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“Some of them are alright”: The effects of experiences with community police officers on Irish young people’s attitudes toward the police

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Abstract

Community policing is regarded as a more proactive policing policy compared to traditional methods of detecting and punishing crimes already committed. Few studies have investigated the effect of such policing on young people’s attitudes toward the police and to date no research in this area has been conducted in the Republic of Ireland. Semi-structured interviews with 20 young people (12 to 18 years old) from the West of Ireland explored the effects of interactions with a community officer on overall attitudes toward the police. Findings suggest that young people make distinctions between different types of officers. While the community officer is positively regarded, this has little impact on young people’s attitudes toward the police more generally, or towards other police officers they encounter and may even reinforce negative views of these officers through comparison of their experiences with the community officer.

Key words: community police, young people, attitudes, police-youth relations, Republic of Ireland

Introduction

Community policing may be well enough established to have emerged as the ‘dominant philosophy’ of policing in the US over the past few decades (Lambert, Wu, Elechi & Jiang, 2012, p. 277, Skogan, 2006), but as an official policy it is still relatively new to many European countries including the Republic of Ireland. The premise of the community policing model rests on the assumption that if community members build a positive relationship with the police they will be more likely to offer information on criminal activity and will be actively involved in crime prevention strategies alongside the police. This is assumed to have the added benefit of helping to reduce the fear of crime within communities, a factor often considered to be of high importance by police authorities and sometimes seen as a reflection of public attitudes toward the police (An Garda Síochána, 2010). Despite the widespread use of community policing practices in many countries research on its effectiveness is scarce and inconsistent, in particular in the area of improving police-youth relationships (Anderson, Sabatelli & Trachtenberg, 2007; Telep & Wiesburd, 2012).

Current international and Irish knowledge of the relationships between young people and the police suggest that they are primarily negative, antagonistic, and fraught with confrontation and a lack of trust (Byrne & Jarman, 2011; Gau & Brunson, 2015; McAra & McVie, 2005). Research consistently finds that the nature and type of interaction that a young person experiences with the police is likely to impact on their overall attitudes toward the police (Crawford, 2009; Mazzerolle, Bennett, Davis, Sargeant & Manning,

2013; Wooden & Rogers, 2014). However, for the most part, this research focuses only on negative experiences between young people and the police, and rarely takes account of the effects of more positive interactions. Community policing, with its emphasis on involving community members in more proactive ways, offers greater opportunity to reduce antagonism between young people and the police and to improve negative attitudes toward the police.

While there is some evidence to suggest that such a community focus is welcomed by the general public and that it helps to increase confidence in the police (Carr, Napolitano & Keating, 2007; Telep & Weisburd, 2012; Wooden & Rogers, 2014), there is also contrasting evidence to suggest that community members feel themselves over policed by such approaches and that it results in little change to actual neighbourhood crime levels (Lambert, Wu, Elechi and Jiang, 2012; Telep & Wiesbund, 2012). In addition, the majority of this research is focused on the views of adults and rarely includes those of younger people within such communities.

Research from other countries has reported that young people are more willing to offer information about crime to community police officers compared to the police more generally (Gau & Brunson, 2015; Lambert, et al. 2012; Tankebe, 2013). Similar findings have been shown in the case of school liaison officers in the UK (Hopkins, 1994) and in the case of officers working on targeted projects with young people ‘at risk’ of criminality in Ireland (Bowden & Higgins, 2000). However, there remains a lack of research around the relationships between young people and community officers, in particular in Ireland where a similar scarcity of research around all aspects of the criminal justice system can be seen (Kilkelly, 2011; Mulcahy, 2011; O’Donnell, 2005; Sozer & Merlo, 2013). In addition, research has yet to investigate the impact of community policing on young people’s general views about the police and whether it can contribute to more positive attitudes overall. The current qualitative study explores the nature of community police-youth relationships in a self-selected sample of Irish youth in the Republic of Ireland.

Irish Context

While an official community policing model was not produced in Ireland until 2010, the Irish police force (An Garda Síochána) has had a community policing style since its formation in 1925. Geographical and demographic factors of the country have meant that the traditional policing approach has always had some elements of the community policing ethos behind it. From its inception An Garda Síochána has been an unarmed force, which was to depend on ‘the good will of the people and their moral support’ (Michael Collins, cited in Allen, 1999) to carry out their duties of enforcing the law. Small, rural jurisdictions meant that officers stationed there would, quite naturally, become a regular part of that community, aided by the continued reliance on police officers to carry out certain administrative duties in their areas (e.g. collecting population census forms), and their long-standing involvement in local sports clubs.

