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Young People Who Use Drugs Views Toward the Power and Authority of Police Officers

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Abstract

Many young people who use drugs are structurally vulnerable to policing powers given the ongoing criminalization of drug possession. Police authority limits and the expression of that authority may play a significant role in police encounters among young people who use drugs. This qualitative study explores the views of young people who use drugs toward police power and authority in their recent encounters with police officers. Interviews were conducted with 38 young people who recently used illegal drugs in British Columbia, Canada. We found five interrelated themes related to perceptions of police authority: (1) skepticism and distrust toward authority; (2) paternalism and authority over drug use; (3) officer use of force; (4) police as power-hungry; and (5) officers above the law. Participants described police authority as limitless, unpredictable, untethered, easily abused, and lacking accountability. Participants feared holding police officers accountable to power abuses in a criminal justice system that they saw as stacked against them. Moving forward, institutional reforms may consider and account for the expression, limits, and use of police authority among young people who use drugs and other structurally vulnerable communities.

Keywords

young adults, marginalization, policing, illicit drug use, power, bounded authority

Young people who use drugs (PWUD) are a structurally vulnerable group due to social marginalization, criminalization, and stigma. In Canada, young PWUD often experience disproportionate targeting and interactions with police (Card et al., 2021; Greer et al., 2020, 2021; Ti et al., 2013). Studies

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show that they are targeted more than adults who use drugs (Greer et al., 2018) and they report regular experiences of police targeting, harassment, and discrimination, particularly among those who are Indigenous (Card et al., 2021; Pan et al., 2013). Some young PWUD even report experiencing physical, verbal, and sexual violence in police encounters, which are linked to sense of distrust and disdain toward law enforcement (Greer et al., 2018; Selfridge et al., 2020; Pan et al., 2013). Compared to adults who use drugs, younger PWUD report significantly more negative attitudes toward police (Greer et al., 2018). Such experiences and views may be important as police encounters have the potential to negatively impact identity and overall wellbeing at an early stage in their development (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003).

One broadly accepted explanation for negative attitudes toward the police is based on procedural justice or whether police encounters are perceived as fair (Hinds, 2007; Tyler, 2006; Tyler & Huo, 2002). Procedural justice posits that regardless of the legal outcome of police encounters, fairness is based on unbiased, respectful, transparent, and impartial treatment from officers (Tyler, 2006). Procedural justice may also be based on the "bounds" of police authority—that is, whether police act within the rightful limits of their authority in certain situations (Trinkner et al., 2018). The bounds or limits of police authority can be expressed through what, when, and where it is exercised. Exceeding the perceived bounds of authority can undermine police legitimacy and willingness for people to obey police authority. To date, few studies have examined the notion of bounded authority in police encounters and their impact on police legitimacy (Huq et al., 2017; Jackson et al., 2020; Kyprianides et al., 2021; Murphy, 2021; Watson et al., 2021).

For young PWUD, police expressions of authority in their encounters with the police are especially relevant. As a socially marginalized group, negative police encounters among young PWUD can play a role in terms of social exclusion and powerlessness at a particularly formative time in their development (Justice & Meares, 2014). However, there are few studies on police encounters with young PWUD related to the role of police authority and its impacts on this diverse population. To our knowledge, no study has examined in depth the experiences and views toward police authority among young PWUD.

The current qualitative study explores young PWUDs' views toward police authority, including the limits, uses, and expression of that authority, during police encounters among young PWUD. Below, we provide a brief literature review on policing among young and adult PWUD, underscoring the role and potential impact of police authority and power in their lives. We then present the research project and methods, followed by the thematic findings. The themes presented include: (1) skepticism and distrust toward authority; (2) paternalism and authority over drug use; (3) use of force; (4) police as power hungry; and (5) officers above the law. Finally, we discuss the findings relative to the current knowledge base and present implications for future policing practice and policy.

Literature Review

Policing PWUD. Given the illegality of drugs in most countries worldwide, PWUD frequently come into contact and interact with police (Greer et al., 2021; Ti et al., 2013; Werb et al., 2011). For young PWUD, police encounters are especially frequent given their greater visibility in public spaces that make them structurally vulnerable to police surveillance and targeting (Greer et al., 2021; Lister et al., 2008). Some young PWUD are subject to regular street-based "stop-and-searches" and carding due to this time spent in public spaces (Gormally & Deuchar, 2012; Greer et al., 2021; Maher & Dixon, 2001; Mcara & Mcvie, 2005; Sharp & Atherton, 2007). Studies suggest that police often target and question young people as a group of "trouble-makers" (Brunson & Miller, 2006), "permanent" or "usual" suspects (Mcara & Mcvie, 2005) and "police property" (Reiner, 2010). Similarly, young PWUD presume that police view them as inherent "criminals" (Greer et al., 2018; Leslie et al., 2018; Selfridge et al., 2020) and are pressured to arrest them (Cooper et al., 2004). Young PWUD report feeling

"looked down upon" by police because of their age and social grouping (Bowles, 2017), and that policing behavior reflects wider society's views toward young people and PWUD (Leslie et al., 2017). Such perceptions and experiences coincide with police reports of using their authority to control PWUD and regulate their space and behaviors, such as forcing PWUD into treatment (Greer et al., 2022; Lister et al., 2008).

