who experience labour market marginalisation or exclusion, are, perhaps unsurprisingly, at greater risk of offending (McAra and McVie, 2022; Weaver et al, 2024). The vicious circle is complete as, of course, justice involvement often compounds this disadvantage as criminal records can mean finding employment, already

challenging enough, becomes even more difficult with a criminal record. This is an important point to cement - labour market exclusion is not just a consequence of justice involvement. It is often a precursor, especially in contexts of poverty, educational disadvantage, social marginalisation and deindustrialisation. This dynamic is particularly pronounced for marginalised youth, growing up in an increasingly interconnected digital society, where they are continually exposed to idealised representations of affluent lifestyles and targeted advertising promoting highly desirable consumer goods. As Itskovich (2025) notes:

…the more individuals are deprived relative to others, the more likely they are to commit crimes of property and violence. These findings imply that addressing inequality levels could be a worthwhile consideration for authorities when formulating intervention strategies, beyond addressing poverty. (p652)

Absent an ambitious political strategy that is serious about addressing increasing inequality, understanding these processes is perhaps crucial for improving relationships between police and the young people offending in neighbourhoods and communities such as those in this study.

7.2: Theme Two: Relationships between young people and local police officers:

7.2.1: Levels of trust of the local police in the communities we investigated is low.

As Loader (1996) observed nearly three decades ago, young people's attitudes toward the police are often marked by ambivalence. This sentiment was echoed in the present study, where participants acknowledged the necessity of police work but frequently coupled this recognition with negative, and in the majority of cases, hostile views:

Young Person, Group 1 (Dundee): '*Most of the police officers deal with stuff quite well but there is some of them…[…]… are just like really quite aggressive, I wouldn't say that helps as much as if they just, if they just sit and speak to you.*'

Young Person, Group 2 (Dundee): '*So they're (nb: the police), they're no so good on one hand but then they're good on the other hand.*'

Young Person, Group 4 (Dundee): '*The police are c****, they're flipping horrible.*'

Young Person, Group 2 (Edinburgh): '*Me personally? Like, I don't speak to police officers.*'

Many of the young people spoke about incidents with officers where they felt unfairly and poorly treated. For example, one young woman, aged 14, described a situation:

Young Person, Group 4 (Dundee): *…and then I got took home with no shoes or nothing. And she (nb: a female police officer) was refusing to let me pull up my top, so basically my boobs were out the whole journey. And there was a male police officer there. Loads of boys there.*

Other young people described situations where they felt that they had not participated in criminal behaviour but were treated poorly by police officers:

Young Person, Group 1 (Dundee): '*So, I was sitting in McDonald's with a couple of friends and then I seen police coming in and then they grabbed me. But I was still, I was still underage at this point, but they grabbed me and then dragged me outside. McDonald's must have thought that I had some sort of substances or something and then phoned the police. I had a vape on me and they took that. Then obviously I had, I had to give them like my mum's phone number so they could let her know what happened, but I never got charged with anything because they never found anything on me.*'

Young Person, Group 2 (Dundee): '*I was just watching it (nb: [neighbourhood] riot) because I knew that it was going to happen. Me and my pal we always just go. But yeah, the police were at mine, but I didn't get grounded for it, I got charged with mobbing and rioting and they said "fly with the crows you get shot with the crows", like that's exactly what they said to me.*'

This is not a new finding, and other researchers have posited that young people in these communities can find themselves the target of police intervention by virtue of their age, social class, their presence on the street and other factors (McAra and McVie, 2005; Deuchar et al, 2014; Jackson et al, 2022).

The ambivalence in attitude towards the police was perhaps nowhere better reflected than in a young man's description of a friend who assisted the police with a particular inquiry:

Young Person, Group 2 (Edinburgh): *'...basically they just helped the police solve the case of what happened that day because there was a, like a really big thing right. And then the police, they know that he was there, he was a witness and then he just gave the police all the information of what happened, and he helped him find out like who, who was there. I think what he done was good, right, but like me personally, I wouldn't do that.'*

Whilst the young man describes the decision to assist as 'good' and 'right', the young man makes the point that he would not cooperate with the police. Without more information it is difficult to know the reasons behind his opinion. Clayman and Skinns (2011) identify three key factors that may influence such a choice: a reluctance to implicate someone known to the individual; a perception of the police as illegitimate and therefore untrustworthy; and a broader socialisation process that discourages cooperation with authority figures, such as the police. Another young person in the same group agreed, stating that:

Young Person, Group 2 (Edinburgh): *'Me personally, like I don't speak to police officers, because like in that situation I just don't want to be in that situation. Because police are associated with trouble right. But like since you're trying to solve the trouble, I'm not trying to help solve the trouble.'*

This ambivalence conveyed to the researchers corresponds with recent surveys of young people in general, within the UK, which reveal that young people hold mixed and often critical views of the police (YEF, 2024; IOPC, 2024; Kings College, 2024). While some young people believe the police do a good job in their local areas, overall trust and confidence are lower among younger generations. Concerns about fairness and discrimination are prominent, with less than half of young people believing the police treat everyone equally regardless of race or religion. Personal experiences, particularly negative encounters such as those described above, can significantly shape perceptions, often leading to distrust.

