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Police–Youth Programs as Citizen-State Interactions: A Case Study of Police and Underrepresented Youth Perceptions

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Interactions with government impact the perceptions and experiences of underrepresented and marginalized groups. Public agencies are increasingly implementing programs designed explicitly for underrepresented citizens to improve these interactions. In the United States, the Miami-Dade County, Florida police-youth program aims to promote positive perceptions and experiences for underrepresented and marginalized youth through citizen-state interactions. This case study qualitatively examined the features and impact of a police-youth program using virtual semi-structured interviews with police officers and youth. The findings revealed that building trusting relationships between the police and marginalized youth requires an understanding of the contexts marginalized youth are embedded in, as well as informal and positive interactions. Despite the program's best efforts, negative perceptions of the police are common among marginalized youth and are influenced by media, history, and personal or vicarious police encounters. Thus, efforts to improve perceptions may take time and persistence.

Citizen-state interactions[1] are a necessary and recurring feature of government. These interactions take many forms, impact public perceptions, and are instrumental to effective public service delivery. One of the most common government interactions in the United States is public interaction with the police. It is estimated that over 60 million individuals over the age of 16 years old have interactions with the police annually (Harrell and Davis 2020). In particular, youth and young adults of color tend to have the most involuntary encounters via stops, frisks, and arrests (Flexon et al. 2016; Hofer, Womack, and Wilson 2020; Hurst, Frank, and Dai 2023) and have a higher risk of offending and victimization (Wu, Lake, and Cao 2015). These involuntary encounters can also negatively impact the perceptions of those interacting with the police (Benton and Landgrave 2024).

Research on police-citizen encounters has often focused on enforcement outcomes, such as the use of force (Bolger 2015), arrest (Lytle 2014), or search of a person (Bolger and Lytle 2018), finding that people of color are typically more likely to have harsher enforcement outcomes compared to their White counterparts (see Headley 2020 for a review of the research). Benton and Landgrave (2024) found correlations between the frequency, onset, and quality of police stops and distrust in the police. They argued that limiting encounters with coercive enforcement and improving the overall quality of encounters can enhance Black Americans' trust in the police. On the contrary, a body of research has examined the effectiveness and limits of community policing models in strengthening the relationship between officers and individuals of color (Brunson and Gau 2015; Brunson et al. 2015; Forman 2004; Gascón and Roussell 2019; Headley 2020; Headley and Kalesnikaite, 2024; Rios, Prieto, and Ibarra 2020; Schafer, Huebner, and Bynum 2003). For example, a study by Brunson et al. (2015) on partnerships between the police and Black clergy found that ministers played a fundamental role in enabling collaboration between community members and law enforcement, connecting citizens in Black neighborhoods to well-needed services, and improving community-based crime prevention efforts.

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[1] We broadly use the term "citizen" to refer to any member of the public interacting with the government or residing in a community. It is not used to denote legal status.

Moreover, survey research has demonstrated that perceptions of police legitimacy may vary depending on the representativeness of the police department or police officer (see e.g., Riccucci, Van Ryzin, and Jackson 2018; Riccucci, Van Ryzin, and Lavena, 2014). In a survey experiment that varied levels of representation in a police department, Riccucci, Van Ryzin, and Jackson (2018) found that Black individuals had more positive assessments of the performance, trust, and fairness of the police department when there were more Black officers. However, additional research is needed to demonstrate what other mechanisms help improve perceptions and encounters with police. For instance, more research should consider how structured police-youth programs impact the youth and officers involved.

To enhance the literature on citizen-state interactions, the current study examined the features and impact of a targeted program designed to strengthen police-youth relations. To do so, we used qualitative interviews that centered on the perceptions and experiences of all participants (program leaders, mentors, and mentees).

In the first section of the article, we provide a brief overview of the literature on citizen-state interactions, arguing that police-youth programs can be considered under citizen-state interactions. Second, we discuss the background and context of the police-youth program in Miami-Dade County, Florida, United States. Next, we present the case study's qualitative research methodology and themes. We find three primary themes in the data. First, youth in the program are often embedded in neighborhoods and schools that are underserved and have high levels of reported crime, while often but not always, raised in single-parent households. Second, police-youth interactions in the program consisted of positive nonenforcement activities centered around educational and social engagement, personal development, safety, and familial engagement. Third, the challenges and promises of building trust are central for all participants. A critical observation regarding trust is that it may be person-specific, in that trust is built with key officers in the program, which may not always translate to generalized trust in the entire system. To build citizens' confidence in any sector of government, we must understand and evaluate the efforts in place to enhance positive interactions between government actors and marginalized groups. Marginalized youth often have the most frequent involuntary contact with police officers (Hurst, Frank, and Dai 2023). Therefore, including the voices of all key stakeholders, especially those most impacted, in this study enhances past research on citizen-state interactions. While youth in police-led programs may continue to have positive experiences with the officers involved, improving global trust in the police remains a key challenge when working with citizens from marginalized communities.

Race, Citizen-State Interactions, and Police-Youth Programs

People of color often have more negative perceptions of the government compared to their White peers (Hetherington and Husser 2012; Mangum 2016; Marschall and Ruhil 2007; Rahn and Rudolph 2005; Wolak 2018). Research shows that poor perceptions of government lead to distrust (Kettl 2017, 2018; Lamothe and Lamothe 2012), lack of civic engagement and participation (Irvin and Stansbury 2004; Nabatchi and Amsler 2014), social unrest (Rosenfeld and Lopez 2020; Wozniak, Calfano, and Drakulich 2019), and reduces the effectiveness of service delivery in specific contexts (Jackson and Hay 2012; McCluskey, Mastrofski, and Parks 1999). Further, poor perceptions of government are often formed cumulatively (Claassen and Magalhães 2022; Meer 2017), passed down via social networks/ties (Leventhal 1980), can take root at a young age (Wu, Lake, and Cao 2015), and once established, these attitudes can be difficult to change, having lasting effects on citizens' outlooks (Fagan and Tyler 2005; Leiber, Nalla, and Farnworth 1998). More scholarly focus is needed to better understand the perceptions and experiences of underrepresented and marginalized groups when interacting with the government.

At the same time, research has examined various ways to improve people of color's perceptions of law enforcement, particularly regarding the representativeness of government. Research on symbolic representation has found that the perceptions of people of color are more positive when interacting with bureaucrats of color (see Theobald and Haider-Markel 2009), though symbolic effects may vary depending on the context or subgroup (Headley, Wright, and Meier 2021; Park 2024). Headley, Wright, and Meier (2021) argued that symbolic representation is most effective when there is some level of positive treatment by bureaucrats. With the limitations of representation in mind, it is critical to not only examine the features and impact of programs designed to enhance police-youth relations, but also to emphasize the perceptions and experiences of those who participate—especially Black and Brown youth who are involved in initiatives to reduce the tension and strained relationships with law enforcement officers (Friedman et al. 2004; Taylor et al. 2001).

Although the impact of police-youth programs on citizens' interactions with the bureaucracy is underexplored in public administration research, several studies in criminal justice have shown that adolescents of color struggle to trust officers and tend to have more negative perceptions of police compared to older adults (Hurst, Frank, and Dai 2023; Taylor et al. 2001). Some attribute these negative perceptions to the consistent negative experiences during citizen-state interactions that police have with youth (Carr, Napolitano, and Keating 2007; Leiber, Nalla, and Farnworth 1998; Lundman and Kaufman 2003). Negative experiences and perceptions can also deteriorate the legitimacy of legal authority (Mastrofski, Reisig, and McCluskey 2002). Citizens who doubt officers' abilities to legitimately serve the public may have no interest in cooperating with law enforcement or obeying the law (Tyler 2001; Tyler and Fagan 2008).

