EDITORIAL

Journal of
COMMUNITY SAFETY & WELL-BEING

Collaboration across sectors: Bridging gaps in substance use and mental health treatment for stronger communities

Anthony Coetzer-Liversage*,†

Effectively addressing community safety and well-being (CSWB) demands a collaborative approach across health, education, human services, and criminal justice sectors (Van Dijk et al., 2019). In recent years, growing recognition of the interconnected nature of these sectors – particularly concerning substance use and mental health – has catalyzed interest in coordinated strategies (Bartkowiak-Theron, 2024; Ricciardelli, 2025). This editorial reflects on my work in implementation science, particularly focusing on substance use disorders (SUDs) and mental health challenges, and explores how multi-sector collaboration can improve outcomes while incorporating perspectives from law enforcement and community safety professionals (Coetzer-Liversage et al., 2024a, 2024b; Hogue et al., 2024; Satcher et al., 2024).

THE ROLE OF IMPLEMENTATION SCIENCE IN COMMUNITY SAFETY AND WELL-BEING

Implementation science promotes the integration of evidence-based practices (EBPs) into routine use, aiming to enhance the quality and effectiveness of health services (Bauer & Kirchner, 2020). Beyond clinical effectiveness, this field emphasizes the contextual and systemic barriers that impact implementation. Key to this approach is identifying obstacles at individual, organizational, and structural levels – and developing strategies to overcome them (Bauer et al., 2015).

Implementation science is especially relevant within the CSWB framework, as it supports the translation of research into practical community interventions. CSWB strategies focus on mental and physical health, food security, housing, and financial stability. In this context, law enforcement and community safety professionals play critical roles in integrating evidence-based approaches into public safety practices (Carroll et al., 2018; Van Dijk et al., 2019). This reinforces the importance of multi-sector collaboration to address complex social issues – such as SUDs and mental health – through coordinated, harm-reducing strategies (Nilson, 2018).

Olswang and Goldstein (2017) underscore the essential role of collaboration in implementation science, emphasizing that partnerships among researchers, practitioners, administrators, and clients increase the likelihood of research being translated into meaningful EBP. Such collaborative efforts help bridge the research-to-practice gap by balancing scientific rigour with contextual relevance, ensuring interventions maintain both internal and external validity.

Similarly, Mitchell (2011) contends that although EBPs are gaining prominence, their adoption in behavioural health settings – particularly for youth with complex needs – remains limited. She advocates for integrating "practice wisdom," or the experiential knowledge of providers, with empirical evidence. This inclusive approach acknowledges the real-world constraints providers face and calls for implementation science to embrace complexity and centre both scientific knowledge and lived experience to improve the effectiveness and uptake of EBPs.

This call is echoed by Ammerman et al. (2014), who note that many public health interventions fail to achieve impact in community settings due to insufficient practitioner involvement in design, high resource demands, and limited scalability. To address these issues, they argue for greater reliance on practice-based evidence – interventions that are developed and tested in real-world environments with ongoing community and practitioner engagement. This shift is supported by policy and funding mechanisms such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Prevention Research Centers (PRCs), National Institute of Health's Clinical and Translational Science Awards (CTSAs), and the Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI), all of which prioritize dissemination and implementation research that reflects the realities of service delivery.

COLLABORATIVE MODELS FOR SUBSTANCE USE AND MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT

Effective collaboration between sectors such as law enforcement and public health is essential for tackling complex societal issues. Despite shared goals, differing professional cultures and priorities often hinder cooperation. Overcoming these barriers is critical to advancing public safety and health (Van Dijk et al., 2019).

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In my experience working with programs like Recovery Corps and research into linkage facilitation across multitudes of sectors (Hogue et al., 2024; Satcher et al., 2024), I have seen firsthand the positive impact of interdisciplinary collaboration in addressing substance use and mental health issues. By integrating law enforcement and public health efforts, we can develop more comprehensive strategies that not only provide care but also prevent unnecessary criminalization of individuals with SUDs (Satcher et al., 2024).

SERVEMINNESOTA: LEVERAGING COLLABORATIVE INNOVATION

ServeMinnesota, the state's Commission on National and Community Service, exemplifies collaborative innovation through AmeriCorps initiatives in education, public health, housing, and conservation. As director of the Healthy Futures Impact portfolio, I oversee three cross-sector programs: Recovery Corps, Public Health Corps, and Heading Home Corps. These programs enhance service system capacity by placing AmeriCorps members in community organizations, creating a networked approach to addressing critical needs.

In partnership with Ampact and the University of Minnesota, these efforts have increased workforce capacity and strengthened support for underserved populations. My research bridges the gap between science and practice by evaluating and expanding the evidence base for these initiatives. These efforts have supported the health and resilience of Minnesota's communities, especially through the integration of peer support into community-based solutions.

Additionally, as an adjunct assistant professor at the University of Rhode Island, I contribute to education, mentorship, and applied research in substance use prevention and treatment. My involvement in the Justice Community Opioid Innovation Network (JCOIN) further supports the adoption of medication for opioid use disorder (MOUD) among justice-involved populations. These academic and community-based roles reinforce the importance of innovation and collaboration in advancing public health.

THE JOURNAL'S FOCUS ON SOCIAL INNOVATION AND EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES

The *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being* emphasizes social innovation and evidence-based strategies, particularly for addressing substance use and mental health. By focusing on social innovation and EBPs, the journal fosters a deeper understanding of how collaboration can enhance CSWB (Bauer & Kirchner, 2020). Its focus on data-driven, technology-enabled solutions aligns with efforts to expand telehealth and digital recovery tools, especially for marginalized populations (Jones & Sandford, 2018; Lyles et al., 2021).

In this edition, my colleagues and I share "Extending the Peer Support Specialist Pathway for Supporting Recovery," which highlights Recovery Corps – a program training individuals with lived SUD experience to deliver peer support in underserved communities. The article explores demand, feasibility, and impact, showing how Recovery Corps builds workforce pathways and strengthens service delivery through sectoral collaboration.

The Recovery Corps model advances implementation science by involving practitioners, policymakers, and community organizations in the co-design and placement of AmeriCorps members to deliver peer support. This collaborative process enhances contextual fit and increases the relevance of interventions (Weisz et al., 2014). In alignment with Albers et al.'s (2020), Recovery Corps demonstrates how collaborative partnerships support effective design and implementation.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION

Despite its promise, cross-sector collaboration faces persistent challenges – organizational silos, cultural disconnects, and resource constraints often impede progress. Tensions between law enforcement and public health entities, shaped by historical inequities and differing priorities, also complicate partnerships (Carroll et al., 2023). Yet, these barriers also offer opportunities for innovation and relationship building (Rodriguez, 2018).

Implementation science offers a road map to overcoming these challenges. By analyzing how each sector contributes to CSWB, we can build capacity, promote mutual understanding, and improve implementation efforts across sectors (Taxman & Belenko, 2025; Van Deinse et al., 2023). This includes developing evidence-based programs and implementation strategies to capacitate the different sectors in understanding each other and improving collaboration between these sectors (Van Dijk et al., 2019). One such strategy is the use of local change teams (LCTs), which bring together members from relevant sectors to work collaboratively as change agents, facilitating the implementation of programs within their own systems while supporting continuous improvement program implementation (Martin et al., 2021). This comprehensive approach to implementation science offers a clear path for overcoming barriers and enhancing service integration across sectors.

CONCLUSION

Collaboration among public health, law enforcement, and community organizations is essential to improve CSWB. This editorial highlights the need for sustainable, cross-sector strategies that enhance resilience and equity – particularly during times of crisis. Policy shifts supporting community-based education, integrated training, and digital infrastructure can close service gaps. Through aligned efforts and evidence-based collaboration, we can build responsive systems that promote both health and safety.

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COMMENTARY

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Regaining the trust of communities: What can we learn from the return of neighbourhood policing to England and Wales

Peter Williams*, Ian Pepper†

INTRODUCTION

The UK government has announced significant financial investment in neighbourhood policing, with 13,000 police officers, community support officers and volunteer special constables to patrol communities (Home Office, 2024). Neighbourhood policing is about connecting with communities, building a culture of mutual trust and confidence with the public, identifying problems and targeting offenders whilst providing solutions to perennial community problems. The College of Policing (2023a) highlights the vital role neighbourhood policing has in keeping the public safe.

In a similar way, police forces across Canada continue to invest in community policing initiatives. Mehmi et al. (2021) discuss the introduction of Neighbourhood Community Officers by the Toronto Police Service and how this is gradually improving trust with hard-to-reach communities, whilst Hodgkinson and Pringle (2023) explore an alternate approach to community reassurance by the police service in Saskatoon, a city with high crime rates. Dumas et al. (2021) highlight from their research in Quebec how interest in the policing of communities wanes as other aspects of policing become the priority.

Yet, as in England and Wales, police forces across nations continue to struggle with limited finances, resources and trust by the public. There are, though, opportunities to evaluate approaches in different jurisdictions (Hodgkinson & Pringle, 2023). We should do more to share and evaluate alternate approaches to solving perennial policing issues, as such the authors have detailed neighbourhood policing across England and Wales to aid discussion and inform opportunities for collaborative research.

NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICING IN ENGLAND AND WALES

As a result of wide-ranging reviews, police forces across England and Wales have recently announced that Neighbourhood Policing Teams (NPTs) are to be reinvigorated with new strategies, structures, funding and resources. NPTs will incorporate multi-agency partnership approaches, part-funded by the Home Office, to tackle and regenerate areas affected by serious and organized crime groups. The government suggests that 50% of crime is committed by 5% of individuals (Gov.UK, 2021), indicating how a small cadre of individuals are at the core of the crime problems. New local policing initiatives will be led by a superintendent, with a focus on place within the neighbourhood, coupled with responsive, proactive and investigative resources, including police officers, community support officers and volunteer special constables being dedicated to each area.

This is good news for communities and is modelled on earlier representations of neighbourhood policing, which were envisaged 20 years earlier and implemented by the roll-out of the National Neighbourhood Policing Plan (Home Office, 2004). This approach is conducive to the requirements of the *Crime and Disorder Act 1998*, placing a responsibility on local authorities as responsible partners to execute an active role in reducing crime and disorder in their areas, a function central to the approach (Sheldon & Williams, 2022). This strategy was also popular with the public, who not only witnessed the efforts of several agencies in resolving perennial problems but also welcomed the visibility of police on the street and, more importantly, a reduction in the fear of crime.

Traditionally, policing in England and Wales was primarily reactive, certainly until the introduction of intelligence-led policing and the National Intelligence Model, which effectively facilitated a shift toward greater proactive policing. In some ways, this dovetailed well with NPTs and the Community Safety Partnerships (CSPs), with partnership working through multi-agency forums mandated by the Crime and Disorder legislation. This corresponds with the move in 1990s New York to transform policing to the three Ps of "prevention, partnerships and problem solving" (Bratton, 2005).

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This, aided by credible intelligence gathered from the local communities themselves, became a far better model of successful policing, and in addition to community problems being resolved outside of the criminal justice system, recorded crime fell to record levels. Whilst there was some criticism directed at the CSPs, there was a clear consensus that partnership working enhanced policing. Unfortunately, the considerable strides forward in partnership working and problem solving were brought to an abrupt halt after the 2008 financial crash, with the implementation of austerity.

Outside of the comfort zone and control of policing, there were compulsory reductions in staff numbers and harsh budget restrictions, with chief officers having little option but to return operational policing to a reactive model. Linked to this, intelligence analysis units were disbanded or merged, and skilled staff left the service, either voluntarily or were left with no choice but to seek other opportunities.

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC, 2017) raised concerns that local neighbourhood policing was being eroded. The College of Policing continues to highlight the essential nature of neighbourhood policing, with the now His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary (His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS), 2023) also reiterating its crucial nature, the importance of allocating rather than abstracting resources and the benefits of collaborating with other agencies to assist solving persistent problems. Skogan (1996) highlights how the police need to listen and respond to community concerns, deliver commitments to solve local problems and, as a result, earn the trust of the public, rather than just assuming it exists. Of course, such trust is easily lost.

Intravia et al. (2020) explore how news events shared via social media can impact the trust and legitimacy of the police, acknowledging that the interaction with the media is not the only factor affecting perceptions. However, it certainly appeared that the killing of George Floyd in 2020 in Minneapolis, USA, negatively impacted the public's trust and confidence in policing, leading to wide-scale demonstrations in many nations.

England and Wales have also gained an insight from the College of Policing (2023b) review into the disappearance of Nicola Bulley. The review highlights the impact on confidence in policing when local people, eager to assist, are not properly coordinated and managed, leading to an uncontrollable explosion of comments and speculation on social media. This illustrates the ever-evolving and complex nature of neighbourhood policing, that as well as working in communities, communities of interest on social media also need to be proactively engaged. Community groups need to be engaged, coordinated and professionally directed to assist in resolving the problem.

The Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) specifically has endured a drastic loss of public trust. The Baroness Casey Review (2023) identifies how the MPS is failing women and children, with cases of murder and rape by serving police officers, such as Wayne Couzens and David Carrick, understandably having negative ramifications across policing. Additionally, the impact of austerity on frontline policing and the impact of institutional racism, sexism and homophobia internally, is amplified by 24/7 news and social media. This all impacts the policing of communities, with the loss of trust having implications for the whole police service. HMICFRS reports that trust and confidence in policing is at an all-time low (Cooke, 2023).

If the response of local communities to recent promulgations concerning NPTs is handled effectively, this may assist in turning a corner and herald a "new age" for policing. The initiative to reinvigorate NPTs, if well led, culturally embedded within the service and professionally delivered, will not solve every problem but could go some way in ameliorating this broken relationship and breakdown of trust and confidence, re-building the key principle that policing in the UK is founded on: policing by consent.

The new Labour government appears to have accepted this concept. An announcement in December 2024 committed more police resources to neighbourhood policing, ensuring that each individual neighbourhood will have a named, contactable officer for their communities. The government has named this the "neighbourhood policing guarantee" and views this as a way to challenge the lack of visibility on the streets, anti-social behaviour, knife crime and violence against women and girls (Home Office, 2024).

CONCLUSION

There seems no doubt that trust in policing is low across many communities in England and Wales. Recent events worldwide, shared via social media, have impacted this. However, there are evidence-based models where policing together with communities can be successful. An evaluation of such a partnership approach by the Toronto Police Service suggests that the trust of minority groups toward policing in hard-to-reach communities is gradually improving (Mehmi et al., 2021), but embedding such community-based approaches to policing takes time (Dumas et al., 2021).

From the inception of the *Crime and Disorder Act* until the implementation of austerity, tangible progress was made in England and Wales for neighbourhood policing. This can be replicated once again and as Bratton (2005) asserts, as the police work in partnership with communities, government institutions and the wider criminal justice system, they can have a significant impact on crime and public disorder. This aligns with the vision of community policing and when applied effectively, it is effective. However, as Dumas et al. (2021) suggest, further comparative research across jurisdictions is required.

As the police service in England and Wales finds itself at a crossroads in terms of public confidence and a situation of enhanced accountability, policing jurisdictions should share experiences and learn from each other's successes and failures. Provided chief officers are given the resources as indicated in the government's recent announcement, including reinvigoration of CSPs, the service has the opportunity to ameliorate complex issues and renew public confidence and trust in policing.

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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

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Mental disorder symptoms in Canadian HEMS personnel: a national-level study

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ABSTRACT

Emergency services personnel are regularly exposed to potentially traumatic events with substantial consequences for their mental health. Current estimations from Canadian emergency medical service (EMS) providers show a prevalence of clinically relevant symptomology of 20% or higher in anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress. Interestingly, evidence from Canadian helicopter emergency medical services (HEMS) demonstrates a substantially lower prevalence rate (i.e., <10%) of mental disorder symptoms. However, current Canadian data stem from a single HEMS service. A comprehensive assessment of mental disorders from a larger, nationwide sample is presently absent, which was the purpose of the current study. A sample of 215 HEMS personnel (male n = 165, 76.6%) from six Canadian provinces (AB, BC, SK, MB, ON, NS) completed an online survey measuring several mental disorder symptoms. The results revealed a prevalence of clinically elevated symptoms of 7% in posttraumatic stress disorder, 16.8% in major depressive disorder, 5.6% in anxiety, and 3.7% stress. Paramedics reported a significantly higher prevalence of clinically elevated symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and major depressive disorder symptoms compared to other HEMS personnel. The findings indicate a higher prevalence of some mental disorder symptoms (i.e., post-traumatic disorder, major depressive disorder) compared to existing data from a single Canadian HEMS organization. There are several psychological (e.g., coping mechanisms), organizational (e.g., time for structured debriefing), and extraneous factors (e.g., COVID-19 pandemic) that may have influenced the results. Yet, the prevalence levels remain much below those reported in on-the-ground EMS workers, which warrants further investigation.

Keywords Mental health; first responders; helicopter emergency medical services; PTSD.

INTRODUCTION

Emergency medical service (EMS) personnel (e.g., physicians, nurses, paramedics, pilots) work in highly dynamic environments, which expose them to unpredictable and potentially psychologically traumatic events (PPTEs, which consist of actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence; APA, 2022) much more frequently than would be expected for the general public (Carleton et al., 2019; CIPSRT, 2019). The stressors may negatively impact physiological responses (e.g., heart rate variability; Petrowski et al., 2023) and well-being, as well as lead to an increase in the prevalence of mental disorders among EMS personnel (Lawn et al., 2020). A recent meta-analysis (Petrie et al., 2018) estimated the prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental disorders in ambulance personnel at more than 10%. Canadian data suggest over one in five EMS workers reported elevated symptoms for major depressive disorder (29.6%), PTSD (24.5%), and social anxiety disorder (20%, Carleton et al., 2018). Taken together, current evidence highlights the immense emotional burden of working in paramedicine.

In helicopter emergency medical services (HEMS), personnel engage in PPTEs in a particularly complex fashion (e.g., attending to severe accidents, events of life-threatening injuries, severe pediatric cases) as a function of transport using helicopters. HEMS personnel missions typically involve PPTEs with a high chance of mortality. Long transportation times from rural communities and changes in weather can further complicate missions and serve as added stressors on HEMS personnel. Despite the additional stressors, research examining mental disorder symptoms among HEMS personnel showed much lower prevalence compared to on-the-ground emergency health

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care professionals (Carleton et al., 2018). For example, Reid et al. (2022) collected data from 161 Norwegian HEMS personnel evidencing positive screening prevalence proportions for PTSD of 3.9%, and for major depressive disorder and generalized anxiety of 1.9%.

The first study assessing mental disorder symptoms in Canadian HEMS personnel involved 100 participants from a single air ambulance service in mid-Western Canada (Harenberg et al., 2018). There were 5% of participants who screened positive for clinically elevated symptoms of PTSD, which was comparable to the general population (i.e., 3.5–6.8%; Kessler et al., 2005) and the Norwegian sample (Reid et al., 2022), but lower than a national Canadian paramedic sample (i.e., 24.5%; Carleton et al., 2018). The prevalence of clinically significant screens for depression symptoms (i.e., 3%), anxiety symptoms (i.e., 9.1%), and stress (i.e., 16.5%) were also lower in the Canadian HEMS personnel sample (Harenberg et al., 2018) than for the national Canadian paramedic sample (Carleton et al., 2018); however, the studies differed in the measures to assess the symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress.

The current HEMS personnel mental health research used relatively small sample sizes from single organizations, limiting the generalizability of results; nevertheless, the differences relative to extant paramedic research suggest that, pending additional evidence, there may be important differences between HEMS personnel and on-the-ground emergency health care professionals that may warrant attention from researchers, clinicians, and policymakers. Before such exploration may be undertaken, data from nationally representative samples ought to be collected. Hence, the current study was designed to assess the prevalence of clinically significant mental disorder symptoms in a large sample of Canadian HEMS personnel.

METHODS

Participants

There were 215 HEMS personnel from six Canadian provinces (AB, BC, SK, MB, ON, NS) who participated in the current study. Most participants were male (n = 165; 76.7%) and identified as white (n = 191; 88.8%). Participants had an average of 19.2 (standard deviation (SD) = 10.0) years of job experience, 11.6 (SD = 7.9) years of HEMS experience, and took 13.1 (SD = 11.6) HEMS shifts per month. Most participants worked as paramedics (n = 74; 34.4%), pilots (n = 65; 30.2%), physicians (n = 36; 16.7%), dispatchers (n = 24; 11.2%), nurses (n = 9; 4.2%), or other staff (n = 7; 3.3%).

Procedures and Measures

The current study was approved by the ethics board of the Saskatchewan Health Authority (REB-20-09) and conducted with permission of the participating HEMS organizations. The design and reporting followed the consensus-based checklist by Sharma et al. (2021). The link to an anonymous online survey was shared with the HEMS organizations for distribution via internal e-mail addresses. The participants indicated their consent to the study by completing the survey. Demographic information and mental health symptoms (i.e., PTSD, major depressive disorder, anxiety, and stress) were collected.

Post-traumatic Stress

The PTSD checklist (PCL-5; Blevins et al., 2015) assesses PTSD symptoms on 20 items, which are rated using a Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 4 (extremely). A total severity score (i.e., sum of all items) was used for the current study. Following the DSM-5, participants were flagged for clinically meaningful PTSD symptoms if they showed a severity score > 33 and elevated responses (i.e., 2 or higher) in all segments of the PCL-5. Good internal consistency was also observed in the present study (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.96$).

Major Depressive Disorder

The Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9, Kroenke et al., 2001) was used to assess symptoms of major depressive disorder. The nine items are scored on a Likert scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 3 (nearly every day). A total severity score (i.e., sum of all items) was used for the current study, with a score of 10 or above indicating clinically meaningful major depressive disorder symptoms. The internal consistency of the scale in the present study was satisfactory (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.88$).

Anxiety and Stress

The anxiety and stress subscales of the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-21, Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) were used. The seven items for each subscale are scored on a Likert scale ranging from 0 (never) to 3 (almost always). A total severity score (i.e., sum of all items) was used for the current study, with a score of >7 for anxiety and >14 for stress indicating clinically meaningful symptoms (i.e., mild or above). The internal consistency of both subscales was satisfactory (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.85$).

Statistical Analysis

Categorical variables were summarized in counts and percentages, while continuous variables were aggregated in means and standard deviations. Chi-squared tests with Fisher's correction (where applicable) were used to compare categorical variables. For continuous variables, bivariate Pearson correlations were calculated to assess the relationship between measures. Independent t-tests with Cohen's d or one-way analysis of variance with partial eta-squared effect sizes were calculated to compare differences between professional groups within HEMS (e.g., pilots, physicians, paramedics, dispatchers). If assumptions (e.g., normality) were violated, non-parametric analyses were used. All analyses were conducted in JASP 0.17.2 and a significance level of 0.05 was set.

RESULTS

The descriptive and demographic information are reported in Table I. There were 15 participants who screened positively for clinically elevated symptoms of PTSD (7%). In addition, 36 participants screened positively for clinically elevated symptoms of major depressive disorder (16.8%) and anxiety (n = 12; 5.6%), and 8 participants showed elevated stress (3.7%). All self-reported symptom scores were inter-correlated and reported in Table II.

There were statistically significant differences across job types for symptoms of PTSD, $F_{(5,208)} = 5.38$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.11$, as detailed in Table III. Paramedics reported statistically significantly higher levels of PTSD symptoms compared to other

TABLE I Sample descriptives

Variable	Mean (SD)/Count (%)
Age	
Gender	Male = 165 (76.7%)
	Female = 49 (22.8%)
	Other = 1 (0.5%)
Ethnicity	White = 191 (88.4%)
	Did not disclose = 8 (3.7%)
	South Asian = 5 (2.3%)
	Other = 5 (2.3%)
	Black = 3 (1.4%)
	Aboriginal = 3 (1.4%)
Province	Ontario = 108 (50.2%)
	Alberta = 44 (20.5%)
	Nova Scotia = 23 (10.7%)
	Saskatchewan = 21 (9.8%)
	British Columbia = 11 (5.1%)
	Manitoba = 8 (3.7%)
Job	Paramedic = 74 (34.4%)
	Pilot = 65 (30.2%)
	Physician = 36 (16.7%)
	Dispatcher = 24 (11.2%)
	Nurse = 9 (4.2%)
	Other = 7 (3.3%)
Years of job experience	19.3 (10.0)
Years of HEMS experience	11.6 (7.9)
Shifts per month	13.1 (11.6)
PCL score	11.4 (14.3)
PCL prevalence	15 (7.0%)
PHQ-9 score	4.4 (4.7)
PHQ-9 prevalence	36 (16.7%)
DASS-21 Stress	4.0 (4.4)
DASS-21 Stress prevalence	8 (3.7%)
DASS-21 Anxiety	1.5 (2.7)
DASS-21 Anxiety prevalence	12 (5.6%)

Notes: DASS = Depression Anxiety Stress Scales; HEMS = helicopter emergency medical services; PCL = post-traumatic stress disorder checklist; PHQ-9 = Patient Health Questionnaire-9; SD = standard deviation.

subgroups. Paramedics also reported significantly higher symptoms of major depressive disorder, $F_{(5,208)} = 3.45$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.08$, and statistically significantly higher proportion of positive screenings for major depressive disorder compared to other job types (27.0%, $\chi^2 = 12.74$, $p = 0.026$, Cramer's V = 0.24). For the remaining variables, there were no other statistically significant differences between job types. There were also no statistically significant differences based on other demographic categories (see Table III).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present study was to examine the symptoms of mental disorders in Canadian HEMS personnel. Nationally and internationally, the well-being and mental health in this population is understudied. Only a single study with a Canadian HEMS sample exists (Harenberg et al., 2018), suggesting a low prevalence of symptoms of post-traumatic stress, depression, anxiety, and stress. Yet, these data were collected from 100 participants in a single Canadian HEMS organization. The present study is a national-level update from six Canadian provinces with a substantially larger sample size. The current findings suggest a higher prevalence of elevated post-traumatic stress and depressive symptoms than indicated by previous data.