Relative to adults who use drugs, police encounters among young PWUD are viewed more negatively (Greer et al., 2018). Young PWUD perceive treatment from police as unfair and discriminatory (Greer et al., 2018; Nelson & Brown, 2020; Pan et al., 2013). Negative encounters among young PWUD can create intense emotions of fear, anger, distrust, and hatred toward law enforcement (Pan et al., 2013; Selfridge et al., 2020). The fear and distrust of police among PWUD can jeopardize personal wellbeing from the mere presence of police in the community (Maher & Dixon, 1999; Werb et al., 2011; Wood et al., 2004). A large body of research shows that police presence in the lives of PWUD discourages them from carrying harm reduction equipment (Beletsky et al., 2014; Small et al., 2006), limits access to harm reduction services (Bardwell et al., 2019; Collins et al., 2019; Watson et al., 2021) and increases their involvement in risky health behaviors (Aitken et al., 2002; Beletsky et al., 2014; Bourgois & Schonberg, 2009; Gaines et al., 2015; Hayashi et al., 2013; Miller et al., 2008; Small et al., 2006; Spicer, 2021; Volkmann et al., 2011; Werb et al., 2008). Policing can also lead to increased violence in drug markets and disruptions to the drug supply that can exacerbate overdose risk (Bohnert et al., 2011; Maher & Dixon, 2001; Werb et al., 2011). Enforcement of drug offences and fear of the police also dissuades PWUD from seeking medical help in an overdose situation among both adults (Tobin et al., 2005; van der Meulen et al., 2021), and among young PWUD (Selfridge et al., 2020). Policing among PWUD has also created greater social and spatial marginalization (Boyd et al., 2018; Collins et al., 2019; Curtis et al., 1995; Gaines et al., 2015), particularly through the symbolic, moralized message of drug market policing that is entrenched in social control and prohibitionist ideology (Coomber et al., 2019; Spicer, 2021). Researchers have noted that it is often the most structurally vulnerable individuals who are punished through drug enforcement (Coomber et al., 2019; Werb et al., 2011; Woods & Rafaeli, 2016).

Police encounters have been described as an "everyday" form of violence in the lives of PWUD (Boyd et al., 2018; Bungay et al., 2010; Sarang et al., 2010). Some scholars suggest that policing is the most visible and documented structural mechanism that perpetuates social violence for this group (Rhodes, 2009; Sarang et al., 2010). For instance, Sarang et al. (2010) suggest that PWUD in Russia live with "police *bespredel*"—the sense that police have no limits to their power. In this study, the sense of unlimited police authority perpetuated and ongoing sense of fear and internalized stigma, contributes to "oppression illness" among PWUD. Another study by Lister et al. (2008) described policing activity among PWUD as the exercise of "coercive authority" where policing power was "untethered by organizational rules, allowing personal discretion and perceived prejudices to dictate the boundaries of authoritative interventions" (pp. 41–42). The adults who use drugs in this study often described police actions as unexplained, unjustified, and inequitable. In Canada, PWUD have also expressed concerns that police officers exceed and misuse their power and authority in the context of harm reduction and health spaces (Watson et al., 2021). Such evidence suggests that for an already marginalized group, police expression of authority may perpetuate oppression and therefore addressing the bounds of their authority may be essential for social and health equity moving forward.

There is a large body of research that shows PWUD are acutely vulnerable to policing power including intimidation, physical violence, verbal abuse, and extortion (Beletsky et al., 2014; Cooper et al., 2004; Greer et al., 2018, 2020; Houborg et al., 2014; Leslie et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2008; Pan et al., 2013; Rhodes, 2002; Rhodes et al., 2008; Richardson et al., 2015; Sarang et al., 2010; Werb et al., 2011). Police actions, including excessive use of force and abuse of power, can be naturalized and legitimized through mechanisms that pervade the lives of PWUD, including criminalization and social marginalization from police (Bourgois & Schonberg, 2009). Such evidence is concerning given

that these actions also send messages about social exclusion, and reproduce and reinforce suffering and marginalization (Bradford, 2014; Bradford & Jackson, 2010). Research also suggests that PWUD can resist the structures and forces that constrain their lives, including police encounters (Pan et al., 2013; Sarang et al., 2010), underscoring the importance of understanding the nature of policing among this group.

The structural vulnerability faced by PWUD can be exacerbated by intersecting social identities, such as overlapping vulnerabilities due to racial identity, Indigeneity, gender, sexuality, housing, and age (Friedman et al., 2021). For instance, PWUD that are also young and homeless experience inequities that can result in regular harassment, targeting, and discrimination from police in the community (Boyd et al., 2018; Card et al., 2021; Collins et al., 2019; Greer et al., 2018; Ti et al., 2013). In other studies, young Indigenous PWUD in Canada report negative experiences with police, including verbal, physical, and sexual police violence (Pan et al., 2013; Selfridge et al., 2020). Some quantitative research further shows that young Indigenous PWUD in Canada are more likely to be targeted, handcuffed, or arrested than young white PWUD (Card et al., 2021). Additional studies reinforce that the targeting and use of physical force by police experienced by young Indigenous PWUD in British Columbia creates strong reluctance to have any interactions with police (Pan et al., 2013; Selfridge et al., 2020).

Police authority. Authority is often described as a fundamental part of policing that entitles officers to exercise great power and demand control over a situation (McCartney & Parent, 2015). Police authority is a privilege that law enforcement officers must use ethically and judiciously (McCartney & Parent, 2015). People can acquire values and information about police authority through their legal socialization, such as in police interactions, that can lay expectations of how police should exert their power, including the bounds or limits to their authority (Bradford et al., 2013; Fine & van Rooij, 2021; Trinkner et al., 2018). Judgements of the rightful and appropriate use of authority may be crucial for police legitimacy and for individuals to see law enforcement as right, proper, and to be obeyed (Huq et al., 2017; Jackson & Bradford, 2019; Tankebe, 2014; Trinkner et al., 2018). When officers overstep the bounds of their authority or go beyond the legitimate scope of their legal powers, the legitimacy of that authority itself should be questioned. When people perceive police as unfair, including being abusive, confrontational, or biased, they may be less likely to trust the police and comply with the law (Bradford, 2014; Fine & van Rooij, 2021; Hinds, 2007; Martin & Bradford, 2019).