As such, agencies must put in additional effort to rebuild those citizen-state relationships due to negative policing interactions. Engaging with citizens in marginalized communities through police programs that prioritize positive interactions is intended to help strengthen relationships with communities and individuals of color (Brunson and Gau 2015; Brunson et al. 2015; Forman 2004; Rios 2011). For example, officers involved in police-youth programs can positively influence the perception and experiences of participating youth and community members by treating them with respect, partnering with community members to enhance crime-prevention initiatives, connecting family members to well-needed services, and being a consistent presence (Estorcien 2023; Lee et al. 2017; Miner-Romanoff 2023). Even then, such programs alone cannot suffice to make up for negative interactions with the police (Headley and Kalesnikaite 2024).

Several police agencies have adopted youth-focused programs where officers work with youth in a nonuniform capacity to enhance positive citizen-state interactions (Anderson, Sabatelli, and Trachtenberg 2007; Estorcien 2023). Police-youth programs often target youth who are from economically and socially disadvantaged communities (Bustad and Andrews 2017; Estorcien 2023; Koper, Woods, and Isom 2016). Through these programs, officers may serve as role models who engage with youth through community groups, such as Boys and Girls Clubs, summer camps, and police athletic leagues (Roth 2000; Thurman, Giacomazzi, and Bogen 1993). Both Roth's (2000) and Thurman, Giacomazzi, and Bogen's (1993) research have documented police-youth programs as a viable context for enhancing youth development and challenging youth's negative perceptions toward officers.

Studies have shown some tangible benefits of police-youth programs but typically focus broadly on youth development (e.g., personal adjustment and social competencies). In contrast, our study takes a targeted approach that specifically identifies the features and impact of a police-youth program designed to enhance police relations with youth affected by gun violence. The deep qualitative exploration into all stakeholders involved helped explore issues of trust and perceptions between officers and underrepresented groups. Overall, our findings contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of police-youth programs by using a case study approach that highlighted the voices of all participants, including the youth most impacted.

Context and Method

We conducted an in-depth case study of a U.S.-based police-youth program in Miami-Dade County, Florida, that aimed to support youth of color who had been impacted by gun violence (primarily youth under the age of 18). Miami-Dade County is home to almost three million people, with 23.3% of the children living in households below the poverty line (City-Data 2022). According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (2023), in 2021 North Miami-Dade experienced a notable level of violent and property crimes, including robberies and larceny. The first author chose the Miami-Dade Police Department as a case that would provide in-depth insights into the impact of a targeted program designed to improve police-youth relations and considered factors such as complexity and accessibility for the program participants. Existing research suggests that law enforcement officers are unlikely to trust outsiders, that is, nonpolice (Paoline 2003). However, the author's strong relationship with, and proximity to, the agency provided an opportunity to have insightful conversations with the program's leaders, officers (i.e., mentors), and youth (Cohen and Arieli 2011).

Established in 2016 and situated within the Miami-Dade Police Department's Community Affairs Bureau, the program is managed by a team of law enforcement professionals who have a history working with youth and adolescents. Engagement was voluntary when the program started in 2016, but it is now an integral part of the officers' paid responsibility and job description, and only those who successfully pass an interview process are selected to join. The program's oversight and development are provided by its directors, managers, and board members. The program is financially supported through grants obtained by the police department and donations from the community, which enables it to offer targeted mentorship to youth identified as "at risk" of gun violence.

The program implementation is administratively divided into regions within the county. The program partners with elementary and middle schools to provide academic, behavioral, and social support to youth. To better serve the community and assist the families of participating youth, the program also partners with other community-based organizations within the county, such as local parks, libraries, The Children's Trust, and Big Brothers Big Sisters. The goals of the police-youth program include the establishment of effective, nurturing, and long-lasting relationships with the youth while improving the quality of their day-to-day lives. Likewise, the program seeks to facilitate the provision of needed social services for families of participating youth.

The first author conducted qualitative, in-depth virtual semi-structured interviews with 40 participants between November and December of 2021: law enforcement program leaders (*n* = 5), law enforcement mentors (*n* = 20), and youth mentees (*n* = 15). All of the program leaders and mentors in the program participated in the research study. The police department assisted in recruiting youth mentees to participate in the virtual interviews. Program leaders were asked to share the consent forms with all participating youth, their parents, or legal guardians for participation in the study. Out of the 32 registered youth (i.e., mentees), 16 signed consents were obtained; one mentee was not interviewed due to a no-show. Participation in the virtual interviews was voluntary and respondents were assured confidentiality. Specifically, pseudonyms were used to safeguard the program leaders', officers', and mentees' privacy. The interviews were transcribed and served as the primary data for the analysis.

There were interview guides for each participant category in the study (program leader, program mentor, and youth mentee; see list of questions in Appendix Tables A1 and A2). The program leaders' interview guide started with their background in the police agency, their motivation for participating as a leader in the police-youth program, and their overall thoughts about the success of the program, its organizational structure, and the mentor-mentee relationship. The mentor questions were similar to the program leaders' with additional questions that focused on their specific approach to mentoring youth. The mentee questions focused on the youth's background (school, family, friends), what they liked about the program, academic achievement, mentors, overall behavior, and demographic questions. Except for demographic questions, all other questions were open-ended and semi-structured to provide an opportunity to probe the interviewees. Each participant participated in a single Zoom interview. The mentees' session lasted 14 to 26 minutes. The program leaders' and program mentors' sessions lasted 28 to 65 minutes. The first author interviewed participants until reaching saturation, when new information stopped emerging, which involved asking a range of questions to ensure thorough comprehension (see Table A1 and Table A2 for details). All program leaders and mentors who participated in the program completed a virtual semi-structured interview. Approximately half of the mentees who were active participants in the program completed an interview (15 out of 32 mentees who participated).

Although the focus of the analysis is specific to the qualitative interview data, in order to obtain reliable insight into the program, the first author conducted extensive document analysis, which included reviewing annual reports, newspaper articles, websites, and relevant policy documents. Further, the first author engaged in participant observations that included attending youth program events, board meetings, and partnership events. Taken together, the research study's dependability was strengthened through an embedded case study design, with prolonged engagement, and by following clear protocols in the data-collection process (Yin 2009).

Interview Data Analysis

An inductive approach to analyzing the qualitative data allowed the themes to emerge from the data (Charmaz 2014; Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007; Nowell and Albrecht 2019). We followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic content analysis procedure: (a) becoming familiar with the dataset, (b) coding, (c) generating themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) locating exemplars (see also Clarke and Braun 2013). We adopted an inclusive approach to enhance the dependability and validity of our coding process. For example, the first author completed the first round of qualitative interview coding. This started by listening to the audio and watching the Zoom recordings of the interviews, followed by reading the interview transcripts to become familiar with the data and gain further insights. Next, the first author grouped text into different codes to summarize high-level themes and paid special attention to the various phrases and contextual segments. Then she consulted with the second author to ensure consistency and accuracy.

After the initial coding was complete, both authors worked together to reread the codes, reorganize themes, clarify the relationship between themes, and interpret initial findings through rounds of in-depth discussion. In sorting our codes, we used tables and theme piles to group the quotes into primary themes or subthemes. The first author cross-checked the primary themes against the dataset to verify consistency in the findings. We created a robust analysis of each theme and contextualized the analysis to current literature. As proposed by Clarke, Braun, and Hayfield (2015) and Floersch et al. (2010), thematic analysis can be a systematic method for identifying codes and themes necessary for reporting analytic observations and interpreting important features from qualitative data.