The prevalence of clinically elevated symptoms of post-traumatic stress in the current sample was 9.4%, which is substantially higher than a previous Canadian prevalence study (i.e., 5%; Harenberg et al., 2018) and more than double of the prevalence found in a study from Norway (i.e., 3.9%; Reid et al., 2022). Accordingly, the prevalence of clinically elevated symptoms of major depressive disorder in the present study was also much higher (16.8%) compared to existing HEMS studies. The most obvious explanation for both findings would be that the data from this study were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced HEMS personnel to be in close spaces with infected patients for long durations. The fear of potential infection and long absence of pre-hospital guidelines on how to safely transport COVID patients (Albrecht et al., 2020) may have aggravated some mental disorder symptoms. Another explanation could be the administration of the online survey. In the study by Harenberg et al. (2018), e-mails were sent from a researcher who was also affiliated with the HEMS organization. This may have jeopardized the sense of anonymity for some participants, potentially leading to more socially desirable answers (i.e., underreporting of symptoms). In the present study, e-mails were sent from an unaffiliated account and clearly mentioned a principal investigator outside of any HEMS organization, which may have fostered a sense of anonymity for the responses of the participants.

Paramedics in the present study experienced significantly higher rates of post-traumatic stress and symptoms of depression compared to the other professional groups in HEMS. Previous research identified organizational factors (e.g., lack of safety particularly during COVID-19, Petrie et al., 2022), environmental factors (e.g., rural care, Courtney et al., 2013), and psychological factors (e.g., burnout, Reardon et al., 2020), among others that may negatively influence paramedics' well-being. For the present study, the paramedics were part of the same organizations and missions as other staff (e.g., physicians). As such, some of the environmental or organizational stressors could be excluded as possible reasons as they were the same for several subgroups of participants. However, in contrast to HEMS physicians and other staff, some of the HEMS paramedics might have also been involved in regular EMS shifts.

TABLE II Correlations of mental health variables

Variable	PCL	PHQ-9	DASS – Stress
PCL	—		
PHQ-9	0.68**		
DASS – stress	0.77**	0.72**	
DASS – anxiety	0.71**	0.71**	0.75**

Notes: ** $p < 0.001$.

Additional EMS shifts may limit rest time for paramedics, as several studies reported poor sleep quality due to shift work in this population (for a review, see Sofianopoulos et al., 2012). While there are plausible explanations, the number of EMS shifts was not assessed in the present study and reasons for elevated mental disorder symptoms in HEMS paramedics should be explored further using quantitative and qualitative approaches.

While the prevalence rates of clinically elevated symptoms of post-traumatic stress and major depressive disorder in the present study were higher than previous estimations, it should be noted that both remain at much lower levels compared to other on-the-ground medical and non-medical first responders (e.g., EMS paramedics, police; Carleton et al., 2018). As such, the question remains why HEMS staff are less affected by mental disorder symptoms, despite the unique challenges, stressors, and exposures that come along with working in this field. There are several possible explanations to answer this question, which can be grouped into individual factors and organizational support factors.

Among individual factors are motivations and coping mechanisms. HEMS professionals are required to complete extensive additional training and undergo rigorous selection processes before they are permitted to work in the field. As such, those only especially motivated individuals choose to engage in the additional training and may see the chance to work in HEMS as a privilege (Shalev et al., 2019). In addition, HEMS personnel may possess enhanced coping strategies to manage challenges well. In a recent qualitative study, van Herpen et al. (2024) revealed that HEMS personnel engage in effective coping strategies before, during, and after a dispatch. Before a dispatch, HEMS personnel shared that they have some information to mentally prepare for what lies ahead of them. They will have received some detailed information from other first responders who attended to the scene already. In addition, HEMS personnel were able to separate the quality of their work from the outcome for the patient. Many times, HEMS will be called to missions in which the outcome is almost predetermined. Participants also shared that repeated traumatic scenes become routine, which may help to regulate stress better. During a dispatch, HEMS personnel described that they could create an emotional distance to the scene, as they are able to solely focus on their mission and work. This may entail removing themselves from the scene when their work is done. After a dispatch, HEMS personnel engaged in periods of reflection and structured debrief with others. Family support was also a contributing factor to well-being. Yet, future research is warranted to explore which mechanisms are most effective to enhance short- and long-term coping in HEMS personnel.

From an organizational perspective, several factors were mentioned as well. HEMS personnel remain on a team with the same professionals regularly, fostering trust, team support, and cohesion. Safe conversations about traumatic experiences and the emotional toll of HEMS work can happen in such teams (van Herpen et al., 2024). In this environment, peer support is central to well-being. The effectiveness of peer support may even be magnified in teams with a longer history of working together and enhanced trust. The members might know each other well and can anticipate if someone needs peer support, in some cases without the person sharing their need (van Herpen et al., 2024).

The current study should be interpreted in light of its limitations. The current study did not explore psychological, organizational, or other extraneous factors, which may affect the mental health of HEMS personnel. Future research in this area is warranted to create a deeper understanding of the findings of the present study. While the sample size in the present study is much larger than previous research (e.g., Harenberg et al., 2018; Reid et al., 2022), a portion of eligible participants did not respond to the invitation to complete the survey. Hence, the sample might be biased as

TABLE III Mental disorder symptoms by job

Variable	Paramedic (*N* = 74)	Pilot (*N* = 65)	Physician (*N* = 36)	Dispatcher (*N* = 24)	Nurse (*N* = 9)	Other (*N* = 7)
PCL	17.8 (18.0)	7.2 (9.8)	7.5 (10.9)	11.5 (13.4)	5.4 (6.1)	8.9 (9.8)
PCL prev.	10 (13.5%)	6 (9.2%)	2 (5.6%)	2 (8.3%)	0	0
PHQ-9	6.0 (5.1)	3.7 (4.6)	2.8 (3.0)	4.9 (5.4)	2.3 (2.6)	4.3 (2.5)
PHQ-9 prev.	20 (27.0%)	9 (13.8%)	2 (5.6%)	5 (20.8%)	0	0
DASS-21 stress	5.3 (5.3)	3.1 (3.9)	3.4 (3.8)	4.1 (3.9)	2.6 (2.6)	3.0 (2.0)
DASS-21 stress prev.	7 (9.5%)	0	1 (2.8%)	0	0	0
DASS-21 anx.	2.3 (3.3)	1.3 (2.4)	0.9 (2.1)	1.5 (2.5)	0.2 (0.4)	1.0 (0.6)
DASS-21 anx. prev.	7 (9.5%)	2 (3.1%)	1 (2.8%)	2 (8.3%)	0	0

Notes: prev. = prevalence; all prevalence estimates are presented in counts and percentages, all other variables in means and standard deviations. DASS, Depression Anxiety Stress Scales; PCL, post-traumatic stress disorder checklist; PHQ-9, Patient Health Questionnaire-9.

only motivated participants may have completed the current study. The cross-sectional nature of data collection further limits its interpretability. Symptoms of mental disorders are fluctuating. Longitudinal studies may shed more light on the prevalence of mental disorder symptoms in HEMS workers over time. Assessing whether HEMS personnel also engaged in EMS or other work would have contributed to the explanation of the presentation of post-traumatic stress and depressive symptoms. Lastly, collecting data whether HEMS personnel engaged in external support to deal with their mental disorder symptoms would have also been of value.

CONCLUSION

The present study contributes significantly to our understanding of the mental well-being of HEMS personnel in Canada. Previous data (Harenberg et al., 2018) most likely underestimated the emotional burden of HEMS work, due to a smaller sample size and data collection from only the mid-west of Canada, among other reasons. The data from the present study delivers information from a large sample of HEMS participants from six Canadian provinces. Yet, similar to Harenberg et al. (2018), the present study found a relatively low prevalence rate of mental disorder symptoms in HEMS personnel compared to other first responders. While previous research suspected underreporting of symptoms as a possible explanation, new evidence from the present study and recent data from Norway (Reid et al., 2022) may suggest otherwise. These findings may pose novel questions for future research exploring the reasons for the low prevalence rate of mental disorder symptoms in Canadian HEMS.

Future research may wish to apply a biopsychosocial approach. Biologically, it may be worth to explore physiological (e.g., skin conductance, heart rate variability, heart rate) predictors and adaptations to traumatic stress in HEMS work. Associations between physiological markers and PTSD have been well established previously in other populations (Gutner et al., 2010). Some research has explored physiological demands of HEMS work (Carchietti et al., 2011; Petrowski et al., 2023); however, the link between physiological markers and mental well-being in HEMS has yet to be examined. Psychologically, more research is warranted to explore personality factors and coping strategies in HEMS workers. Drawing on the findings by van Herpen et al. (2024), more exploratory studies should assess the relationship between adaptive personality traits, coping mechanisms, and mental disorder symptoms in HEMS personnel. Lastly, research on social perspectives may focus on dynamics within HEMS teams as well as organizational support that may decrease the prevalence of mental disorder symptoms. For example, peer support and team cohesion may be a significant factor in this relationship, with evidence from other fields supporting this hypothesis (e.g., armed forces, Du Preez et al., 2012).

There may also be additional organizational factors. For instance, to our knowledge, there is an absence of research exploring psychological selection criteria of HEMS staff, both for joining the organization and also for the pairing with other professionals. Research in this area may shed more light on the factors that HEMS organizations (in Canada and other countries) consider when making staffing decisions. Based on the recommendations, it is apparent that quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods studies may be utilized to answer the questions resulting from the present study. Such research is worthwhile as it may deepen our understanding why initial findings suggest that HEMS workers are emotionally well compared to other first responder and public safety personnel groups with similar traumatic exposure. Such knowledge may assist these groups to further prevent the negative impact of mental disorder symptoms in the workplace.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

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Police–community dynamics of trust: Who trusts whom, and does it matter?

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ABSTRACT

In the current environment of tension surrounding police reform, police–community relationships remain strained. Studies indicate interactions with the public play a role in officer wellness, experiences of safety, and career sustainability. Here, we adapted measures of trust and sense of community (SOC) to explore police–community trust dynamics. Surveys were deployed among officers (N = 169) in nine police departments and residents of five counties of southern New Jersey (N = 285). Results indicate community members hold higher levels of both SOC and trust in police than do officers toward the community. SOC levels were significant predictors of trust in both samples. However, the models provided only a weak to moderate explanation for variation in trust. We discuss the implications of these results for police–community interactions.

Key Words Police attitudes; community interaction; sense of community; trust.

INTRODUCTION

Policing practice occurs within contexts informed by reciprocal assessments of social conditions and individual behaviours between officers and members of the public. In this paper, we argue trust-building is a process with the potential to reverberate throughout aspects of police–community dynamics, including building and maintaining the legitimacy of policing (e.g., Hawdon, 2008; Kochel, 2019; Mourtgos & Adams, 2019; Nix et al., 2018; Stoutland, 2001). Bottoms and Tankebe (2012) argue legitimacy is conditional and dependent on the interplay between public and police assessments of one another's bases of power-holding and obedience. We argue dynamics of trust between police officers and members of the public are similarly dialogic and responsive. Here, we compare levels of reciprocal trust between police officers and members of the communities they serve, to (1) identify areas of difference and (2) examine whether trust is associated with another community-based assessment – *sense of community* (SOC).

Previous examinations of trust related to policing reference different models and interrelated concepts including organizational justice, legitimacy, confidence, compliance, fear of crime, cynicism, and social cohesiveness and order (e.g., Cao, 2015; Carr & Maxwell, 2018; Goldsmith, 2005; Hamm et al., 2017; Jackson & Sunshine, 2007; Kääriäinen & Sirén, 2012; Mourtgos et al., 2020; Stoutland, 2001). Cao (2015) describes trust as reciprocal, relational risk-taking between individuals or individuals and institutions. Hawdon (2008) elaborates by stressing trust also reflects assessment of an individual's behaviour within a specific role (e.g., police officer) and is essential to developing bonding capital. While policing literature uses no uniformly accepted measure of trust, we, like others, explore trust by examining measures of officers' and residents' reciprocal care or benevolence, capability or competence, respect, fairness, dependability, and influence or voice (e.g., Carr & Maxwell, 2018; Hamm et al., 2017; Jackson & Sunshine, 2007; Stoutland, 2001).

In the United States, police–community dynamics are complicated by the decentralized nature of policing across overlapping federal, state, county, and municipal agencies. Thus, officers in one jurisdiction are subject to public criticism following events that occur in another with little recourse. Police–community dynamics are further exacerbated by a recent "war on cops" rhetoric (MacDonald, 2016a, 2016b, 2017), despite a lack of unequivocal evidence (Nix et al., 2018; Shjarback & Maguire, 2019; White et al., 2019, 2023). A rhetoric of this sort can have a lasting impact on individual officers

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and, as a result, on police culture(s). For example, studies of police officers (e.g., Edwards et al., 2021; Nix & Wolfe, 2018; Velazquez & Hernandez, 2019) associate public criticism with negative outcomes for officers' self-legitimacy, mental health, and professional attitudes. Thus, officers experience tension between *macro*-level assessments of history and institutional legitimacy and *individual*-level evaluation of personal relationships, service, and safety.

Policing scholars have previously examined factors in assessing the public's trust in policing as a social institution, police officers as individuals, and officers' trust in their own agencies or organizations (e.g., Flexon et al., 2009; Haas et al., 2015; Hamm et al., 2017; Kochel, 2019). Fewer studies focus on officers' trust in the communities they serve (Carr & Maxwell, 2018; Kääriäinen & Sirén, 2012; Mourtgos et al., 2020). Scholars have proposed a variety of trust models; our study uses Stoutland's (2001) framework, which builds on a qualitative study of police–community relationships, highlighting four contributing factors – competence, dependability, respect, and shared priorities or interests. Following Hawdon (2008), we required participants to assess how others might fulfill expectations within an assigned social role (i.e., as resident or police officer). We also tailored our measurement of trust to one specific hypothetical context – officer-involved shootings – to avoid the limitations of generalized trust measures (Kääriäinen & Sirén, 2012). Given the importance of localized, street-level interaction in public perceptions of police services and capacity, comparing trust levels among individuals living and serving in one geographic area offers a different lens on trust dynamics compared to a focus on macro- or meso-level institutional confidence or legitimacy.

Our study also explores the potential association between SOC and trust. SOC, broadly defined, is, "the fundamental human phenomenon of collective experience" (Peterson et al., 2008, p. 62), and, as a measure of community psychology, assesses belongingness, influence and impact, needs fulfillment, and connectedness (Stewart & Townley, 2020). In their review, Stewart and Townley (2020) found higher SOC levels significantly predict or mediate measures of psychological and social well-being across populations and contexts. With trust and SOC in mind, we address two research questions. First, how do levels of trust and SOC compare between members of the public and police officers within one geographic area? Second, can SOC, as a validated measurement of community belonging, be used to explore trends in police–community trust? In doing so, we contribute to an evolving body of literature focused on understanding the dynamics of police–community relationships to support efforts at constructive change.

STUDY CONTEXT

This paper represents one part of a larger interdisciplinary research project initiated in 2018 to explore the roots of conflict between the public and police following incidents of police-involved violence (Bonnan-White et al., 2022; Tartaro et al., 2021). Here, we expand on our previous work, comparing levels of trust held by police to those held by members of the public. These results build upon other scholarship investigating officers' trust toward the public (Carr & Maxwell, 2018; Mourtgos et al., 2020), as well as how SOC might be applied to understanding police–community dynamics of trust.

To address our research goals, we tested the following hypotheses:

1. Community members will report a stronger SOC than police officers.
2. Community members will report greater trust toward police than police toward community members.
3. Levels of SOC will be positively associated with levels of both police and community trust.

METHODOLOGY

Our multidisciplinary team developed surveys for distribution to community members and police officers measuring factors that might inform officer–public interactions, including SOC and reciprocal trust. Nine police departments were recruited through non-random, purposive sampling of departments located in five counties in southern New Jersey (Atlantic, Burlington, Camden, Cape May, and Ocean). Our focus on southern New Jersey counties reflects unique geographies of sociopolitical and economic conditions used in other New Jersey-based studies (Curtis et al., 2024a; 2024b). Following department approval, surveys were distributed to officers in various formats, including paper copies, e-mailed Qualtrics links, or links on internal computer systems (September 2019–March 2020)[1], depending on the preference of department leadership. Between April and May 2019, the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University sampled households in the five counties using random digit dialling. Recruitment posts on Facebook were used to supplement phone polling; participants were asked to identify their county of residence. Neither police officers nor community members were offered compensation for their participation.

In total, 590 officers received the survey; 169 (28.6%) were sufficiently completed to be included in the present analyses. Although relatively small, our sample size is similar to recent studies of officer experiences and attitudes (Carr & Maxwell, 2018; Kääriäinen & Sirén, 2012). In terms of public response, 362 community members (excluding anyone currently employed in policing) completed the community survey. Of these, 285 (78.7%) drawn from the same five counties represented by police departments were included in the present analysis. Out of concern for officer participation rates, we collected limited demographic data on police respondents to maintain assurances of anonymity (Table I). Human subjects' research approval was obtained from the Stockton University Institutional Review Board (IRB) (#2019.042).

SOC measures adapted validated items available in the literature (Peterson et al., 2008) (see Table II). Responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), and a single summative SOC variable was calculated for both community members and police officers. For trust, the team wrote survey items incorporating Stoutland's (2001) work assessing how both officers and residents evaluate aspects of respect, shared interests/priorities, dependability, and competency in a specific context of police-involved shootings. For this study, we created

[1]Data collection ended just prior to the onset of coronavirus disease 2019-related lockdown measures to reduce viral spread.

TABLE I Demographic characteristics of sample respondents

Community Members (*N* = 285)	***n***	**%**
Political ideology ($\bar{x}$ = 3.12; SD = 1.24)		
Very liberal	31	10.9
Somewhat liberal	52	18.2
Moderate	69	24.2
Somewhat conservative	68	23.9
Very conservative	38	13.3
Did not answer	275	9.5
Race		
White	209	73.3
Black or African American	32	11.2
Identify with more than one race	26	9.1
Asian or Pacific Islander	5	1.8
Native American	2	0.7
Other	5	1.8
Missing	6	2.1
Highest level of education ($\bar{x}$ = 3.34; SD = 1.11)		
Did not graduate from high school	10	3.5
High school or votech graduate	57	20.0
Some college or associate's degree	97	34.0
Four-year college degree	70	24.6
Graduate or professional degree	50	17.5
Missing	1	0.4
Sex		
Male	139	48.8
Female	145	50.9
Missing	1	0.4
Police Officers (*N* = 169)		
Political ideology ($\bar{x}$ = 4.00; SD = 1.23)		
Very liberal	3	2.2
Somewhat liberal	7	5.1
Moderate	34	25.0
Somewhat conservative	35	25.7
Very conservative	57	41.9
Did not answer	33	19.5
Total years employed in law enforcement		
Less than 5	17	10.1
5–10	34	20.1
11–20	66	39.1
21–25	46	27.2
Over 25	6	3.6
Current rank		
Below sergeant	144	85.2
Sergeant and above	25	14.8

$\bar{x}$ = mean; SD = standard deviation.

two different scales of trust – police trust (of community members) and community trust (of police). Each scale was composed of five mirrored items measured on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = completely disagree to 7 = completely agree) (see Table III).

Data analyses were conducted using SPSS 28.01.1. Bivariate analysis consisted of independent samples *t*-tests and Pearson's *r* correlations coefficients. Multivariate analysis included ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics for respondent characteristics are available in Table I. Both community and police samples leaned conservative in political ideology. Only community respondents were asked about their race, sex, and education level. The majority (73.3%) reported being White, with 11.2% Black or African American, and 9.1% identifying with more than one race. For this analysis, we condensed race to a dichotomous variable (1 = White and 0 = non-White). Fifty-one percent (50.9%) of community respondents were female. As for education, 3.5% did not graduate from high school, whereas 20% had high school, General Education Development, or vocational school degree as their highest level of education. Thirty-four percent completed some college or an associate's degree, 24.6% completed a 4-year college program, and 17.5% had a graduate or professional degree. For police respondents, 30.2% spent 10 or less years in law enforcement, 39.1% spent 11–20 years, and 30.8% had over 20 years of service. Here, the third category (20+ years) was used as the reference category in analyses. Most police respondents (85.2%) held a rank below sergeant.

Summed mean responses for SOC, community trust, and police trust variables are displayed in Tables II and III. Overall, community and police responses for most SOC items indicate somewhat positive feelings, although police held relatively lower levels (27.52; standard deviation (SD) = 6.94) than the community (29.77; SD = 7.56). As with SOC, the summative trust total for police respondents (18.84; SD = 6.29) was relatively lower than for community members (27.57; SD = 7.69). All summed measures showed high degrees of reliability, with all Cronbach's alpha values equalling or exceeding 0.894.

Bivariate analysis results are shown in Tables IV and V. As hypothesized, SOC is positively correlated with trust levels (Table IV). Table V includes independent sample *t*-test results, comparing community members to police officers on their scores on the community and trust scales. Although only slightly higher, the difference between community members' and officers' SOC values was significant. Cohen's d indicates a rather small effect size of 0.307. For trust scales, the difference between the summed totals was also statistically significant

TABLE II Sense of community (SOC) measures in sample respondents

	Community [A]		Police [B]	
	$\bar{x}$	SD	$\bar{x}$	SD
[A] I can get what I need from the community. [B] As a police officer, I can get what I need from the community I currently police.	3.79	1.24	3.54	0.95
[A] This community helps me fulfill my needs. [B] Members of the community I police help me fulfill my needs as a police officer.	3.70	1.24	3.43	0.89
[A] I feel like a member of this community. [B] As a police officer, I feel like a member of the community I police.	3.90	1.24	3.58	1.16
[A] I belong in this community. [B] As a police officer, I belong in the community I police.	4.10	1.20	3.66	1.22
[A] I have a say about what goes on in this community. [B] As a police officer, I have a say in what goes on in the community I police.	3.01	1.45	2.80	1.19
[A] I feel connected to this community. [B] As a police officer, I feel connected to the community I police.	3.62	1.30	3.52	1.10
[A] I have a good bond with others in this community. [B] As a police officer, I have a good bond with others in the community I police.	4.08	1.16	3.64	1.05
[A] People in this community are good at influencing each other. [B] People in the community I police are good at influencing each other.	3.55	1.20	3.41	0.94
Summative total for sense of community Chronbach's alpha	29.77	7.56 0.894	27.52	6.94 0.928

Note. Items were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree; minimum total = 8, maximum total = 40); [A] denotes responses to items included in community member survey, [B] denotes responses to items included in police survey.
$\bar{x}$ = mean; SD = standard deviation.