Originally introduced in Ireland to serve as a support service for the Garda Drugs Task Forces in the late 1980s, which were formed to tackle a growing heroin problem in the country and were populated by community members with support from the Gardaí, community policing was initially composed only of Neighbourhood Watch and

Community Alert Schemes (a rural equivalent of Neighbourhood Watch) (Joint Committee on Justice, Equality, Defence and Women's Rights, 2005). The new model of community policing is more focused on reducing the fear of crime, and addressing the perceived growing problem of anti-social behaviour particularly among young people in deprived urban areas. The current community policing model sets out a number of aims and objectives, which focus on areas such as 'problem-solving', 'building trust' and 'crime prevention and reduction' (An Garda Síochána, 2010).

While most of these aims involve increased visibility and accountability of police officers in conjunction with local community agencies there is a specific reference to young people in the community:

“To engage meaningfully with young people to develop and foster positive relationships with the goal of promoting personal and community safety” (p. 3).

In the model, it is proposed that through engaging with young people within their communities, relationships between young people and the police will be improved and will lead to a reduction in crime and anti-social behaviour within communities. While not explicitly stated, there is an assumption that more positive relationships between the community officer and young people will also lead to better overall relationships with the police.

Despite engaging more with community organisations, however, the Irish police are still frequently criticised for their lack of transparency in practices and data collection and dissemination (e.g. Charman & Corcoran, 2015; Conway, 2010; O'Donnell, 2005) and have even been referred to as 'one of the most secretive police forces in the Western world' (Conway & Walsh, 2011, p.254). This poses difficulties for researchers as much data that is commonly available in other countries is unreachable in the Irish context. For example, information on stop and search practices, the extent of their use or the purposes of them are not made public in Ireland. This may be of particular relevance when investigating police-youth relationships where much of the contact that occurs is likely to be of this nature, usually resulting in no formal action being taken (see for example Institute of Criminology, 2003).

The latest figures¹ from the annual public attitudes survey (conducted multiple times throughout the early and mid-2000s) suggest that adults in Ireland are overwhelmingly supportive of the police, but this gives no indication of the attitudes of those younger than 18 years old as they are not included in the survey (Browne, 2008). A recent study using a modified version of the public attitudes survey for adults with Irish youth found that young people in Ireland hold much more negative views of the Gardaí compared to adults (Feeney and Freeman, 2010). However, the research base assessing the attitudes of Irish citizens toward Gardaí is sparse to date. Some inferences may be made from studies that have been conducted in other countries, in that they are likely to be less positive than those of adults, there are a number of cultural differences between Ireland and other Western countries that would suggest that more research in this area is needed from an Irish youth perspective.

Present Study

This paper forms part of a larger research project investigating the overall attitudes of Irish youth toward the police, an under researched area in an Irish context. The main aim of the present paper was to explore young people’s perceptions of their interactions and relationship with a community officer and to determine if they impact on more general views about the police. An exploratory qualitative approach was taken as there is a need to explore the factors young people themselves feel are important in influencing their relationships with and attitudes toward the police within Ireland.

Participants

Initially, six youth centres in a city (population 250,000; CSO, 2011) in Ireland were contacted by letter and then by phone regarding participation in the study. Two of these agreed to take part and ten self selected, voluntary, participants from each youth centre were subsequently interviewed. Participants were aged between 12 and 18 years old, four were female and sixteen were male, all were currently attending second level education. For those less than 18 years old, parental consent was obtained in addition to participant consent. All data were treated confidentially and reported anonymously with participants assigned a number to protect their identities. The study was approved by NUI Galway’s research ethics committee.

None of the participants had spent any time in prison or a detention centre, and while four participants had been formally cautioned by police at some point, none had been sent to court for trial for their offences.

Research Sites

Each of the two youth centres was located in a different area of the city and they differed in a number of ways. Site 1 was in the city centre and was an open, drop-in type of centre that provides advice, information and support to young people within a non-judgemental community based setting available six days of the week. Site 2 was located in what is officially regarded as a disadvantaged area in need of increased community resources, and this centre is opened only for a few hours on certain days, at the time of data collection this site also ran a number of Garda Diversion Programmes during opening hours and provided space for sporting activities and homework support for local young people. All participants from Site 2 were members of the travelling community². Also those in Site 2 lived in a neighbourhood that, at the time, had community officers who they knew at least by sight, and on occasion would be involved in youth club activities with young people. Only one participant from Site 1 reported that there was a community officer assigned to his community, but stated that he didn’t know him and had never spoken to him.