7.2.2: The police are seen with fear by some young people.

There was a general perception amongst the young people, in addition to the aforementioned ambivalence, that the police sought to intimidate young people and that this was a key tactic to dissuade young people from causing trouble:

Young Person, Group 2 (Edinburgh): *'I mean I don't really think they deal with the trouble, they're just there to intimidate us.'*

Young Person, Group 1 (Edinburgh): *'They don't engage with young people. They're not chatting, they're just there (nb: in school) for like a threat.'*

Young Person, Group 3 (Dundee): *'I just hate them (nb: the police), they are scary. They are scary sometimes.'*

McAra and McVie (2005) cite the work of Choongh (1998), suggesting that an informal objective of police in communities such as those explored here, is potentially to enforce discipline through strategies such as intimidation and the cultivation of fear – the 'social disciplinary model' as it is termed. We would suggest that work is required to encourage young people that such an approach is not pursued intentionally by police. Policing in Scotland and the UK is officially grounded in the principle of policing by consent, underpinned by principles of cultivating public trust, legitimacy, and cooperation rather than fear or coercion. This model aims to ensure that police powers are exercised with the approval and support of the communities they serve (returning to the principle of legitimacy), rather than through intimidation or force. However, many of the young people in this study did not see it that way. Hanway and Hambly (2023) make the point that:

There is strong evidence showing that the relationship between the police and public is negatively affected if there is a poor quality of police-citizen contact, and by a lack of community engagement. If the public views the police as lacking legitimacy, working in procedurally unjust ways or not engaging with them, then confidence and trust will reduce. The public will also be less likely to cooperate with the police. (n.p.)

They go on to say that factors that could improve relations, particularly in communities where there is reduced trust in the police such as those in this study, include better communication and increased community engagement.

7.2.3: Police officers are not known to the young people and there's a disconnect as a result. This is in contrast to their connection to other community-based practitioners e.g. teachers, youth workers and anti-social behaviour officers.

As stated above, of the young people in this study, only one was able to speak of a positive relationship with an individual officer and paradoxically perhaps, this was exclusively related to his compulsion to engage with an officer due to his having an ASBO. Youth work practitioners spoke of a changing dynamic over a number of years where there was more consistency of police officers but that had disappeared.

Youth Worker (Dundee): *'We never have consistency, and I always felt like you had more consistency. They maybe come to one community safety meeting and then the next time it's somebody else. So huge amount of inconsistency. Some of them absolutely got it. They came in here, had a game of pool and that was enough to start building relationships with the young people. But the other ones make it clear that they are only responding to incidents. So, they're only here when you're in trouble.'*

For the young people in Edinburgh, campus officers were known by face – but the young people felt that very little effort was made to engage with them, this in contrast to the relationships they have with the youth workers. The first two quotes below concern different schools in Edinburgh:

Young Person, Edinburgh (Group 2): *'Well they (nb: campus police officer) had a wee office in the school just for their self and if there was like trouble, like fights or that, they'd just come out and sort it out between the people that were like just fighting and that.'*

Young Person, Edinburgh (Group 1): *'The youth workers, they actually, like if you see them in school or anything they'll actually like come up and talk to you and stuff. And like actually like have a conversation with you.'*

The presence of police officers in school has been debated but Deuchar et al (2014) make the point that:

Some researchers have argued that the presence of campus officers brings about an increased focus on surveillance, and that the emphasis on authoritative control may create an ethos of fear and distrust and weaken the sense of community in schools…[…]…however, in the UK there is a growing body of research that argues that campus officers provide a familiar and positive presence in schools and engage in 'pastoral policing. (p60)

This returns us to the earlier point about roles, objectives and whether or not building and cultivating relationships with young people is seen as part of an officer's remit. The SPA (2023) notes that 'an essential component of upholding the rights of children and policing by consent is listening to, and learning from, the children and young people that Police Scotland serve.' On the basis of the views of the young people here, there appears work to be done. However, there appears potential for campus police officers to engage in more relational forms of practice with young people, fostering trust and mutual understanding through sustained, community-based interaction.

7.3: Theme Three: Reflections on the purpose, role and operation of local police officers:

7.3.1: Young people see police officers in and around their communities, but for some this does not impact on their feelings of safety.

The ambivalence and hostility expressed by young people toward the police is mirrored in their perceptions of the police's purpose. These views are closely linked to the likelihood of young people engaging positively with the police, suggesting that attitudes toward law enforcement play a critical role in shaping potential relationships between youth and policing bodies (Hanway and Hambly, 2023). When asked what they thought the purpose of the police was, the young people's responses were mixed:

Young Person, Group 1 (Dundee): *'Their job is to protect the community, to protect people, and ourselves, and themselves.'*

Young Person, Group 1 (Edinburgh): *'Keeping people safe. But I think they tuck away from that, and they just go and sit in the schools and stuff. So it's pretty pointless, they're just wasting time.'*

Young Person, Group 2 (Dundee): *'To get people in trouble, I don't know, they're just so petty. They're petty.'*

Given the aforementioned ambivalence and hostility it is perhaps little surprise that this is reflected in how they view the role of the police in their communities.