Content analysis was conducted using a qualitative analysis software, NVivo 12. NVivo allows for data collection, organization, visualization, theory building, and analysis, which helps understand research (Bazely and Jackson 2013). NVivo enables researchers to cross-examine information while dealing with massive data from transcripts, videos, field notes, audio, and published documents (Welsh 2002; Wong 2008). This software helped provide us the flexibility to manage large amounts of data, which helped improve the quality of generated results (Alam 2021; Gibbs 2002). While transcribing the interview data, it was necessary to edit specific sections for improved clarity and conciseness. As demonstrated in the results section, we employed brackets to indicate words we inserted to enhance clarity or maintain confidentiality and we employed ellipses to indicate where we removed words to prioritize conciseness while preserving the intended meaning.

Descriptive Statistics of the Sample

A total of 25 law enforcement officers (i.e., program leaders and mentors) and 15 youth (i.e., mentees) participated in this study (see Tables 1 and 2 for descriptive statistics). Of the 25 law enforcement officers who participated in this study, 56% identified as female and 44% as male. Regarding race, 40% identified as Black, 24% as Hispanic or Latino, 8% as White, and 4% classified as other. As for age, 36% of the respondents were between the ages of 26 and 35 years old, 20% were between the ages of 36 and 45, 12% were between the ages of 46 and 55, and 8% were between the ages of 56 and 65. Most officers identified themselves as frontline officers (63.16%), followed by police managers (e.g., sergeant, lieutenant, captain, deputy chief, and chief; 21.05%), and others (15.79%). Regarding years of experience working with the youth program, 68.42% of the respondents had less than 1 year, 26.32% had 1–2 years, and 5.26% had 3–5 years of experience. As for educational level, 16% had a high school diploma, 12% had some college experience, and 48% were either college graduates or had a professional degree. The percentage of participants who did not provide additional details about any other sociodemographic characteristics apart from gender was 24%.

Concerning the mentees' demographics, all 15 youth who participated in the study identified as Black, 60% identified as female and 40% as male. Out of all respondents, 40% were in middle school (6th through 8th grade) and 60% were in high school (9th or 10th grade). As for the age range, 53.33% of the participants were aged 13 or 14, and 46.67% were between the ages of 15 and 17.

Table 1. Program Leaders' and Mentors' Characteristics

	Number (Percentage) *N* = 25
Gender	
Female	14 (56)
Male	11 (44)
Race	
Black	10 (40)
Hispanic/Latino	6 (24)
White	2 (8)
Other	1 (4)
Missing	6 (24)
Age in years	
26-35	9 (36)
36-45	5 (20)
46-55	3 (12)
56-65	2 (8)
Missing	6 (24)
Rank in the police department	
Frontline police	12 (48)
Police manager	4 (16)
Other	3 (12)
Missing	6 (24)
Years of experience in the program	
Less than a year	13 (52)
1 to 2 years	5 (20)
3 to 5 years	1 (4)
Missing	6 (24)
Education	
High School graduate	4 (16)
Some college	3 (12)
College graduate	8 (32)
Professional degree	4 (16)
Missing	6 (24)

Findings

As demonstrated in Figure 1, three major themes emerge from the data. First, citizen-state interactions through police-youth programs require a strong understanding of the contexts marginalized youth are embedded in, including but not limited to their family, schools, and neighborhoods. Second, informal and positive police-youth interactions serve as a crucial component of the youth program. Third, building trust is a clear goal of the program, though external factors, such as the media and past police encounters, can hinder trust between officers and youth, particularly in marginalized communities. Figures 2, 3, and 4 provide additional details on these themes (i.e., family, schools, and neighborhoods, police-youth interactions, and building trust, respectively).

Table 2. Youth Characteristics

	Number (Percentage) *n* = 15
Race	
Black	15 (100)
Gender	
Female	9 (60)
Male	6 (40)
Grade Level	
6th	2 (13.33)
7th	2 (13.33)
8th	2 (13.33)
9th	4 (26.67)
10th	5 (33.34)
Age in Years	
13	3 (20)
14	5 (33.33)
15	5 (33.33)
16	1 (6.67)
17	1 (6.67)

Context: Family, Schools, and Neighborhoods of Youth Impacted by Gun Violence

As shown in Figure 2, the main components of the context within which youth are embedded are broken into three categories: family dynamics, school environment, and neighborhood safety. Family dynamics include factors such as parental presence, sibling relationships, and residential instability. Themes in the school environment are characterized by teacher quality, student comprehension, cultural differences, and peer interactions. Lastly, discussions of neighborhood safety are primarily about gun violence exposure.

Family Dynamics

Understanding the context in which marginalized youth are situated enables officers to better serve youth and ensure they have access to equitable opportunities. For example, youth in the program often came from single-

Figure 1. Overview of Findings of Police-Youth Program

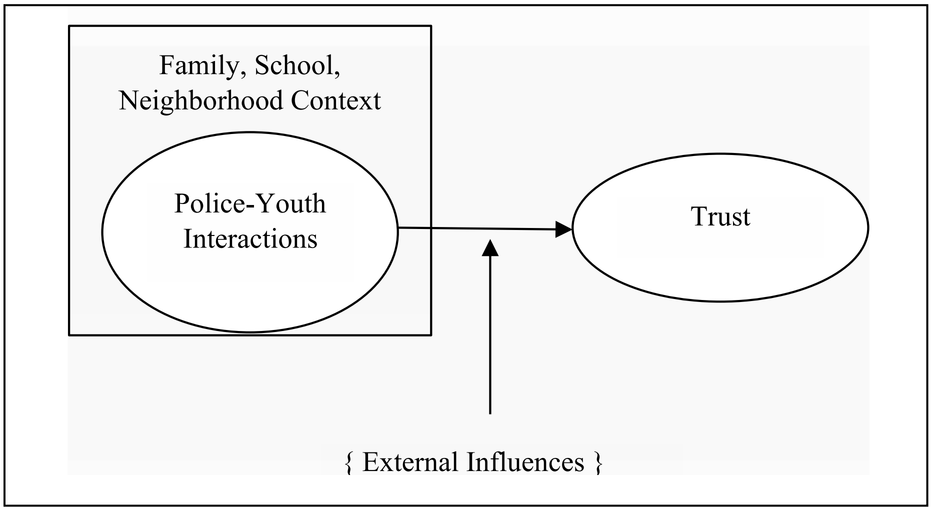
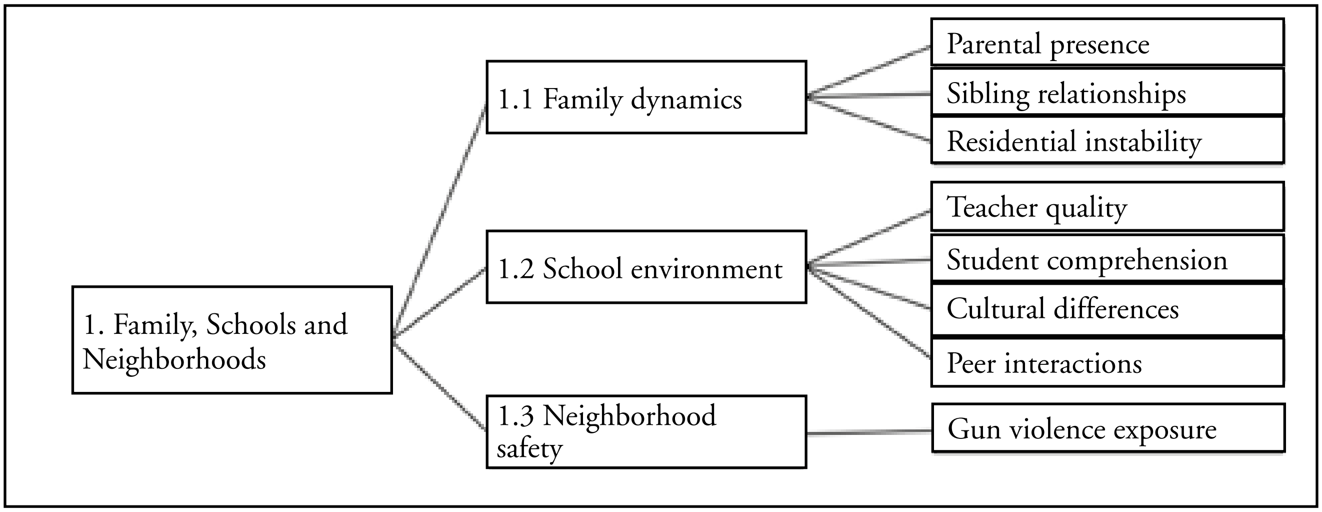