TABLE III Community and police trust measures in the sample respondents

	Community [A]		Police [B]	
	$\bar{x}$	SD	$\bar{x}$	SD
[A] I can generally expect my community's officers to treat me fairly as a resident. [B] I can generally expect residents to treat me fairly as I perform my duties as a police or law enforcement officer in the community.	5.56	1.72	4.66	1.48
[A] If police officers were involved in a shooting in my community, the police would understand the needs and priorities of concerned residents. [B] If an officer-involved shooting were to happen in the community I police, residents would understand the needs and priorities of police officers.	5.66	1.71	3.65	1.49
[A] If police officers were involved in a shooting in my community, police officers would still be respectful to me as a community member. [B] If an officer-involved shooting were to happen in the community I police, residents would still be respectful to me as I perform my duties.	5.95	1.56	4.02	1.49
[A] If police officers were involved in a shooting in my community, investigators would follow correct procedures to look into the incident. [B] If an officer-involved shooting were to happen in the community I police, residents would understand procedures used to investigate the incident.	5.62	1.72	3.43	1.47
[A] If police officers were involved in a shooting in my community, police officers would keep a non-judgmental attitude until an investigation came to an end. [B] If an officer-involved shooting were to happen in the community I police, residents would keep a non-judgmental attitude until an investigation came to an end.	5.72	1.74	3.08	1.52
Summative total for trust levels Chronbach's alpha	27.57	7.69 0.933	18.84	6.29 0.901

Note. Items were measured on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = completely disagree to 7 = completely agree; minimum total = 5, maximum total = 35); [A] denotes responses to items included in community member survey, [B] denotes responses to items included in police survey.
$\bar{x}$ = mean; SD = standard deviation.

TABLE IV Pearson's *r* correlation coefficients

	Sense of Community	Trust Level
Sense of community	1.00	0.489*
Trust levels		1.00

*$p < 0.001$.

and had a large effect size (Cohen's d = 1.22). Results indicate sampled community members hold significantly higher levels of both SOC and trust (in police) compared to police levels of SOC or trust in the community.

Table VI shows the results of two OLS regression models for trust as a dependent variable. Collinearity diagnostics revealed no problems with multicollinearity. Model 1 includes the summed measure for SOC and political ideology as independent variables. In model 1, only SOC significantly predicted police trust in community members. As SOC values increased, so did trust levels in community members. For community trust levels, both SOC and political ideology were significant predictors. In this case, not only did trust increase with higher levels of SOC, but the more politically conservative community members rated themselves, the higher their levels of trust in police. The R^2 value for model 1 for police trust, however, is moderately weak, explaining only 10.7% of the variation in trust levels. For community trust, however, the strength of model 1 is higher, with 42.1% of the variation in trust explained.

In model 2, additional demographic factors were added to SOC and political ideology. For police officers, SOC again served as a significant predictor, along with specific ranges of length of service. As with model 1, the higher the SOC values, the higher the trust levels. However, having served between 11 and 20 years (being a mid-career officer) resulted in significantly lower levels of trust. Additionally, model 2 once again remains generally weak for police respondents, with only 11.7% of the variation in police trust explained by predictor variables. For community trust, SOC and political ideology remain significant, along with race. Identifying as "White" resulted in higher trust levels in police, compared to "non-White." For community trust, model 2 again demonstrates moderate strength, with 46.2% of variation in trust explained.

DISCUSSION

Policing is an emotive subject in the United States, representing the inherent risks of policing to both community members and police officers. Our study provides insights into the dynamics of belonging and trust that can inform conversations on macro-level issues such as legitimacy and confidence (Cao, 2015). Here, we explored community members' SOC and levels of trust in police officers. Similarly, police officers were asked about their trust levels in residents and their SOC in relation *to the communities they serve*.

Results confirm our first hypothesis, that community members report higher levels of SOC in comparison to police. Although we did not probe individual item differences, belongingness for officers might be an area to further explore. Our survey instrument asked officers about their feelings not as residents, but *as police officers in those communities*, stressing their professional role in relation to the communities they serve (Carr & Maxwell, 2018). Whether officers live in the communities they police may contribute to variation in patterns of personal and professional belongingness. These results highlight a source of potential SOC variation when different social or professional roles and identities are considered and may reflect differences in how individuals define *community* in those roles.

Police officers reported not only a lower level of SOC but also a significantly lower level of trust in community members, confirming our third hypothesis. These results echo previous generalized comparisons of police–community trust (Kääriäinen & Sirén, 2012). For community members, racial identity, political ideology, and SOC were significant predictors of their trust in police. Conversely, among officers, trust levels in community members were predicted only by SOC and mid-career service (11–20 years). Thus, our second hypothesis – that SOC would be associated with higher trust in both populations – was also supported. Most notable, however, were differences in explanatory power between the two groups. While about 42–46% of variation in community members' responses was explained by predictive variables, only about 10–11% of police trust was explained. Previous research suggests contacts with police, rather than race identification, more heavily influence public attitudes toward the police (Alberton & Gorey, 2018). However, questions persist regarding how social and political identities also interact (Burgason, 2017; Hansen & Navarro, 2023). Our results suggest race and political ideology are two, but certainly not the only, significant factors predicting trust in police in this geographic context. We stress, however, these patterns are not static, and other factors may shift attitudes over time (DiSalvo & Nagler, 2023; Vitro et al., 2022).

Given the variation in model strengths, as well as differences associated with race and political affiliation across the samples, additional factors informing police trust in community must be explored. Again, we suggest this gap might reflect how questions were posed – to respondents

TABLE V Independent sample *t*-tests results for community and police population comparison

	Community Members		Police		*t*	95% CI	Cohen's d
	$\bar{x}$	SD	$\bar{x}$	SD			
Sense of community	29.77	7.56	27.52	6.94	3.15*	0.82–3.67	0.307
Trust	27.57	7.69	18.84	6.29	12.23**	7.32–10.13	1.219

CI = confidence interval; $\bar{x}$ = mean; SD = standard deviation; *t* = *t*-statistic.
*$p < 0.01$.
**$p < 0.001$.

TABLE VI Results of OLS regression models of predictors for trust results

	Trust Levels			
	Model 1 Police Respondents	Model 1 Community Respondents	Model 2 Police Respondents	Model 2 Community Respondents
	B (SE)	*B* (SE)	*B* (SE)	*B* (SE)
Sense of community	0.348*** (0.073)	0.549*** (0.051)	0.367*** (0.073)	0.532*** (0.051)
Political ideology	−0.032 (0.488)	0.328*** (0.311)	−0.018 (0.489)	0.328*** (0.314)
Police rank			−0.075 (1.624)	
Less than 10 years as officer			−0.093 (1.468)	
11–20 years as officer			−0.223* (1.384)	
Sex				0.067 (0.770)
Highest level of education completed				0.052 (0.357)
Race				0.163** (0.929)
Adjusted R^2	0.107	0.421	0.117	0.462

B = unstandardized regression coefficient; OLS = ordinary least squares; SE = standard error.
*$p < 0.05$.
**$p < 0.01$.
***$p < 0.001$.

either as *residents* or in *professional roles*. While SOC might be one factor in trust levels, findings suggest other factors impact how officers envisage community support. Thus, we advocate for direct, constructive engagement with officers about their assessment of localized realities and national-level debates. Relatedly, while officers leaned toward the conservative end of the political spectrum, political ideology was not a predictor of trust; thus, it might be helpful to address sensitivity to, or belief in the prevalence of, "war on cops" narratives as a distinct issue from officers' political identities.

Previous studies indicate that lack of mutual trust and misunderstandings between police and community members affect levels of officer proactivity and engagement (Mourtgos et al., 2020; Patil & Lebel, 2019). Our study builds on this body of scholarship highlighting factors influencing officers' trust in the public. Carr and Maxwell (2018), for example, found officers' trust in communities was significantly affected by their assessments of agency-level organizational justice and community policing approaches. Feelings of organizational justice, however, cannot effectively be measured among members of the public. Our measures of trust also reflect one specific context – officer-involved shootings – thereby, avoiding the vagueness of some more generalized measures.

Our study was limited by relatively small samples of police officers and community members. A larger, systematic sample might provide a more complete picture. In addition, polling and social media limitations meant we could not sample community members at the jurisdictional level to provide more localized comparisons. In the future, we would recommend prioritizing sampling at the jurisdictional level and offering this localized effort as a potential benefit in recruiting police departments. Future studies may also incorporate different models of trust to confirm our findings. Finally, this study measured a cross-section of attitudes during a short period of time; future analyses would be strengthened by repeated efforts at capturing similar data to determine trends in the interaction between trust and SOC.

CONCLUSION

Results presented here suggest trust community members hold in police and that of police officers in community members varies in response to multiple factors. Our study contributes to an existing body of literature in that we sampled both police and community members in one geographic area in the hopes of documenting localized relationship dynamics. In fact, in the context of national-level public critique and negative media attention surrounding police-related violence, it is notable that community members in the study area continue to demonstrate a relatively high level of trust in localized police practitioners.

Although beyond the scope of this study, historic patterns in localized, regional, and national-level policing are likely to inform the response to police-related violence and perception of evolving threats to officers' safety, among other issues (White et al., 2023). Highly publicized events of police-related violence may invite negative rhetorics that position police interests as conflicting with those of communities. In presenting these results, we hope to encourage academics, police officers and administrators, community members, and community advocates to keep lines of dialogue open – even when difficult – to proactively address issues impacting police–community relationships at local and national levels.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

ETHICS APPROVAL AND INFORMED CONSENT

Human subjects' research approval was obtained from the Stockton University Institutional Review Board (IRB) (#2019.042). Consent of participants was collected via affirmative answers on online surveys or via paper surveys.

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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

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Decriminalizing public space governance: The role of the police

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This article is directly related to the First African Regional Conference on Law Enforcement and Public Health, held in Pretoria, South Africa, December 2024.

ABSTRACT

Punitive criminal justice responses towards essential life-sustaining activities, such as sleeping, bathing and trading in public spaces, have a detrimental impact upon the most vulnerable and marginalized groups in society. These groups include people experiencing homelessness, people who use drugs, migrants, sex workers, LGBTIQ+ persons, persons with disabilities, informal traders, human rights defenders and racial and ethnic minorities. Gender, class and privilege play a key role in enabling and perpetuating these discriminatory processes within the criminal justice system. Laws that criminalize life-sustaining activities, driven by attempts to survive poverty, are often justified on the basis of public health and public order objectives. Unfortunately, law enforcement officials have often been used as a blunt instrument to enforce these laws that target socio-economically vulnerable groups. This approach, of criminalizing poverty and status, has failed to positively address increasing levels of homelessness and poverty while entrenching systemic disadvantage. These laws are found across the Global South in Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia and are frequently based on vague, dehumanizing language while providing law enforcement officials with wide discretion. This article explores strategies to foster non-punitive, human-rights-based approaches to public space governance. It also explores how law enforcement can play a role in preventing crime and violence while enhancing the human capabilities of vulnerable groups in a gender-responsive manner.

Key Words Public health; criminalization of poverty; law enforcement; public space governance.

INTRODUCTION

Globally, the criminalization of poverty and status has entrenched socio-economic exclusion, and disproportionately impacted the rights of marginalized groups, particularly women (APCOF, 2023). This paper explores the human rights implications of the enforcement by police of laws that punish individuals for engaging in basic survival activities in public spaces. It highlights the disproportionate burden on populations vulnerable to systemic discrimination and socio-economic exclusion (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2024). It critiques existing approaches to public space governance and argues for non-punitive and rights-based alternatives based on a mapping exercise of the laws and their impacts in Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper considers three interconnected theoretical lenses. The first is the socio-ecological model on crime prevention. This model constitutes a framework for understanding the complex nature of crime and violence (SADC, 2019). This approach explores and addresses risk factors (that lead to crime) and encourages interventions that address risk factors at each level (SADC, 2019). The second theoretical lens entails the capabilities theory, developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. This theory examines whether individuals have the means and free-

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dom to live the life they have reason to value and emphasizes enhancing an individual's abilities to achieve the life that they value. The third lens entails a feminist lens. As pointed out by the United Nations Development Programme (1995), "Human development, if not engendered, is endangered."

The Socio-Ecological Model

The socio-ecological model provides a multifaceted framework for recognising and addressing the risk and protective factors that cause or mitigate crime. This model, which is widely applied in crime prevention and closely linked to the work of law enforcement, recognises that poverty and homelessness comprise complex social challenges. A complementary model used in crime prevention, that of understanding prevention through three tiers – primary, secondary and tertiary crime prevention strategies – is also useful. Primary prevention focuses on addressing root causes before problems emerge (SADC, 2019), for example by ensuring access to livelihood opportunities, social security and affordable housing to reduce reliance on negative coping mechanisms, such as selling drugs (SADC, 2019). Secondary prevention works with victims to address harm and prevent them from falling victim again (SADC, 2019), while tertiary prevention works with offenders to prevent reoffending. This involves diverting offenders from the criminal justice system into counselling and support programmes (SADC, 2019). When used together with the socio-ecological model, these tiers of crime prevention help to identify were, when and how interventions should be implemented.

The Capabilities Approach

The capabilities theory, developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, is a framework that can be utilized to strengthen the socio-ecological model of crime prevention in a manner that actively cultivates human dignity and gender equality. Due to the inherent bias against marginalized and vulnerable groups (Muntingh & Petersen, 2015), a theoretical framework is needed that effectively challenges moral judgments regarding the blameworthiness of people whose actions – related to poverty and status – are criminalized.

Socio-economic deprivation and inequality impede one's capacity to fulfil their life plans, to live a life of dignity and to "participate effectively in political, economic and social life" (Liebenberg, 2005). Police therefore need to be made aware of this dimension and enabled to apply and internalize it in their daily operations. As summarized by Martha Nussbaum (2000), a dignified human life requires physical health, safety from violence, including gender-based violence (GBV), unwarranted search and seizure and the freedom to live without fear, alongside emotional and intellectual growth. It also encompasses the capacity to cultivate meaningful relationships, opportunities for recreation and autonomy in shaping one's life.

Integrating a Feminist Perspective

Due to the gendered division of labour (McLean & Chenwi, 2009; Moser, 1989), many women are unable to compete on an equal basis in the labour market, which in turn prevents them from becoming economically independent, ultimately impeding their ability to escape poverty and homelessness (UN Women, 2023).

Many women are also forced to engage in sex work (African Union, 2019) in order to support their dependents, placing them at risk of arrest and prosecution under vagrancy laws in many countries (African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, 2020; APCOF, 2023). As underscored by the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights (2020), women are particularly vulnerable to arrest "due to their inability to pay fines, bail or legal representation" (Advisory Opinion No. 001/2018). Prior experiences of GBV are also prevalent, with many incarcerated women being prior victims of domestic violence (Mahtani, 2016; UN Human Rights Council, 2023).

PROBLEMATIC LAWS

Mapping the Current Enabling Legal Environment

Below is a list of laws that need to be repealed or overturned through parliamentary engagement, advocacy and strategic jurisprudence. However, research has revealed that even in instances where laws are repealed or overturned, law enforcement continues to target vulnerable groups.

Vagrancy laws

These laws penalize persons for failing to provide a "good account of themselves," for not having a fixed residence or for not having proof of a means of income. They use vague wording such as being "rogue," "vagabond," "disorderly" or "idle" (OHCHR, 2024). These laws are used to exclude people "on the basis of their race, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status or other contextual marker of social exclusion or vulnerability" (OHCHR, 2024).

Activity-based criminalization

These laws tend to criminalize specific conduct such as sleeping, eating, washing or bathing, causing a noise disturbance or blocking an entrance to a public or private building (OHCHR, 2024).

Public health criminalization

These laws target littering, unauthorized disposal of waste or garbage, cooking in a public space, urinating in public, washing clothes or bedding in public (OHCHR, 2024).

The criminalization of begging

These laws punish requests for money or any other valuable goods. This can include a blanket ban on all begging or apply to specific areas (OHCHR, 2024).

Informal labour criminalization

These laws criminalize individuals who work within the informal labour market, targeting those who undertake hawking, trading, car guarding and washing in a public space (OHCHR, 2024).

Laws that place time restrictions on parked vehicles

These laws prohibit individuals from sleeping or camping in a vehicle, tent, caravan or any other type of temporary or provisional accommodation in a public space (OHCHR, 2024).

Exclusion and Criminalization in Public Space Governance

Approaches to public space governance mirror broader societal inequalities, often reinforcing exclusion experienced by marginalized groups. This applies both to the legislative framework for public space governance and the strategies

applied to public space management by law enforcement agencies.

People experiencing homelessness people who use drugs, migrants, sex workers, LGBTIQ+ persons, persons with disabilities, informal traders and racial and ethnic minorities, among others, are especially vulnerable to persistent discrimination, exclusion and harassment in public spaces for basic acts of survival or on the basis of their status (APCOF, 2023). Women, in particular, experience unique vulnerabilities in public spaces, including heightened risks of GBV and harassment by law enforcement (APCOF, 2023).

The effect is to undermine the rights to dignity, life, equality, health, liberty, assembly and livelihood. Instead, states need to prioritize public space governance approaches that centre concepts of dignity and address increasing levels of homelessness, poverty and status-based social exclusion (OHCHR, 2024). Furthermore, policing practices often involve arbitrary enforcement, discriminatory practices and the violation of human rights, which reinforce systemic inequalities and stigma (APCOF, 2023; OHCHR, 2024).

A comparative analysis of Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia is revealing. Across the Global South, the legal frameworks and strategies regarding policing public space management are often rooted in colonial-era vagrancy statutes which control who can access public spaces, at what time and for what purpose. The analysis reveals significant similarities and distinct regional characteristics.

Across the three regions, outdated and discriminatory laws persist, criminalizing acts related to a person's poverty or status. These laws frequently target life-sustaining activities such as vagrancy, begging and street vending, which disproportionately affects marginalized groups. Enforcement of these laws often relies on broad police discretion with limited oversight, which heightens risks of abuse, corruption and human rights violations.

African countries often retain colonial-era laws (Okiror, 2023), such as the Penal and Criminal Codes in Botswana (Penal Code of 1964) and Nigeria (Criminal Code Act of 1916), which criminalize vagrancy and other activities on the basis of public order. Specific laws, such as South Africa's municipal by-laws, penalize everyday survival strategies like bathing or cleaning, disproportionately burdening women. Begging is also widely criminalized, as seen in Libya and Congo.

The Caribbean reflects greater regional variance in offences and punishments. Laws criminalize behaviours such as loitering and carousing, while penalties range from fines to custodial sentences, with notable inconsistencies between countries on severity and enforcement of these penalties. Public narratives also dehumanize people experiencing homelessness, portraying them as nuisances (Leonard, 2023). In Trinidad and Tobago, the conflation of public space governance with other challenges, including sex trafficking, in addition to issues regarding police corruption, highlights the intersections between poverty, gender inequality and systemic exploitation.

In South Asia, laws like Bangladesh's Vagrancy Act and India's Street Vendors Act target homeless persons and informal workers, with violence often used during enforcement. Gender and caste dynamics are pronounced in the enforcement of laws, with Dalit Street vendors and transgender persons facing intersecting discrimination (Chowdhury, 2021). Laws such as Pakistan's Transgender Persons Protection Act ostensibly protect rights but inadvertently marginalize persons further by criminalizing their survival strategies (International Commission of Jurists, 2020).

DE FACTO CRIMINALIZATION

One of the ways in which police exercise their discretion negatively is to criminalize conduct that is not criminalized de jure. Sex work is not criminalized in India and Sri Lanka, but sex workers are arrested, detained and subject to violence (Ramachandran, 2015).

In Uganda, after the President declared that the police can no longer arrest people on the grounds that they are idle and disorderly, the police started arresting individuals for being rogues and vagabonds (APCOF, 2023).

In Malawi, the High Court decision of *The Republic v Phempho Banda and Others Review Case No. 58 of 2016* found that engaging in sex work is not an offence and that sex workers should not be arrested under a law that is intended to protect them from exploitation. However, police continue to arrest sex workers and other vulnerable groups and charge them with being rogues and vagabonds (APCOF, 2023).

TRANSLATING THEORY INTO ACTION: ALTERNATIVES TO PUNITIVE APPROACHES

Recognizing Inherent Dignity

A human rights-based approach recognizes these individuals (and particularly women) as an end in themselves. Public space governance must be informed by a recognition of the inherent human dignity of all vulnerable groups, while shifting away from blaming vulnerable groups for their plight. Part of this respect entails not being dictatorial about what it means to live a dignified life. Agency requires that these individuals should have a wide space to make important types of choices and to foster meaningful affiliation (Nussbaum, 2000). A practical example of this is harm reduction programmes. These programmes offer a promising alternative framework to guide law enforcement's engagement with persons using drugs (OHCHR, 2024).

Adopting an Intersectional Perspective of Vulnerability

In accordance with the crime prevention principle pertaining to differentiation, it is necessary to develop responses to poverty that take account of intersecting forms of vulnerability as well as adaptive preferences which can reinforce injustice. This necessarily requires a holistic conception of well-being at the individual, family and community levels and involves not only physical health but also psychological well-being, social inclusion and the ability to participate in community life. Policing strategies should be evaluated not only in terms of crime prevention but also on their impact on the overall well-being and capabilities of individuals, particularly the most vulnerable members of society. Alternatives to imprisonment should be implemented in a manner that addresses the specific needs of individuals, such as women's caregiving duties.

Addressing Systemic Inequality

The capabilities approach requires policing strategies to not only prevent harm but also play a role in dismantling the

systemic barriers that limit the capabilities of vulnerable populations. As opposed to being used as a blunt instrument to enforce systemic discrimination, law enforcement authorities can and should protect the rights of persons in street situations (OHCHR, 2024). Law enforcement is thus not only required to refrain from causing harm but can also facilitate the work of supportive social services (such as social workers) in a manner that enhances the protection of human rights (OHCHR, 2024).

Performance Management and Priority Setting

It is essential to examine the manner in which police performance is measured and prioritized to identify the impact of performance metrics on policing behaviour and priorities. As underscored by a South African research publication on arbitrary arrest (APCOF, 2022), "the internal culture of policing organisations has long been influenced by historical notions of performance measurement, with arrests traditionally viewed as a key indicator of success." (APCOF, 2022).

Community-Based Approaches

One of the key requirements under an effective crime prevention strategy is that it must be community-based and community-owned. Under a capabilities approach, participation in defining social justice goals by those experiencing social injustice is also inherent. Vulnerable populations should have a say in how policing is conducted in their communities. This participatory approach ensures that policies are responsive to the needs and perspectives of those most affected.

Fostering Substantive Agency while Facilitating Access to Resources

Law enforcement should aim to facilitate access to the relevant resources and support to enable vulnerable populations to exercise their human rights. Law enforcement should consider appropriate non-custodial measures such as verbal warnings and sanctions, the proactive facilitation of access to social or healthcare services (such as counselling) and community service programmes that are geared towards social integration (OHCHR, 2024). Law enforcement can provide critical support for the implementation of these measures.

Enhanced Accountability

There is also a need for independent monitoring of human rights abuses committed by law enforcement, along with the development of programmes and strategies to address these abuses and hold perpetrators accountable. Such monitoring should be conducted by independent bodies with the authority to investigate allegations, ensure transparency and make binding recommendations to prevent impunity. (OHCHR, 2010).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The objective of this paper is not to assert a definitive solution. Instead, States should actively engage with affected vulnerable groups to collaboratively develop policies, protocols and solutions that are tailored to their unique needs and contextual circumstances. Below are a number of recommendations that can be further tailored by States that are aiming to apply the above analysis in an operational policing context.

Legal Reforms

There is a need to decriminalize many acts, such as petty offences and same sex conduct, and to limit police discretion – or to guide police discretion in accordance with human rights – in terms of other offences.

Law Enforcement Reforms

Undertaking an audit of existing policing policies/ practices

Collect data and information to understand the specific context and the unique challenges pertaining to human rights compliance within that specific law enforcement organization. For example, do officers regularly engage in excessive use of force/sweeping arrests/move-on orders/unlawful evictions/wrongful arrests/discrimination/failure to comply with existing laws, as well as gendered challenges such as GBV? If so, there needs to be an analysis of the underlying causes and drivers and factors that enable the normalization of such actions.

Creating a vision for supportive policing practices

Once existing gaps have been identified, it is necessary to develop a vision that promotes supportive policing, one that fosters human capabilities. States need to ensure that this vision is translated into a coherent policy as well as detailed procedures. The principles mentioned above (adopting a holistic approach, fostering meaningful engagement, etc.) should filter into police policy and practice, as well as existing safety plans. It is also important to traverse and develop guidelines on existing alternatives to punitive responses, such as diversion, community-based sanctions and harm reduction programmes.

Building political will and assembling a response team

The state at the highest levels as well as the respective law enforcement agencies must exhibit commitment to the adoption and implementation of non-punitive, restorative approaches to public space governance and champion the approaches and strategies listed above. Non-punitive, restorative approaches should become part of institutional policy, plans for implementation and action plans. To maintain transparency and build public trust, the government should establish an independent external body (such as human rights institutions) to review, monitor, audit and publish the results of the implementation of said action plans.

Improving training and education

While all law enforcement need to be trained on the rights of vulnerable groups, dedicated response teams should receive regular training while also undertaking regular assessments to ensure they remain up to date with developments pertaining to responding to vulnerable groups. It is also essential to provide training on traditional and cultural impediments to effective policing.