Due to the administration and circumstances of policing, there can be a high degree of discretion or fluidity to police authority along with a low degree of accountability in how officers use it (Bronitt & Stenning, 2011; Goldstein, 1960). For example, one U.S. study with 900 police officers found that a substantial minority of officers considered it acceptable to go beyond the authority legally afforded to them (Weisburd et al., 2000). This study also found that most officers do not hold colleagues accountable to excessive use of force or power abuse, indicating a "code of silence." However, most officers strongly supported norms around the boundaries of police authority. Yet, there is still a high potential for abuse of authority among officers due to the discretionary nature of policing that often occurs in low visibility, unsupervised settings (Bacon, 2019; Cohen, 2010a, 2010b; Goldstein, 1960).

Considering the high potential for authority abuses in police encounters, it is surprising that there relatively little research on the notion of bounded authority (Huq et al., 2017; Jackson et al., 2020; Kyprianides et al., 2021; Murphy, 2021; Watson et al., 2021). In one survey with 2,500 Canadians, the degree of police authority witnessed by citizens was a predictor of their legitimacy (Jackson et al., 2020). Another national survey in England and Wales showed that excessive use of police authority, including officers abusing their power, acting above the law, and violating people's freedoms, was related to low police legitimacy (Huq et al., 2017). More recently, Murphy (2021) further expanded the idea of bounded authority with a survey among 398 Australian Muslims showing that bounded authority violations result in resistance and disengagement from policing. Such evidence suggests

that police expression of authority may influence perceptions of the legitimacy of police actions and defiance of policing power (Corren & Perry-Hazan, 2021; Huq et al., 2017; Kyprianides et al., 2021). Some qualitative evidence also suggests that there may be limits to the places and expression of police authority, and that expression of this authority may impact marginalized groups (Kyprianides et al., 2021; Watson et al., 2021). However, more research is needed which takes up the notion of bounded authority, especially among groups such as PWUD who often experience policing as part of their everyday lives (Bungay et al., 2010; Sarang et al., 2010).

For young PWUD, police authority may also be important in terms of social control, inclusion, and exclusion. Scholars argue that police officers, in their positions of authority, are representatives of societal values and provide information about social inclusion and acceptance (Murphy & Cherney, 2018). Their actions "communicate meaning, not only about the police . . . but also about power and authority in society" (Loader et al., 2003, p. 43). Discrimination and unfair treatment can signal that individuals are under-valued members of society (Bradford, 2014; Loader, 2006; Murphy & Cherney, 2018; Pettersson, 2013). Similarly, degree of authority and power used by officers in encounters with young PWUD may communicate messages about their social positioning, belongingness and value in society, and the role of legal authorities in their lives (Jackson & Gau, 2016; Justice & Meares, 2014; Trinkner et al., 2018). In other words, for young PWUD, police authority may represent inequitable priorities of the dominant social order and perpetuate social oppression (Jackson & Bradford, 2009). If police expression of authority has the potential to produce social harm through their uses or abuses of power, police encounters with young PWUD may therefore play an important symbolic role in terms of social inclusion or exclusion (Bradford, 2014; Martin & Bradford, 2019). However, more research is needed on the role and perspective of police as "power holders" (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2013; Martin & Bradford, 2019), including their use of authority, particularly among interactions with PWUD.

Study Objectives

In this study, we focus on a community sample of young PWUD in three non-metropolitan communities in British Columbia, to gain insights into their views toward police authority in recent encounters. This qualitative study explores the use, expression, and impact of police authority from the perspective of young PWUD. As others have noted, qualitative research is especially well positioned to unearth the dynamics of police as authorities and citizens as subordinates (Harkin, 2015; Martin & Bradford, 2019; Tyler & Jackson, 2013). This study sheds new light on the important role of police authority and power in encounters with young PWUD and has implications in terms of promoting accountability, alternative policing approaches, and more positive relations between police and PWUD.

Method

The Youth Experiences Project is a multi-method, multi-jurisdictional study of police encounters among young people in British Columbia. Recognizing that much of the research on young people's interactions with police has been conducted in eastern Canadian provinces (Carrington & Schulenberg, 2003; Wortley & Owusu-Bempah, 2011) or research on PWUD is focused on urban, metropolitan, and inner-city areas (Collins et al., 2019; Ti et al., 2013; Werb et al., 2008; Wortley & Tanner, 2004), we focused on three non-metropolitan communities in British Columbia: Prince George, Chilliwack, and Victoria. The locations were similar in size, with between 73,000 and 94,000 residents (Statistics Canada, 2016), each study location had different police departments, including the Royal Canadian Mountain Police and a municipal police department.

Of 449 young people, aged 16–30 years, who participated in the quantitative arm of the project, 38 were invited to take part in the qualitative interviews. Participants were recruited from November 2017

to June 2018, prior to cannabis legalization in Canada. The 38 individuals were identified and invited through specific criteria, based on the primary objective of this study, and included only those who experienced at least one police encounter in the local jurisdiction within the past twelve months. Other inclusion criteria were (1) used an illegal drug (including cannabis) at least weekly in the past six months; (2) under the age of 30; and (3) English-speaking. We aimed to gather data from "information-rich" cases with specific or diverse experiences or backgrounds in mind therefore, we employed a purposeful sampling strategy (Patton, 1999, 2002). The qualitative team met regularly during data collection to ensure we recruited participants from a range of ethnicities, genders, and experiences, such as those who had witnessed an overdose event.