Before proceeding it is worth noting what previous research has reported about relations between the Gardaí and the travelling community. Public and academic discourse on interactions between Gardaí and members of the travelling community has generally outlined a tension filled and mistrustful relationship (James, 2007; Mulcahy, 2011). This has been partly explained within the context of the nomadic lifestyle of most Travellers leading them to be seen as sitting ‘outside’ mainstream society which incurs suspicion and misunderstanding. The young people from Site 2 in this study had spent most of their lives in a ‘settled’ community setting (i.e. in housing), attended the local

secondary school and were at this stage established within the local community. This may have placed participants from Site 2 in a particularly unique position as being part of a dual community and data were analysed with this in mind. However, the views expressed by young people from both sites showed enough similarity that they are presented here as an overall reflection of young people's views of the Gardaí in preference to reporting them as perceptions from distinctive groups for which there was no support within this data. .

Procedure and Analysis

Semi structured interviews were conducted in private rooms at each research site. Each interview was on a one to one basis and lasted between 25 and 45 minutes and was tape recorded for later transcription. The interview schedule was modified throughout the data collection process to follow up on some aspects and some questions were subsequently dropped. The main areas of investigation remained the same however, including, types of experiences with the police, perceptions of these experiences, the perceived relationship between the police and young people and, attitudes toward both types of officers.

A constructivist grounded theory approach was used for data analysis, with no prior hypotheses formulated before data collection and data were analysed concurrently with collection. Themes and categories were identified and refined through a series of iterations of coding (Charmaz, 2006). Due to the nature of data collection and analysis it was anticipated that the perceptions of participants would be revealed rather than an explicit retelling of objective events.

Findings

In light of the stated aims of the community policing model (Garda Síochána, 2010), to engage meaningfully with young people, to foster positive relationships with the community and, to promote personal and community safety, the data from these interviews were analysed to assess how these aims were addressed from the perspective of the young people involved in this study.

Overall attitudes to Gardaí among participants were highly ambivalent, where they reported both positive and negative views of the police. In almost all cases positive comments were related to views about, or interactions with, the community Garda and negative comments were in relation to other individual Gardaí or the institution of the Gardaí. Comments referring to the community Garda frequently included positive language such as 'brilliant', 'great' or 'fair' while in contrast words used to describe other Gardaí included 'lazy', 'cocky' and 'useless', indicating a clear demarcation between the two in the views of participants.

However, despite all participants initially expressing negative views of the Gardaí in the early stages of the interviews, only two persisted in this negativity throughout; the other 18 participants also included some positive views or experiences with the Gardaí.. Almost all participants expressed support for the concept of the police and felt that some form of social control is necessary to maintain law and order, but participants also made clear that this social control should be achieved without the use of aggression or

abuse. In this sense, participants had a clear sense of what they believed were the purposes and responsibilities of the Gardaí and how they should meet these obligations.

Meaningful Engagement with Young People

A variety of interactions with both community and street Gardaí were reported by participants, these ranged from having informal conversations with an officer, to being moved on from a public place, to being stopped and searched on the street, up to being formally arrested and cautioned.

Overall, the interactions between young people and the community officer were seen as non-confrontational, a view also held by those young people who had been formally cautioned by the community officer for offences committed:

Well...sometimes they have a good reason to hassle younger people. Like, underage drinking, or drugs or whatever, but, sometimes they can just pick on teenagers like for no reason (Male, 16 years old, Site 1).

Depends, if you done nothing they would be, just saying hello, or having a chat with you, and how are you going on or something...(Male, 14 years old, Site 2)

The community officer’s decisions were seen to be fair, reasonable and unbiased. Participants across the study agreed that crimes should be punished by legal authorities including offences they commit themselves.

In contrast the interactions between young people and other Gardaí were generally interpreted as antagonistic and unfair, without any relation to their behaviour:

Even if we’re like just sitting down on a bench like or something, they just say like “move along (Male, 16 years old, Site 1).

...you could have, you mightn’t have even been doing anything, you could tell them that, and they still wouldn’t believe you... (Male, 13 years old, Site 2).