All interviewees, but especially young people, raised safety concerns - mostly about their community and home environments. There was less focus on school and safety but those who did discuss school had two contrasting views: a minority saw it as a safe space, while most described it as unsafe or frightening due to traumatic incidents that had happened there.

Young Person, Group 2 (Edinburgh): *I do see a few police officers just walking about the area just looking for like people that are like just causing trouble and that.*

Young Person, Group 4 (Dundee): *'We always stay on the phone with each other walking home till we know we're both in the house safe.'*

Young Person, Group 1 (Edinburgh): *'Like up this way, isn't really safe for kids, like walking down the street. If you live closer to the main road as well then that's more dangerous as well.'*

The quotes above are from young women in the study and reflect a more general decline in feelings of safety in their communities within the UK. However, the young men in the study discussed feeling unsafe in their communities, too:

Young Person, Group 1 (Dundee): *It is a wee bit cool, and frightening…[…]…it's not the best of places to grow up.*

Young Person, Group 1 (Dundee): *Not really. No. It's just there's been quite a few murders actually in the last year. And then now it's just really bad with drug users and that as well. And there's always like drug raids going on in like where I live.*

Young Person, Group 2 (Edinburgh): *It's a bad school because, people get battered all the time and I don't feel safe going to that school.*

Recent research reveals that many young people in the UK feel increasingly unsafe within their communities, with significant gender disparities shaping these perceptions. While general surveys suggest that a majority of youth feel safe in their local areas, this sense of security declines sharply among those living in more marginalised neighbourhoods (Ipsos UK, 2023). Girls, in particular, report markedly lower feelings of safety than boys, especially in public spaces, schools, and online environments. According to Plan International UK (Cann et al, 2024), only 5% of girls aged 12–21 feel completely safe in public, with trust in institutions like the police notably low among older girls. This is repeated in terms of feelings of safety in school as post-pandemic data from Jerrim (2025) shows a steep drop in girls' sense of safety at school, reversing pre-pandemic trends. He goes on to suggest that:

…likewise, pupils from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds and with special educational needs tend to feel less safe than more socio-economically advantaged pupils and those without special needs. Robust evidence also emerges of an important link between perceptions of school safety and wellbeing: when children feel less safe at school, their wellbeing declines. (p519)

Again, this reinforces the layers of inequality that young people, such as those in this study, experience in their lives and creates another potential barrier to their progression into adulthood.

Previous research has highlighted the relationship between neighbourhood effects and both the likelihood of committing and experiencing crime - risks to which young people are disproportionately exposed (Posey et al., 2024; Scottish Government, 2025c). Many of the young people in this study reported having been both perpetrators and victims of crime, primarily involving

violence or low-level, petty offences. While the majority noted a visible police presence in schools and local communities, this visibility did not appear to translate into a corresponding sense of safety or security. Though this is perhaps a reflection of the two communities being amongst the higher end of the spectrum when it comes to criminal activity.

7.3.2: There is a need for different community-based practitioners to understand their contrasting objectives, interventions, methods, and desired outcomes.

At a police / practitioner level there was much discussion in stages two and three regarding the differing values, objectives and methods utilised when working alongside young people in marginalised communities:

Police Staff (World Café Session Table Two): *Competing priorities for police – are the police best placed/resource to support young people? Police can't do it alone, it is a joint responsibility.*

Youth Worker (World Café Session Table Two): *We need a better understanding of each other's role/remit.*

Youth Worker 1 (Dundee): *You see it advertised that you can come for coffee with a cop or something which on like once in a blue moon. But they're not done at a time where even young people could come. I don't know why they're not maybe promoted within school to try and build those relationships. Like something does need to get done to build those relationships, know why they're doing that with the community but it's maybe not happening often enough and maybe they should be going to where the young people are as well.*

There was a question from the youth work practitioners regarding the role of the police and whether or not it is their role to build positive relationships with young people in marginalised communities? Whilst resourcing is clearly an issue, this perhaps does not mean that individual officers in these communities can approach their work with young people with more understanding. However, as one officer pointed out:

Police Staff (World Café Session Table Two): *Youths frequently gather in large hostile groups make it harder for police to approach/talk or have positive engagement.*

Clarity of role and purpose could be a starting point for better partnership working, sharing of skills and resources and working towards improved relationships between police and young people. Resourcing continues to pose a significant challenge to partnership working, much as it did over a decade ago when McCarthy and O'Neill (2014) observed that both cultural and organisational differences, alongside limited resources, can hinder effective collaboration between the police and other agencies. However, they do note that informal discussions can lead to better understanding of organisational goals and lead to more successful collaboration:

Formal partnerships also involved some time being devoted to getting to know more about the specific functions and duties carried out by partner agencies. This often took place informally before meetings in the form of a chat and cup of coffee. In other situations, the process was supported through a workshop activity which addressed these issues in a more structured environment. These types of engagement can help improve the level of understanding from agency representatives about the overall goals and functions of partnership mechanisms and help focus each agency to its key contributions. (p247)

It was communicated to the research team, anecdotally, that both police staff and youth work practitioners enjoyed the opportunity to meet one another (during both stages one and three of this research) and share and discuss perspectives – something that they had not had the opportunity to do, previously.