Participants received a $30 CAD cash honorarium for a one-to-one qualitative interview lasting approximately 45–90 minutes. The researchers [AG, MS] and research assistants conducted the interviews. A semi-structured question guide informed the interviews, which included questions about recent encounters, the local context of policing, and perceptions of police and the legal system. The question guide was reviewed by young people in the communities of interest to promote its relevance and to check the wording of questions. Questions included: "can you tell me about a recent experience with police that stands out for you?" and "what do you think the role of police is in your community?" The interviewer encouraged participants to share freely and used probing questions to generate deeper insights. The research team regularly reviewed the question guide to assess the depth, richness, and relevance of information gathered—an iterative process that informed subsequent questioning for a greater understanding of perspectives and experiences. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and imported into a qualitative organization software, NVivo, for coding (QSR International, n.d.).

A thematic analysis was used to deductively and inductively identify themes across the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, initial themes and codes were generated by a repeated reading to search for meanings and patterns of an initial a selection of interview transcripts. The qualitative analysis team [AG, MS, BP] met to develop and refine the hierarchical coding framework used to sort the data into conceptual dimensions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We discussed discrepancies in the coding and further refined the framework. A research assistant then systematically applied the coding framework to the full dataset using NVivo 11 (QSR International, n.d.).

For the current study, the analysis was led by the first author [AG]. The analysis was both deductive and inductive as we looked for ideas relating to police authority, power, and legitimacy while also considering alternative expressions, interpretations, and explanations. Bounded authority and structural violence were used as analytic tools, rather than deductive frameworks, to help illuminate the expression of authority in participants' examples, descriptions, and views toward police and police encounters. We made note of and discussed relationships between the codes and themes—as distinct and as a whole—and what it meant for the findings. We considered alternative explanations for findings, including possible unique, conflicting, and absent ideas (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Morrow, 2005). Our team reviewed and discussed the patterns in the data until we developed a nuanced understanding of young PWUDs' experiences with and perceptions of police and its relation to police authority, power, and legitimacy. The research team reviewed, discussed, and agreed on the final themes presented in the current paper.

The study received ethics approval from the University of Victoria, University of the Fraser Valley, and University of Northern British Columbia.

Table 1. Demographics for Qualitative Interview Participants ($N = 38$).

	N	%
Age, in years		
<20	16	42.1
21–25	13	34.2
26–30	9	23.7
Gender		
Female	15	39.5
Male	21	50.1
Other	2	5.2
Ethnic group		
White	28	52.6
Indigenous	10	26.2
Other	6	21.1
Income		
<$14,400/year	31	78.9
$14,401–24,000	2	5.3
$24,001–48,000	6	15.8
Employment		
Yes	18	47.4
No	20	53.6
Education		
Did not complete high school	18	47.4
Completed high school	17	44.7
Completed post-secondary	3	7.9
Housing status		
Stably housed	26	68.4
Unstably housed	12	31.6
Street involvement		
Yes	17	44.7
No or unknown	21	55.3
Number of times stopped and questioned by the police in the past five years		
2–3 times	7	18.4
4–10 times	18	47.4
>10 times	13	34.2

Findings

Sample

Thirty-eight young PWUD took part in the qualitative interviews. Participant characteristics are in Table 1. Half of the participants self-identified as male ($n = 21$) and fifteen as female (39.5%) whereas two self-identified as either trans male, trans female, or other gender (5.2%). Just over half of participants identified as white ($n = 28$; 52.6%), while over a quarter identified as Indigenous ($n = 10$; 26.3%) and the rest as other ethnicities ($n = 8$; 21.1%). Most participants reported an annual income of under $14,400 (78.9%) and just over half were unemployed (53.6%). Approximately one-third of the sample was unstably housed (31.6%) and nearly half were street-involved (44.7%). When asked about the number of times the participant was stopped and questioned by police in the past five years, seven reported two or three encounters (18.4%), eighteen reported four to ten encounters (47.4%), and thirteen reported over ten encounters (34.2%).

Table 2. Frequency of Drug Use Past 6 Months ($N = 38$).

	N	%
Cannabis		
Never	1	2.6
Once or twice	2	5.3
Monthly	3	7.9
Weekly	6	15.8
Daily or almost daily	26	68.4
Cocaine		
Never	14	37.8
Once or twice	7	18.9
Monthly	11	28.9
Weekly	5	13.5
Daily or almost daily	0	—
Amphetamine and/or ecstasy		
Never	13	34.2
Once or twice	11	28.9
Monthly	9	23.7
Weekly	4	10.5
Daily or almost daily	1	2.6
Opioid use		
Never	19	50.0
Once or twice	9	23.7
Monthly	3	7.9
Weekly	1	2.6
Daily or almost daily	6	15.8
Hallucinogens		
Never	14	36.8
Once or twice	16	42.1
Monthly	6	15.8
Weekly	2	5.3
Daily or almost daily	0	—
Polysubstance use (monthly or more)		
Cannabis only	6	15.8
Polydrug use	32	84.2

Categories and frequency of illegal drug use varied among participants (Table 2). Over three-quarters of participants reported using cannabis at least weekly ($n = 32$, 84.2%), while under one-quarter used opioids ($n = 7$, 18.4%) or amphetamines ($n = 5$, 13.2%) at least weekly. However, most participants used more than one drug at least monthly ($n = 32$; 84.2%), while six participants used only cannabis monthly or more (15.8%) within the past six months.