Participants at Site 2 had interacted with the community officer through the local youth club where she was involved in running Diversion Projects³ aimed at ‘at risk’ youth. This more proactive approach to preventing anti-social and criminal behaviour aims to reduce offending by providing young people with educational and recreational activities facilitated by the community officer. This is one of the ways that meaningful engagement may be seen to be promoted. However, none of the participants in this study referred to these interactions, indicating that they had little impact on their attitudes to Gardaí overall.

The perceived motivations of the Gardaí in interacting with young people in the first place appeared to be an influencing factor on the way that interactions were interpreted. To a large extent participants felt that the nature of the interactions they experienced with Gardaí was dependent on luck:

Well, it depends what Guard you meet, you could meet some nice Guards, out this way they are, like, they listen to your part of the story, but then you have Guards there that won't even look at you,...it depends what Guard you meet, that's the way it goes (Male, age 15 years, Site 2).

In contrast to what young people believed were the intentions of 'street' Gardaí, who were seen to be interested in causing young people trouble, the community Garda was thought to be more focused on keeping young people in the community out of trouble:

...being honest...they're putting them on the right track, because if the [police] didn't come along then they'd end up on drugs, or doing offences that they shouldn't be doing...(Male, 17 years old, Site 2).

This distinction based on the motivations of both groups of Gardaí appears to have had a dichotomising effect on young people's attitudes whereby the community Garda comes to be seen more positively and 'street' Gardaí are increasingly seen in more negative ways. It may be that the community officer is seen as 'atypical' of the institution of the police and therefore young people are able to make clear distinctions between the two types of officers (Anderson, et al., 2007; Bowden and Higgins, 2000; Mazerolle et al., 2013).

While interactions with the community Garda were certainly more positive and less antagonistic than those with other Gardaí, responses from participants do not indicate that they were necessarily more meaningful. The community Garda does appear to make efforts to engage in more informal and friendly conversation with young people but she was generally still seen as a 'Guard' albeit a more approachable one compared to other Gardaí.

Fostering Positive Relationships

The second stated aim of the community policing model is to foster more positive relationships between the Gardaí and young people. This can be seen as an acknowledgement that there is work to be done to improve relations although the actual mechanisms through which this is expected to be achieved are not outlined.

A clearer picture of the distinctions made between community and other Gardaí emerges from this theme where young people reported that they felt the attentions of the Gardaí arose out of a tendency to label them as 'troublemakers' and 'always up to no good'. Young people felt that they were targeted by Gardaí because of their age rather than because of their behaviour:

I don't think they show us respect, they just see a teenager, and just like... that's a teenager and...they just assume that we're up to no good kind of thing (Female, 16 years old, Site 1).

A further frustration in this regard is when young people perceived that compared to adults, they were not granted the same levels of respect or rights and that this was due to the Gardaí having no respect for younger people:

Well, people my age, they don’t give you the time to talk...when they should be listening, what about, from your part of the story (Male, 15 years old, Site 2).

...maybe if they just take younger people more seriously, I have wondered that if it was my Mum that had gone down to the [police] station [to report a burglary] that time they would have thought “Oh this is an older person, they’re definitely being serious about this” (Female, 18 years old, Site 1).

When young people tried to find reasons for this harassment, they attributed it to the fact that they are young and therefore have little voice in society as a whole:

It’s easier to treat us badly I suppose, who are we going to tell? (Male, 15 years old, Site1).

Young people reported that when they were not respected by Gardaí they feel that there is no opportunity to have their side of the situation heard, and many participants stated that their main complaint against police treatment was that sense of having ‘no voice’. Participant’s reports of their interactions with the community Garda were clearly seen in a more positive light than with other Gardaí:

I’ve had positive encounters with the Guards, there is some really nice Guards like, who have...actually sat there...just chatting having a conversation with a Guard like...he’ll have a conversation with you ...and, em, there is some nice Guards out there who are like that... (Male, age 18 years, Site 2).

em, she’s [the community Garda], she’s brilliant yea, she’s alright. Some are different than her, like... (Male, 13 years old, Site 2).

In general though, she was seen to be an exception to the rule, and this more equitable relationship that existed between young people and the community Garda did not foster greater respect or trust in the Gardaí as an organisation, and, further, did not appear to increase the likelihood of young people co-operating with other police officers in the future:

...with different Guards there’s different rules that will apply because they have that leeway, they can decide to arrest you, decide what to do with you, so, when you meet a Garda, you’re hoping you get lucky (Male, age 16 years, Site 1).