The officers in this study appeared to welcome the prospect of greater collaboration:

Police Staff (World Café Session Table Three): *Police can't do it alone! It is a joint responsibility, sharing of information and resources. Small steps locally and build positive interactions during early years.*

Police Staff (World Café Session Table Two): *Better understanding of each other's roles/remits, joint bids for funding and more focused actions from strategic meetings.*

This is not to pretend that such work is, or would be, straightforward. Partnership working is fraught with challenge and particularly so when partners may have different values, perspectives or goals. Morris-Jarra (2025), for example, highlights the suspicion held by youth work practitioners in England, who often operate from a welfarist perspective and perceive the police as approaching the work from a more punitive standpoint. It may be the case that trust requires to be built with practitioners such as youth

workers first, before addressing trust with young people in marginalised communities? Crawford and L'Hoiry (2015) note that tensions can arise for non-police partners working in marginalised communities, particularly when local residents become aware that, for example, youth workers are collaborating with the police. Such associations can risk undermining trust between practitioners and the communities they serve. However, the authors also emphasise that effective partnership working is still possible, even in contexts marked by differing organisational cultures:

Shared values, a common purpose and an appreciation of divergent organisational priorities and cultures are the glue that holds complex partnership relationships together. The basis for effective and mature partnerships lies in creating shared understanding about the problems and a collective commitment to the possible means of resolving them…shared understanding demands that the partners understand each other's positions well enough to have meaningful dialogue about the different interpretations of the problem, and to exercise collective knowledge about how best to seek to resolve or overcome it. (p7)

While challenges remain, partnership working between the police and other practitioners offers a promising pathway toward building more positive and trusting relationships with marginalised young people. The ongoing collaboration between Police Scotland and the Edinburgh Futures Institute may offer a strong platform from which to embed this work.

8. LIMITATIONS

This study focuses primarily on the experiences and perceptions of a relatively small group of young people in relation to policing, a deliberate methodological choice given the funding call that the team responded to. It is also grounded in the aim of amplifying youth voices within a context where they are often underrepresented. While it is acknowledged that the absence of police officer perspectives in direct relation to the opinions expressed by the young people may be viewed as a limitation, the research does not seek to present a balanced institutional account. Rather, it prioritises the lived experiences of the young people interviewed within the two communities under scrutiny – young people who are disproportionately affected by certain policing practices and whose views are critical to understanding public trust, legitimacy, and engagement. This approach aligns with precedent in youth-focused research (e.g., Loader, 1996) and contributes to a growing body of literature that centres marginalised perspectives in discussions of justice and authority. Future studies may build on these findings by incorporating police perspectives to develop a more holistic understanding of relations between police officers and young people.

It is also important to note that young men were underrepresented in the Dundee half of the study. Given the documented associations between young men and certain forms of criminal activity, their limited participation may constrain the depth of insight into these dynamics. While this does not invalidate the findings, it does highlight the need for further research that includes their perspectives.

A further limitation of this study relates to the degree of openness among some participants. While efforts were made to create a safe and supportive environment, a number of young people appeared reticent to fully articulate their experiences. This may reflect broader issues of trust, stigma, or discomfort in discussing sensitive topics, and could have shaped the depth and nuance of the data collected. As noted, particularly in Edinburgh, the young people were reluctant to go into too much detail due to fears of potential repercussions. Future research may benefit from employing methods that build trust over time, such as longitudinal engagement, peer-led interviews, or creative and participatory approaches, to facilitate more open dialogue.

9. CONCLUSIONS

This report has explored the multifaceted relationship between police and young people in two communities in Scotland. It has highlighted both structural and relational tensions, as well as potential opportunities for meaningful engagement. In concluding, we draw together the key insights that have emerged, responding to each of the objectives in turn.

1. **To understand how young people feel about life in their local area – the positive aspects, the negative aspects and the opportunities that they have available to them**

   The findings reveal that while young people are navigating challenging economic circumstances, marked by limited opportunities and material constraints, they nonetheless express a strong sense of connection to their local area. This connection is rooted not in formal institutions or services, but in the everyday relationships they maintain with friends, family, and peers. These social ties provide a sense of belonging and stability, even in the face of broader structural difficulties. This finding is in line with previous literature. While outsiders may view these communities as dangerous or places to be avoided, it is important to recognise that they hold deep significance for many of the young people who grow up there. This attachment, though sometimes marked by ambivalence, is grounded in the familiarity of place and the strength of social ties that shape their everyday lives.