Qualitative Findings

Five themes relating to young PWUD perceptions of police authority are presented below. The themes include: (1) skepticism and distrust toward authority; (2) paternalism and authority over drug use; (3) officer use of force; (4) police as power hungry; (5) officers above the law.

(1) Skepticism and distrust toward authority. Participants offered clear descriptions of their experiences with police officers and how they viewed police authority. Many viewed police through a negative lens and that they were skeptical of police authority. For example, one participant explained they were

"very skeptical toward authority . . . I have a hard time trusting a lot of people, but especially [police] because of the authority" (White female; no street involvement; cannabis only). Skepticism was especially evident among those who lacked expectations of police authority. Several participants explained that they feared the unknown. As one person said:

> Before I had interactions with police where it sort of is, like, it's scary at first, right? Because it's, they have power to put you in trouble. But, when I was younger and I hadn't had run-ins, I'd say I was more nervous . . . . Now that I've seen what happens, it's . . . not so scary. (White female, street involvement, mixed drug use)

Before having lived experiences in police encounters, young PWUD were unsure how police might wield their power. The importance of legal socialization for developing comfort and expectations of police authority underscored the importance of interactions with police early on in life.

Participant views of police also revealed a negative lens among young PWUD. As one expressed: "Every teenager at one point develops a distaste for authority, especially the police . . . my little brother . . . saw the police as like something that interrupted his fun" (Indigenous male; no street involvement; mixed drug use). At a time when young people sought autonomy from adults, police officers represented a controlling and constraining authority. However, some participants did not agree with police using their power to control young people. As one participant explained:

> They have more control which is not what—that's not their job, to control. They're literally just supposed to help, supposed to mediate if, at best. But that's not what they do. They come, they command, they control situations. And half the time, most cops actually don't know all the laws. . . . I'd say there's not a cop anywhere that knows all the laws. (Biracial male, street-involved, mixed drug use)

Many participants' examples revealed that police officers were not using their authority to enforce the law, but instead to constrain young people. Seeing this misplacement or misuse of authority resulted in young PWUD questioning the legitimacy of police altogether.

(2) Paternalism and authority over drug use. Young PWUD provided many descriptions of police authority being directed toward their drug use. One participant shared that their encounters with police were "mostly, like, drug-related" (White male; no street involvement; mixed drug use). Several young PWUD gave examples related to cannabis use in addition to other drugs, such as cocaine and methamphetamine. Although drugs including cannabis were illegal at the time of the interviews, drug use was viewed as part of young people's personal lives where police should not have authority. This boundary violation was discovered in the way in they described police actions in relation to drug use, explaining that officers would give "lectures . . . try to teach us a lesson" (White male; no street involvement; cannabis only). Several participants talked the demeaning and paternal nature of policing in relation to drug use: "[treated] as stupid . . . because I was high" (White female; street-involved; mixed drug use). Such descriptions indicated a condescending or demeaning nature to police officer's expression of authority with regards to drug use. Similarly, a young Indigenous man said:

> [Police should be] a little bit more respectful when it comes to like teenagers. Like yeah, you're older. Yeah, you're a police officer. We get it. But you don't have to act like you're the biggest fucking person in the world for like, what? A few teens smoking pot? With police, it's honestly fucking difficult to explain too because they hide it so fucking well, but we - like teens know, like the police think we're fucking stupid . . . every time that we get caught . . . like: "you guys know that you're not supposed to do that, right? You know that's illegal, right? You guys know you're not supposed to have those bongs, right? You guys know you're not supposed to be smoking, right?" And it's just like: Yeah! We fucking know. (Indigenous male, no street involvement, mixed drug use)

Again, many participants viewed police as paternalistic when they applied their authority to their drug use in their personal lives, which made them question the use and appropriateness of applying police authority in those situations.

Participants' descriptions of drug-related encounters often were coupled with experiences of discrimination and targeting. They explained how "[police officers] treat like the junkies . . . a little more different than like regular kids" (White male; no street involvement; mixed drug use). Participants recognized that their vulnerability to policing was based, at times, on police officers' perceptions toward drugs and PWUD. As one person said: "They [police] think that everybody that uses drugs is dangerous . . . even with cannabis . . . they think it's dangerous or something" (White male; no street involvement; cannabis only). Some participants viewed police as stereotyping young PWUD and treating them differently because of it. Such stereotypes seemed to apply to a range of drugs, including cocaine, methamphetamine, and cannabis; although, "harder" drugs seemed to be subject them to relatively more punitive attitudes compared to cannabis.

Our data also suggested that young PWUD were subject to police attention both due to their drug use and other intersecting social positioning related drug use in public spaces. Young PWUD experiencing homelessness were especially structurally vulnerable to policing. As one street-involved person said: "they definitely judge people differently . . . like lower income people differently, low income, on the streets, addicts; I think they treat those people differently" (White female; street involved; mixed drug use). When police were viewed as discriminatory toward young PWUD who had no choice but to use in public, participants questioned the intentions of police and if their actions were justified or merely harassment.