Promoting accountability and supervision

There is a need to review regulatory frameworks which provide for the exercise of police powers within the context of poverty and, in particular, who exercises that power, how it is exercised and the extent to which law enforcement are

held accountable (Fombad & Abdulrauf, 2020). There is a need for enhancements to accountability mechanisms to ensure fair and just policing.

Re-prioritizing budgetary allocations

In alignment with Harm Reduction International's Divest/Invest Campaign, governments and law enforcement organizations are urged to prioritize budgetary transparency and to reallocate funding from punitive law enforcement policies to evidence-based initiatives that empower vulnerable communities (Harm Reduction International, 2023). These programmes can include harm reduction services, mental health support, access to housing and social safety nets.

Nurturing collaboration and partnerships

It is necessary to establish a duty to coordinate between the police, other organs of the state, public health agencies, human rights organizations and community organizations (SADC, 2019).

CONCLUSION

The criminalization of poverty and status has failed to address increasing levels of discrimination, poverty and violence in public spaces. Rather, it has had the opposite effect of entrenching socio-economic exclusion and heightening the risk of further human rights violations, with a disproportionate impact upon women. It is therefore necessary to develop alternative ways to govern the use of public spaces. While law enforcement has historically been utilized as a tool to entrench existing patterns of inequality, it is possible to shift their role to one that is able to prevent crime and violence while enhancing the human capabilities of vulnerable groups.

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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

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"If we must secure our communities, we must do it together": Co-creation of crime prevention and security governance in Lagos, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Developing partnerships between the state, the police, and local communities to prevent crime is increasingly recognized as valuable by security researchers and actors. Yet their effectiveness is undermined by a range of factors, particularly socio-political and institutional. Utilizing qualitative investigation, this study evaluates the specific forms of politics and strategies being used to confront insecurity in Lagos with the involvement of various actors. The study explores why co-production in Lagos exists and what can be done, and by whom, for co-creation to thrive in the city. What the Lagos experience teaches is that crime reduction through co-creation is more likely to emerge and endure. This is the case even in a political landscape, where police power is centralized around the presidency and an executive bureaucracy, especially if there is a viable socio-economic case, such as when crime rates are high and the police lack capacity and numerical strength to fight crime or, worse, when the state provides security to some groups but not to others. Despite the many challenges, findings show that co-creation of crime prevention exemplifies many successes. The limitations on co-creation opportunities are noteworthy and will require significant political and institutional support moving forward.

Key Words Violent crime; security governance; state and non-state actors; multi-sector partnerships.

INTRODUCTION

States in Africa are considered to have failed to deliver on public utilities and services – their citizens remain poor and are commonly disregarded by their leaders, corruption reigns, security services are miserably unreliable and ineffectual, and deficits remain extreme (Carbone & Pellegata, 2017), particularly in the informal neighbourhoods that provide homes to more than half of city dwellers. For security, improvement initiatives are many, but they seem unsustainable in the face of systemic state performance deficits. Co-creation has been acknowledged as one way to tackle this complexity (Baud et al., 2021; Collard et al., 2021; Ward et al., 2011). Thus, co-creation is a way in which complexity in public service delivery is tackled by a group of stakeholders, instead of any singular actor (Mazerolle et al., 2017). This approach has been used in countries like Finland (Jalonen et al., 2021; Raisio et al., 2021), the United States (Brewer & Grabosky, 2014), and Zimbabwe (Zhou & Njanji, 2021) among others. Co-creation is also evident in Lagos and is particularly apparent in the Lagos concept for Neighborhood Watch.

Co-creation is conspicuous in the community safety domains. There are quite a few studies on different policing interventions that use co-creation approaches. Modern instances are evident in problem-oriented policing (Exum et al., 2014; Reisig, 2010; Scott & Kirby, 2012), reassurance policing (Raisio et al., 2021; Tuffin et al., 2006), pulling levers (Berry et al., 2011; Braga & Weisburd, 2012; Messing et al., 2015), third-party policing – TPP (Mazerolle & Ransley, 2005; Mazerolle et al., 2017), networked policing (Crawford, 2006; Rosenbaum & Schuck, 2012), plural policing (Crawford et al., 2005; Ericson, 2007), intelligence-led policing (Ratcliffe, 2008; Weisburd & Eck, 2004), and community policing (Jones & van Steden, 2013; Mangai et al., 2023). Yet, only few of these studies are able to identify the processes shaping the partnerships that produced successful results in community safety. Even so, the effectiveness of the processes must be understood in relation to wider political settlement contexts so as to understand the challenges and offer precise solutions.

Understanding the political environment is critical because it determines the technical process of co-creation by making security provision, management, and oversight more

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effective and accountable, within a framework of democratic control and the rule of law. This is lacking in previous studies and particularly in Lagos, where little is known about the nature of state and non-state co-creation of crime prevention in the context of the existing wider political settlement – understood as the formal views of (security) governance and the underlying forms of power and politics that shape which (security) institutions emerge and how they actually function in practice (Kelsall et al., 2021). A recent political settlement analysis classifies the settlement in Lagos as "narrow concentrated" (Kelsall et al., 2021) which implies that the state has the power to act decisively on security development issues but it is likely oriented to the benefit of few. As such, co-creation practices which try to respond to the needs of the citizenry might run into potential challenges and oppositions. Besides, there are numerous discussions about crime trajectories in Lagos. But very little has been written about the practices and practitioners involved in maintaining public order in the city, particularly multi-stakeholder collaborations.

To date, political settlements have primarily been applied at the level of national politics and security governance in Nigeria. While there are different dimensions and typologies of political settlements (Kelsall et al., 2021; Schulz & Kelsall, 2021), this study explores the power configuration dimension of political settlements – that is, the extent of concentration of power (which directly shapes security services by (non)-state) in the country's top leadership. This article thus brings together an appreciation of the wider political system and explores the co-productive practices operating in Lagos' security landscape and critically examines their effectiveness. Its key contribution is to examine the extent to which state and resident partnerships for crime control constitute cooperation and the scale and significance of the solution that this collaboration has delivered. This article identifies the politics that shape decisions to invest in co-creation initiatives and offer them the support to deliver on their mandates. It explores the ways in which co-creation of crime prevention has been shaped and how it continues to be shaped by the politics, state commitment, and local capacity for security and the outcomes achieved so far, as well as in terms of creating a more enabling environment for crime prevention in Lagos at present and in the future.

The research questions guiding this study include the following: How is security governed in Lagos, and how has this impacted co-production of crime prevention? What is the nature of co-creation approach? How do non-state security providers relate to the state in terms of influence and/or neglect? What institutional support do they receive and require to effectively fulfill their mandates? In what ways has the co-creation contributed to crime reduction, and what obstacles are they facing? How can those outcomes be improved and the challenges addressed? How can they be harnessed by the state for the prevention of crime? Assessing these issues is highly significant to adding the experiences of Lagos to the growing body of literature, drawing important implications for handling crime and advancing understanding about how co-creation forms and how it might function more effectively. This article contributes to an understanding of how co-production of crime control can contribute to inclusive and equitable security provisions in African cities.

To develop the ideas of this study further, the next section discusses the methodology of this research. This is followed by research findings and discussions on the governance, politics, activities, and complications of co-creation in Lagos. Moving forward, the article provides some policy recommendations about future directions for the co-production of security before the conclusion.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a geographical case using Lagos, Nigeria (see Figure 1). Lagos is currently the largest city in Nigeria and also in Africa in terms of population. While it is hard to come up with the exact number (since most residents live in slums), Lagos has an estimated population of over 26 million (26,435,408) people (United Nations, 2024). Lagos covers 20 municipal areas (16 metropolitan and 4 peri-urban areas; see Figure 1). While crime is and has always been a fundamentally critical issue in Nigeria, the crime rate is high in Lagos for the fact that the vast majority of people in Nigeria live in Lagos as combined with other issues such as climate change, limited public finance, extreme poverty, and radicalism (Badiora, 2023). The combination of rapid urbanization and crime reflects clearly both the vulnerability of Lagos and the value of resilience through plurality of players, instead of any singular actor.

For the field research, the study adopted a qualitative approach, allowing for a nuanced and complex understanding of the co-production apparatus and its functioning and relationship to the politics. Data were collected from various groups of people. The study took a bottom-up approach, beginning with a rapid interview at the street level, speaking with residents/people on the streets, and then to a conversation with the key informants/actors. Overall, two sets of respondents were interviewed. The first group was the citizenry living in Lagos. To engage these people, four pivotal areas were purposively selected from both the Lagos metropolitan area and peri-urban areas. In the metropolitan areas, Mushin, Oshodi-Isolo, and Lagos Island were selected, while Ikorodu was selected in the peri-urban area (see Figure 1). In all, 50 respondents were surveyed through purposive sampling; that is, approaching individuals on the streets, asking and requesting their participation in the research. The second group of respondents were key informants. This includes members of the state and non-state groups who played important roles in the security process and governance of Lagos. A total of 15 key informant interviews were prepared for, but only 12 were completed. The key informant interviews were more informal dialogues, speaking with the representatives of communities, police department, non-governmental organizations, house guards, and vigilante operatives. The study then moved upward, bringing the community representatives and key stakeholders together in a forum of research validation workshop and engagement meeting.

For qualitative research, there is no strict number that is agreed on to reach data saturation. Nevertheless, this study took advice from Vasileiou et al. (2018) who claimed that a minimum sample size of 12 can produce data saturation for a qualitative study. Hence, 62 interviews were considered satisfactory for the qualitative analysis and evaluation criteria for this study. The interviews were distributed proportionally

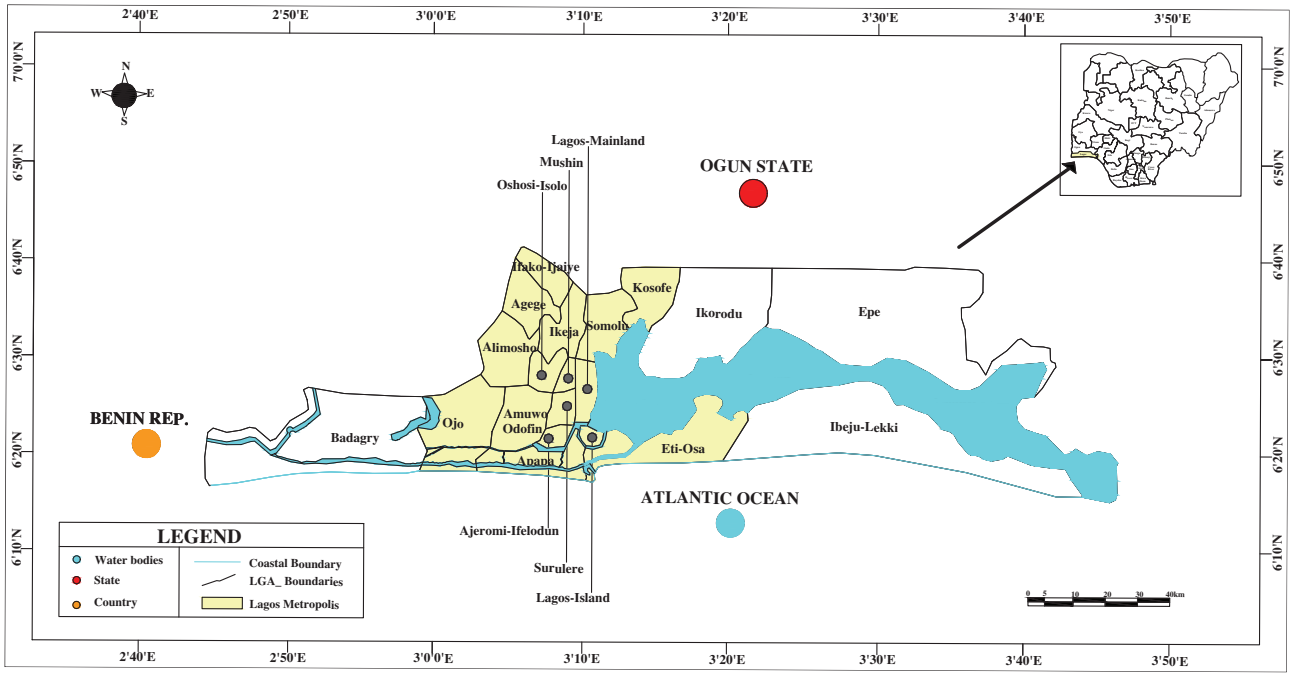

FIGURE 1 Map indicating the Lagos metropolitan and peri-urban areas.

based on the geographical coverage of each focal area: the Mainland, the Island, and the hinterland. To be included in this study, participants needed to be aged 18 years and above and must have spent at least 5 years living in Lagos. By including individuals aged 18 and above, this study was able to capture a wider range of perspectives and experiences about co-creation and gather data on various socio-economic and demographic factors such as age and gender. The study ensured priority to gender fairness – 46% of the respondents were women, most from the working class, while few of them were full-time housewives whose husbands worked in Lagos. A significant percentage (23%) were youth who engaged in various crime prevention co-creation activities. More information on the participants' distribution and characteristics is summarized in Tables I and II.

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. Respondents were asked, among other questions, about their participation in co-creation of crime prevention and what lessons could be learned from these collaborations. Depending on the choice of participants, discussions were held in either Yoruba,[1] Pidging,[2] or English. A combination of voice recording transcription and note-taking was used during the interview. For those conducted in Yoruba and Pidgin, they were later transcribed into English. This process risked altering and/or losing details of the discussion. This was minimized by clarifying all questions emerging and referring back to the original records when required. For data analysis, the study conducted a thematic analysis using the six-phase method (Cichoń, 2020). As part of this procedure, descriptive codes demonstrating features of the discussions were generated and then collated to form overall discussion subjects. Following this, excerpts were extracted from each theme from the discussion transcripts. The final stage involved telling the story in writing from the research problem.

Prior to data collection, ethical clearance was obtained from the Health Research Ethics Committee of the University of Lagos, Nigeria. Informed written and verbal consent were obtained from the respondents. This study sustains avoidance of injury and privacy of respondents' personalities. Besides, the study exercised informed consent during data collection by ensuring that respondents were conversant with the intention of the study and why they were invited to participate as well as how their information will be used. They were also given equal chance to participate and withdraw their participation at any time.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses findings relating to the politics and governance of security and the nature of co-creation movements and various outcomes and challenges of these co-creation partnerships. Unless where otherwise stated, the narratives are the summary of the outcomes of the literature review and residents' and key informants' interviews carried out from September 2022 to January 2023.

The Politics and Governance of Crime Prevention

Results show that security performance in Lagos is due in part to the nature of politics at both federal and state levels. Under the Nigeria's constitution, responsibility for law enforcement (e.g., police and prisons) resides with the federal government.

[1]A local Nigerian language for Lagos indigenous people.
[2]A simplified form of English language, some elements of which are taken from local language, especially as used by a non-Lagos indigene speaker.

TABLE I Characteristics of the respondents

Unit of Analysis	Variables	Frequency (*N*)	Percentage
Gender	Male	33	54.0
	Female	29	46.0
Age distribution (years)	18–40	14	23.0
	41–50	30	48.0
	50–60	18	29.0
Participant category[a]	Residents	50	81.0
	Key city stakeholders	12	19.0
Length of stay in Lagos (years)	5–10	13	21.0
	11–15	16	26.0
	16–20	24	38.0
	>20	09	15.0
Profession and work	Public and civil servant	28	45.0
	Private employee	19	30.0
	Business entrepreneurs/employer	12	20.0
	No formal employment and full-time housewives	03	05.0

[a]While some participants are both residents and key stakeholders, the study only allowed a participant to serve in one category.

TABLE II Key informants/stakeholders' organizational background

No. of Participants	Organizational Category/Background (Public Authorities, Private Sector, and NGOs)
1	Nigeria Police Force (NPF), Lagos State Neighbourhood Safety Agency (LSNSA)
6 (5)[a]	Community vigilante groups – "Olode" group, "Onyabo" vigilante group, Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC), "Ma dan wo" vigilante group
3	NGO – Rethinking Cities, Shanty Towns Empowerment Foundation (SHEF), Center for Law Enforcement (CLEEN) Foundation, and Spaces for Change (S4C)
5 (3)[a]	Community institution – traditional rulers "Baales," Community Development Association (CDA), and youth groups

[a]Number of participants initially scheduled. However, this was altered due to the participants' change of agenda and unavailability.
NGO = non-governmental organization.

Thus, the legal and executive framework for combatting crime is overtly concentrated at the centre and cedes no power to subnational (state and local) governments. The Nigeria Police Force (NPF) is in charge of internal security and has a centralized management command and control structure in which the federal government single-handedly determines all policy and operational matters. Therefore, the law of the Federal Republic of Nigeria limits the Lagos State from hiring police officers and/or imposing a new security tax and policies. This complexity of Nigeria's federal structure compounds decision-making surrounding security.

There are issues of a lack of coherence which hinder the effective functioning of the police. In practice, while the federal government has exclusive power over the NPF regardless of the devolution of police command, state governments have power over the state justice system excluding the NPF. Basically, there are multiple structures for the management of police and justice institutions at both federal and state levels. The Federal Ministries of Interior, Justice, and Police Affairs have major responsibility for policy-making and coordination. But there is poor coordination between these federal ministries, as each seems to function discretely without an inclusive policy framework. The Ministry of Police Affairs particularly is reduced in its power (see Figure 2), because the inspector general of police (IGP) reports directly to the president. There is also the Police Service Commission (PSC) – a civilian oversight body established under the Nigerian constitution for the NPF.[3] It has the power to appoint, promote, discipline, and dismiss all NPF officers except the IGP. At the state level, each state government has its own security council headed by the state governor, which is parallel to and complements the state police command structure. However, where decisions made by the Lagos State governor and/or his council challenge those of the federal police command, they are thrown out by the Lagos State commissioner of police who takes orders directly from the IGP, who in turn reports to the president (see Figure 2).

[3]Police Service Commission (PSC) – http://www.psc.gov.ng/.

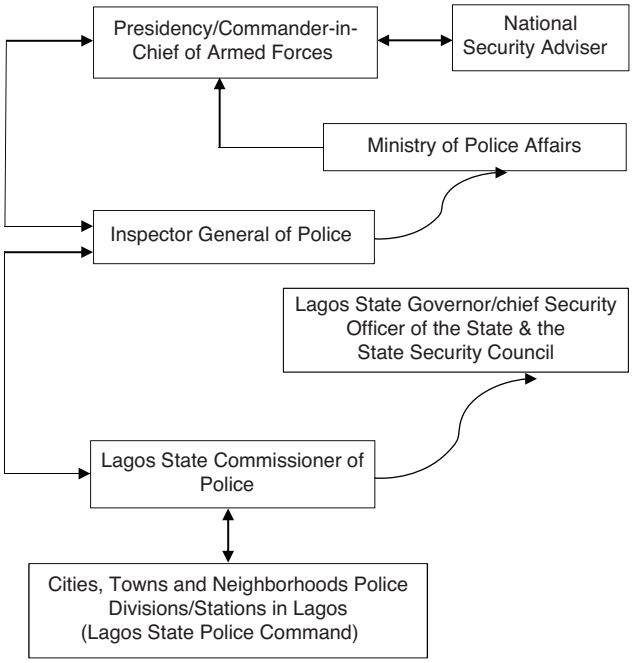

FIGURE 2 Internal security governance arrangement in Nigeria.

This structure has created several tensions between the central and state authorities or even within both. The following illustrates examples of the many face-off tensions. On June 15, 2024, the IGP accused the PSC of enlisting unqualified individuals into the newly recruited constables and therefore distanced the NPF from the new constables. On the other hand, PSC disclaimed the contentions and lobbied the presidency for the immediate removal of the IGP.[4] On January 5, 2022, a chief superintendent of police refused to obey the Lagos State Governor, Babajide Sanwo-Olu's order to evacuate police officers who had laid siege on the Magodo Estate on the Lagos Mainland.[5] On this day, residents of the estate protested the continuous presence of armed policemen. The protest and the closure of the estate gate were already brewing violence as this grounded vehicular movement, and some residents and business owners were prevented from going to their various destinations. The intervention of the governor (who, by law, is the chief security officer of Lagos) was refuted by the police officer who told the governor that he only answers to the instructions of his superiors who were yet to get an order to leave the estate from the IGP.

The appointment of the IGP is the prerogative of the president.[6] This at times disturbs the quality of security services provided as officers are loyal to the president and his allies at the expense of the communities they are meant to serve. Police personnel are posted to Lagos by the inspector general of police seated in Abuja. They are frequently rotated in an effort to keep them from becoming too comfortable with and/or being co-opted by local political elites. But, in many cases, the postings are done in a partisan political setting that produces a large turnover of senior police officers whenever regimes change. Although this approach seeks to reduce corruption and impunity, it hinders the development of grassroots security knowledge and undermines professionalism, continuity, long-term security planning, learning, and innovation in the Lagos police command. Besides, centralized governance arrangement is characterized by a bizarre concentration of power in the "ruling party." As a result, each ruling party tends to govern mainly on the basis of its election campaign promises, rather than on the basis of a wide-ranging national security agenda. The result has been a perpetual discontinuity in policy direction following party and/or individual president turnovers in government. A respondent said, "… any time a new government comes to power, security plans set by predecessors are abandoned and replaced with new ones, sometimes without regard for the wider national security implications…"[7]

This system has also created extreme inequality as the limited security resources available are shared by political elites and members of the ruling political parties for their personal, business, and household protection. In cases of emergencies or responses to distress calls, preferential treatments for elite communities by the state security agencies operations are evident, particularly compared to the informal settlements within the city core and the peripheral areas, despite that these areas provide homes to more than half of Lagos dwellers. Consequently, the question remains as to whether this system of security governance can be deemed pro-poor and inclusive. A respondent said, "… in this Lagos, it is not uncommon to see politicians, notable figures and those VIPs, and the worst of it, are social media celebrities with police force convoy while many people and places are without police protection. Of a truth, the common man is only in the hand of God in this city. That is why everyone has devised ways to protect themselves and family …"[8]

It is therefore evident that Lagos, Nigeria, possesses a concentrated political settlement, with police authority centralized around the presidency, including the state governments that do the president's biddings. The net effect, however, is the tendency to over-rely on the executive presidency for action, and, when this is not sanctioned by the executive, there is a resultant lack of attention by the very departments that are supposed to exercise law enforcement. Besides, security resources are oriented to the benefit of the elite, neglecting the less privileged. Generally, respondents branded this approach to security administration as a system which does not work and which severely dwindles the state government's ability to implement security reforms and programs.[9] In a reflection of the generally weak state of bureaucratic capacity, a majority of respondents reported that NPF has not been able to deliver its mandated functions effectively.[10]

[4]PSC – https://punchng.com/provide-evidence-of-corruption-in-recruitment-exercise-psc-tells-ig/#google_vignette.
[5]Police superintendent defies governor's order – https://saharareporters.com/2022/01/04/police-superintendent-defies-governor-sanwo-olus-order-claims-nigerias-attorney-general.
[6]Nigerian constitution, Chapter 6, Part 3, Section 215.
[7]Key stakeholder/informant interview, Lagos – November 2022.
[8]Interview with residents of Mushin – September 2022.
[9]Interview with residents of Ikorodu – September 2022.
[10]Engagement with key stakeholders and residents – November 2022.

In situations such as this, co-creation has been found to be a key mechanism through which the uneven waters of political settlements can be navigated (Baud et al., 2021; Jones & van Steden, 2013; Mitlin & Satterthwaite, 2013), particularly in Lagos, where the political settlement fails to generate incentives for elites to come together and deliver equitable security improvements to the people.

THE NATURE OF CO-CREATION OF CRIME PREVENTION

In Lagos, co-creation of crime prevention has emerged in different forms such as vigilantes, house guard (known as "Mai-guard" or "Olode"), and the community court (CC). These are briefly discussed as follows.

Vigilantes

One indicator of the Nigerian security governance failure is the rise of vigilantes. These are self-appointed residents who undertake law enforcement in their local communities or who take it upon themselves to confront criminals and their activities in their neighbourhood. This type of non-state action is common in low-income neighbourhoods and informal settlements of Lagos. This is because informal settlements have to deal with crime and insecurity but do not always have the political capital to demand proactive patrolling from the "presidency-" controlled state police unlike the elite's neighbourhoods. Vigilantes do, however, collaborate with the NPF in different ways. They engage with NPF on night patrols. They also compile information on crimes, suspicious activity, and criminal suspects in their area and provide that relevant intelligence to the police as needed.