Family, School, Neighborhood Context
Police-Youth Interactions
Trust
{ External Influences }

Figure 2. Overview of Family, School, and Neighborhood Context


1. Family, Schools and Neighborhoods
1.1 Family dynamics
1.2 School environment
1.3 Neighborhood safety
Parental presence
Sibling relationships
Residential instability
Teacher quality
Student comprehension
Cultural differences
Peer interactions
Gun violence exposure

parent households, where parents or guardians managed competing demands. In such households, siblings frequently assumed additional responsibilities, such as caring for their younger siblings, and the youth found themselves frequently moving. That said, the youth often reflected on good times with their family, ranging from storytelling, beach trips, movies, and having fun. However, having a lot of siblings and growing up in single-parent/guardian households also meant that the youth helped their family. For example, Louise, a 13-year-old female mentee, explained, "I help my little brother, he's seven, I help him with his homework, and then my little sister, she's one, when she cries, I pick her up, so she can stop crying or I take her into my room, and I give her something to play with."

Given the familial context of youth, Francisca, a program leader, explained that providing consistency is crucial "because a lot of times kids in these communities don't have that." Thus, program mentors must understand that they are "wearing the police officer hat, the mom and dad hat, to the teacher hat, all the above" (Dorothy, program mentor). Officers (Olga, Mathew, Andrew, Leon, all program mentors) explained that youth engaged in the program often have a sibling or family member impacted by gun violence. For instance, "we pretty much work with children between the ages of 12 and 17, who have been victims of gun violence, they've experienced some type of gun violence in their home, or they have been a victim themselves" (Olga, program mentor). In reflecting on a prior anti-gun violence community event, Andrew, a program mentor, explained that two of the youth they brought along had "family members [who] were gunned down," so the event held significance for them.

School Environment

Several youths provided insights into the successes and challenges at their schools and their experiences with teachers. For example, youth offered various reasons for struggling in school, including variations in teacher quality. Some students reflected on teachers not providing detailed explanations on assignments, unclear expectations, or receiving insufficient answers to questions asked. In contrast, others explained that teachers are helpful, care about student comprehension, "do amazing things for us" (Hugh, a 15-year-old mentee), and are "cool" (Howard, a 15-year-old mentee). That said, even when teachers do care, cultural differences and language barriers make knowledge acquisition and comprehension hard for some students.

In addition to direct experiences with the teachers, several students spoke about the broader school environment. They noted that other students "don't follow the rules" (Maxine, a 13-year-old mentee), there are "a lot of fights" (Angie and Alexis, youth mentees, ages 15 and 14), students talk back and do not pay attention, all of which interrupts the learning environment for everyone. Annette, a program leader, acknowledged these challenges and stated, "We want to work with some of those schools, and we're working with targeting the zip codes of those communities that we know are not the safe communities, those communities with the highest gun violence."

Neighborhood Safety

The communities in which the police-youth program operates are plagued with challenges. Despite some student's desire to "have a gun to protect themselves," program mentors like Leon highlighted that many students have good grades but live in an environment that encourages a harmful lifestyle. Virgil, another program mentor, shared an example of a student he mentored who consistently achieved high grades yet engaged in risky behaviors to gain acceptance in the neighborhood and street credibility. Unfortunately, this led to the student becoming a target, and he later lost his life in a shooting incident, as per the officer's account. According to Olga, a program mentor, "[in Miami] the neighborhood and the beef is so big." She expounded that the youth harbor animosity toward one side of the community or a particular group of people due to the older generation's lingering hostility toward them.

Targeted recruitment of youth experiencing gun violence is a feature of the program. When asked about the recruitment process, Louise, a 13-year-old mentee, stated, "My dad, he got shot in his neck and his arm and that's when the program came." Similarly, in reflecting on neighborhood violence, Clint, a 13-year-old mentee, shared, "Where my mom lives it's [a] bunch of gang bangers and stuff. Like my mom, [where] she lives it be a bunch of gangbangers and rappers talking about they gonna blow it up." Unfortunately, youth were hyperaware of the implications of gun violence on their social activities, often noting that their parents placed restrictions on where they could play outside. For instance, Howard, a 15-year-old mentee, stated, "In the old days everybody be coming outside, but now everybody be in the house, and they be shooting down there sometimes too, and people be scared, and the gun violence need to come down a little bit."

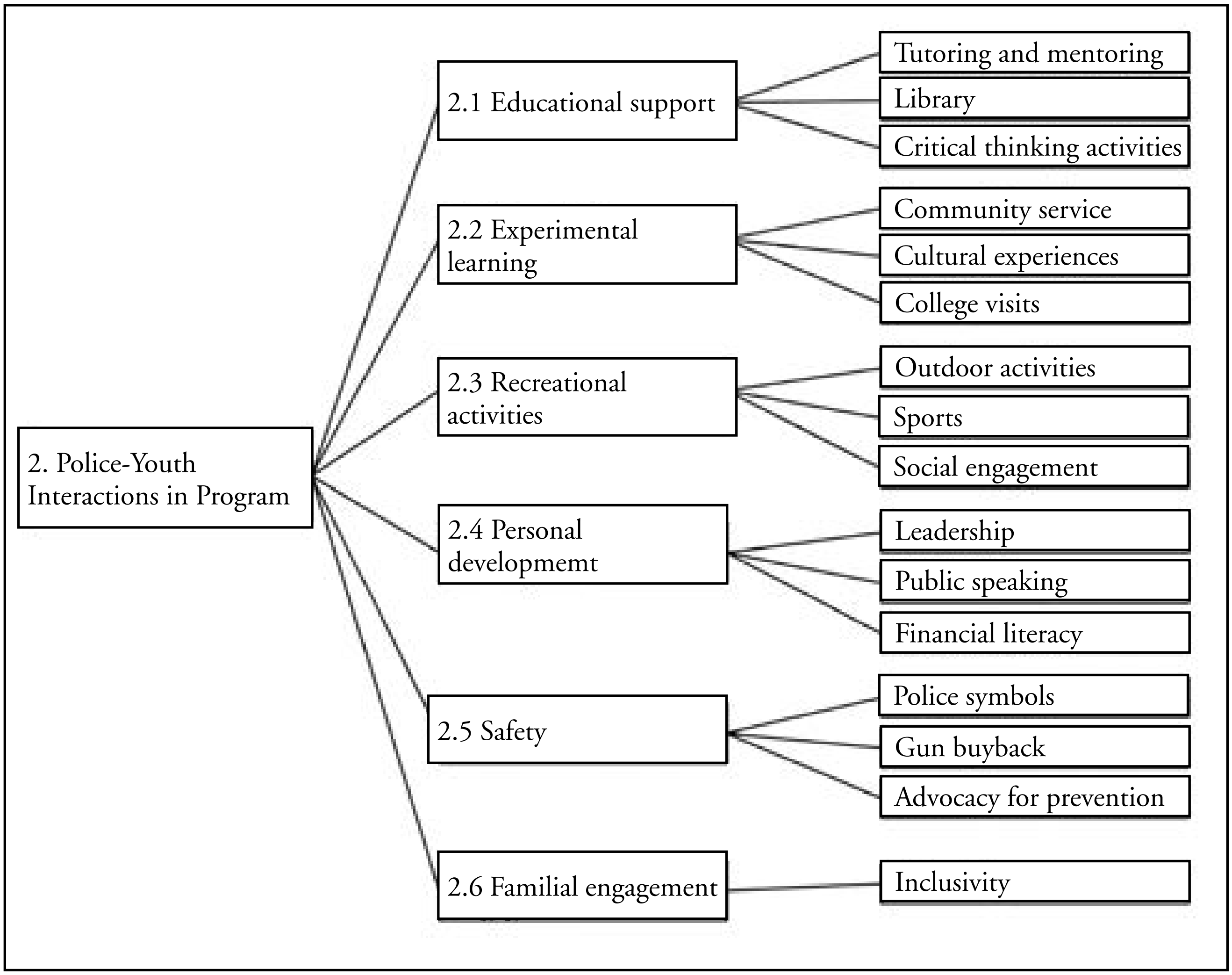
Police-Youth Interactions in the Program