(3) Officer use of force. The experiences shared by young PWUD also revealed overt use of physical force by police officers—both through their own experience of physical violence as well as witnessing police force used against others. It was a clear expression of unbounded police authority in experiences where physical force was beyond necessary to control a situation or enforce the law. Several participants used phrases such as "unnecessary," "uncalled for," and "overkill" when describing officer use of force. They provided numerous examples of how police would go "too far" from their expectations of how force should be used. For instance, a young street-involved PWUD spoke about police using physical force to contain the activities of intoxicated young people at a party: "that level of aggression was not required" (White male; street involved; mainly cannabis). Most participants were deeply concerned about the intensity and extent of physical strength and violence they witnessed or experienced among young people.

The power imbalances between young PWUD and police officers was also communicated to them through the sheer physical size differences between young PWUD and adult officers. Particularly with young women who use drugs in our sample, concerning levels of officer use of force was described in confrontations. One young woman recalled an incident where young people were using drugs: "[police officer] just like puts her in a choke hold, like this tiny [pregnant] 5-foot-2 girl . . . it was just fucking wild. I was like 'What the fuck is happening?'" (White trans male; street involved; mixed drug use). Another participant recalled a similar scenario: "[the officer] was just like 'I said get up and go! What are you doing still standing here?' . . . I'd stand up again and he'd push me down . . . Here he is, this fucking like 45-year-old man pushing me around and I'm only 14 years old" (Indigenous female; street involved; mixed drug use). Physically overtaking the young women in these examples sent a message about powerlessness rather than justice. It made them feel bullied and mistreated, often in front of their peers. Exceeding physical power in this way put into question whether use of force was used legitimately, or rather sent a social message about powerlessness and social positioning.

In relation to use of force and physical intimidation, participants expressed a deep concern around the limits placed on police use of physical force by policing organizations and questioned policing accountability. As one person reflected on the institution of policing overall:

> They need to go back and make a more focus on, you know, what's an acceptable limit of aggressiveness to the situation and how things are handled like physically . . . it should be a pretty obvious line of "this is too much force." (White male, no street involvement, cannabis only)

Young PWUD viewed officer use of force as discretionary method to express police authority. They were uneasy about the perceived lack of guidance given to officers on how to use force, as well as a lack of accountability. Given this perceived lack of guidelines and accountability, young PWUD were fearful and distrustful of the police.

(4) Police as power hungry. Many young PWUD believed that officers were in their position because of the power and authority the policing role assumed. Participants viewed some police officers as "power hungry," seeking out the policing role specifically because of the unbound authority the position afforded. As one young PWUD explained: "I know why they want to be police, they just like the power struggle. They want to feel up top. That's why people are police" (Biracial male; street involved; cannabis only). Like this participant, others viewed excessive power as a part of the job that officers enjoyed: "Cops are on power trips. They like to be powerful and tell you what to do." The perception that police intentionally sought out and enjoyed taking advantage of their authority created a sense of distrust toward officers' intentions.

Some participants talked about the belief that officers were trying to regain power from other aspects of their lives. For instance, one young PWUD believed that police use their authority to feel powerful over others:

> Lots of cops . . . were a bunch of dudes who got beat up in high school and they became cops. And then they took their pain out on us . . . Like that guy didn't get laid in high school, did he?" . . . you like put on this uniform and then like all of a sudden, you're just like "I'm a crazy asshole." (Biracial male, street involved, mixed drug use)

This view that police authority is used for self-interest put into question whether law enforcement was legitimate. When officers were viewed as ill-intentioned, young PWUD did not trust police actions.

For some young PWUD, police abuse of power was inevitable—a seductive aspect of police authority for the officer themselves. Speaking to this unbridled power, a participant stated: "[police officers have] too much power and they know it. So, like they're going to take advantage of that" (White male; no street involvement; mixed drug use); and another said: "Like I said, power corrupts them" (White male; housing unknown; mixed drug use). Several young PWUD had low expectations that police officers could use their authority within reason. They thought that officers could not resist their own unchecked powers, throwing into question whether any expressions of police authority were rightful or justified.

However, not all participants viewed police officers as inherently "power hungry" and without limits. Some participants commented on when officers restrained themselves, emphasizing the importance of bounded authority. As one white female said:

> And the cop treated us with respect. I don't know, it was the first time I got arrested. Didn't exceed their power . . . It's probably one of the only cops that have like respect for now. Never saw her again, really. That was it. So that was a good experience. I went from like good one, to like really bad all shit throughout my whole life, to now it's getting a little better. (White male, street-involved, mixed drug use)

Here, the participant's view of fairness in encounters was rooted in their perceptions of respect, a common part of procedural justice, as well as assessment of whether policing acted within limits of their power.

Some expressed that there were certain "bad guys" seeking power whereas other police officers kept their authority in check. One participant said:

> It wouldn't be untrue to say that some police like being in that position of power. That's certainly why I think *some* police officers want to be in a position of authority and carry a gun . . . [it's] why they want to be a police officer. But I think that that's not the majority. I think the majority are good people who want to do what's best for the community and keep the keep our city a safe place. (White male, no street involvement, cannabis only)

Although some participants were still wary of the potential for abuse, they thought some officers could restrain themselves and act within the moral bounds of their authority. Several participants emphasized the importance of police accountability and training to clearly define the bounds of police authority and to dissuade officer abuse of power.