In some cases, they join the NPF intelligence response team to raid hideouts of criminal in their local areas. With the clearance of the NPF, they also assist Lagos State agencies in the protection of their premises, plants, and equipment. Thus, at least, this model allows NPF to increase efficiency by concentrating on their core functions while transferring surplus responsibilities to vigilantes. A respondent said, "… we realise that the police are increasingly unable to respond swiftly to distress calls, so landlords devise alternative arrangements for protecting themselves by supporting members of vigilante group in securing our community …[11] Having collaborated more closely with the NPF through vigilante services, a respondent said, "… we always blame the NPF for every issue on this street. But as I began to work with them (NPF) through our community vigilante group, I began to understand their plight. The politics is not in their favour. They lack equipment, capacity, and personnel. If we must secure our streets and communities, we must do it together with them. So, this vigilante group has come to stay …"[12]

Findings show that Lagos vigilantes cannot prosecute criminals and they are not expected to carry arms nor use brute force. They are only expected to hold suspects until they are handed over to the NPF. Nevertheless, when a respondent did speak of the use of force, his instances were cases in which vigilante officials acted in self-defence and/or in situations where suspects attempted to escape.[13] But then, further critical evaluation of abuses by vigilantes is discussed later in this article. The commander/leader of vigilantes is called the vigilante chairperson. Unlike the state's centralized and narrow security governance, the vigilante chairperson is selected through voting by members of the community vigilante groups and then ratified by the concerned community leaders. The vigilante chairperson gives direction for the execution of all vigilante activities within the community. Vigilante's personnel are paid through financial contributions by residents. They sometimes receive support from the local government, politicians, and donors. The employment of vigilante members is part of local government and community strategies to co-opt unemployed youths into community development roles. Indeed, some of these youths were sometimes reformed "area boys" who could use their own local criminal knowledge to help curb crime, typifying the Yoruba adage, "Ole lo mo ese ole to lori apata" (meaning – it is the thief who can trace the footsteps of another thief on the rock).

In Lagos, vigilantes differ from one another in terms of membership, structure, means of recruitment, training, and oversight, as well as in their relations to NPF. They exist under different names – for instance, the vigilante effort in "Oworonshoki" community is called "Ma dan wo," while it is called "Ma Sun" and "Onyabo" in Oshodi and Ikorodu communities, respectively. Vigilante officers are indigenous locals where they operate, which is a deliberate strategy to make use of their local knowledge to achieve maximum collaborations in grassroots security intelligence gathering and community policing. For most parts, members of the vigilantes have no other formal employment. They take odd jobs during the day (e.g., working as a casual labourer on construction sites or as a commercial motorcyclist) to supplement their incomes from the vigilante engagement. Although women traditionally play a significant role in Lagos vigilante, with cultural factors shaping their contributions, vigilante members in practice are mostly men. Nevertheless, women remain prominent in this collaboration, particularly as primary informants, presenting ample opportunities for their continued participation. Vigilante personnel ages vary, but typically they are either in their mid-20s or, if much older, in their 50s or 60s.

House Guards (Known as "Mai-Guard" or "Olode")

Beyond community safety through vigilante–police collaborations, the security of individual properties is prioritized in Lagos. While some have been able to engage the state police through political and economic power, others are left to cater for themselves. Hence, the idea of "Mai-guard" or "Olode." A respondent said, "… I have to engage a house guard. I cannot leave my house unguarded. I already suffered break-in twice in this year (2023). It could have been worse if not for the community vigilante. Yet, you see a local government councilor on this street with 2-3 policemen at his gate. Other politicians and big men of Lagos will take their share of our police too. These are the people who should protect us but,

[11]Interview with the residents of Ikorodu – September 2022.
[12]Interview with a key informant – November 2022.
[13]Interview with a key Informant (vigilante officer) – November 2022.

it is unfortunate that they have left the people to guard a few elites…"[14]

As the name implies, house guards watch individual houses, managing and controlling access in and out. In some exceptional cases, however, some streets/communities in Lagos use "Olode" to patrol their streets at night instead of vigilante groups. The personnel are commonly private, traditional in their outlook (use voodoo or black magic to capture criminals), and uneducated. They also lack in formal organization unlike vigilantes who are associated with the community resident groups. But in recent times, retired gentlemen of the state security agencies are now joining this initiative. The use of house guard services is common with the residents of high and medium neighbourhoods of Lagos. House guard reward varies and it is usually negotiated with the property owner. A generous occupier can pay a guard comfortably more than an entry-grade NPF constable receives.

Co-creation is evident as they often work hand in hand with the relevant community vigilantes and sometimes with the NPF. At times, a house guard could be a member of a vigilante group who has also been specifically assigned to a property on request of the property owner. Unlike other initiatives, house guards are exclusively male. They play a significant role in security alertness and information sharing in Lagos. House security guards demonstrate a remarkable level of knowledge about their socio-physical surroundings. They engage in doorstep and kiosk shops where they do petty trading and sell basic household commodities in addition to house guard services. Their activities are at times more collaborative. They also engage in chats with colleague guards of adjoining properties. In this manner, news and warnings, especially relating to crime and insecurity, spread quickly in the community and to appropriate security agencies.

Community Court

Away from policing, CCs in Lagos are informal structures that co-create judicial roles with law courts by acting as jury with the aim of providing order in the community by meting out penalties to suspects who are found guilty. This kind of dispute settlement had been in existence before the advent of the British law court and has continued to exist even after the adoption of the British law court system by the country. These jury systems exist in the traditional settlements of Lagos like Ikorodu, Oworonshoki, Somolu, Isale-Eko, and Lafiaji among others. They are rooted in historical institutions and have precedents. The first CC is the head of the family (usually male) with the duty of restraining his family members regarding deviant behaviours in the community. He is also expected to handle complaints of petty crimes or misbehaviour within his family and resolve these. However, some cases are transferred to the "Olori-Ebi," who is usually the oldest man in an extended family. He would listen to the complainants and then the accused would be allowed to present their defence. At this stage, witnesses, if any, will be called upon.

Some more extended issues are transferred to the "Olori Adugbo" (neighbourhood head). The Olori Adugbo is the "Baale" appointed by the Oba as the administrative head of a neighbourhood. He enjoys the approval and recognition of the Oba and reserves the right to conduct preliminary investigations in immoral and lawless cases in his neighbourhood. He could pass judgment on subtle cases such as theft which must be in conjunction with some other chiefs whose members are not parties to the case. Any appeal from the Olori Adugbo's court would be addressed by the Oba's court. The "Baale" is a member of the Oba's court, but he would have to allow other "Baales" to adjudicate on cases that come from his area. The Oba will then give judgment after listening to both sides of the case and to the contributions of his "Baales" and witnesses, if any. Whatever judgment is given would be final, at least in the CC process.

This community effort is commonly associated with civil cases and minor infractions as well as land disputes. Penalties involve fines, and the judgment may vary from warnings to communal service or outright ban from the community. In many cases, this process is co-produced with members of the NPF and vigilantes, particularly in situations where cases become too heated for the CC process to handle without the security officers' presence. In most instances, CC has a team of lawyers who help facilitate the settlement processes. Cases of grievous crimes are handed over to the NPF for state prosecution – a process where the CC actors also play an important witness role.

OUTCOMES OF CO-CREATION OF CRIME PREVENTION

These multi-sectoral collaborations have helped to reduce violent crime to some extent in Lagos and mainly in informal communities where the NPF is lacking. Particularly in the last 5 years, co-creation of crime prevention has contributed in no small measure in bringing down the crime level. A respondent said, "… things are a little better. Before now, it was dreadful as criminals and hoodlums operate openly. Although this is not the desired Lagos we want, there has been a commendable level of improvements in safety and security in the last five years …"[15] The vigilantes and house guards have been using their local knowledge to assist community policing. They have been of immense assistance to the NPF, often due to their knowledge of Lagos terrain. Their presence on Lagos streets, serving as the "eyes on the street" has been a deterrence to criminals. They undoubtedly offer important services – supporting and helping the NPF fight crime generally.

A respondent narrated "… we are local people. We know our community very well. We can easily spot strangers and suspicious movements. This local knowledge is what we have, that the NPF do not have. So, we complement their efforts by providing dependable intelligence for their work. Beyond that, we also escort NPF patrol, and our presence has helped them to penetrate streets they would not have been able to navigate by themselves …"[16] Likewise, another respondent also said, "… before we started "Ma dan wo" vigilante, crime was a serious problem here in Oworonshoki. People were being robbed in broad-day-light. Some were even killed. Walking in dark hours of evening and early morning was a big risk. But, "Ma dan wo" has really help to curb this.

[14]Interview with residents of Lagos Island – September 2022.

[15]Interview with residents of Lagos Mainland – September 2022.
[16]Ibid.

Although pockets of crimes still exist, the community is far better now …"[17] In Ikorodu community, residents hailed the local vigilante ("Onyabo") for their help in curbing the atrocities of deadly cult gangs called "One Million Boys and Bados."[18] While the presence of "Mai-guard" is neither an essential force nor effective enough for preventing street crimes, these persons, nevertheless, play a vital role as security witnesses and informants. A system of "Olode" has the capacity to turn some sets of properties into a more organic social unit that communicates internally, increasing resistance to criminal activities in the neighbourhood.

Findings further show that because the vigilantes are usually local residents, people view them more favourably and are more ready to work with them compared to the NPF. However, they can be very chauvinist, and problematic in cases which relate to women in particular.[19] The CC system has been tremendously helpful in reducing crime and strengthening the capacity of traditional rulers in Lagos.[20] This initiative has contributed to the less congested court in some parts of Lagos and public confidence in the criminal justice system of Lagos. A respondent said, "… going to court is waste of time and resources. In this community, it doesn't take time for our royal father to weigh into issues and resolve the dispute amicably at no cost to parties involved …"[21] The positive result of the CC is also evidenced by the increasing number of cases that the community rulers referred to the NPF for further prosecution and scrutiny. Besides, issues and conflicts related to fighting and land issues, which could have escalated into a serious breach of public peace, have been settled through this CC system.

CHALLENGES OF CO-CREATION OF CRIME PREVENTION

Despite the many benefits, the proliferation of vigilantes has raised several concerns. Vigilante in Lagos is a patchwork of isolated actors and groups, with much fragmentation and weak organization. At present, the number and membership of community vigilantes is unknown. With unstandardized recruitment processes, poor training, and supervision, their members are prone to arbitrary use of violence and violation of human rights. Extortion of locals, particularly those accused of crimes, is also widespread. They are also susceptible to political bias and allegiance. Since the police in Lagos are federal, the public acceptance and funding of vigilantes allows local politicians to use them as their own private soldiers to intimidate political opponents and secure their positions as sources of patronage. Being a cosmopolitan city with significant ethnic and religious diversities, vigilantes are also affiliated to a variety of ethnoreligious-protective groups, with clash of interest at times. Presently, vigilantes are being coordinated by a voluntary "trade union association" called the Vigilante Group of Nigeria. Therefore, vigilantes are not directly accountable to a public bureau or the legislative body, but rather to often weak and voluntary regulators.

Another challenge is the constitutional legitimacy of community-organized vigilantes in terms of the provisions of the Nigerian constitution, the *Police Act*, and the *Public Order Act*. Many bureaucrats, including the attorney general and justice minister, have said they are unofficial.[22] Moreover, because of the obvious weakness in performance and corruption issues facing the NPF, the debate on the legitimacy of vigilantes continues among media houses and politicians with no clarity. Undeniably, the significant and legitimate role of non-state security structures was in part recognized by the Department for International Development-supported community policing initiative. The initiative (in which individual community policing developers were identified from within the police force and trained to operate alongside community vigilante groups) was piloted in Lagos and other five states of Nigeria. However, there was no buy-in by major actors, like the Minister of Justice and IGP (and by inference, the president). Hence, the initiative was unable to generate the desired multiplier effect.

Even when the federal political cards are clearly stacked against it, the vigilante initiatives have been found to be legitimate in the judgment of common people and have been found to even produce better outcomes.[23] As such, non-state arrangements have been accorded different degrees of legitimacy by residents who exercise their demand for security through these sources. Consequently, the state has lost a substantial share of its monopoly on the use of force and as a sole security provider. There is also the challenge of firearm possession and use. Other than the NPF, no personnel are expected to possess a firearm except with a licence from the presidency or the IGP. Vigilante members, however, carry, at best, a single-shot game-hunting rifle traditionally called "Sakabula" in the local Lagos parlance. Yet, these are less effective against armed robbers who go about with modern weaponry. Thus, some stakeholders have argued that vigilantes need more firepower to fight criminals armed with military-grade weapons, while others worry that granting gun permits to every vigilante officer would lead to misuse and anarchy as seen in countries suffering from gun violence.[24]

The affairs between vigilantes and the NPF range from amiable and collaborative to distrustful and hostile. In some areas, vigilantes work closely with the NPF and the police solicit partnerships with vigilantes. Elsewhere, the relationship may be uneasy, as detailed by a respondent: "… the activities of vigilantes are usually unlawful in the way and manner they deal with suspected criminals when they are apprehended. Most times, they violated the constitution of the country. The lawful thing for them is to report suspected criminals to the police, but many times, they take law into their own hands, and we cannot overlook this…"[25] In another view, respondents felt it was risky to work the NPF as their identities might be exposed, leading to further harm. Members of vigilantes have been attacked by criminals as being responsible for disclosing facts leading their arrests.

[17]Interview with residents of Oworonshoki – September 2022.
[18]Interview with residents of Ikorodu – September 2022.
[19]Interview with residents of Oworonshoki – September 2022.
[20]Ibid.
[21]Interview with residents of Lagos Island – September 2022.
[22]Amotekun' is an illegal outfit, says FG – https://www.thecable.ng/breaking-amotekun-is-an-illegal-group-says-fg/.
[23]Engagement meeting with residents and stakeholders in Lagos – November 2022.
[24]Ibid.
[25]Interview with a key informant: police personnel – November 2022.

A respondent said, "… we cannot totally entrust suspects and our community to the police. We have situations where suspected criminals were released without any investigation and prosecution. Not only that, corrupt police personnel give hints to these convicts about key vigilante members behind their arrests, and these criminals go all-out for them after their unlawful freedom from the police custody …"[26]

These show that police–vigilante relationship could be tense sometimes, and this is due to the fact that they have both had suspiciously negative encounters (e.g., human right abuse or extrajudicial killings, among others). Hence, the police sometimes view vigilantes as competitors, inhibiting their official work. They particularly object when vigilantes assume the full role of policing, using firearms and/or other lethal force. For their part, vigilantes sometimes distrust the police because they perceive them as corrupt. The mutual suspicion undermines prospects for the multi-sectoral collaborations necessary to fight crime. Furthermore, while traditional justice systems provide a valuable supplement to the criminal justice system in the Lagos context, some residents argued that their activities sometimes do not comply with human rights and equity standards. Whereas "Mai-guards" showed a remarkable level of knowledge about their socio-physical environments, findings show that this local knowledge can be two edged, and petty stealing, aiding, and abating thefts by some "Olode and Mai-guards" are some of the more common problems of this approach.

MOVING FORWARD

Given a wide and reasonable perception that co-creation contributes to filling security gaps across Lagos, the practices in their varying forms are clearly a continuing necessity for internal stability as the NPF is overwhelmed, infiltrated, and corrupt. Nevertheless, there is a compelling need for policy responses to address the challenges highlighted in this paper, moving forward. A general lack of trust in co-creation of crime prevention, especially in relation to vigilante–police collaboration implies that building trust will require addressing perceptions of corruption, partiality, abuse of power, and human rights violation. Besides, both the NPF and vigilante members must see the need to maintain the truth and secrecy of the whistleblowers as a way to foster smooth cooperation and protect each other from reprisal attacks from criminals. Since vigilantes often have more legitimacy with the citizenry, the state should leverage this acceptance and collaborate more with vigilantes to help communities devise measures to deal with some of the underlying reasons for crime, such as political negligence, poverty, and inequality that often sparks frustration and response through crime.

There is a convincing need for policy responses to curb the proliferation of vigilantes in the short run and for plans to improve NPF services in the long run. Importantly, whether NPF, vigilantes, or CCs are able to deliver effectively on their obligations is a function of the political support that they receive. In the short run, politicians should work to better institutionalize, regulate, support, and shape vigilantes. The framework should address issues relating to operations, firearms, oversight functions, basic training standards, recruitment, and code of conduct, protocols of engagement, and the modalities for finance. In the long run, the government must focus on improving the police service through comprehensive reform of concentrated security governance and devolution of police power to the state under dispersed power configurations. The goal should be to reverse the proliferation of vigilantes and reach a point where their members who have the required qualifications can be absorbed into official decentralized NPF roles while others are released from the policing service and, where suitable, helped to secure other jobs.

The state in partnership with communities should periodically organize community accountability town hall meeting which will serve as a forum where vigilantes and other actors meet with the residents to address complaints and discuss security issues. Also, it is strongly recommended that the state considers including performing vigilante groups among the beneficiaries of the state security funds. Moreover, there is the need to closely monitor the CC systems and incorporate them officially into the state legal framework. The state should progress carefully to ensure that the CC systems do not lose their positive aspects, the authority of the CC actors is not undermined, and human rights and equality are respected in proceedings before such proceedings. A legal framework providing for state recognition should provide the option for the accused to oppose their participation and have the matter tried in the formal courts, particularly in cases where a fundamental right protected by the constitution is concerned. There is also a need to domesticate the CC across the Lagos traditional level by deploying judicial officers for the resolution of their civil case. To protect against petty stealing, "Olode and Mai-guard" should only be able to obtain their positions after a comprehensive background check and personal connections, which makes them easy to trace to their places of origin.

CONCLUSION

In the specific context of Lagos, this article presents a critical analysis of the specific forms of politics being used to tackle crime with the involvement of multi-sector collaborations. It has examined why this collaboration thrives, and how it has created a more enabling environment for crime prevention, and what may need to change for multi-sector collaboration to be able to generate more inclusive forms of security service delivery. It is evident that the NPF no longer have, nor can they claim, a monopoly on policing in Lagos. Regardless of state police, the prevention of crime is achieved locally through police-community collaborations. Policing has become pluralized, particularly, outside the elite spaces, crime prevention is co-produced and sought after by informal communities who do not always have the political investment to demand for NPF proactive protection.

What the Lagos experience teaches us is that crime reduction through co-creation is more likely to emerge and endure. This is the case even in a political settlement, where police power is narrowly concentrated, and particularly, if there is a viable socio-economic case, such as when crime rates are high; the state police not having the capacity to fight crime or, worse, when the state provides security to some groups

[26]Interview with a key informant: vigilant person – November 2022.

but not to others. However, co-production arrangements may also struggle to realize their various mandates. It is obvious that context matters; precisely, the strength of local politics is significant. The constraints on co-creation opportunities being exploited to their fullest advantage have been noted, with the required political commitment, regulatory and institutional change, besides substantial funding and investment as well as scaling them up.

From the foregoing analysis, it seems clear that the future of police consolidation depends on both reforming the institutional (state and non-state) and constitutional basis of governance in the security sector. The fact remains that the NPF cannot be trusted within neighbourhoods if it retains a structure that is only accountable to a centralized command in a "corrupt" culture, instead of a crime prevention approach. If the latter is chosen as the primary purpose, then what gets emphasized is grassroots policing, community participation and co-creation as well as police intelligence.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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SOCIAL INNOVATION NARRATIVE

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Extending the peer support specialist pathway for supporting recovery

Anthony Coetzer-Liversage*,†, Pete Nelson*, Ben Suker*

ABSTRACT

Recovery Corps is a pioneering social innovation in behavioural health, addressing the critical need for peer-driven recovery support services amidst the ongoing substance use crisis in the United States. Leveraging AmeriCorps infrastructure, Recovery Corps recruits and trains individuals with substance use disorder (SUD) lived experience to provide peer support in underserved communities. This narrative examines central assumptions associated with the Recovery Corps initiative, including those related to a perceived unmet demand for peer support, the feasibility of training community members without professional backgrounds, the impact of Recovery Corps peer support on recovery outcomes, and the degree to which Recovery Corps experience creates career pathways for individuals in recovery. By bridging service gaps, enhancing recovery capital, and fostering sustainable workforce development, Recovery Corps offers a comprehensive model for integrating peer support within behavioural health frameworks. Lessons drawn from Recovery Corps underscore the importance of capacity building, flexible evaluation methods, and strategic partnerships to sustain and scale peer-driven interventions. This program highlights an adaptable approach to recovery support, presenting a model that may inform future social innovation in behavioural health.

Key Words Recovery; peer support; career pathway; substance use; implementation; scale.

INTRODUCTION

The escalating substance use crisis in the United States has created an urgent need for innovative approaches to recovery support. In 2023, approximately 48.5 million adults reported having a substance use disorder (SUD), highlighting demand for scalable, cost-effective solutions to address the complex needs of individuals with SUDs (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), 2023a, 2023b). This trend underscores the necessity for strategies that improve engagement, enhance recovery outcomes, and bolster intervention efficacy. Many researchers focus on developing evidence-based interventions (EBIs) but often neglect studying their implementation (Weisz et al., 2014). As a result, EBIs, though well researched, lack the necessary implementation strategies for real-world effectiveness, leaving practitioners to rely more on personal experience than data to guide efforts (Albers et al., 2020).

Peer-based recovery support services, leveraging lived experiences, have shown promise in improving recovery outcomes, including treatment adherence, relapse prevention, and building supportive networks (Bassuk et al., 2016; du Plessis et al., 2019; Tracy & Wallace, 2016). Recovery capital, encompassing the social, physical, human, and cultural resources needed for sustained recovery (Cloud & Granfield, 2008; Hennessy, 2017), is central to these services. Peer support interventions enhance recovery capital by addressing personal and systemic challenges faced by individuals in recovery (Drazdowski et al., 2024; Eddie et al., 2019). However, most organizations lack the capacity to deliver these services at scale and the data infrastructure to assess their implementation and impact. Existing research also overlooks the perspectives of practitioners and policymakers crucial for effective implementation (Powell et al., 2012, 2015).

This social innovation narrative highlights Recovery Corps (RC), an initiative designed to expand peer support services and improve understanding of peer support implementation and impact by creating a rich data infrastructure for evaluation. Using the AmeriCorps infrastructure, RC recruits, trains, and places Peer Navigators in diverse settings, adhering to the SAMHSA standards (SAMHSA, 2023a, 2023b). By integrating linkage facilitation (Hogue et al., 2024)

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and personalized recovery navigation (Griswold et al., 2010; Stowell et al., 2022), it aims to improve recovery outcomes and address the gap in peer support research. Additionally, RC embeds evaluation within practice, aligning with Albers et al.'s (2020) call for continuous feedback loops to ensure the model's effectiveness.

RC stands out by reversing the traditional model of evidence-based practice, using data-informed outreach to refine its peer support services. This approach aligns with Albers et al.'s (2020) emphasis on integrating implementation science with real-world practice, ensuring that empirical evidence guides the development of recovery strategies. By generating practice-based evidence, the program contributes to broader implementation science, while addressing both immediate recovery needs and systemic change (Coetzer-Liversage et al., 2024). It exemplifies a scalable intervention model, capable of expanding from small settings to real-world conditions while maintaining effectiveness (Milat et al., 2013).

The RC model also addresses a gap in implementation science by engaging practitioners, policy leaders, and other stakeholders in the development of peer support interventions (Weisz et al., 2014). This collaboration ensures that implementation strategies are evidence based and tailored to the specific needs of those implementing the interventions. RC reflects Albers et al.'s (2020) call for partnerships between researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to enhance successful implementation.

In the following sections, we explore RC as a social innovation, examining its implementation, effectiveness, and impact on recovery capital, offering insights for scaling peer-based models in broader substance use intervention frameworks.

RECOVERY CORPS

Initial Development Process

RC development began in 2017, driven by the need to bolster the capacity of organizations serving individuals in recovery in Minnesota. A planning grant from AmeriCorps enabled a community-engaged and team-based approach of collaboration with state recovery leaders, researchers, and practitioners, leading to a recovery boot camp hosted by Hazelden Betty Ford in 2016. In addition, Minnesota's state AmeriCorps service commission (ServeMinnesota) created an Opioid Response Task Force, composed of 15 Minnesota leaders and recovery experts. This task force, including a state senator and two members of the Minnesota House of Representatives, played a key role in informing the initiative's efforts, convening quarterly as thought partners to support the state's response to opioid-related substance use broadly and the launch of RC specifically.