These findings would suggest that the demeanour and the perceived motivations of individual officers have a strong effect on how young people view the Gardaí, and that officer behaviour in interactions is an important aspect of the development of attitudes toward them.

This, in turn, can lead to young people either deliberately antagonising the police to provoke a reaction, or more commonly simply agreeing with the officer and ‘not giving any cheek’ so as to avoid arrest:

I thought they'd listen to you...but they didn't, they just barred me [from the school bus] and they didn't give me a chance to talk, put my part of the story, so that's why I just didn't really like them afterwards” (Male, age 15 years, Site 2).

While this tactic may shorten the interactions in the short term, there may be other, longer term effects of this feeling of not being listened to. For example, of those participants who had reported a crime (3 out of 20, all at Site 1) in the past, they complained that these crimes were not investigated by Gardaí because it was a young person who had reported it, which leads them to feel that there is little point in them doing so in the future:

...like I mean I wouldn't disrespect them, I wouldn't be like “Oh, fuck the [police]”, or that kind of, but I kinda just, don't really care now... (Female, 18 years old, Site 1.)

[when asked if he would report a crime in the future] No, I'd deal with it myself, because it just...if you report it to the [police], it just, they go, they just say, “Ok, we'll see what we can do”, and that's all you hear (Male 18 years old, Site 1/)

This sense of being both over policed and under protected added to the ambivalent attitudes already held by most participants. When compared to their views of what the Gardaí should be focused on which tend to centre around ‘helping people’ and ‘keeping an eye out’ for the public, it can be assumed that these types of experiences add to the disillusionment with the police, and by association the legal system:

...because they [the Gardaí] and the law are associated together so if you don't like the Guards, naturally enough you're not going to like the law, so to gain respect for them you kinda gain respect for the law” (Male, age 16 years, Site 1).

The most pertinent issue in how interactions and relationships were defined by young people in this study related to the issue of fair procedures in dealings with them. In the case of the community Garda, her decisions were seen to be based on factual evidence rather than assumptions or stereotypes. Young people can then predict possible outcomes of interactions with the community officer based on previous experience. They accepted that when they offended the community officer would likely inform their parents and possibly caution them, a practice that was seen to be fair as participants accepted this as part of the role of Gardaí.

With other Gardaí there was a level of uncertainty and ambiguity about the process and outcomes of that interaction, even when they had been in the same situation in the past as explained by this participant on being caught drinking underage:

...it’s mixed because there’s times when they’ll throw you into the cab [police car], and there’s times when they’ll just pour out your drink, so, there’s not a balance view on it, because it depends on the Guard you get, some of them will abuse their power, some of them won’t, some of them will just take a bad liking towards you and they’ll do things differently, but, I mean, some of them can be quite nice and let you off the hook.
(Male, 16 years old, Site 1).

It may be that young people have learned to expect different types of treatment from different types of police officers. With the community officer they assume that their treatment will be fair based on their own behaviour and will be able to anticipate the outcomes of any interaction, which in many cases is simply a friendly conversation with a police officer. In terms of officers that they have no previous experience with, young people appear to have come to expect unfair and negative treatment which can often be based on what they perceive to be the officer’s personal feelings, as reflected in the quote above.

There was a sense of resignation here that despite the actions of young people, they will be subject to a diverse range of types of policing which they see as being primarily due to the individual whim of each officer, coupled with the perceptions of the Gardaí about trouble-making youth. This belief can also contribute to feelings of disengagement with the police and the law when young people feel that they have no control or impact on their situations. Young people may then believe that when all they can do is ‘hope you get lucky’, there are no added risks involved in offending and that ‘there’s no point following the law if they’re [the police] not going to try and help you’ (Male, 15 years old, Site 2).

Promoting Personal and Community Safety

Based on previous experiences with Gardaí, and the resulting relationships that are created, young people constructed strategies to negotiate these relationships. The types of strategies used were dependent on the type of Garda they were interacting with in that particular situation. Interactions with the community Garda tended to be relatively straight forward in that young people had an expectation of fairness and respect and they reported that they are more likely to reciprocate this respect. The majority of interactions that occurred with other Gardaí were interpreted as instances of harassment and these led young people to engage with one of two types of strategies. One strategy was to feign respect and deference toward in the expectation that the interaction would therefore be shorter and more likely to result in no further action from the Gardaí:

...so a lot of people would be very, very wary, they may not not break the law but, they would be very careful doing it (Male, 16 years old, Site 1).