(5) Officers above the law. Many participants described or reflected on officers misusing their authority to side-step or go above the law. Some participants believed that police officers had "special privileges" where the law did not apply to them or that they could bend the rules. Some talked about how officers " . . . feel that they're above the law and that they can act however they want" (White male; no street involvement; mixed drug use). Another young PWUD described officers: "taking advantage of [their] badge" (Indigenous female, street involved, mixed drug use). Young PWUD perceived officers in a position of authority where they could easily break the law without consequences. For instance, several participants gave them example of officers speeding and texting while driving: "they think they're top shit and they can do everything they want. I've seen many, many, many cops just like straight up burn red lights and like trying to do like some sneaky shit" (White male; no street involvement; mixed drug use). Observing officers break the law significantly eroded participants' trust in police. Witnessing a complete disregard for the law conveyed messages about the use of authority and whether it was used legitimately. As one person said:

> Cops take their power sometimes for granted . . . just flick on their fucking, their lights, to pass by a red light. And they instantly turn it off . . . . I also see cops being on their phones constantly, handheld, when they're not supposed to . . . they've lost their sense of judgment [and] justice . . . I actually kind of used to look up to the police . . . every time I see a cop car now, it's just a haunting reminder of what the police were . . . I used to see cops as protectors . . . heroes of our streets. (Indigenous male, no street involvement, mixed drug use)

Observing police abuse their power or use their authority to disregard the law compromised police legitimacy.

Participants' views that officers were "above the law" made some feel wary of the entire criminal justice system. Some recalled experiences or expressed fears about lodging a complaint about power abuses. In their pursuit of justice, several young PWUD commented on their view of a small likelihood of success in a system that favored police authority. The powerlessness some participants experienced in the criminal justice system was captured among some who recalled having to " . . . sit there, be quiet, and do whatever they say. And it's like, okay. Because otherwise . . . you're going to pin you for things that you didn't do" (Indigenous female; no street involvement; mixed drug use). This quote revealed a troubling belief among some participants that outcomes could become worse for young PWUD if they spoke up.

Young PWUD feared the combination of officer discretion to use force alongside their authority in the justice system:

> They could take your life for one millisecond if they wanted to. All they would have to do is point their gun, and boom. They could say "Oh, he tried to attack me." And that's all it could take, and they'd still have their job. (White male, street involved, cannabis only)

Unbounded police authority was seen as insidious in the criminal justice system and young PWUD assumed their voice would be constrained alongside officers. This was particularly the case for participants who experienced intersectional structural vulnerabilities, such as homelessness:

> They're very spiteful to [drug] users . . . if we fall asleep anywhere in public, they'll kick us in the head to wake us up. And I mean, like in court, there's no way we'd win; let alone how would we afford a lawyer. So, it's like, it's not like we can do anything about it. They just take advantage. It's bad, they're just, like, preying on how spiteful they are. They just dole out whatever the hell punishments they want. Because what's the courts going to believe? The cops or the kid with a mohawk. (White male, street involved, mixed drug use)

For young PWUD experiencing multiple social disadvantages, powerlessness in the criminal justice system felt like an inevitable consequence. Police opinions were seen as privileged within the criminal justice system—thus undermining justice and constraining young PWUDs' agency. The distrust toward the system overall was captured by one participant who said:

> [Police] have a certain power that like some people don't have, like lots of people don't have. And then like you can just fuck me over like that and I can't do none about it. I can't fight back; I can't do anything. Because like if I do, then I'm going to be in more trouble. (White male, no street involvement, mixed drug use)

This example of unbounded police authority in the criminal justice system directly contravenes procedural justice. Many participants believed that police authority could override fair procedures and only make matters worse.

Participants' sense of corruption in the criminal justice system produced a deep sense of distrust toward police. One person said:

> I used to feel like that's who I could call to be safe, and like would figure everything out and fix it. And like now it's just kind of like I don't trust them. I've seen like corrupt cops. And even some of the comments that cops make, it just doesn't make me feel comfortable at all or like he's actually looking out for my well-being. (White female, street involved, cannabis only)

This pessimism coalesced into feelings that police were ineffective and untrustworthy—again, eroding the legitimacy of police overall.

Discussion

In this qualitative study involving young PWUD in British Columbia, Canada, police authority was viewed as an unbounded and unaccountable force that was easily abused. Participants' experiences and observations of police expressions of authority, including use of physical force and overstepping the law, put into question whether officers were acting within the rightful bounds and limits of their authority or abusing their positions of power. The experiences of young PWUD were linked to a deep sense of distrust, skepticism, and cynicism toward officers which undermined police legitimacy.

Young PWUD were in an impressionable stage of developing views toward police and their own identity more generally; police encounters seemed to play a part in learning about their relative power and voice in the criminal justice system. Overall, this qualitative study provides new and critical insights into how young PWUD experience and view expressions of police authority. Findings have important implications in terms of social justice, police legitimacy, and policing practice with young PWUD moving forward.

This study offers much-needed insights into the lived experiences of young PWUD and their views toward police authority. Perhaps one of the most concerning findings of this study is the magnitude and seriousness of police power abuses that the young PWUD in this study reported. Police authority was viewed as unlimited and unaccountable among young PWUD. This sentiment echoes Sarang et al.'s (2010) concept of *police bespredel* or the overwhelming sense that there are no limits on policing power. These findings are especially concerning given that, for young people at an impressionable age, violence can be normalized, internalized, and difficult to resist (Sarang et al., 2010; Scheper-Hughes, 1996). The powerlessness in police encounters can become embedded and embodied to produce shame, stigma, and self-blame. While PWUD can and do actively resist such oppression, ongoing and unchecked power abuses can still become naturalized and normalized into "everyday" life (Boyd et al., 2018; Bungay et al., 2010; Sarang et al., 2010). Our hope here is not to normalize or promote the acceptance of the policing complex, power disparities, and its pervasiveness in the everyday lives of young PWUD.