2. **To understand how young people growing up and living in marginalised communities feel about the police**

   The research highlights a complex and often strained relationship between young people in marginalised communities and the police. Hostility was a recurring theme, shaped by past experiences and perceptions of unfair treatment. Alongside this, some young people expressed ambivalence, acknowledging the role of the police while remaining sceptical of their intentions. For others, the police were associated with fear, particularly in contexts where encounters felt unpredictable or intimidating. These responses reflect broader issues of trust, legitimacy, and the need for more youth-centred approaches to policing

3. **Identify the opportunities and challenges arising from the changed approaches to professional work with young people during and beyond the pandemic.**

   The pandemic brought significant disruption to professional work with young people, exposing and intensifying existing challenges. One of the most pressing issues is the limited and diminishing resources available to support youth services and community-based initiatives. This scarcity has placed considerable strain on practitioners and organisations alike. However, the findings also point to potential opportunities: collaborative and partnership working could offer a promising path forward. By pooling resources, knowledge, and relationships, professionals can potentially work together to create more responsive support that better meet the needs of young people in marginalised communities.

4. **Enable those involved to benefit from cross-disciplinary comparison through participation in the seminars and its disseminated outcomes.**

   The project created valuable spaces for cross-disciplinary exchange, particularly through the stages one and three of this study, particularly the World Café session in stage three. Youth work practitioners, education staff and police officers alike expressed appreciation for the opportunity to come together, share experiences, and reflect on their respective roles in working with young people. These sessions enabled participants to compare values, approaches, and challenges in a constructive environment, fostering mutual understanding and opening up possibilities for more joined-up working in the future.

5. **Form a joint strategy (police, youth work and schools) for continuing theoretical and methodological discourse about early actions needed to support and promote trust and build resilience of relationships between the police and young people as we emerge from the pandemic.**

   The project points towards the potential for partnership working between police, youth workers, and schools in shaping early interventions that foster trust and build resilient relationships with young people. Collaborative approaches offer a promising way forward, particularly when grounded in shared values and mutual respect across disciplines. Youth workers, in particular, are well-placed to support bridge-building efforts between young people and the police, given their established presence and trusted relationships within communities. However, this role must be approached with care. The trust youth workers cultivate with young people, often in contexts marked by hostility and scepticism toward authority, requires thoughtful curation. Any joint strategy must therefore recognise the delicate balance youth workers navigate, ensuring that collaboration does not compromise their credibility or the safe spaces they provide to young people.

10.RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE POLICE

1. More proactive engagement with young people is required to understand their lived experience – with a particular focus on young people in more marginalised communities. This would also support young people to understand the role and approach of police. For example, school-based officers could lead engagement activities alongside young people to support relevance.
2. In line with the Scottish Government's commitment to a trauma-informed justice system, it is recommended that police services prioritise the monitoring and evaluation of how trauma-informed principles are operationalised in everyday interactions with young people, particularly those in marginalised and impoverished communities. This would support both accountability and learning, ensuring that practice reflects policy intentions and contributes to more compassionate, person-centred policing.
3. Given the crucial role poverty and inequality appears to play in the police/youth relational dynamic, there is an argument that officers should have awareness training regarding this critical issue, if they do not already. Though this may form part of the ACEs training that officers do, already?
4. Given that resourcing remains a significant challenge, there is scope to develop more strategic partnerships between police, youth work practitioners, school staff, and other professionals working with young people. While such collaborations also require investment, they offer the potential for more sustainable, preventative approaches that could lead to longer-term savings and improved outcomes.
5. It was fed back to the research team from all of the professionals involved in this study that they enjoyed and appreciated coming together with other professionals to share perspectives in stages one and three. These could be replicated at a local level to build understanding as well as potentially contribute to improved partnership and collaborative working.
6. Practitioners across agencies and organisations should work together with communities to develop localised plans that respond to the specific issues facing neighbourhoods. These plans should be grounded in the particular assets of each community, whether physical spaces, existing services, or key individuals and relationships, ensuring that strategies are not simply adapted from national models but genuinely reflect local strengths and needs.
7. Directly involve young people in the design and implementation of initiatives aimed at improving police-youth relations. Drawing on the skills and knowledge of youth and community workers will undoubtedly aid this process.