The next major theme provides a descriptive account of the actual interactions that occur in the police-youth program. Figure 3 illustrates the components of the program, including educational support, experiential learning, recreational activities, personal development, safety, and familial engagement. Educational support includes tutoring and mentoring, library visits, and critical thinking activities, whereas experiential learning is further divided into community service, cultural experiences, and college visits. Recreational activities include outdoor activities, sports, and social engagement. Personal development is focused on leadership, public speaking, and financial literacy, whereas safety includes subthemes of police symbols, gun buybacks, and advocacy for prevention. Finally, familial engagement centers on inclusivity. How officers engage with the youth is important because, over time, youth who participate in the program view the officers as there to help them. Sandy, a 14-year-old mentee, described a day-to-day interaction with the officers by stating the officers who picked her up "asked us about our day, as soon as we get into the van. They asked us how our day was, what did we do? They make it like they're there for us when we need help."

Educational Support

Officers provide tutoring, mentoring support, and enrichment opportunities for the youth, focusing on assisting with homework and monitoring student grades. The officers also find enriching activities for youth to develop their creativity, critical thinking, writing, and foster teamwork. For example, when the youth are at the

Figure 3. Overview of Types of Police-Youth Interactions in Program


2. Police-Youth Interactions in Program
2.1 Educational support
Tutoring and mentoring
Library
Critical thinking activities
2.2 Experimental learning
Community service
Cultural experiences
College visits
2.3 Recreational activities
Outdoor activities
Sports
Social engagement
2.4 Personal developmemt
Leadership
Public speaking
Financial literacy
2.5 Safety
Police symbols
Gun buyback
Advocacy for prevention
2.6 Familial engagement
Inclusivity

library, the officers "create short films with the kids . . . help them do different things cause a lot of them are like into music" (Leticia, program mentor). Engaging in multimedia activities, though not directly related to students' schoolwork, can cultivate curiosity, enable shared learning, and build skills.

Experiential Learning

According to Natasha, a program leader, mentees participate in different experiential learning activities, ranging from community service activities (e.g., beach and park cleanups), cultural experiences (e.g., museums), and college campus trips. Francisca, a program leader, stated, "Officers expose [students] to various things, taking them to zoos, taking them to the airport [and taking] them to events where they learn how to sit, they learn how to eat, how to interact with adults or other kids." Likewise, the officers use their personal and cultural backgrounds to expose the mentees to different cultures. For example, Leticia, a program mentor, teaches the mentees some Spanish words and shares her Hispanic culture and food with them. These experiences engage students and program mentors often see an immediate positive impact. Israel, a program mentor, noted the youth's "eyes light up just because it's something that they've never been exposed to, and [officers] exposing them to something new is satisfying." Echoing similar sentiments, Hugh, a 15-year-old mentee, shared, "We get to learn new stuff . . . we never learned before and [the officers take] us on trips and take us to places that we've never been before." This type of exposure is an intentional part of the program design. However, Virgil, a program mentor, acknowledged the challenges of getting full participation from youth, with some activities where "not all these kids showed up, and you can't force them."

Recreational Activities

Recreational activities are typically not directly connected to academic achievement but are "fun activities" that are more engaging for youth. According to program mentor Kathryn, youth are taken on "different field trips that will stimulate . . . their mind." These interactions foster a deeper level of relationship-building among the police and youth. For example, a program mentor, Bobbi, shared that when the officers go to the park with the youth, they do "little activities, play games, get to know the kids a little bit better, so they can get to know us [the officers]." Mentees said they interact with the officer through sports, field trips, and other fun activities. "It's actually good to stay out the house and we get to like, do stuff with them," Hugh, a 15-year-old mentee, stated. Another mentee added, "We have a cooking class and hip-hop class, it's just fun things that I never get to do" (Angie, a 15-year-old mentee).

Personal Development

Engaging in police-youth programs can often play a significant role in personal development for underrepresented youth. Olga, a program mentor, emphasized improved leadership in youth by sharing, "They step up, they initiate on their own. They are constantly trying to make us feel welcomed, as we are trying to make them feel welcomed." Olga also shared that the youth often "make a little bracelet for us and they don't just do it for one, they do it for everybody. So, it shows the growth from day one until now." Program leaders and mentors observed that many youth were shy when they first joined the program and disliked public speaking. However, over time, the officers began to see improvement in the youth's confidence. Specifically, "they become more confident with speaking and actually learning how to speak [publicly]" (Laura, program mentor). In addition to leadership and public speaking skills, the officers "try to teach [the youth] about money assets and getting bank accounts" (Olga, program mentor). Specifically, Dorothy, another program leader, explained, "We've taken them to a bank, we had a bank, agreed to open up a checking account for them, and try to teach them about financial responsibility." The officers have also attended classes on resumes to help the mentees build their resumes and learn about different career options, according to Dorothy, a program mentor.

Safety

Officers noted two different strategies used to help protect the youth engaged in the youth program and keep them safe. First, police reported they hide the visual symbols often associated with the police, such as police cars, uniforms, and guns. For example, youth are picked up in unmarked vehicles, where "nobody or the neighbors don't see police vehicles coming and they think of them [as] snitches" (Annette, program leader). Leon noted they do not carry their firearms because they distract youth. Second, as stated by Leon, a program mentor, the organization frequently conducts gun buybacks where citizens are "offered computers for guns." The goal is to create a safer neighborhood where youth reside. In addition to these efforts, the officers participate in anti-violence youth rallies with their mentees as a means of advocating for gun violence prevention.