This study offers unique and important insights on the role of police authority in shaping relations between police and young PWUD. Our findings suggest that expressions of police authority influence how young PWUD perceive fairness of police encounters. This observation adds to what is known about procedural justice in interactions between police and citizens. Specifically, the notion of bounded authority (Trinkner et al., 2018) is relevant. Our study suggests that police authority can be viewed as limitless, untethered, and unaccountable—or unbounded—which puts into question whether police authority is legitimate, justified, and acceptable. The current study was exploratory and not specifically designed to explicitly test the notion of bounded authority in action. However, more research specifically examining unbounded authority with various social groups would make welcome contributions to the literature on this topic.

Other studies show that young people have a negative bias toward authority figures (Fagan & Tyler, 2005; Fine et al., 2020). Dirikx et al. (2012) suggest that negative attitudes toward the police may be normative or "part of the deal" among young people and authority figures, rather than definitive judgements of policing. This may be particularly the case among young PWUD who see police officers as controlling and oppressive (Leslie et al., 2017). Thus, the views of young PWUD in our study may indeed be shared by other groups of young people.

Our study also adds to these ideas about views towards authority figures among young people. Young PWUD expressed skepticism toward police which was linked to agency threats and their desire for autonomy. The degree of authority expressed by police was also important. Authority that was overly demeaning, paternalistic, violent, abusive, and directed toward drug use was viewed as unnecessary and unwarranted. Therefore, the expression and degree of police authority exerted in encounters, including where, how, and when it is exerted, matter greatly. Police authority may help explain why police encounters are viewed significantly more negative among young PWUD compared to those who are adults (Greer et al., 2018). Again, more research is needed that takes up the notion of bounded authority and unpack this relationship further.

The findings of this study are also timely and important in light of recent public protests and action regarding police violence against Black and marginalized communities across North America (Jacobs et al., 2020; Wolfe & McLean, 2021). It is an opportune time to examine and unpack the role of police in society—to both reform and restrict the ways in which they wield their authority, as well as examine our reliance on the institution of policing and emphasis on

procedural justice. Our findings provide insights on the importance of the expression of police authority in the community for young people and reinforce the need for clarity around police authority and greater accountability. However, some scholars suggest that focusing on procedural justice is a "double edge sword" (MacCoun, 2005)—focusing on procedural justice and bounded authority may only normalize the role of policing in society and detract from larger structural changes such as legal reform (Thacher, 2019). The infrastructure of dealing with social issues, such as homelessness, loitering, and drug use, may be symptoms of a "bloated criminal code" in which procedural justice and legitimacy are used to make policing practices more palatable (Goldstein, 2015). Alternatively, seeking solutions such as legal reforms that move away from oppressive policing systems may be required to shift away from a reliance on policing, and to instead build new relationships and invest in community-based responses (Jacobs et al., 2020; Thacher, 2019).

Limitations and Future Research

The aim of this exploratory study was to examine experiences and views of police authority through the lens of young PWUD. Other research has shown that PWUD experience inequities due to intersecting social identities beyond their drug-using status, including homelessness, gender, race, and Indigeneity (Card et al., 2021; Dhillon, 2015; Greer et al., 2021; Maher, 2004; Marshall, 2015; Pan et al., 2013). In the current study, we cannot meaningfully comment on significant differences across all these groups, although we did consider the role of intersectional vulnerabilities in the analysis and commented on these social identities where they were observed and relevant. Understanding the influence of intersectional identities on views and experiences of policing among young PWUD is an important area of future research, particularly among Indigenous and other racialized groups (Alberton et al., 2019). This may be especially the case in British Columbia where 80% of young Indigenous PWUD have been previously detained by police (Spittal et al., 2007). Studying the perspectives on police authority among young Indigenous PWUD is critical to appropriately address ongoing experiences of colonialized violence.

In this exploratory study, we also did not explicitly ask about police authority in the interviews. Rather, the observed patterns in the topics of authority and power were inductive. Considering that these topics were not explicitly probed, the emphasis on authority and power among participants may be indicative of its meaning or importance. The findings of this study are a good indication that it is important to ask young people specifically about their perceptions of police authority, including the uses and places in which police use it, in future research.

Finally, we are mindful of contextual differences. The current study was conducted in three non-metropolitan locations in British Columbia. Findings in other jurisdictions where policing is more lenient or targeted, or conversely where drug use is more criminalized, may elicit different findings. As well, in October 2018 cannabis was federally legalized in Canada for adults, thus after data collection. The policing of cannabis among young adults and underage youth in this sociolegal context may elicit different findings than those reported here—this too is an area for future research.

Conclusion

Overall, the views toward police and their legitimacy among young PWUD seems to be influenced by the expression of police authority and power during their encounters. Our findings indicate that excessive police authority and power is an important feature of encounters with police that shape young PWUDs' perceptions of them. The current findings add to deliberations about the ongoing tenuous relations between groups of PWUD and police that may be attributed to power imbalances and harms experienced by them (Shane, 2020). To promote better relationships in the future, governments and policing agencies may need to place harder bounds on police authority, including use of physical

force, and promote accountability over police authority. A pressing need remains for interventions and actions that help communities actively resist, challenge, and reform institutions that allow police power abuses. Regular solicitation of feedback from citizens, including young PWUD, in research and other venues will further promote police accountability and greater empowerment for the community.

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Author Contributions

A.G., M.S., and B.P. contributed to the study design and led the study analyses. TM.W. contributed to the analysis and theoretical framing of the article. S.M. was the study principal investigator. All authors contributed to the data interpretation and writing of the manuscript.

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