...just, don’t give them back cheek or something like, because then they’d give you a caution or something (Male, 13 years old, Site 2).

The other strategy employed by young people was to purposely antagonise the Gardaí as they believed that they had already been deemed guilty of some offence and that their own behaviour would not make any impact on outcomes:

I got arrested and...the [officer], a female Guard kept punching me constantly, in the side of the head, because, supposedly, I was resisting arrest, but I was sitting in the back of the car in handcuffs...(Male, 18 years old, Site 1).

...so even if the Guards are walking up towards you to move you on, you'll have a few people who will try and antagonise them and a few people trying to get a chase because, there's nothing better to do...(Male, 16 years old, Site 1).

Ultimately using either of these strategies can lead to the reinforcement of existing negative attitudes. When talking about the institution of the Gardaí, young people showed high levels of cynicism toward and disengagement from both the purpose and the effectiveness of the Gardaí. Legal cynicism is linked to individual's beliefs and likely conformity to legal norms, those with higher levels of cynicism in this respect will be more inclined to accept norms 'outside' of the law as reasonable (Bradford, 2014; Trinkner & Cohn, 2014). This can be especially pertinent given that a number of young people reported that they tend to see the police and the law as 'the same thing'. Across both research sites there was some evidence to suggest that those with the most negative views of the Gardaí had also come to perceive illegal behaviour as acceptable to some extent, in Site 1 there was general endorsement of underage drinking, while in Site 2 minor offending was seen as reasonable as long as it didn't hurt anyone else.

In terms of meeting the third aim of the community policing model, it appears that positive interactions and relationships with a community Garda does not add much to promoting community or personal safety at least as far as it refers to reducing crime or anti-social behaviour. While participants at Site 2 expressed more favourable views of the community Garda in comparison with other Gardaí, they did not report that they would be more likely to report crime to the Gardaí or to assist them in investigating crime in the future indicating that this relationship alone is not sufficient to encourage greater cooperation with the Gardaí overall.

Discussion and Conclusion

At first glance, in line with study findings from other countries (Byrne & Jarman, 2011; Dirix, Gelders & Parmentier, 2012; Gau & Brunson, 2015) young people in this study appeared to have largely negative views of the police. However, they also expressed strong support for policing more generally in that they advocated the need for social control within society and that the Gardaí were best placed to enforce this, although this was stated to be within the context of fairness, justice and non-aggressive behaviours. When these ideals were not seen to be met, young people reported being disappointed and disillusioned with the Gardaí and this appeared to cause a sense of ambiguity in their overall attitudes toward the legal system as a whole.

The relationship with the community Garda was reported to be respectful, fair and predictable which encouraged more respect from young people, indicating that the community policing initiative has the potential to improve relations between young people and the police. In effect, the more positive attitudes expressed toward the community Garda were due largely to a sense of predictability, the feeling of being

listened to and respected and not being stereotyped as a ‘troublemaker’ by this officer. The issue of procedural justice and fairness in interactions that most young people saw as being part of the adult-police relationship was highlighted by almost all participants as being of particular importance to their own views of the police.

Procedural justice theory argues that citizens will be more inclined to view the police as legitimate authorities if they experience fair and unbiased treatment from them. This in turn will lead to citizens feeling an obligation to obey that authority and comply with the law because they feel it is justified to do so rather than because they fear punishment for not doing so (Mazzerolle, et al, 2013; Tyler, 2006). This view was clearly expressed by the participants in this study who placed more emphasis on the fairness of their interactions with Gardaí than the outcomes. This finding is consistent with other research that focuses on the procedural justice approach to policing in both quantitative (Bradford, 2014; Feeney & Freeman, 2010; Trinkner & Cohn, 2014; Tyler, 2006) and qualitative studies (Bowden & Higgins, 2000; Byrne & Jarman, 2011; Dirikx, Gelders & Parmentier, 2012; Gau & Brunson, 2015) and has been applied to both adult and youth populations.

This may explain some of the differences generally found between the attitudes of younger people and adults toward the police (Feeney & Freeman, 2010; Mazzerolle, et al., 2013; Tankebe, 2013). If young people feel that they are shown differential treatment from police they are more likely to interpret this as unjust and unfair which consequently leads to more negative perceptions of the police organisation.