Public engagement was also a central component of the initial development strategy, exemplified by participation in events such as The Opioid Crisis: The Response from Minnesota in October 2018. This event attracted recovery professionals, legislators, a pharmaceutical representative, AmeriCorps members, and state service commissioners. The forum featured speakers such as Peter Gaumond from the Office of National Drug Control Policy, Liz Farmer, fiscal reporter for Governing magazine, and Leslie Crutchfield, author of *How Change Happens: Why Some Social Movements Succeed While Others Don't*, while also prioritizing the voices of individuals with opioid use disorder lived experience to ensure a grassroots perspective was provided (Cheng & Smith, 2009). Finally, RC benefited from consultative support from Dr. John Kelly, Director of Harvard's Recovery Research Institute, and an AmeriCorps-funded partnership with community engagement researchers at the University of Virginia in 2019. This collaboration aimed to further understand the needs of the population served, with particular focus on underserved groups.

Program Design

RC was developed in accordance with peer support standards established by SAMHSA (2023a, 2023b). By integrating the principles outlined by Albers et al. (2020), RC addresses critical gaps in recovery services through strategic partnerships with local networks that pave the way for RC members – referred to as "Navigators" – to provide peer support. Navigators are trained in motivational interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 2023), linkage facilitation (Hogue et al., 2024), and goal setting. Leveraging their lived experience, Navigators cultivate trust, enhance self-efficacy, and promote long-term recovery while addressing participants' social, personal, and community recovery needs (Čtvrtečková et al., 2024).

Navigators are placed in a variety of settings to provide individualized peer support, including recovery community organizations, health services organizations, collegiate recovery organizations, harm reduction organizations, non-profit health care services, treatment centres, recovery residences, and state and local agencies (e.g., Department of Corrections). They are supervised to ensure compliance with AmeriCorps rules, track progress, and conduct evaluations. In addition, an RC program manager provides Navigator oversight, maintains site relationships, and supports Navigator development. To foster community engagement and reflection, monthly Corps Days provide members with opportunities to connect with one another and the community, consistent with recommendations for ongoing professional development and community integration found in the literature (Albers et al., 2020).

Data Collection and Evaluation Framework

Navigators regularly integrate data into their service using an internally developed data management system (DMS) to inform services. In addition to DMS-sourced data, RC collects experience data from Navigators and supervisors annually and assesses the professional and personal development of Navigators using a career development survey at multiple time points within and across years of program participation. The data infrastructure for RC enables continuous feedback loops to assess program implementation and its overall efficacy. An overview of the RC data elements is provided in Table I.

Implementation, Scale, and Preliminary Impact Data

As an emerging innovation in the peer support environment, there are a number of important assumptions to consider: (1) that there is significant need for additional peer support services at organizations across the nation, (2) that untrained community members with SUD lived experience can be trained to deliver peer support services with

TABLE I Data elements for Recovery Corps

Data Element	Description	Frequency
Site characteristics	The program documents site-level characteristics (e.g., type of partner site, geographic location) during the site application process.	Once at start
Participant characteristics	Navigators document a large number of participant demographics during the first session in the DMS.	Once at start
Participant goals	Navigators work with participants to create a service plan composed of specific participant goals, documented in the DMS.	Dynamic
Service characteristics	Navigators document information about each service interaction using the DMS. This includes the date of service, the focus of the interaction, length of the interaction, and delivery method.	Each session
Site characteristics	The program documents site-level characteristics (e.g., type of partner site, geographic location) during the site application process.	Once at start
Self-report outcomes	Navigators document self-reported outcomes (outlined below).	Every 2 weeks
Recovery capital	Developed by Dr. John Kelly and colleagues as an abbreviated version of the validated 10-item BARC-10 scale assesses recovery capital (Vilsaint et al., 2017).	
Quality of life (QOL)	Rooted in a comprehensive instrument by the World Health Organization (Harper & Power, 1998), this 8-item scale measures participants' overall well-being, capturing vital domains like physical health and psychological well-being, offering an in-depth look into a participant's holistic health during recovery.	
Self-esteem	Single item: "I have high self-esteem."	
Self-efficacy	Single item: "How confident are you that you will be able to stay in recovery the next 90 days?"	
Craving	This 5-item scale measures the frequency, severity, and resistance to substance cravings and serves as an invaluable tool to predict potential return-to-use risks (Costello et al., 2020).	
Resource attainment outcomes	A comprehensive list of potential resources or tangible benefits is used to guide the goal-setting process. Navigators update that list as necessary when participants make progress toward goal resources.	Ongoing
Experience data	Collected via Navigator and supervisor surveys near the end of the service year.	Once
Career development	Data on the knowledge, skills, and attitudes, as well as career plans, are obtained at the outset and end of each program year and annually thereafter.	Twice annually with 1-year follow-ups

Notes. BARC = Brief Assessment of Recovery Capital; DMS = data management system.

adequate dosage and fidelity, (3) that the support provided produces meaningful impacts on those served, and (4) that RC creates meaningful post-service career pathways for people in recovery who are interested in peer support. In this section, we draw from DMS data and survey data to focus explicitly on indicators of implementation – including dosage and scale over time – as well as indicators of efficacy to illustrate potential for this community-driven model as an avenue for increasing service provision, creating pathways for long-term peer support careers, and advancing research-to-practice linkages.

RC scale

Through diverse partnerships, RC provides critical capacity for peer support and also collaborates with site partners to learn and adapt the model to meet local needs. This approach to partnership builds trust, enhances recovery outcomes across regions, and is consistent with the collaborative approach recommended by Albers et al. (2020) for effective implementation. Since its inception in Minnesota, the RC program has expanded to Illinois and Virginia, with significant growth in both Navigators and individuals served (Table II). For example, the number of partnering sites increased substantially from 16 in Minnesota (2020–2021) to 76 across multiple states (2023–2024). Navigator numbers also rose, with Minnesota growing from 43 to 94 Navigators, Illinois from 17 to 38, and Virginia from 37 to 95. That growth highlights the potential of an AmeriCorps-driven infrastructure for scaling promising interventions and provides evidence of a deep capacity gap to provide peer support services. Relatedly, survey data from site supervisors lend additional evidence for the match between the program and site needs. For example, supervisors (N = 55) across all three states indicated agreement that the program had a positive impact on their site (98%), had a positive impact on site beneficiaries (98%), fit within the culture and values of the site (96%), and provided resources or services that would otherwise not be provided (91%). Further, 95% of supervisors indicated that Navigator training and coaching prepare them to enter the peer support workforce.

Intervention dosage

Intervention dosage data – including duration (time spent receiving support), frequency (number of interactions), and amount (session length) – provide a critical reference for understanding assumptions about capability of Navigators

TABLE II Implementation measures

Indicators and States	Frequency			
	2020–2021	2021–2022	2022–2023	2023–2024
Number of sites				
Minnesota	16	24	32	34
Illinois	—	10	24	25
Virginia	—	—	10	17
Number of RC members				
Minnesota	43	43	67	94
Illinois	—	17	31	38
Virginia	—	—	37	95
Number of people served				
Minnesota	773	714	1,469	1,249
Illinois	—	255	312	468
Virginia	—	—	559	1,241
Dosage				
Average number of sessions (frequency)	4.1	5.2	11.6	16.56
Average number of weeks (duration)	—	10.1	21.68	9.80
Average amount of time in session (amount)	—	—	45.40	48.97

Note. Dosage only reflects data for Minnesota and Illinois for 2022–2023 due to implementation and data issues in the state of Virginia.

TABLE III Session format

	Percentage			
	2020–2021	2021–2022	2022–2023	2023–2024
In person	—	65.00	62.00	64.00
Phone	—	33.00	37.00	34.00
Video	—	2.00	1.00	2.00
Individual	—	87.00	88.00	85.00
Group	—	13.00	12.00	15.00

to deliver peer support in practice, as well as how continuous feedback loops and program monitoring might be used to strengthen dosage across time (Metz & Bartley, 2020).

In the case of RC, the average number of interactions between Navigators and participants increased from 4.10 in 2020–2021 to 16.56 in 2023–2024, indicating improved engagement. The average duration and length of support have remained relatively consistent over time, with most Navigators providing support for approximately 10 weeks, and each interaction lasting about 45 minutes. These trends may provide insight on typical dosage in practice and highlight RC's commitment to optimizing peer support dosage, which is linked to improved outcomes (Ashford et al., 2021). Few applied studies report on dosage and optimization of participant engagement to improve outcomes (Vayshenker et al., 2016), providing RC an opportunity to expand the literature in this area as it reports on dosage and participant outcomes tracking.

Intervention format

As outlined previously, RC also captures information about the format of peer support delivery as it has important influences on implementation fidelity (Malaguti et al., 2020). Unlike elements of intervention dosage, characteristics related to the format of service delivery were relatively stable across time, with 64% of interactions delivered in person, 34% by phone, and 2% by video sessions in 2023–2024. Individual sessions were by far the most dominant format (85%), with group sessions making up 15%, reflecting the program's adaptability to meet participant and contextual needs (Table III).

Impact on community participants

Existing research provides promising evidence for the impact of peer support (Ashford et al., 2021; Reif et al., 2014); however, leveraging AmeriCorps as an entry point for delivering peer support across a diverse population of sites types is somewhat different in nature, making insight on the degree to which the application of peer support in this context produces positive benefits.

When examining pre-post scores on a variety of health outcomes measures collected by RC, there is evidence of meaningful growth each year, with average gains tending to increase in concert with program scaling and continuous improvement efforts. More specifically, scores for recovery capital, quality of life, and self-efficacy showed significant

TABLE IV Participant outcome

	Mean (SD)			
	2020–2021	**2021–2022**	**2022–2023**	**2023–2024**
Recovery capital				
First session	45.40	46.68 (9.04)	46.5 (8.90)	47.74 (8.03)
Last session	51.00	49.66 (8.48)	49.8 (8.60)	50.82 (7.79)
Quality of life				
First session	3.40	3.55 (0.82)	3.46 (0.84)	3.67 (0.84)
Last session	3.90	3.78 (0.83)	3.69 (0.81)	3.75 (0.85)
Self-efficacy				
First session	7.70	7.91 (2.49)	8.21 (2.20)	8.51 (2.17)
Last session	8.50	8.30 (2.19)	8.40 (2.16)	8.65 (2.04)
Substance-free days				
First session	22.30	24.14 (10.24)	23.6 (10.60)	24.62 (9.81)
Last session	26.20	26.36 (8.27)	26.2 (8.60)	25.65 (9.19)

SD = standard deviation.

TABLE V Pre- and post-analysis of recovery capital

	Mean (SD)	**t-Score**	***p* Value**
Baseline recovery capital	47.74 (8.03)		
Post-recovery capital	50.82 (7.79)	11.72	0.000

SD = standard deviation.

gains, alongside increased substance-free days (Table IV). Recovery capital in particular saw substantial improvements, with a paired samples t-test t-score of 11.72 and a *p* value of 0.000 by the end of 2023–2024 (Table V). These gains are generally consistent with those observed in published correlational research conducted under similar conditions (Ashford et al., 2021). For example, Ashford et al. reported a 1.33-point increase in recovery capital among 3,459 people who received peer support at recovery community organizations for an average of 18.7 weeks and 9.75 sessions, whereas RC has observed larger gains in the last 4 years.

Additionally, RC Navigators also reported on the impact of their work on community participants through the Member Experience Survey. This survey captured Navigators' (N = 110) perceptions of their influence, with 99% indicating a positive impact on those they served throughout the year.

TABLE VI Recovery Corps Navigator career capital

	Adjusted Variance	**Z-Score**	***p* Value**
Career capital			
Knowing Why	60508.25	2.17	0.010*
Knowing What	63127.12	4.382	0.000*
Knowing Who	55527.12	2.913	0.003*
Total career capital	60705.00	4.59	0.000*

*p = 0.000.

Impact on RC Navigators

As we note above, RC is designed to introduce additional pathways into a peer support career or related career in the recovery field. To evaluate the viability of that design, the program collects data on the knowledge, skills, career interests, and employment of Navigators at the outset and conclusion of service. In general, those data indicate that the program significantly impacts Navigators by improving their skills and career prospects. For example, examining data from 2023–2024, notable advancements were observed across all career capital scores – "Knowing Why," "Knowing What," and "Knowing Who" – as detailed in Table VI, with all improvements showing statistical significance (p = 0.000). By the end of the service year, 28% of recovery Navigators had secured employment, and 38% were seeking employment. Additionally, 54% of members chose to return for another year of service. Many also indicated plans to pursue further education, including certifications, associate degrees, and bachelor's degrees, enhancing their professional development. This supports existing literature which highlights that professional growth and self-efficacy are key outcomes for peers involved in recovery support roles (du Plessis et al., 2019).

A thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) of Navigators' experiences (2023–2024) identified several key themes (Table VII), emphasizing professional growth, challenges, and impact of their work. The major themes were Personal Growth and Self-Care, Support and Advocacy, Professional Development, Community Impact and Empowerment, and Challenges and Reflections. The experiences of Navigators highlight the importance of managing personal well-being while fulfilling their roles, with a focus on setting boundaries and prioritizing self-care to prevent burnout. Their

TABLE VII Thematic analysis of RC Navigators

Theme	Definition	Subtheme	Exemplar Quote
Personal Growth and Self-care	Focuses on self-improvement and maintaining personal well-being while serving others. Highlights how RC Navigators evolve, managing limits and emotional health.	Boundary setting	I was not the best at setting healthy boundaries or self-care. I was go, go, go, just wanting to help as many people as I could. I crossed major boundaries and gave my personal number out … I had a very productive talk with my site supervisor about what was going on and how I was feeling. She helped … We spoke about setting healthy boundaries with my peers.
		Self-care	It taught me I am not being selfish by saying no or taking care of myself. If I am not mentally doing ok how can I help others. Boundaries and self-care have been something I have struggled with my entire life. I always wanted to make sure others are ok even if that means putting my feelings about it last.
		Emotional resilience	I have learned I can relate to my peers without taking away from them and their story.
Support and Advocacy	Providing support and advocacy, navigating complex systems, and offering emotional encouragement.	Advocacy for participants	I worked with a person, who is a participant in a specialty court in district court. They needed an advocate for them in a court hearing. Even better than this, I knew their judge! I was allowed to speak in their hearing to let the judge know how well they were doing in their recovery.
		Navigating systems	I was working with a participant who was unsure what he needed to do to become eligible for a driver's license as not only had he never had one before, he had several DUI convictions. I attempted to look online, but found conflicting information that was severely out of date. I told him he would most likely have to call or go into the Secretary of State's office or DMV, and noticed an option to schedule an appointment on the state's website, so I asked if he wanted me to just schedule one for him since I was already on the site. He agreed and thanked me profusely, saying he could not remember the last time someone had taken time out of their day to help him like that.
		Empathy and emotional support	I got to help her and watch as she progressed from being in a desperate, less than functional state to the mom it was clear she had been for her kids the entire time.
Professional Development	Growth and learning within their roles, acquiring new skills and understanding role expectations.	Training and skill enhancement	I was able to do an Independent Training Request to complete Crises Intervention Team Training alongside County Deputies. It was amazing! I am now so much better equipped to serve my community.
		Understanding role expectations	It is really important to me to not bring my home life problems into the workplace because you never know what someone else is going through.
Community Impact and Empowerment	Positive influence on the community, empowering individuals through support.	Enabling change	While working with my very first participant in what I believe was our first session, she said something to me about not being able to go to school because she is a convicted felon and is thus ineligible for any financial aid. I informed her this was simply not true and helped her enrol and begin attending classes.
		Supporting families	One day a family member was starting their journey through recovery with the same organization that I am now working for. To me this was by the grace of God.
Challenges and reflections	Reflecting on challenges and learning from experiences, personal and professional.	Overcoming obstacles	I was able to get to intake/Admissions, where I met her in person for the first time, after having many, many phone conversations about what to expect from the program.
		Learning from experience	A lot of the peers I work with just need time to debrief about what is going on or had gone on. I am here to be an example to others within my community to help give them hope.

DMV = Department of Motor Vehicles; DUI = driving under the influence.

advocacy work, navigating complex systems, and providing emotional support were central to helping individuals overcome barriers and achieve their goals. Professional development was a critical part of their journey, with continuous learning and adaptation essential for enhancing their effectiveness. Moreover, their work made a significant impact on the community, empowering individuals and families. Lastly, Navigators' reflections on overcoming challenges demonstrated their resilience and professional growth. These themes provide further consistent findings with the existing literature which show the personal and professional benefits that providing peer support services has on the peer (du Plessis et al., 2019).

REFLECTION AND LESSONS LEARNED

Challenges and Solutions

Preliminary evaluation data for the RC program illustrate its potential as a transformative entry point for peer support careers, offering a feasible and impactful model that introduces a diverse workforce to the recovery field. This initiative brings new individuals into the peer support profession, demonstrates positive career and skill-building outcomes for its members, and produces meaningful benefits for the people served by its members. However, an examination of RC also illustrates potential challenges – some specific to RC and others reflective of those faced more broadly within peer support. For example, scaling the program and generating rigorous evidence on its impact require significant resources, planning, and partnership. Due to the dynamic, relational nature of peer support, designing and implementing experimental evaluations can be complex. Addressing these challenges requires strengthening internal research capacity, fostering external partnerships, and engaging site partners who are committed to evidence-based practices.

The diversity of implementation contexts within RC also provides valuable insights into how different settings influence outcomes. This variance allows the program to assess how factors like site partner onboarding and peer integration impact the effectiveness of peer support, yet it also introduces variability that can hinder consistency. That is, the manner in which different organizations believe "peer support" should be operationalized differs, and those beliefs influence implementation. Challenges in site placement and peer integration, such as inadequate job descriptions and limited site staff understanding, align with existing literature on peer workforce integration barriers (Albers et al., 2020; Bauer et al., 2015). To address these issues, RC has implemented structured coaching for site partners to support effective onboarding and enhance implementation fidelity, consistent with evidence-based recommendations for sustainable program impact (Fleddermann et al., 2023). However, as peer support becomes increasingly prevalent in a variety of contexts, the impact of site environments on the delivery of peer support is an area in need of future research.

Lessons for the Field

RC provides valuable lessons for advancing peer support models in behavioural health, built on four key assumptions that inform the feasibility and scalability of the program and broader peer support strategies.

1. It reveals unmet demand for peer-driven services in underserved areas, showing peer support can close behavioural health gaps and enhance recovery outcomes.
2. It provides evidence for success in training individuals with SUD lived experience, underscoring the value of structured capacity building for peer support delivery.
3. It demonstrates peer support's positive impact on recovery, validating its benefits and the need for further study of practice to evidence.
4. It provides career pathways for individuals in recovery, addressing behavioural health workforce shortages and promoting sustainable recovery.

These lessons illustrate RC's role as a pioneering model in behavioural health, establishing that peer-driven support is both feasible and impactful in underserved areas. By addressing service gaps, fostering workforce development, and validating the recovery impact of peer support, RC lays a foundation for advancing peer support as a core component of sustainable recovery initiatives.

CONCLUSION

Building on these lessons, RC demonstrates the powerful role of peer support models in behavioural health, offering a framework that addresses service gaps, trains individuals in recovery to deliver effective support, and opens career pathways for them. The program's success emphasizes the value of building internal capacity, forming research partnerships, and developing the behavioural health workforce. Lessons from RC highlight the need for adaptable implementation and evaluation methods to fully capture peer support's impact, guiding future programs in scaling and sustaining these models for lasting recovery benefits.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The authors declare that they are the employees of ServeMinnesota, the state commission responsible for Recovery Corps design and evaluation.

ETHICS AND HUMAN SUBJECTS

No ethics board approval was needed, as all data are part of program implementation and evaluation; however, all participants provided informed consent that the data collected as part of the implementation of the program can be used for research and publication purposes. Importantly, all precautions were taken to protect the participant information and confidentiality.

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SOCIAL INNOVATION NARRATIVE

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Re-thinking the critical incident response (CIR) for police officers involved in ambush situations

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, the role and expectations of police officers has undergone significant transformation. Challenges such as social media, societal pressures, officer fatigue, and increasingly sophisticated and lethal criminal activities have made the job more difficult. Specifically, police ambushes and targeted attacks have created a divide between officers and the communities they serve, often resulting in moral injury and mental health issues for officers. From a leadership perspective, ambushes have caused emotional distress, a situation that is becoming more frequent in Canada. The progression in crisis support practices has been slow, with many services still using Critical Incident Stress Debriefing, a program with questionable effectiveness and safety. An alternative strategy involves peer teams that are trained in clinical intervention techniques and have access to an external clinical psychology team. This setup offers peer team members the necessary support and guidance when assisting colleagues in distress. This trauma-informed approach, which considers the needs of individual officers while delivering quick and effective intervention, can reduce the impact of critical incidents on officer mental health.

Key Words Police; ambush; trauma; critical incident; debrief; peer support; mental health.

INTRODUCTION

With almost 60 years of police service and over 20 years in peer support and counselling experience between them, the authors are well placed to write this timely article on the importance of a police/psychological support collaboration to best support police officers' mental health before and after a critical incident. The nature of crime and social problems have both intensified over the past three decades. The strain on service providers has also continually increased. Only recently have we begun to understand and acknowledge the jeopardy of moral injuries and post-traumatic stress on frontline personnel. Agencies have a responsibility to care for their members' mental health.

Reports such as the Ontario Ombudsman's report "In the Line of Duty" (Marin, 2012) and "Staying Visible, Staying Connected, for Life: Report of the expert panel on police officer deaths by suicide" (Chief Coroner of Ontario 2021) have played a significant role in bringing police officers' mental health and well-being to the forefront. The evolving nature and methods of crimes have heightened anxiety among frontline police officers across Canada. One area of concern is the increasing public scrutiny, disrespect, and antagonism toward officers. For example, there has been a notable rise in ambushes and unprovoked assaults specifically targeting police officers in Canada (Rai et al., 2023). In this article, we explore the ambush phenomenon and highlight the need for evolved trauma mitigation processes outside of the familiar Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) debrief model.

AMBUSHED ON DUTY

Policing inherently involves risk, with officers often facing emergencies and violent criminals with little time to plan and prepare. However, ambushes are particularly egregious because they deceive officers into believing they are responding to help, only to be violently attacked. Such assaults underscore the vulnerability of police and can threaten the community's perception of law and order (White, 2020). Additionally, ambushes can significantly influence police attitudes and behaviours toward the public and impact the ongoing debate about officer safety (Balko, 2015).

The Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI's) Law Enforcement Officers Killed or Assaulted program distinguishes the differences between an ambush and other violent phenomena (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2019). A premeditated

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ambush involves a scenario in which an unsuspecting officer is deliberately targeted or lured into a dangerous situation as the result of conscious consideration and planning by the offender. An unprovoked attack is an assault on an officer that, at the time of an incident, is not prompted by official contact between the officer and the offender (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2019).

In other words, an unprovoked attack occurs without any long-term planning and is typically a crime of opportunity. The subject usually decides to act as the officer moves into their area or while an officer may be preoccupied with other duties (e.g., investigating a traffic accident). The International Association of Chiefs of Police reported that officers were killed about 54% of the time when they were ambushed. Blair and Duron (2022) predict ambushes to be deadly because they happen by surprise and officers are not adjusting their behaviour to deal with a potential threat. Typically seen as an occurrence that happens more frequently in the United States than in Canada, both ambushes and unprovoked attacks have been prevalent in the media in Canada. In 2022 and 2023, 10 Canadian police officers died in the line of duty, with 5 officers being ambushed (Rai et al., 2023).

AMBUSH DIFFERENT FROM OTHER CRITICAL INCIDENTS

As a staff sergeant and team leader, the author Beth Milliard's platoon recently experienced an ambush that resulted in a deadly force encounter. Members of Milliard's platoon were called to a residence for a break and enter in progress. When the officers arrived on scene and exited their vehicles, a male started shooting from a bedroom window. Realizing he was not successful in hitting his target, he left the residence to face the officers head on. Besides minor injuries to one of Milliard's officers, none were physically hurt; however, they all felt the toll emotionally and psychologically. These types of incidents not only affect the members who are directly involved but the psyche of the whole platoon.

MORAL INJURY

In an ambush scenario, a police officer is sent to a call believing they are going to assist someone in need. Upon arrival, without any forewarning, their role can swiftly shift from helper to victim in mere moments. In a split second, they can be compelled to take another person's life. Moral injury refers to the "moral and ethical challenges experienced by frontline professionals in the line of duty" (Papazoglou & Tuttle, 2018, p. 6). In ambush situations, police officers face moral injury as they grapple with the reality that someone intentionally devised a plan to harm or kill them simply because they are in uniform. Then they are compelled to use lethal force against that person.

Police officers can find themselves in conflict with the community they vowed to safeguard, leading to an ethical and moral dilemma. Involved officers are forced to grapple with the following question: why would those for whom I risk my life want to harm me? Clifton et al. (2018) explain that following the attacks on officers in Dallas, Texas, and Louisiana in 2016, officers who did not receive the appropriate professional support reported decreased motivation levels while at work. Some wanted to quit.