Familial Engagement

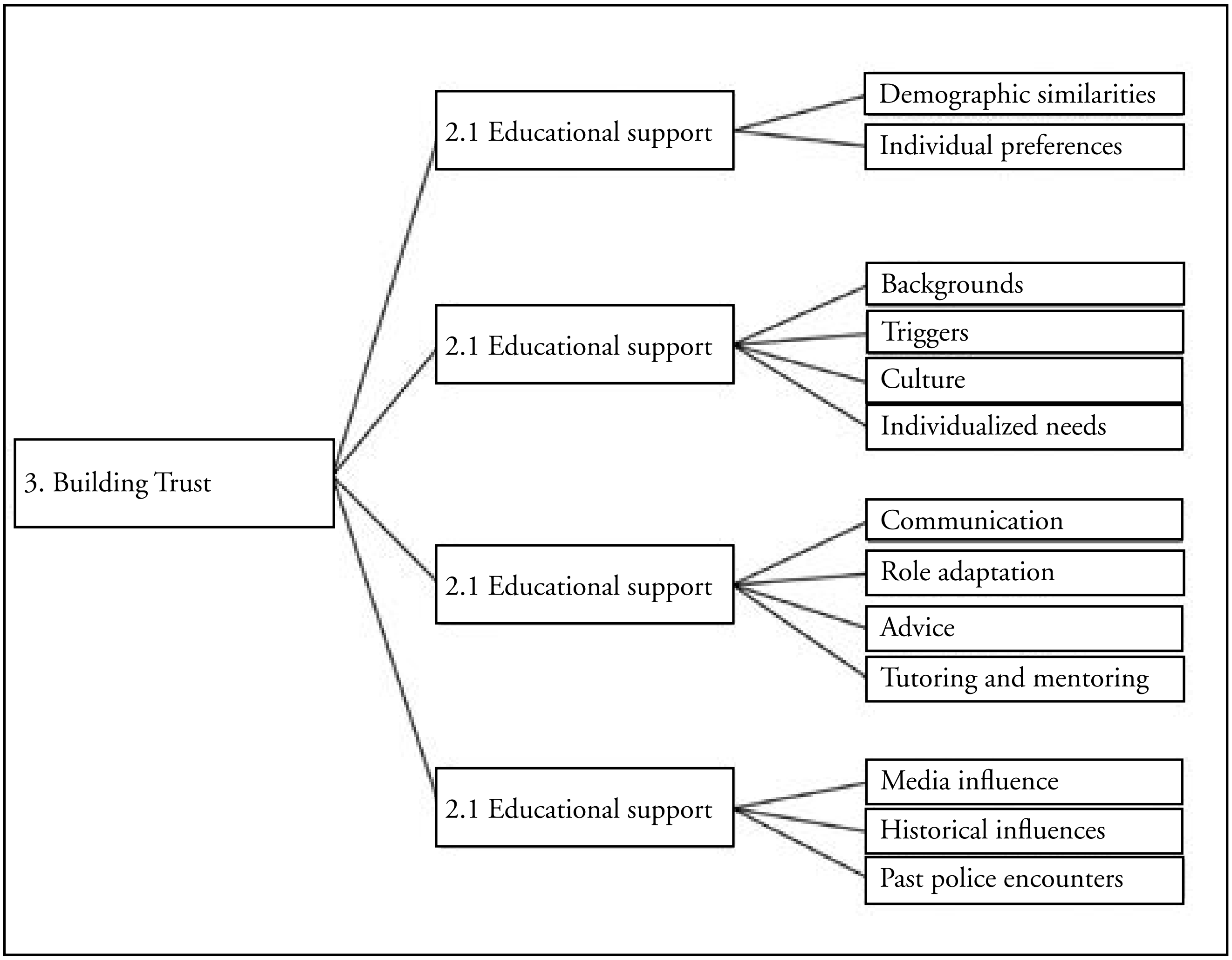
One benefit of familial engagement is that officers can work in partnership with families to minimize the harm associated with gun violence in marginalized communities. Annette, a program leader, provided an example to show how relationships with family can enable information-sharing regarding crime and violence:

> Well, the mother called because she had my number, […]. And these two young kids were recording themselves with like, a high rifle, high powered rifle in front of the porch, just talking a whole bunch of like, you know, nonsense threatening, they recorded themselves, somebody else got that recording and […] they sent it to her, okay, so she was able to send it to us. And right away, through the resources, not only did we start the police investigation, to identify who were the ones making the threats with the guns, which we ended up arresting in less than two weeks, because her whole family was at risk. […] And so that's one of the examples. You know, like, we're already developing a rapport where they feel comfortable enough.

Building Trusting Relationships

Figure 4 provides an overview of aspects that influence building trust in a program. The four main components are personal connections, understanding, mentorship approach, and external influences. Personal connections delve into two primary subthemes touching on demo-

Figure 4. Overview of Aspects That Influence Trust in a Program


3. Building Trust
2.1 Educational support
Demographic similarities
Individual preferences
2.1 Educational support
Backgrounds
Triggers
Culture
Individualized needs
2.1 Educational support
Communication
Role adaptation
Advice
Tutoring and mentoring
2.1 Educational support
Media influence
Historical influences
Past police encounters

graphic similarities and individual preferences, whereas understanding includes factors such as backgrounds, triggers, culture, and individualized needs. The mentorship approach was discussed as it relates to communication, role adaptation, emotional support, and advice. Finally, external influences include the influence of media, history, and past police encounters.

Personal Connections

When officers share similarities with youth regarding personal demographic characteristics or familial upbringing, it can be a driver for them to engage as mentors in the program. Rosario, a program mentor, explained that she became a mentor because she was also raised in the "projects" and in a single-parent home. She wanted to "give back" and desired to show youth "you don't have to be a product of your environment." Further, Israel, a program mentor, shared how the diversity among the officers makes it possible for the youth to find someone they can relate to or reach out to for advice due to sharing a similar background. Conversely, officers who share different upbringings or demographic backgrounds may have to work harder to build relationships. For instance, Dorothy, a program mentor, stated, "Now a challenge for me personally [...] I am a Caucasian, so it has taken me a lot longer to be able to build rapport with some of these kids and people within the community [...but,] hopefully I can shine through in some other manner for them to see that I truly, genuinely am there to be a mentor and to help the community."

For youth, the personality differences between officers and who the youth connect with matter. Many mentees mentioned specific officers by name. Sheila, a 16-year-old mentee, stated she connected with some more than others: "I like them. They cool. Like, I feel like I can trust them." In reflecting on her "go-to person" and backup officer, Lauren, a 17-year-old mentee stated, "They just know me better, like they know when I'm down and when I'm not in the mood, they can tell." Those personal relationships reassure the youth that the officers are mentoring for the right reasons. "I want them to know that it's genuine love with the officers that we really want to be here" (Olga, program mentor). According to Dorothy, a program mentor, "Each officer has different personalities, and some kids are going to open up more to others, and it's really up to them. We want them to feel safe, we want them to feel comfortable and confide in us, and we're going to do everything we can, you know, to help them." Sandy, a 14-year-old mentee, shared that "My relationship is very strong [...] they're there for us when we need help."

Understanding

Trust is a key challenge for officers working with people from marginalized communities. As such, the officers must be patient and understanding toward the citizens they serve. Officers actively engaged with the program understood that "it wasn't going to be easy to win the trust of these kids and their families, and that they're gonna have to work hard" (Francisca, program leader). Officers also understand that the citizens they serve are from different cultural backgrounds, have different needs, and can be triggered by past experiences. As per Bobbi, a program mentor, "One of our kids [...] she doesn't have a mom or dad, so you have to be aware of what you're saying, and what could be her triggers." By being mindful of these triggers, officers can prevent causing distress and be prepared to offer comfort to the mentee if needed.

Gaining the initial trust and building the long-term trust of mentees and their families can be an uphill battle. In reflecting on initial participation in the program, Clint, a 13-year-old mentee, stated, "At first, I didn't go to the van. When they first came, I thought I was in trouble. So I had to wait." This shows the importance of some immediate impressions of the police. Clint went on to share how it was only once he spoke to his mom and she dropped him off at the program that he was willing to participate in. As mentioned by Kathryn, a program mentor, "In the beginning, you can tell that they're a little hesitant that we are police officers," referring to the parents of the youth engaged in the program. For instance, Angie, a 15-year-old mentee, stated, "I don't like when people make me feel comfortable enough to share my personal problem with them and then when we're not on good terms, they tell everybody else and I don't like when people are being two-sided. Yeah, I just have a lot of trust issues."