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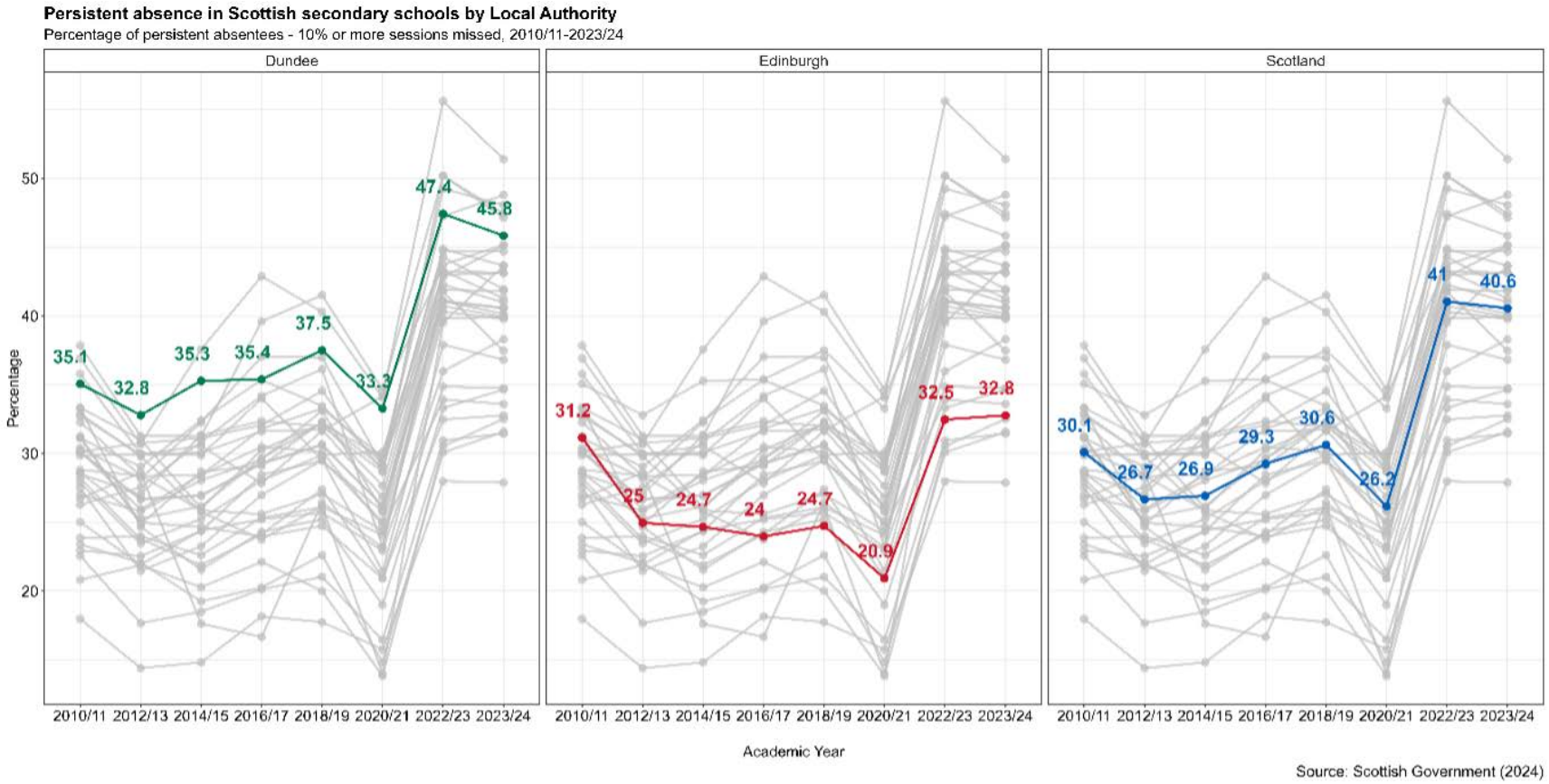