Traumatic experiences that pose a high level of personal threat, such as being ambushed, are more distressing to police officers than those that do not (McCaslin et al., 2006). McCaslin et al. (2006) found that officers whose critical incident was in the categories of duty-related violence or personal life threat had higher symptoms of hyperarousal than the officers whose critical incident involved a civilian death (Teaff, 2019). With the rise of ambushes and unprovoked attacks, it is crucial that police services embrace swift psychological intervention and incorporate a variety of programs and procedures to support members before and after a deadly force encounter.

ROLE OF THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

As leaders, we must be cognizant that, over time, in ambush situations officers may start to feel cognitive overload. When processing the incident, they realize the attack was initiated without warning and start to question their role and the high risk the job puts them in. For example, according to the Ontario Special Investigations Unit (SIU), both subject and witness officers are those who are directly involved. However, as supervisors, we must not forget the impacts on the officers who were indirectly involved. This includes those officers who held the scene, transported officer's equipment, provided peer support, and continue to come into work and pick up the workload for those officers who are off. It also affects the civilian staff who dispatch the call and play various support roles. In addition, an ambush has the potential to greatly impact the officer's family and significant others. Since these individuals often provide valuable support following an incident, it can be beneficial to involve them in the intervention process.

Leaders need to be mindful that people may respond to crisis events in a physical/physiological, psychological, behavioural, and spiritual/existential levels (Levers & Buck, 2012). In addition, the way an individual mentally processes an event will largely depend on their personal experiences. People's reactions and the extent to which they recover can differ greatly due to previous risk factors and experience. Supervisors should have a basic understanding of the purpose and utility of peer support programs, know the SIU process, be aware of the services debrief procedures, and have awareness of Workplace Safety programs. Knowledge, and in some cases re-vamping of internal policies and practice, gives experienced leaders an advantage when supporting members.

It is essential to consider group dynamics, existing relationships, and personal styles when deciding if senior leaders should engage with the affected group. In certain situations, senior leadership can offer crucial reassurance, guidance, and support. This largely depends on the leader's style and their previous connection with those impacted by the ambush. Therefore, selecting the most appropriate people to provide effective and well-received support is crucial.

Most police services have the best intentions when supporting their members. The response to officer wellness and how we support our members who have gone through critical incidents such as ambushes must change. Police services are encouraged to create partnerships with various psychological resources to best ensure members are supported well. Affected officers should be assessed and

provided appropriate treatments and consistent follow-up, including for their families and loved ones.

Organizations with established peer support teams need to ensure peers have established protocols incorporated before and after the incident. In this way, officers can be properly informed and assisted in processing traumatic events to ensure they can return to work with a healthy frame of mind.

ISSUES WITH CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS DEBRIEFING

Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD), part of the CISM program, was developed by Jeffrey T. Mitchell. It has faced scrutiny regarding its effectiveness. Nevertheless, this program is extensively utilized in police services across North America. Concerns over protocol structure, appropriate referrals, psychoeducation, and risk assessment were noted as early as 2004 (Jacobs et al., 2004).

The CISD process is commonly employed, but there is insufficient evidence supporting its benefits (Dangermond et al., 2022; Khalid et al., 2022). Khalid et al. (2022) suggest that skilled clinicians can effectively use psychological interventions to address post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among first responders. Moreover, Dangermond et al. (2022) discovered that psychoeducation programs, which improve mental health knowledge and build resilience, along with suicide prevention programs, are effective for first responder groups.

Further reviews indicate CISD might cause harm in some cases (Carlier et al., 1998, 2000; van Emmerik et al., 2002), often due to low facilitator skill level, poor protocol adherence, and group dynamic challenges (Williams et al., 2021). Mandatory debriefs that promote sharing details of any event with peers should be avoided, as they often do not reduce trauma symptoms effectively (Kenardy, 2000). Furthermore, facilitators using CISD in individual formats can overstep therapeutic boundaries. Conversely, trauma clinicians can assess recovery from ambushes and provide psychoeducation without pathologizing natural recovery. A different approach to debriefing is needed, especially considering the current environment of targeted attacks on police.

NEW CONSIDERATIONS IN RESPONDING TO POLICE AMBUSHES

Providing timely and effective support to police officers after ambushes is crucial in reducing the impact of trauma and moral injury. In recognition of the urgent need for programs in first responder agencies that promote resilience, early issue identification, and swift intervention, a shift in service provision has been adopted. Historically, psychologists treating first responders who had endured severe trauma from their work would not see members come through their doors for years post incident. By the time they seek treatment, their symptoms of PTSD, panic, anxiety, and other challenges are often deeply entrenched. In the interim, many have developed additional issues such as addiction, workplace discipline problems, and marital breakdowns. Some become estranged from their children due to their challenging behaviours. This prolonged period of suffering frequently leads to the development of mood disorders, adding another layer of complexity to their struggles. This underscores the importance of early intervention and support for first responders to prevent these cascading effects.

For a critical incident program to function effectively between police organizations and psychology clinics, it is essential to establish strategic relationships. Lara Sigurdson (one of the authors) has worked with trauma for many years. She describes a more ideal process for managing trauma. Sigurdson's program incorporates processes that guarantee a swift response to the needs of the organization and ensure that trauma clinicians are available when a critical incident arises. A common challenge is that police services struggle to have psychologists available when critical incidents take place.

EARLY POST INCIDENT

The service should quickly determine which officers and communicators have been impacted by the ambush. This ensures that those participating played a central role in the event engendering appropriate group cohesion. Peer support teams are influential in ascertaining who is at risk in the early stages post event and are integral in providing information on the next steps in the debrief process and normalizing acute trauma reactions. In the aftermath of a targeted police attack, peer support teams should focus on offering practical assistance to members. This includes contacting families, supplying food and clean gear, providing transportation home, and sharing information about the next steps in the debriefing process.

The goal is to avoid conducting a detailed debrief within the first 3 days since members are likely to experience nervous system disruptions like sleep disturbances, fixation on event details, emotional fluctuations, hypervigilance, and significant discomfort. These reactions are normal responses to being attacked and do not necessarily indicate long-term problems. It is important to differentiate operational debriefs that are traditionally conducted in policing from a psychological debrief.

The main goal of an operational debrief is to review the actions undertaken during an operation, assess the success of the strategies and tactics used, identify any problems or challenges faced, and gather insights for future improvement. On the other hand, a psychological debrief is a structured process designed to offer support and aid recovery for those who have gone through a traumatic event. A key distinction is that psychological debriefs involve processing emotions, thoughts, reactions, and personal experiences related to the event, along with symptom exploration and assessment.

IMPORTANCE OF EARLY PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT AND INDIVIDUAL DEBRIEFS

An individual debrief (ID), based on Sigurdson's model, includes psychological testing to assess the current degree of distress, a risk factor assessment, and the delivery of a structured method of processing the event. IDs are provided as early as a week after an event, if the member wishes it. Importantly, the trauma clinician must be equipped to intercept moral injury issues, often associated with civilian oppression toward police early, possibly lessening long-term difficulties. Following this, another session is booked 30 days later, with an optional session 3 months post incident. The

longer-term screening is necessary to monitor and support the officer in natural recovery from the event and to provide information on maladaptive coping (e.g., substance use, avoidance) that could impede their progress. If a member is evincing notable distress, three sessions will be delivered within a shorter time span.

IDs, conducted by clinicians experienced in trauma care, cater to the specific needs of officers, enhancing recovery and processing. This approach also respects the privacy of officers and encourages openness and honesty. Furthermore, the risks inherent in traditional psychological debriefs are avoided when provided in individual format. IDs are deliberately not mandated for officers affected by a police ambush. Sigurdson claims it is crucial to give officers a sense of autonomy in their recovery process, as their feelings of control and power have often been compromised in the event itself.

The names of who attend IDs are not provided to the service to provide privacy. Indeed, officers are concerned they may suffer retribution if they acknowledge they are struggling and attend the ID. Conversely, if they do not attend, they worry they may be perceived by the organization to not be doing what they should to move through the event effectively. As such, anonymity of officers who choose to attend is a must.

GROUP INTERVENTIONS

A second component of the CIR process is a group intervention. The group psychological response takes place only if a larger team of officers is impacted. For smaller groups, only IDs are activated. Members are invited to attend, if they wish, with the predetermined impacted group. Three trauma clinicians deliver the group intervention. Parameters are clearly set, namely, that details of the event will not be reviewed, with the rationale behind the risks explained. If a group member is having difficulty or withholding event details, a trauma clinician will guide them to a designated area where they can talk separately, protecting other group members from possible harm. The group focus is largely a discussion on current symptoms members may be experiencing, psychoeducation on the typical stress/trauma response, and helpful ways to cope.

Members can attend just the ID, just the group, or both. Participation in both individual and group sessions is voluntary, allowing members to choose based on their readiness. Additional components that Sigurdson has provided in CIR activations can include a psychoeducation group for families, as well as a multi-service group when several professions are impacted on the same call (police, EMS, fire, corrections, etc.).

CONCLUSION

In this new era of increased risk of lasting psychological impacts from traumatic events, police agencies need to step up support for their members. This can require specialized resources that would be challenging to maintain within every organization. This regional shared service model offers an alternative that can deliver high-quality expedient service to officers, regardless of their location.

Until recently, CISM teams were considered the go-to option for many years, as organizations struggled with the stigma associated with police officers seeking mental health support. However, as the nature and type of crime have changed, so have the complexities and challenges of being a police officer. As such, organizations have an ethical responsibility to not only offer mental health supports but also to evaluate the types of supports they are currently providing to their members. In addition, police organizations should be collaborating with experts in the mental health field.

Not every organization has the means to hire in-house psychologists. However, consulting and liaising with psychologists who are trauma/first responder informed can increase the efficacy of wellness programming. In addition, organizations should seek and encourage information from those leaders who can provide insightful accounts of their experiences in overseeing members who were directly and indirectly involved in an ambush.

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PRACTICE GUIDELINE

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Coercive control in the context of partner abuse: behavioural markers, assessment challenges, and interview approaches

Madison Wesenberg*, Sandy Jung*, John Tedeschini†

ABSTRACT

Coercively controlling behaviours are highly prevalent in the context of intimate partner violence. However, coercive control often goes undetected because, unlike physical violence, it has not always been recognized as a criminal offence, is often perceived as less severe, and does not produce visible signs of physical violence. This paper outlines the importance of understanding what coercive control is, what coercive control looks like, why it is difficult to identify, and how investigative interviewing approaches can be employed to capture behaviours associated with coercive control when working with individuals who have engaged in partner abuse. Investigative interviewing approaches and motivational interviewing can help uncover coercively controlling behaviours that would otherwise be undetected by police and other justice-involved practitioners. Use of these approaches are illustrated to emphasize the importance of planning and preparation prior to the interview process, establishing rapport, and creating collaborative, non-adversarial relationships between the interviewer and the interviewee. These factors are likely to increase the quantity and quality of information gathered during the interview process, capture the nuances of coercive control, and reduce the likelihood that the interviewee will engage in controlling behaviours that could negatively impact the interview process.

Key Words Coercive control; partner violence; interviewing; psychological abuse; motivational interviewing; cognitive interviewing.

INTRODUCTION

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a pervasive issue. IPV represents 30% of all police-reported violence in Canada (Cotter, 2021), and a staggering 44% of women will experience some form of psychological, physical, or sexual IPV during their lifetime (Cotter, 2021). When IPV is defined, there is often a focus on the physical forms of IPV, rather than the non-physical forms of IPV like psychological or emotional abuse which are often seen as less severe (Koshan, 2023). However, there is substantial evidence that non-physical IPV is harmful on its own (Lohmann et al., 2024; Myhill, 2015) and is associated with increased IPV frequency and severity (Hardesty et al., 2015). This is particularly true in the case of coercive control.

Coercive control is a distinct form of IPV. Unlike situational couple violence, which is generally the result of specific conflicts that lead to violence by one or both partners (Johnson, 2008), coercive control involves a pattern of behaviours aimed at exerting control over a target (i.e., victim or potential victim). Specifically, it involves a coercive demand (e.g., that the victim cease communication with friends and family) where the victim perceives the demand as negative and the demand is typically followed by a credible threat for non-compliance (e.g., victim will be harmed if they continue to talk to family members; Dutton & Goodman, 2005; Hamberger et al., 2017). As coercively controlling behaviours may not involve physical violence and reflect an overall pattern of behaviour rather than a single incident, it can be difficult to detect by friends, family, and authorities (Gill & Aspinall, 2020). Despite being difficult to spot, identifying the presence of coercively controlling behaviours in partner abuse situations has important implications. This paper outlines how existing evidence-based interview approaches can offer strategies and processes that can effectively draw out disclosures of coercive control from those who perpetrate IPV.

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THE IMPORTANCE OF IDENTIFYING AND ASSESSING COERCIVE CONTROL

Only recently has greater attention been given to coercive control and this is in part due to consistent findings that coercively controlling behaviours are prevalent in intimate partner relationships, have significant psychological consequences, and are risk factors for further violence.

Prevalence

Within the context of IPV, coercive control has consistently been reported to be prevalent in such relationships. For instance, a study conducted by Breiding et al. (2014b) found that, while 31% of women reported having experienced physical violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime, nearly 40% experienced at least one act of coercive control. Of relationships that involved physical or sexual violence, an overwhelming majority (95%) of partner-victims experienced some form of coercive control (Myhill, 2017). One study conducted in India (Kanougiya et al., 2022) reported that 48% of ever-married women had experienced coercive control in the last 12 months. These studies reveal that non-physical forms of abuse like coercive control is prevalent in the majority of IPV cases and in many partner relationships where IPV is not reported. Hence, there is a need to both identify and assess the nature of the coercive control within an abusive relationship.

Negative Consequences

Further adding to this need is the association between coercive control and negative psychological outcomes, as well as severe physical abuse – both have been well documented. A recent meta-analysis found that experiencing coercive control was positively correlated with post-traumatic stress disorder as well as depression (Lohmann et al., 2024). Myhill's research (2015) indicates that victims are 2.5-times more likely to experience mental or emotional problems compared to those who had experienced situational violence, even when controlling for physical violence severity, and they are more likely to experience more severe forms of IPV. The presence of coercive control has been found to be associated with an increased risk for victims to experience other forms of IPV, including emotional, physical, and sexual abuse (Kanougiya et al., 2022). A later study published by Myhill (2017) found that victims who experience coercive control in conjunction with physical violence sustained more serious and frequent bodily injuries, such as internal damage and broken bones or teeth. Coercively controlling behaviours have also been found to be associated with severe, sub-lethal forms of IPV including strangulation and use of weapons (Myhill & Hohl, 2019), with nearly 74% of IPV cases including non-fatal strangulation involving coercive control as well (Bendlin & Sheridan, 2019).

Elevated Risk for Violence

Increased risk of harm is particularly concerning for women leaving coercively controlling relationships, as they are at an increased risk for violent acts and harassment, experience a greater frequency of violent acts, report higher levels of fear during and after their relationship ends, and perceive a higher level of future threat (Hardesty et al., 2015). Some studies have even found that those who experience coercive control alone, rather than in conjunction with physical violence, may experience more fear after separation (Crossman et al., 2016). In fact, coercively controlling behaviours are more likely to persist following separation (Myhill, 2015), and such behaviours have been found to be associated with an increased risk for IPV recidivism (Hilton et al., 2023). Others have suggested that the presence of controlling behaviours may be a better predictor of intimate partner murder than merely the presence of past physical violence (Johnson et al., 2019; Regan et al., 2007), and consequently identifying coercive control has important implications for interventions and safety planning.

Summary and Current Legal Context

In sum, the presence of coercive control presents as a strong indicator of a pattern of persistent and severe IPV and is associated with an increased risk of physical and psychological harm for the victim. More recently, it has become even more crucial to identify the presence of coercively controlling behaviours in Canada where coercive control will likely become a chargeable offence in the criminal code (Hilton & Jung, 2023), similar to other countries, such as the United Kingdom, Ireland, and New South Wales where coercive control has been criminalized (see Giesbrecht, 2024). Canada's House of Commons has passed Bill C-332 in its third reading, which will make coercive control a criminal offence, and at the time of writing, Bill C-332 is under review by the Canadian Senate. Hence, processes to specifically assess and identify the presence of coercive control, beyond IPV behaviours that involve physical and sexual assault, are imperative.

DEFINING COERCIVE CONTROL

Stark and his colleagues (Stark, 2009; Stark & Hester, 2019) have written much about what coercive control in abusive intimate relationships may look like, and there is a plethora of questionnaire-type tools published (Hamberger et al., 2017). More generally, coercive control can comprise a variety of behaviours with the intention of trying to gain control of the victim by exploiting their resources, depriving them of their autonomy and well-being, and interfering with social supports, thus making the victim dependent upon their abuser for their practical and emotional needs and remain in the abusive relationship (Stark, 2009). These behaviours increase or capitalize on vulnerabilities present in the victim. There are too many features, exemplars, and measures of coercive control to review. So, to provide a more parsimonious description, the following deconstructs coercive control into four essential categories of behaviour: controlling the victim's resources, manipulating their well-being, controlling the victim's social network, and using power and threats to control the victim's autonomy (see Figure 1).

Control of Resources

Controlling the partner's finances or resources to maintain independence may be one objective of the abusive partner. Breiding et al. (2014a) reported that 75% of female IPV victims reported that their partner kept them from having their own money. This could involve limiting their access to bank accounts, paychecks, or employment. The use of the term "economic control" provides a broader definition of this objective and refers to monitoring and restricting a partner's use of and ability to acquire economic resources

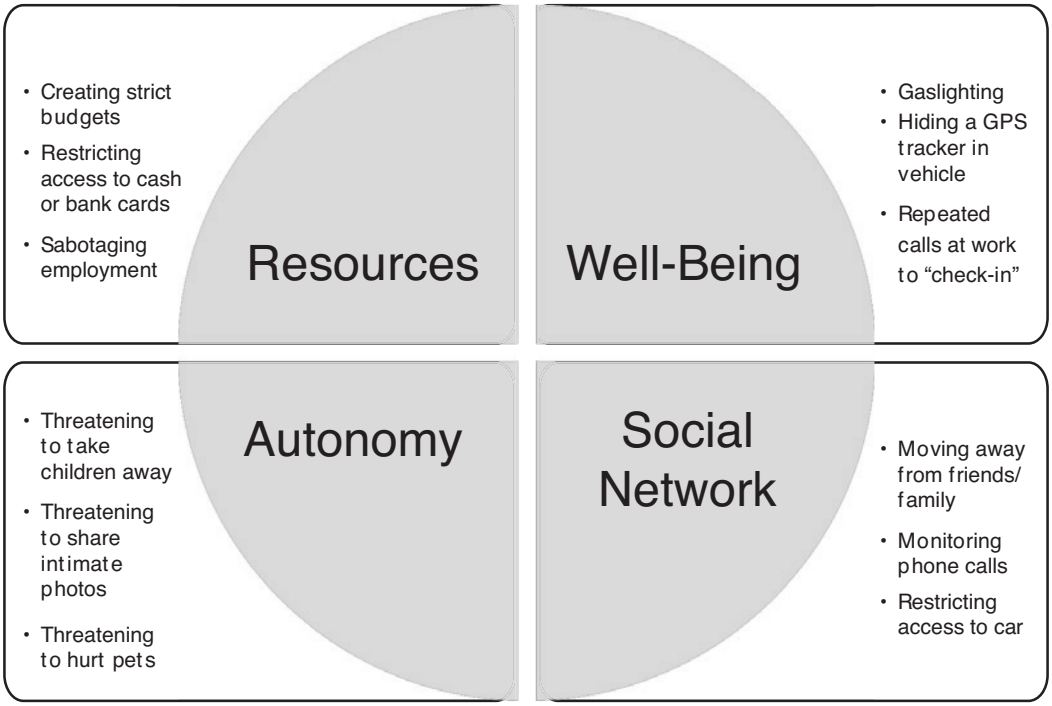

FIGURE 1 Domains of coercive control in the context of IPV. IPV, intimate partner violence.

(Postmus et al., 2020; McKay White & Fjellner, 2022), which may include making victims dependent on their abuser for resources to meet their practical needs (e.g., food, hygiene products), or sabotaging employment (i.e., interfere with victims' ability to keep a job or obtain one).

Manipulate Well-Being

Coercive control may involve limiting the victims' autonomy or worsening their well-being (Stark, 2009). This can be executed in a variety of ways, such as reproductive coercion (e.g., prevent victim from using contraception, force abortions or hide pregnancies, or prevent from terminating unwanted pregnancies; Buchanan & Humphreys, 2020) or religious coercive control (e.g., prevent from participating in religious ceremonies, use religious doctrine to regulate their clothing, modesty, or sexual relations; Mulvihill et al., 2022). In addition to limiting autonomy, abusive partners may also engage in emotional manipulation tactics that aim to reduce the victim's well-being. Gaslighting (American Psychological Association, n.d.) is a form of abuse where the abusive partner challenges the victims' perceptions of themselves and the world around them through insults, accusations, and manipulation (e.g., accused of being crazy, overly emotional, stupid, selfish, or unattractive), which leads them to doubt their own abilities, perceptions, and mental stability (Klein et al., 2023). It is commonly experienced by IPV victims as shown in a study conducted by Kim et al. (2023) where 54% reported experiencing gaslighting tactics.

Control Social Network

Coercively controlling the victim's social life and support by interfering with their social connections leads to victims becoming overly reliant on their abusers for social and emotional support, to making it difficult for them to leave the relationship, to it being unlikely that the abuse in the relationship will be detected, and to reducing the victim's resilience (Stark, 2009). Coercively controlling partners may keep victims from family and friends, limit access to a cell phone or the Internet, or physically isolate them by moving away. Using technology to surveil victims has become a commonly reported tactic (e.g., cameras installed around the house, tracking apps on victims' phones, breaching victims' password security to monitor e-mails and text messages; Douglas et al., 2019).

Control Autonomy

An abusive partner may use direct and indirect threats to ensure their victim complies with their demands. Direct threats could involve explicit threats to physically harm the victim or those close to them like friends, family, children, and pets (Breiding et al., 2014a) or reliance on the victim being fearful that the abusive partner will repeat violence toward them or to others (Dutton & Goodman, 2005). Non-physical direct threats could include behaviours that have other consequences for the victim, such as threatening to share intimate photos or videos to friends and family (Henry et al., 2022), to have children taken away (Hay et al., 2023), or to have them deported (Alsinai et al., 2023). Non-direct threats can target victims' specific vulnerabilities, such as their attachment to their family, friends, or neighbours (e.g., threats to harm them) or their mental state (e.g., pushing them to abuse substances, admitting them to a mental health facility; Dutton & Goodman, 2005).

Summary

These four domains highlight that coercive control is a form of abuse that cuts across nearly all domains within a victim's life. It includes both covert and overt behaviours, both inside

and outside the household, and the individual perpetrating coercive control with their partner has many objectives in their pursuit of control over them. Coercive control reflects a pervasive pattern of abuse, and unfortunately, there are still myriad barriers preventing its detection.

DIFFICULTIES IDENTIFYING COERCIVE CONTROL

Despite coercive control being highly prevalent and reflecting a distinct pattern of abusive behaviour, it often remains undetected and undocumented. This is problematic given that coercive control will soon become a criminal offence in Canada (Bill C-332, 2024; Giesbrecht, 2024). At the current time, coercively controlling behaviours are not recognized by some countries, including Canada (Gill & Aspinall, 2020). In Canada, the passing of Bill C-233, known as Keira's Law, which led to standardized training for judges on partner violence and coercive control, has begun a strengthening of laws around coercive control in partner-abusive relationships (Bill C-233, 2022). Until coercive control is officially recognized in the criminal codes of all westernized countries, individuals who engage in these behaviours could be charged for other criminal code offences, such as criminal harassment, uttering threats, or mischief. However, these offences do not fully capture the nature and consequences of coercive control (Gill & Aspinall, 2020). As police and other justice professionals are likely to focus on specific chargeable incidents, they may fail to recognize the repeated controlling behaviours causing the victim psychological distress (Gill & Aspinall, 2020). Beyond the criminal justice system, there are also misconceptions about non-physical IPV and coercive control that can make it difficult to identify.