Similarly, Olga, a program mentor, argued that getting the youth to open up is difficult; it is "a tough challenge of breaking that child [...] they've been taught and learn for 13–14 years of their life that you don't trust the police, and they're not here to help you, and they're looking for any little situation to lock you up." Maxine, a 13-year-old mentee, shared that even though she has two of the police officers' numbers, she "wouldn't call them first because like, we haven't developed that type of bond yet. Like we're not like [...] big sister, little sister. We're just like, she's just a police officer that I really like. I'm probably a child that she really likes." Although it may be a challenge for the officers to gain the trust of the youth and families when they first meet, officers acknowledge that things begin to change over time. For families, the program's perceived benefits and safety shape their willingness to allow their children to engage in the program. Kathryn, a program mentor, explained that the parents became more trusting over time because "they feel that their son or daughter is like changing and they kind of want to go to school and they want to venture off and do different things like college." Over time, parents become less resistant, and some acknowledge that the program provides a "sense of safety" because parents know that police officers are supervising the youth (Rosario, program mentor).

Mentorship Approach

An essential aspect of mentoring youth from marginalized communities is ensuring that the professional identity of being a police officer does not hinder interpersonal connection. "Don't let the badge get in the way of you being human [...] once you have that trust level with the kids, everything else will fall into place" (Rosario, program mentor), even despite "youth being skeptical of law enforcement" (Francisca, program leader). By connecting on an interpersonal level, officers make communicating more effortless for the youth. Sandy, a 14-year-old participant, shared that she communicates with the officers not only during program hours but also outside of them. According to Sandy, "My big sister, I have her number. So, if I need anything or have trouble, I could text her and tell her how I feel, and she'll text me back or even call me to see how I'm doing."

Officers in the youth program also understand that they will take on additional roles and provide emotional support and advice when interacting with the youth. As stated by Warren, a program mentor, “I believe that being part of the youth [program], we’re going to be like the parents in a way, we can communicate with the teachers, find out exactly what is it that the child is struggling with? . . . and really get to understand what’s going on? Why is it that you’re not putting in this effort? Is it because you just had a bad day? And, just talk to them.” That level of police-youth interaction involves the youth, the teachers, and, at times, the parents. In reflecting on the assistance provided by the police-youth program, Clint, a 13-year-old mentee, stated, “The program it’s like [...] it’s my family away from home.”

External Influences

External influences, such as the media, historical accounts, and direct or vicarious police encounters, can impact police-youth relations and hinder trust, particularly for youth from marginalized backgrounds. Although the officers try and leverage traditional and social media to promote the program, the media can also be a challenge because the youth the officers work with may “have a different way of seeing law enforcement, they see us more like what they actually see on TV . . . we’re against them” (Lowell, program mentor). Officers try to bridge this gap by engaging in dialogue and asking the youth “how [they] feel about what’s going on in the news.”

According to Francisca, a program leader, when the police-youth program was introduced, many parents did not want law enforcement to engage with their children because of their knowledge of historical police-community relations or direct experiences. Olga, a program mentor, noted the difficulties in building rapport when youth “have in their mind or have been told not to trust police or that they don’t want to deal with us.” Even then, program mentors note that youth receptivity to the program varies, with some youth who are actively engaged and others uninterested in building relationships due to their skepticism of law enforcement more broadly. Despite resistance, officers strive to overcome obstacles and create a supportive atmosphere for all youth.

Overall Impact

The police-youth program impacted the lives of participating youth by addressing critical familial needs and challenges they face in their schools and neighborhoods. Because the environment in which these mentees live can leave them vulnerable to negative influences or exposure to crime and violence, the youth benefit from officers actively involved in the program serving as positive role models. On top of navigating challenges within the school environment, such as variation in teacher quality, additional caregiving responsibilities that some youth have further complicate their adolescent development and education. Thus, officers provide support and relief through their interactions with the youth in the program. Although this engagement is not always positively received due to the tension between law enforcement officers and communities of color, when it is beneficial it can foster academic achievement, empowerment, and social-emotional growth among mentees. Over time, officers can establish trusting relationships with youth, especially those officers who make youth feel comfortable and those with whom the youth share similar demographic and cultural backgrounds. However, youth often expressed individualized positive relationships with specific police officers, as opposed to changed perceptions of policing as a whole.

Discussion and Conclusion

Scholarly attention focused on understanding the experiences and interactions of youths with the government is fundamental to the literature on citizen-state interactions. Research has documented that underrepresented groups have more negative perceptions of government (which stem in part from direct or vicarious interactions). One common citizen-state interaction that occurs in the United States is with the police department, particularly for Black youth. Although these interactions often hinge on enforcing the law, there are formalized programs designed to improve the interactions between police and youth. Thus, this study examined the features and impact of a targeted program designed to enhance interactions with youth of color. Police-youth interactions through police-led programs are complex and multifaceted; however, in this study, we were able to provide a deeper understanding of how officers engaged with youth in marginalized communities and the youth’s perceptions and experiences while in the program.

Although police-youth programs have been associated with enhanced perceptions of trust, safety, and being part of a community (Anderson, Sabatelli, and Trachtenberg 2007), qualitative explorations of the features and impact of police-youth programs from all participants involved remain underexplored in public administration. In contrast to Anderson, Sabatelli, and Trachtenberg's (2007) work that focused on using survey responses following the completion of a community police-youth development program, our analyses examined the lived experiences of the officers and youth while they were still participating in a police-youth program. Interviews with officers and youth impacted by gun violence allowed for an in-depth exploration of the program in a marginalized, low-income community. Our research findings support the idea that fostering positive relationships in place of more coercive interactions (e.g., traditional enforcement encounters) can enhance public safety goals; however, there were clear challenges the program faced in building trust.

Our study reveals that the police-youth program creates an environment for positive police-youth interactions. Most notably, participating in police-youth programs with minority youth requires a thorough understanding of their family dynamics, school environment, and neighborhood context. By possessing such knowledge, officers can better serve the youth and intervene when parents or legal guardians are absent. Many youths in the police-youth program assist in caregiving to their siblings while also navigating challenges at their school, such as variations in teacher quality or class interruptions, and live in neighborhoods that experience high levels of crime. Officers recognize that being a mentor in the program means wearing multiple hats in order to support youth. The larger context that youth are embedded in demonstrates that without investing in social support and structural dynamics in communities and schools, the ultimate impact of a police-youth program is likely to be limited at best.

That said, how officers interact with youth during the program is crucial to actualizing any positive effects. This program included various formal and informal activities, such as educational support, recreational activities, and personal development. Because youth of color have the most frequent involuntary contact with police officers (Hurst, Frank, and Dai 2023), and their assessments of officers are more likely to be negative compared to those of adults (Hurst, Frank, and Dai 2023; Taylor et al. 2001), actively providing positive and voluntary interactions paints a different picture of police-youth interactions.

The third research finding revealed that building trusting relationships is a vital program goal, but it is often a challenge for officers. Officers serving as mentors acknowledge that gaining the youth's and their families' trust takes time and active commitment to work through resistance and fear. Officers believe factors such as media, historical police-community relations, and prior direct or familial police encounters impact building trusting relationships. Over time, the program's perceived benefits and safety shaped families' willingness to allow their children to engage in the program. Similarly, youth in the program started to trust the specific officer they viewed as a mentor and enjoyed the program activities. Our findings cannot speak to whether these trusting relationships with specific officers dispersed into widespread positive perceptions of the police department. Ultimately, future research is needed to better parse the effects of programs like this on more generalized perceptions of police, especially because that is often one goal of such programs.

Several limitations exist in this study. The first author interviewed all participating program leaders, officers (i.e., mentors), and numerous youth whose legal guardians or parents provided consent. The first author's strong relationship with and proximity to the agency may introduce bias, potentially influencing data interpretation, which is why having a second author with more distance who helped code and interpret the data was important. Second, the study only provides insight into one program at a specific point in time. Police-youth programs in areas with different racial/ethnic demographics, lower crime rates, or variations in the quality of police-youth relations may have different perceptions and experiences compared to what we found in our study. As a result, we cannot track how participants' perceptions and experiences vary across geography or time. That said, qualitative research is most concerned about the transferability of findings and their relevance and applicability to similar situations or populations beyond the specific research context (see Lincoln and Guba 1985). Therefore, the qualitative data taken from this program may be transferable to other police-youth programs that serve similar communities (e.g., where police-community relations, crime rates, socioeconomic conditions, and demographic characteristics may resemble those in Miami-Dade County).