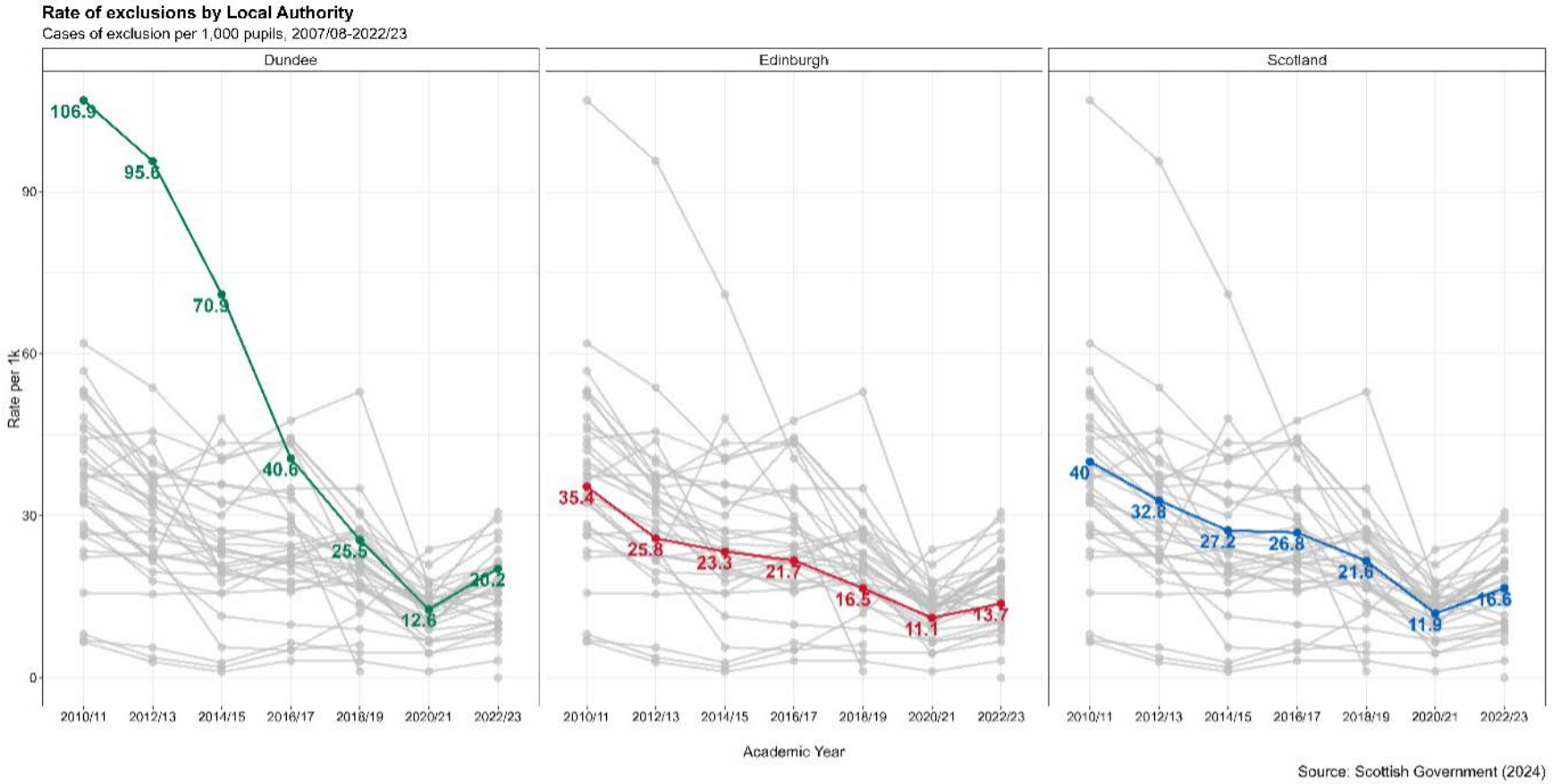
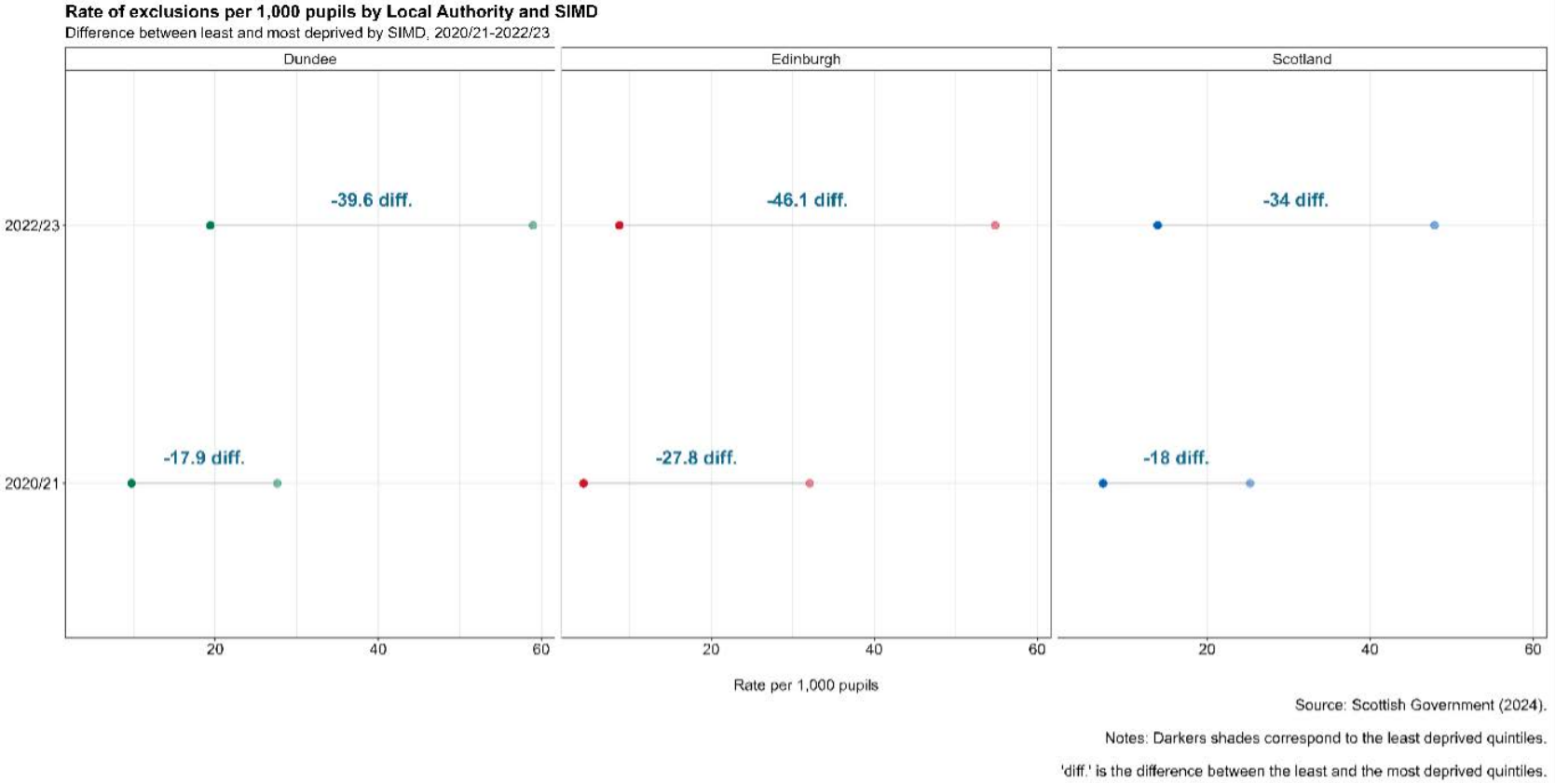
12. Appendices