Perceived as Less Serious

Although coercive control is associated with negative psychological outcomes and is associated with more frequent and severe IPV, it is still often perceived as less severe than physical violence (Koshan, 2023). Past research has shown that coercive control behaviours are unlikely to be detected by police unless there is physical violence present (Robinson et al., 2017), and that police were unlikely to arrest abusers who only engaged in threats or harassment (Myhill, 2015). It has also been found that as much as 86% of U.S. police officers agree that too many IPV calls are for verbal family arguments (McPhedran et al., 2017). This downplay of the severity of non-physical violence can lead police officers to see victims as childish for reporting coercive controlling behaviours (DeJong et al., 2008) and influence how they respond to disclosures, thus inhibiting victim reporting. Given this information, it should be unsurprising that 63.4% of women chose not to report their abuse because they did not think it was serious enough (Fanslow & Robinson, 2010).

Oversimplified Solutions

Another barrier to identifying coercively controlling behaviours is that outside observers often only see simple solutions, such as leaving their abuser or reporting their abuse to police. Past research has found that 71% of U.S. police officers agreed that victims could easily leave their abusers if they wanted to (McPhedran et al., 2017), and that 50% of university students believed that women decide on their own to stay in abusive relationships (Policastro & Payne, 2013). However, the reality is that leaving an abusive relationship is the most dangerous time for women, with 36% of intimate partner murder cases occurring after separation (Dobash & Dobash, 2015). There are also numerous other barriers preventing individuals from leaving abusive relationships, such as lack of social support or money, that are further exacerbated within coercive controlling relationships (Fanslow & Robinson, 2010). Reporting abuse also may not be an effective option for dealing with coercive control. Reports of coercive control in the absence of physical violence may never be properly recorded as IPV by police or other authorities (Robinson et al., 2017).

Invisibility

Unlike physical violence which can produce visible bruising or welts, coercively controlling behaviours are intangible. It is necessary for victims or perpetrators to disclose their experiences for it to be properly detected. Many self-report measures of coercive control are also available (see Hamberger et al., 2017), but these are not commonly used outside of research. Many Canadian police offenders report using a risk tool when addressing IPV at the time of investigation (Saxton et al., 2020), but items included in many risk assessment tools, such as the Ontario Domestic Assault Risk Assessment (ODARA; Hilton et al., 2004) or the Spousal Assault Risk Assessment Guide (SARA; Kropp et al., 1995), do not adequately capture coercively controlling behaviours. Furthermore, these tools cannot be used in the absence of physical violence. The invisible nature of coercively controlling behaviours and need to identify this as a pattern of behaviours, and not merely an instance in an index offence, are caveats to properly document or address coercive control.

EVIDENCE-BASED INTERVIEWING APPROACHES

As coercive controlling behaviours are difficult to detect and associated with increased risk of physical and psychological harm to the victim, it is pertinent that interview techniques that increase the likelihood of truthful, accurate disclosures are used. This is exceptionally important given individuals who engage in IPV are motivated to suppress incriminating details to avoid or minimize punishment (Watson et al., 2022). Early research has shown that how an interview is conducted can greatly influence the quality and quantity of information gathered (Fisher et al., 1989). For example, interview techniques that were commonly used by Western law-enforcement agencies, before evidence-based approaches were introduced over the past couple of decades, have been found to entice witnesses to withhold information, only provide information when directly asked, provide short, abbreviated responses, as well as provide information they are unsure of (Geiselman & Fisher, 2014). Studies have shown that these ineffective and dated methods typically involved inadequate rapport building, many closed-ended or leading questions, and limited efforts to assist witnesses in recalling events (Fisher & Geiselman, 1992; Gudjonsson & Pearse, 2011; Milne & Bull, 1999; Vallano & Compo, 2011). Calls for reforming police investigative interviewing practices over the past few decades (Snook et al., 2010) have led to a movement

toward evidence-based approaches world-wide, resulting in expert-led protocol outlining principles on effective interviewing, also known as the Méndez Principles (Bull, 2023; Méndez et al., 2021). Fortunately, a number of interviewing approaches have been introduced over the past few decades that can effectively address the shortcomings of older and dated investigative techniques, and a few are described here (note this list is not exhaustive but briefly described to provide context for the core elements in the next section).

Motivational Interviewing

One such approach is motivational interviewing (MI; Miller & Rollnick, 2023), which is seen as a collaborative approach and in some ways a more humane interviewing method than other dated investigative techniques used by the police (e.g., REID model; Inbau et al., 2011). Originally developed for treating those with addictions, MI aims to reduce ambivalence for change by drawing out clients' own motivations and ideas for change (Miller & Rollnick, 2023) and can be used in the context of police and other investigative interviewing contexts (Surmon-Böhr et al., 2020). MI is a directive approach, so its constructive and palpable approach can be useful to engage suspects, victims, and witnesses and offers a structure to training police officers on developing rapport with suspects in criminal investigations (Tedeschini & Jung, 2018). MI has clear components that are defined and guide this process (Miller & Rollnick, 2002, 2023) and has received empirical support in offender research on reducing recidivism (e.g., Anstiss et al., 2011). MI can facilitate working through denial, minimization, and victim blaming that is commonly seen among partner violent men (Scott & Straus, 2007; Smyth et al., 2024) and therefore can help to establish a working relationship with suspects.

Cognitive Interview for Suspects

An approach that was developed to counter the shortfalls present in many commonly used police interview techniques is the Cognitive Interview for Suspects (CIS; Geiselman, 2012), which focuses on the psychological processes of memory and cognition, social dynamics, and communication, and recognizes that suspects may intentionally deceive interviewers and leave out information that is pertinent to the investigation. The CIS is based on the Cognitive Interview (CI), an interviewing protocol originally designed to facilitate more accurate and detailed memory recall from cooperative witnesses to crimes (Fisher & Geiselman, 1992). For this reason, CI and CIS were developed with an increased focus on gathering a larger volume of information, as this is more likely to uncover inconsistencies in the suspect's account (Satin & Fisher, 2019). Given that in the context of IPV, much of what is experienced may only be reported by the partner who is the victim, CI and CIS offer a way to bring to light these "invisible" behaviours of coercive control without diminishing the seriousness of the perpetrator's behaviour – much of which happens behind closed doors.

Strategic Use of Evidence

Another approach is the Strategic Use of Evidence (SUE) technique (Granhag & Hartwig, 2015), which is a science-based approach that has been shown to be highly effective when used in the context of investigative interviews with suspects (Hartwig et al., 2014). The underlying theory behind the SUE technique is that innocent individuals are generally forthcoming during interviews whereas guilty ones are inclined to be avoidant or use denials. Therefore, when investigators ask questions around key pieces of evidence without making the suspect aware they possess it, an innocent individual's account will be more consistent with the evidence. Conversely, the account provided by a guilty suspect, who obviously does not wish to expose themselves, will be more inconsistent with the evidence. Using the SUE technique can also cause guilty suspects to change their earlier statement(s) and/or attempt to give an innocent explanation for their inconsistencies because they realize the interviewer may be holding some incriminating evidence against them. For example, coercive control evidence may entail substantiation that the suspect downloaded a tracking application on the victim's phone, constantly sends texts while the victim is at work, or signed documents limiting the victim access to their bank account. SUE allows the investigator to raise discrepancies between what the individual says and evidence of coercively controlling behaviours and strategically use the evidence to challenge the suspect in an interview.

SYNTHESIZING EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACHES TO CORE ELEMENTS

Utilizing one or more approaches would be a solid start. But given the challenges in identifying coercive control and gathering evidence or acknowledgement from the suspect, an integrated approach borrowing from these sound evidence-based interviewing approaches may increase the information gathered. MI, the CIS, and SUE techniques can be employed when interviewing individuals who have been violent toward intimate partners, in order to facilitate an assessment of coercive controlling behaviours in that relationship. The first half of this paper emphasizes that it is essential for investigators to know what coercive control looks like and why we should assess for such behaviours. When one's role is to interview suspects who have been accused of IPV, questioning them about their behaviour is not as simple as merely asking whether they have engaged in coercively controlling behaviours, in addition to asking about the accusation of physical abuse against their partner. Capturing these behaviours through an interview can be especially challenging. Learning from existing research on effective investigative interviewing and psychological assessments, we can identify many things to avoid. For instance, poor interviews often include the following elements: They are rushed, the interviewer engages in a disciplinary or confrontational approach, or there is no allowance for the interviewee to expand on anything that they have stated in their interview (see Kassin et al., 2010; Snook & Keating, 2011). On the other hand, effective interviewers put the interviewee at ease (e.g., MI uses a collaborative approach; Miller & Rollnick, 2023) and aim to gain as much information as they can from the interviewee without coercion or suggestion (e.g., CIS can lead to greater information; Geiselman, 2012). For victims and witnesses, it can be a struggle to identify coercive controlling behaviours or categorize them as offences (as opposed to

merely the suspect's problematic manners leading up to the physical incident; Fanslow & Robinson, 2010).

This section outlines core elements needed to be effective at information gathering. Although applicable to investigations of any reported crime, specific attention to coercive control will be the focus, especially in light of the challenges in capturing coercive control, as previously noted. These elements may be applicable to interviewing victims and witnesses, but given the challenge of interviewing IPV suspects, examples will mostly reflect working with those accused of partner violent behaviours.

Rapport

Prior to the active information gathering needed to identify coercive controlling behaviours, the interviewer should establish rapport with the interviewee. Research has shown that confrontational or accusatory approaches, such as being judgmental, argumentative, or sarcastic, limit the ability to gather information and leads to a greater resolve by a suspect not to talk (Alison & Alison, 2020; Surmon-Böhr et al., 2020). Establishing and maintaining rapport is key to eliciting comprehensive accounts from both cooperative and resistant interviewees (Abbe & Brandon, 2014; St-Yves, 2006; Vallano & Compo, 2011). A rapport-based interviewing approach also helps to create a collaborative environment between the interviewer and the interviewee. Such an environment can help mitigate the asymmetry that is typically present in an interview dynamic (i.e., the power imbalance where the interviewer is in control and thus presents as an authority figure) and reduce the likelihood that the suspect will engage in behaviours that could prevent the interview from being conducted effectively, such as refusing to cooperate or becoming aggressive (Geiselman, 2012; Watson et al., 2022). Rapport-building techniques are wide-ranging and can include asking low-stakes neutral questions, expressing concern for the interviewee's well-being, inviting them to ask questions, and ensuring that any special needs of the suspect are attended to (e.g., such as using the washroom or grabbing a bottle of water).

For the most part, establishing rapport with the interviewee is recommended. Of particular note, a recent meta-analysis showed that there is a significant relationship between narcissism and IPV perpetration, and interestingly, vulnerable narcissism was associated with psychological IPV perpetration (Oliver et al., 2023). Unlike what is more commonly known as grandiose narcissism (i.e., high self-esteem), those with vulnerable narcissism have discrepant self-esteem between what they show and what they feel, and consequently, their self-esteem is fragile, they are hypersensitive to rejection and respond with anger and shame, and they tend to be highly self-conscious. Since there is a greater likelihood that coercively controlling individuals may exhibit vulnerable narcissism, purposely building rapport can be beneficial given their lower internal self-esteem and increase receptiveness when a more compassionate approach is used by the interviewer.

Uninterrupted Narrative

Not surprising, another core element is to allow the interviewee to provide an uninterrupted account of the event or response to an open-ended question. It has widely been shown that interrupting suspects in an interview are likely to inhibit information gained from the interview, increase resistance, and are less likely to lead to confessions (e.g., Kelly et al., 2024). Although early studies examining interviews by police detectives showed that a mere 7.5-second elapsed before they interrupted an eyewitness responding to an open-ended question (Fisher et al., 1987), recent studies show that interruptions are less common in witness interviews (Snook & Keating, 2011) and suspect interviews (Leahy-Harland & Bull, 2017). However, despite fewer interruptions, some research has shown police may spend more time talking in an interview than the interviewee. Researchers found that the 80–20 talking rule was violated in 89% of the interviews (Snook & Keating, 2011). It has been recommended that effective interviews follow an "80–20" talking rule where the interviewer should only talk for 20% of the interview; hence, the proportion of listening should be longer than talking by police officers. A significant benefit of this approach is that the interviewee feels a sense of freedom in the interview and is thus less likely to engage in resistant behaviour, and furthermore, there is a greater likelihood that the interviewee will offer conflicting (or possibly incriminating) information (Geiselman, 2012).

With partner violent suspects, there is a tendency to deny, minimize, blame their partners, and appear socially desirable (Scott & Straus, 2007; Smyth et al., 2024), often with the goal to hold back details that might incriminate themselves (Watson et al., 2022). In these instances, the interviewer should make brief notes of any questions or topics that they wish to probe and develop later in the interview. By using extenders, such as "tell me more about that," the interviewee is encouraged to provide more information and elaborate on specific topics or points (Geiselman, 2012).

Collaborative Communication Skills

Another core element is to engage in communication that is collaborative. Revisiting MI, a number of interpersonal communication skills are proposed to ensure a collaborative environment, which supports the interviewee's freedom to speak, elaborate, or be silent. One of these core skills is OARS, which stands for open questions, affirming, reflections, and summaries (Miller & Rollnick, 2023).

Open questions are questions that cannot be responded to with short, abbreviated answers. Using open questions allows the interviewer to get a better understanding of the interviewee's thoughts, feelings, and interpretations, while also facilitating a collaborative environment by allowing the interviewee to respond in their own words and guide the discussion. Table I provides several examples of open questions that can be used in the context of questioning the interviewee about the presence of coercively controlling behaviours by domain.

Affirming involves focusing on the interviewee's strengths, abilities, and positive efforts, rather than any deficits or failures they may present with. It also involves seeing the interviewee as a person of worth who is capable of growth and change, especially given the likelihood that a suspect may not wish to cooperate so easily when being questioned about abusing their partner. Conversely, many IPV victims may be fearful of participating in a police interview that may lead to further escalation of violence by their abusive partner;

TABLE I Examples of open questions to start the collaborative conversation about each domain of coercive control

Domain	Examples of Open Questions
Resources	– What does the spending look like in your household? – How do you think your (ex-) partner views their independence? – How do you and your (ex-) partner budget your expenses? – How do you and your (ex-) spouse handle unexpected expenses? – How would you describe your role in regulating finances at home? How would you describe your (ex-) partner's role regulating money at home?
Well-being	– How would you describe the mental health of you and your (ex-) partner? – How do you and your (ex-) partner divide up household tasks or chores? – Can you describe the ways that you and your (ex-) partner take care of your physical health? – Can you describe what it was like when you found out that your (ex-) partner was pregnant? – Can you describe what your (ex-) spouse's typical day looks like?
Social network	– What does independence look like in your relationship? – How does communicating about your plans and schedules with work, seeing people, or other appointments look like in your relationship? – What do the social interactions with others outside of your relationship look like? – How would your (ex-) partner's friends/family describe your relationship? – What is your relationship with your (ex-) partner's friends/family like? – With regard to friends/family, how do you see their role in your lives? – With regard to friends/family, how do you think they see their role in your lives?
Autonomy	– Could you describe the ways in which you positively encourage them and ways that you have negatively discouraged them? – How do you and your (ex-) partner settle disagreements? – Can you describe a time when you may have unintentionally said something hurtful to your (ex-) spouse? – How do you normally cope with stress at home? – How did it make you feel when your (ex-) spouse asked for a divorce?

hence, reinforcing the victim's positive attributes may help maintain rapport and continuation of the interview.

Reflections are statements made by the interviewer that show that they understand the meaning and experience of the interviewee. Of course, this must be balanced with not endorsing their behaviour. Reflecting the interviewee's circumstance and experience provides the interviewee the opportunity to hear their experiences in different words, which can provoke deeper understanding and exploration, as well as demonstrate an expression of empathy toward the interviewee.

Summaries pull together the key points of the interview and can be used to end a section of an interview or the interview, transition to another task, promote understanding, as well as show the interviewee that the interviewer has been listening carefully. Perpetrators of violence and coercive control against a partner are more likely to present themselves in a positive light (Watson et al., 2022). Therefore, hearing the interviewer harnessing their words, listening to them with curiosity and not judgment, and trying to get them to open up about their experiences may make them feel like they have been heard.

OARS can be used strategically to prompt an individual to give longer responses and hence more information. Figure 2 provides an example of how it can be applied in the context of identifying coercively controlling behaviours.

Follow-Up Questions

A common part of investigative interviews is to ask follow-up questions to a suspect, witness, or victim about their statements or account of the alleged event. When discrepancies are noted, non-confrontational challenges to the interviewee about their account of the events are needed to clarify details. Once rapport is established and OARS is employed early in the interview, the interviewer can begin to ask follow-up questions based on the narrative that the interviewee described. Focusing on one event or topic at a time, the interviewer should start with broad, open questions, followed by more pointed close questions when necessary (Geiselman, 2012). It is important to note that an interviewee may be inclined to jump to different topics in an effort to gain control of the interview or avoid topics that do not paint them favourably (Watson et al., 2022). In these cases, it is important for the interviewer not to cut the interviewee off, but rather, refocus the interview in a non-confrontational way. A way to carry this out is to start with the least incriminating evidence. This prevents the interviewee from becoming overwhelmed and allows them to elaborate on each inconsistency separately rather than providing a comprehensive explanation.

Recall that the SUE technique (Granhag & Hartwig, 2015) can be used to address information that may cause guilty suspects to change their earlier statement(s) and/or attempt to give an innocent explanation for their inconsistencies. However, this is not consistent with adhering to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 1982, s 6(2)(b)). Ethically, a more sound approach would be to take on the stance of being curious, rather than aim for a "gotcha" moment (i.e., tricking the interviewee by catching them in the act of being wrong), which would be more effective in addressing such discrepancies. For example, in a situation where a suspect reports never keeping track of their partner's whereabouts during their relationship, yet the interviewer knows the victim found an AirTag (i.e., Bluetooth-enabled tracking device that is the size of a quarter) in their gym bag and there is a receipt showing AirTags were

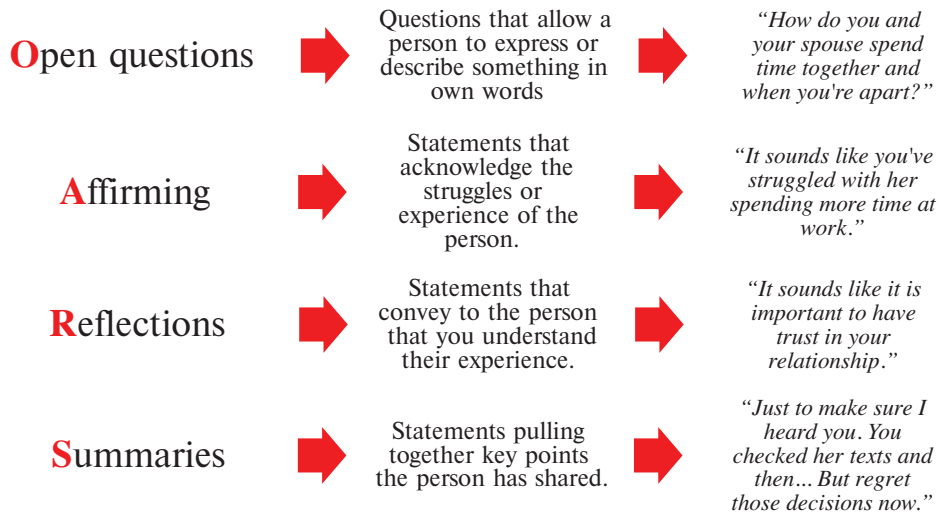

FIGURE 2 Foundational communication skills ("OARS") as applied to coercive control of the victim's social networks.

purchased by the suspect, it would be easy to immediately confront the suspect. However, this would be an ineffective and counterproductive interview strategy that would likely lead to resistance or possibly shutting down in responding any further during the interview. Because it is important to raise this inconsistency, the interviewer can show curiosity about the discrepancy and using an open-ended question reduces any judgmental tone that may interfere with the effectiveness of the interviewer (e.g., asking "I've read here that you had purchased AirTags in March and one of these AirTags was found in Jamie's bag, can you tell me more about this?"). Although many coercive controlling behaviours are not easily corroborated with evidence, the investigator would need to be more aware of these discrepancies and use their skills in a non-confrontational way to effectively obtain a narrative from the suspect.

Maintaining a Firm but Fair Handle of the Interview

A final core element to note is the importance of maintaining a firm handle of the interview. It is important to convey experience, confidence, and an atmosphere of authority. In contexts where an individual is suspected of engaging in coercive control with their intimate partner, one could surmise that they would also engage in this coercively controlling behaviour with an investigative officer or with their supervisor or therapist. Watson et al. (2022) examined 29 interview transcripts with suspects accused of controlling or coercive behaviour within intimate relationships to determine if their familiarity at deliberately influencing others through these behaviours extended to a police interview setting. Their results showed that suspects employed a wide range of influence behaviours, including those intended to establish dominance over the interviewer.

Another challenge is if the interviewer exhibits psychopathic features. Studies have shown that psychopathy is an important predictor of criminal behaviour in general and intimate partner violent perpetrators (Cunha et al., 2021), and that psychopathic individuals are more likely to engage in coercively controlling behaviours such as stalking (Cunha et al., 2023), emotional abuse (Spencer et al., 2024), and sexual coercion (Hoffman & Verona, 2021). In light of evidence indicating that rapport building may be ineffective or counterproductive when trying to elicit information from a psychopathic suspect (Marques & St. Yves, 2022; Quayle, 2008), it should not be surprising that interviewees with these features may exhibit greater tendencies to control or manipulate the interviewer. To maintain a firm handle on the interview, it is critical to prepare ahead of time (i.e., review any victim/witness statements, draft open-ended questions); it is not only important but compulsory when working with someone with psychopathic features, as the interviewee may attempt to exploit perceived inexperience, inadequate credentials, or lack of confidence.

Summary

Although not an exhaustive list of evidence-based interview approaches, MI, CIS, and the SUE technique provide a practical set of processes and techniques for interviewing individuals suspected of committing coercively controlling behaviours in intimate relationships. Both approaches highlight the importance of planning and preparing prior to the interview as well as rapport building and creating a non-adversarial environment. Employing evidence-based approaches when dealing with coercively controlling behaviours not only increases the volume and quality of information gathered (Geiselman, 2012), but also increases the likelihood of cooperation (Watson et al., 2022), which is an important consideration, as interviewing coercively controlling partners can have its own unique set of challenges to overcome.

It goes without saying that interviews must be conducted ethically and adhere to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 1982, s 6(2)(b)). As seen with these core elements outlined that it would be a challenge for investigative interviewers to build rapport with the interviewee, patiently listen without interruption, collaboratively communicate, use a non-confrontational approach to addressing discrepancies, and maintain

a firm but fair stance throughout the interview – while ***also*** engaging in manipulative, accusatory, or confrontational tactics. The latter tactics are not condoned nor do they align with the Canadian Charter. If the suspect, witness, or victim makes exculpatory or inculpatory statements, the interviewer must protect the rights of the individual and ensure warnings pertaining to their right to silence, and interview approaches should comply with the Charter by ensuring the protection of individuals from being indirectly compelled to incriminate themselves. What is suggested here is not intended to overshadow existing police practices but to ensure that in the context of IPV investigations, coercive control is not neglected and that incorporating open-ended questions to assess the presence of coercive controlling behaviours is infused in an investigation. Some more proactive ways to ensure coercive control is examined in IPV investigations is to adopt questions at the time of interviewing the victim, witness, and/or suspect, especially within the first 24 hours. For instance, many police services in Canada (Saxton et al., 2020) use the ODARA (Hilton, 2021) tool to assess partner violence risk, and additional questions to capture these coercive control domains (control of resources, manipulating well-being, control social network, control of autonomy) could be part of the protocol of information gathering.

CONCLUSION

It is unmistakable that identifying and assessing the domains of coercively controlling behaviours is a necessary component of interviewing individuals who engage in abuse against their partners. It would be remiss to say that police investigators would find it easy to merely ask questions to assess these intangible behaviours, since it is unlikely to be so simple and easily disclosed. We can certainly borrow from knowledge and research on investigative interviewing and other evidence-based approaches. Foundational components of interviewing for coercive control should include rapport building, allowing for uninterrupted narratives, using broad open-ended questions, engaging in follow-up on things said by an interviewee, and maintaining a firm but fair handle over the interview. In contrast, taking the view that such individuals will only talk, disclose, or confess after being "broken" through confrontational methods is less helpful. Increased recognition of the negative impacts of coercively controlling behaviours is reflected not only in the research literature (Lohmann et al., 2024; Myhill, 2017; Myhill & Hohl, 2019), but also in the increased likelihood that criminal law will soon capture coercively controlling behaviours in Canada (Giesbrecht, 2024). Due to the nature of coercively controlling behaviours and the challenging task of consistently acquiring concrete corroboratory evidence, detection relies largely on voluntary disclosures from suspects, victims, or other witnesses. For this reason, using core techniques drawn from MI, CIS, and the SUE approaches can help better assess the presence of coercive control in the context of partner violent relationships.

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