Further, the youth and their families participating in these programs are self-selected and more than likely have malleable dispositions due to their willingness to engage with the program in the first place. As such, the qualitative insights here are limited. The majority of the officers also had less than one year of experience working with the youth program, which could raise concerns about the police-youth program's effectiveness if program mentors frequently change. Additionally, trust is a time-dependent process, and frequently changing police mentors can limit their ability to establish meaningful relationships with participating youth.

Despite the limitations of the research, our findings offer valuable case study insights into a police-youth program with structured, positive interactions in a marginalized community that has been impacted by gun violence and its potential to impact the perceptions of the youth participants (even if only limited to the specific officers involved in the program).

The results suggest several directions for future research questions. First, how does positive interaction with specific police officers influence long-term perceptions of the department as a whole, as well as other long-term social, academic, or professional outcomes? Do the potential perceptual impacts that result from programs like this also influence individuals not directly involved in the program? For example, although the first author did not interview participating youth's parents or legal guardians, it would be interesting to learn if there were any changes in legal guardians' perceptions of the police. Finally, and arguably most importantly, the interviewer did not explicitly ask about negative experiences with law enforcement (though this sometimes came up naturally in the course of an interview). More research is needed on how positive and negative experiences with the police coexist, how individuals make meaning of these interactions, and what that means for citizen-state interactions more broadly. The concerted efforts of police-youth programs are only beneficial to the extent that we understand (a) how recipients perceive the programs, (b) if they influence their perception and interactions with the police more broadly, (c) whether these effects persist over time, and (d) how these programs coincide with traditional punitive law enforcement practices operating simultaneously.

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Appendix

Table A1. Program Leaders and Program Mentors Interview Guide[2]

Categories	Questions	PL	PM
Introduction	Do you have any questions for me before we get started?	x	x
Background	Tell me a little bit about your position and what you do.	x	x
	In your position, what do you wish you got to do more of? What do you wish you had to do less of? How come?	x	
	Tell me a bit more about your youth program (e.g., number of participants, recruitment process, etc.).	x	
	When did you first sign up to become a mentor?		x
	What made you sign up to begin with? What motivated you to take that step?		x
	What did you expect mentoring to be like when you first started?		x
	Have you ever thought about stopping? When? In what moments? Probe: What made you decide to stay?		x
Organizational Structure	Do you keep track of the youth outcomes (i.e., school/program retention rate, academics, behavior, dropout rates, etc.)? If so, how?	x	
Incentives	What type of opportunities/incentives are available to officers serving as mentors, if any?	x	
Organizational Culture	Overall, how would you describe the youth program culture?		x
Program Success	What are some of the major factors that may have contributed to the program's success or failure (e.g., partnerships, community involvement, family support, etc.)?	x	
	How do you define program success when it concerns the youth?	x	
	In your view, what is a measure of successful mentorship?		x
	How would you define success when it concerns your mentee's overall achievement?		x
Organizational Challenges	What are some of the major organizational challenges you face as a program leader, if any?	x	
Mentoring Challenges	What are the things that make mentoring a mentee difficult?		x
Mentor-Mentee Relationship	How do you address a conflict between a mentor and a mentee?	x	
	Can you tell me what specific program efforts are made to enhance the positive mentor-mentee relationship?	x	
	What can/could the program do better or differently regarding promoting positive mentor-mentee relationships?	x	
	Elaborate on your relationship with your mentee.		x
	What would you say the program did right when it concerns promoting positive mentor-mentee relationships?		x
Officers' Motivation	What were your motivations for becoming a program leader?	x	
	What made you sign up to begin with? What motivated you to take that step?		x
Mentorship Approach	Explain your approach to mentoring your mentee.		x
Mentorship Strategies	What were the mentorship strategies that you consider were successful or not successful?		x
Relationship with Program Leader	Tell me a little bit about your relationship with your program leaders.		x
Mentees' Needs	What do you feel is your mentee's greatest challenge?		x
	How do you go about addressing the needs of your mentee?		x
	What do you do if you cannot meet your mentee's expectations?		x
Program Activities	What type of activities do you do with your mentee?		x
Recommendation for Program	What are your recommendations for improving the program's organizational structure?	x	
	What are the three things you would like to improve in this organization?	x	
	What can/could the program do better or differently when it concerns meeting the program outcomes (i.e., school/program retention, academic performance, behavior)?		x
Trust	How do you gain the mentee's and their family's trust?		x
Wrap Up	I'm curious: Do you know anybody else who has served as a mentor and may be interested in participating in this study?	x	x
	Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today. Before I let you go, would you like to ask me any questions or share anything with me that I have not thought to ask you about?	x	x

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[2] This is a summarized and condensed version of the interview guide used in this study for program leaders (PL) and program mentors (PM). The semi-structured nature of the interview format allowed for deviations from and/or additions to questions.

Table A2. Mentees' Interview Guide[3]

Categories	Questions	PMU	PMO
Introduction	Do you have any questions for me before we get started?	x	x
Background	Tell me a little bit about yourself.	x	x
	What do you like about the program?	x	
	Tell me a little bit about your siblings.	x	
	Why did you join the program as a mentee?		x
	What do you enjoy most about the program?		x
Mentee Personal Challenges	Tell me about some of the major challenges you face at home.		x
	What are some of the major challenges you face in the community?		x
	What are some of the major challenges you face at school?		x
Mentor-Mentee Relationship	Tell me about your mentor or police friend.	x	
	When do you see your mentor or police friend?	x	
	What do you enjoy doing with your mentor or police friend?	x	x
	Tell me some ways your mentor or police friend helps you.	x	
	Tell me about your relationship with your mentor.		x
	How often do you talk with your mentor?		x
	How often do you spend time with your mentor, just for fun?		x
	How do you prefer to communicate with your mentor and why?		x
Recommendation for Program	What would you like your mentor to do differently?		x
Academic Achievement	Tell me about your grades in school.	x	x
	Tell me about your favorite and least favorite class.	x	x
	What do you think is a good grade in school and why?	x	
	Since joining the program, how have your grades improved?		x
Academic Support	Tell me a little about who helps you with your homework.	x	
	Tell me some of the ways your mentor has helped you improve your grades.		x
	Tell me some of the ways your mentor helps you.		x
Behavior	Do your friends in school like you or not like you, and if so, why?	x	
	Why are you nice/mean to your friends in school?	x	
	Have you ever been put in time-out? If so, why?	x	
	Have you ever missed school? If so, why?	x	
	Do you go to after-school programs? If so, tell me about it.	x	
	Since joining the program, how has your behavior changed?		x
	What can your mentor do to help you improve your behavior?		x
	Since joining the program have you ever been suspended in school? If so, why?		x
	How has the program impacted your relationship with the people in your life?		x
	Have you ever missed a school day? If so, why?		x
	Have you ever missed a session with your mentor? If so, why?		x
Demographics	What is your age?	x	x
	What grade are you in?	x	x
	Do you speak any other languages?	x	x
Wrap Up	Do you want to tell me anything else before I leave?	x	
	Would you like to share anything with me that I have not thought to ask about?		x

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[3] This is a summarized and condensed version of the interview guide used in this study for program mentees ages 12 and under (PMU) and program mentees ages 13–17 (PMO). The semi-structured nature of the interview format allowed for deviations from and/or additions to questions.