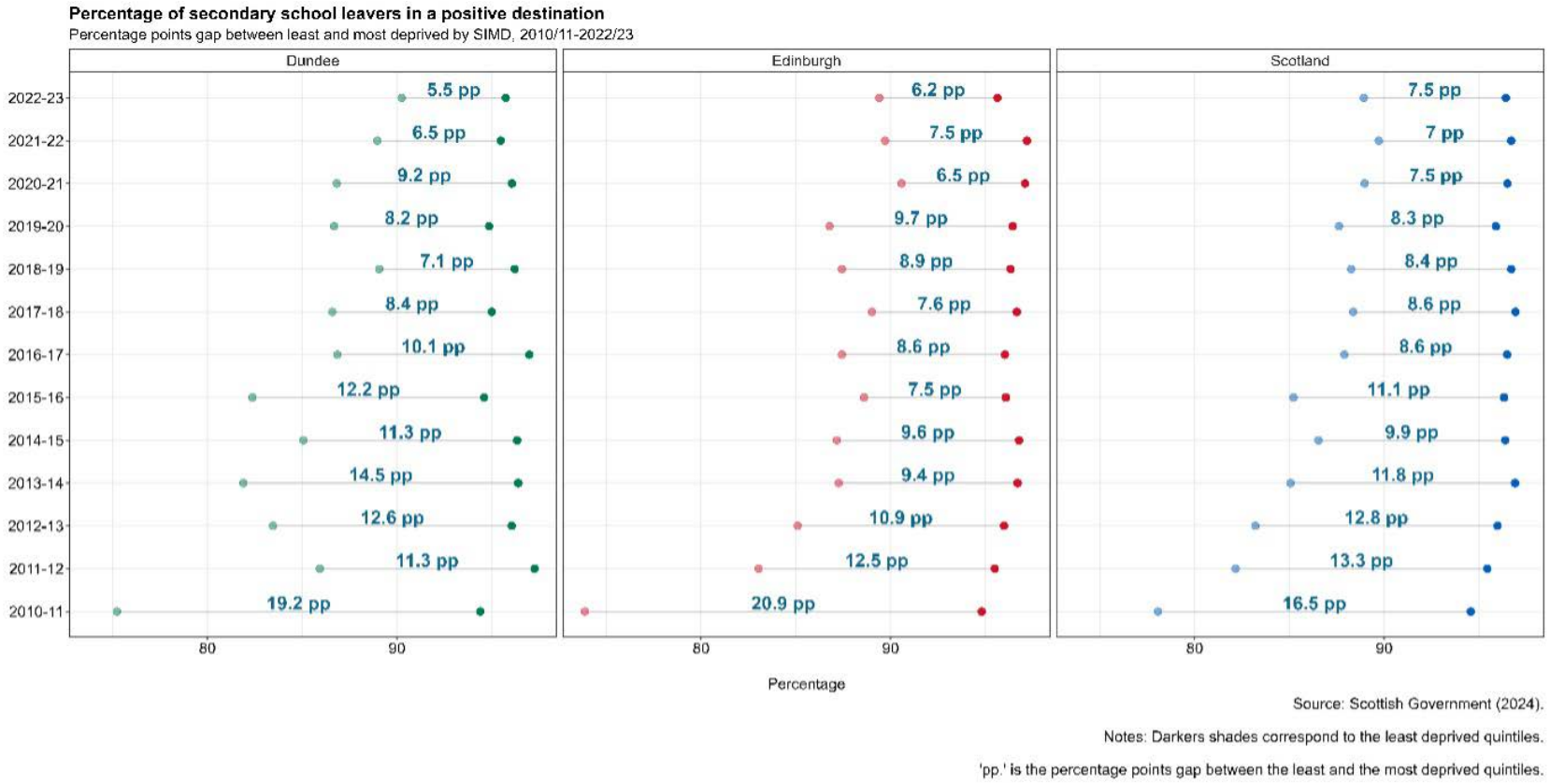
Appendix 1: *Percentage of secondary school pupils classified as "persistently absent" by Local Authorities (2010/11-2023/24)*



Appendix 2: *Rate of exclusions by Local Authorities (2010/11-2023/24)*



Appendix 3: *Rate of exclusions by selected Local Authorities and SIMD (2020/21-2022/23)*



Source: Scottish Government (2024).

Notes: Darkers shades correspond to the least deprived quintiles.

'pp.' is the percentage points gap between the least and the most deprived quintiles.

Appendix 4: *Percentage of secondary school leavers in a positive destination by selected Local Authorities and SIMD (2010/11-2022/23)*

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