Previous research has shown that community police officers have more positive views of the community they serve compared to other police (Anderson, et al. 2007; Pelfry, 2004; Telep & Weisburd, 2012) and this could lead to less antagonistic interactions with community members. This may have further effects on the nature of the relationships between young people and the community officer who is likely to perceive them in a different light compared to other officers who are not involved in the community in the same manner. While this could lead to more meaningful engagement between Gardaí and young people, there was little evidence to suggest this was the case in the current study.

The differences in attitudes toward different types of Gardaí influenced the ways that young people negotiated their interactions with them dependent on which type of Garda they met. Participants from Site 2 showed overall consensus in talking about the community Garda and how they interacted with her, in that it was generally non-confrontational and often friendly. This held even for those young people who had been arrested or cautioned by this officer. Similar findings have been reported on young people’s experiences with police officers tasked with interacting directly with young people in schools (Anderson, et al., 2007) and with young people from disadvantage backgrounds (Bowden and Higgins, 2000). As with the Bowden and Higgins study, also conducted in Ireland, participants in this study made distinctions between different types of Gardaí without positive experiences impacting on their attitudes toward the Gardaí more generally.

The community Garda was largely seen by participants as an exception to ‘normal’ Garda behaviour, especially in her behaviour and attitudes toward young people. It appears from these findings that being exposed to differential treatment from different types of Gardaí gave young people a template for how they feel they should be treated by the Gardaí. Rather than helping to improve overall attitudes, however, experiences with the community Garda may have entrenched existing negative attitudes toward the Gardaí in more general terms as young people have a comparison of more acceptable treatment from the community officer. While participants reported positive relationships with the community Garda, this had no impact on the relationships with other Gardaí as young people felt that these officers stereotyped them as young and therefore ‘troublemakers’ who are not deserving of respect or fair treatment. These views were further backed up by the personal experiences of participants being moved on from public spaces, arrested and reporting crimes to the Gardaí.

In terms of the interactions between young people and the Gardaí, the expectations and beliefs that young people held about the Gardaí, and the behaviour of officers in each situation, inevitably had some bearing on how they themselves reacted and behaved in that interaction which had the potential to lead to increasingly antagonistic situations between the two. Reports of interactions with Gardaí offered two possible ways that young people negotiated interactions, either by attempting to avoid all contact, or by purposely antagonising Gardaí as they feel they are seen to be guilty regardless of what they do. This indicates a lack of respect for the Gardaí and a reluctance to engage with them on any level. Findings from this study also suggest that despite the positive attitudes toward the community Garda reported this extended to cooperating, either by offering information or reporting crime, with this Garda also. It appears from these findings that attempts to use community policing to promote safety in the community needs more than the single positive relationship developed between the community Garda and young people.

The current study was a small scale ($N = 20$) exploratory investigation into the attitudes of a local group of young people toward community and more traditional type Gardaí and caution should be used in interpreting the results in the context of the general population. In addition the participants in this study were referring to a single community Garda and their views may not be shared by young people with experience with different community officers. However, it does offer some insight into the different ways that police-youth relationships are perceived and interpreted by young people who have experienced both positive and negative interactions with different types of police officers and suggests ways that the police can reduce antagonism in their interactions with young people and increase the likelihood of cooperation with police directives.

Future research will need to be conducted in order to expand on the findings presented here, with a larger sample size and with young people with a wider variety of experiences of the juvenile justice system overall. As it was not possible to assess one of the main aims of community policing models here, that of reducing crime within communities, it would be useful to further investigate this potential outcome by assessing both official crime statistics and community member’s views on crime reduction. In addition, as the young people in the current study continued to express

more negative views of the Gardaí in general, it is important to explore whether changes in the approach of officers to coincide with that of community officers would help to improve these attitudes toward the police more generally among the population.

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Notes

1. A call for tender was issued by An Garda Síochána in 2014 to conduct a Public Attitudes Survey; the results from this survey have not yet been published (as of April 2016).
2. The Travelling community in Ireland is a traditionally nomadic, ethnic minority (although this status is contested) group, estimated at around 24,000 in an overall population of approximately 4.5 million people. All participants from the Travelling community who took part in this study were at the time living in social housing in the local area.
3. Diversion Projects were given a statutory footing in the Children Act (2001) whereby the intention is to target young people deemed to be 'at risk' of offending in neighbourhoods with high levels of crime and unemployment. The aim is to find ways of diverting young people from potentially criminal lifestyles by intervening with youth club activities and teaching them about personal safety.