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Understanding Youth Assaults of Police Officers in Australia: A Power Threat Meaning Framework Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study explores youth violence towards police officers in Australia through the Power Threat Meaning Framework (PTMF) to better understand the underlying factors contributing to such violence; focusing on power dynamics, childhood adversity, and trauma. It examines power dynamics in past and present circumstances and the function of violent behaviours in these encounters. To do this, a content analysis was conducted using court findings and coroner reports of all Australian cases where a person aged 12–24 was found guilty of assaulting a police officer between 2010 and 2023, yielding 40 cases. Six key themes were examined: *Power, Threat, Meaning, Exacerbating Factors,* and *Threat Responses and Functions of Threat Responses*. The findings show that young people who assaulted police had substantial disempowerment across the life course, with disrupted attachments, childhood maltreatment, institutional mistrust, and social disadvantage. In the sample, violence predominantly functioned to reclaim a sense of control and power in situations when the young person was confined, unsafe, or disempowered. It is recommended that the pathway to safer interactions between youth and police requires awareness training and policy responses that understand the underlying factors and power imbalance that contribute to and exacerbate negative relations between police officers and young people.

Youth violence is a prominent issue in Australia, drawing media attention and political focus, evidenced by the recent Inquiry into Youth Justice Reform in Queensland Parliament (2023). Over the past two decades, youth crime in Australia has generally declined, with national statistics indicating that the number of young people involved in crime decreased by approximately 19% between 2008 and 2018, particularly in relation to one-off and low-to-moderate offending (McCarthy 2021). However, a smaller subset of chronic youth offenders—defined as those committing ten or more offences annually—has increased by 46% over the same period (McCarthy 2021). While this group remains a minority of young people, they are more likely to engage in serious or violent offences, contributing to concerns about crimes against the person. Thus, while overall youth crime has declined, the persistence of violent offending among a subset of repeat offenders complicates the broader narrative of this decline. Youth violence is a complex phenomenon shaped by multifaceted social, psychological, and structural factors (Blakemore et al. 2018; Rak and Warton 2023). While extant literature has focused on youth violence in general, incidents of youth violence towards police remain largely unexplored in empirical literature.

1 | Assaults on Police

Youth violence towards police can result in physical injuries, psychological trauma, and heightened stress for officers, which can lead to distress, decreased job satisfaction, and heightened

vulnerability (Hine and Davenport-Klunder 2024). For the young person, there can be legal consequences, including criminal charges and incarceration (Queensland Sentencing Advisory Council [QSAC] 2021), with the Northern Territory and Western Australia having minimum penalties for persons aged 16–17 found guilty of assaulting an officer. Such punitive measures sit at odds with the broader support for developmental-informed and rights-based rehabilitative strategies (Malvaso et al. 2024).

Australian studies of police assaults have primarily concerned adult perpetrators (den Heyer 2023), with research indicating that between 22% and 31% of police fatalities were due to an assault on an officer (Hine and Carey 2021). Predictive indicators include younger males who are often intoxicated (den Heyer 2023; Johnson 2011). The seminal work of Alders and colleagues (1992) is the only empirical study to distinguish between youths and adults. They found that 98% of officers reported harassment or assault (mostly verbal) by young people, with 52% experiencing physical hitting, 40% kicking, 30% object throwing and 18% weapon use (Alder et al. 1992). In Queensland, between 2009 and 2019, 528 young people were penalised for assaulting a police officer, including 118 involving bodily fluids, 55 causing bodily harm to the officer, and 30 involving weapons (QSAC 2021). The youngest person to assault an officer was 10 years old. Young people accounted for 10% ($n = 15$) of serious assaults on police and 8.5% ($n = 15$) of serious assaults on watch house officers (QSAC 2021).

Australian officers tend to perceive interactions with youths as hostile and adversarial (Richards et al. 2019) and connect youth hostility and violence to a lack of respect for authority figures and poor police legitimacy (Dawes et al. 2019; Richards 2020; Richards et al. 2019). Officers have attributed the rise in violence to an erosion in confidence in police (Dawes et al. 2019). The Western Australia Police Union 'WAPU' (2024) suggested that the recent rise in youth violence against police is due to underfunding and the undervaluing of policework, leading to a lack of police integration in education and youth institutions (Western Australian Police Union [WAPU] 2024). Although Richards (2020) proposed that officers' understandings of why youth crime occurs lacked recognition of the sociopolitical and structural factors noted in scholarship.

2 | Youth Violence and Offending

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) defines a young person as 12–24 years old (AIHW 2023). Current Australian policies are predominantly based on adult male profiles and do not reflect the unique developmental, psychological, and social factors influencing youth behaviour (Rak and Warton 2023). Distinguishing youth from adult criminal behaviour acknowledges the impact of neurophysiological maturation in decision-making. Developmental processes are impacted by economic, social and relational adversities (Johnstone and Boyle 2018; Malvaso et al. 2022). There is a correlation between childhood adversity and criminal behaviour, evidenced by the substantial proportion of young people with child protection involvement going into the justice system (Baidawi et al. 2024; Malvaso et al. 2024). Globally, there is an over-representation of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable young people in the justice system, including First Nations or ethnic minorities, youths with disabilities, and youths with low socioeconomic status backgrounds (van den Brink 2024), reflecting deeper sociopolitical and cultural inequalities that affect judicial processes and interactions with authority figures.

Studies into violent youth offending have identified several risk factors, including traumatic experiences and adverse childhood experiences ([ACE] Malvaso et al. 2022; Peltonen et al. 2020), with young people repeating cycles of violence from their histories of victimisation and familial relationships (Baidawi et al. 2024). Moriarty et al. (2024) highlighted that child protection history was a substantial risk indicator for violent youth offending, with evidence that frequent youth justice contact and sensitivity to anger also contributed. Papalia and colleagues (2014) noted that intoxication and substance use were the strongest markers of youth violent offending.

Australian researchers have suggested that young people use violence as a method of communicating and connecting, a way to equalise power imbalances, fulfil needs, and form social bonds (Blakemore et al. 2018). Rak and Warton (2023) argued that youth violence, or readiness to use violence, is a way of legitimising or proving social identities and group positionality/hierarchy. The function of violence can be individualistic, such as relieving frustration, or broader social/group functions, such as attaining social status, proving masculinity, or honour-based identity (Gallagher et al. 2023). One way to explore youth violence is through the Power Threat Meaning Framework (PTMF). The PTMF considers the meaning and underlying factors that contribute to distress and violent behaviour, particularly in the context of power dynamics, the role of past trauma and adversity, and as a response to perceived threats to autonomy and sense of control.

3 | Power Threat Meaning Framework (PTMF)

This study draws on the PTMF to understand violence and problematic behaviour in young people towards police. This novel approach reframes violence as a survival strategy, which has functioned to keep the individual safe. The PTMF was initially developed to understand mental distress and symptomology but is increasingly being applied to incarcerated and forensic populations (Reis et al. 2019; Gallagher et al. 2023). In forensic contexts, the PTMF offers a holistic perspective of behaviour as functional, driven by historical and current circumstances, cultural and individual belief systems, and bodily reactions and capabilities (Johnstone and Boyle 2018). Human beings have core needs, including safety, security, and autonomy (Johnstone and Boyle 2018). Threats occur when power is exerted over one's core needs; they link early adverse experiences, such as childhood maltreatment and trauma, with present environmental conditions, such as hostile incarceration contexts (Reis et al. 2019). Violence is a learned coping strategy and survival mechanism for many criminalised persons, where cycles of violence and victimisation are omnipresent (Gallagher et al. 2023). The PTMF has yet to be applied to violence against police officers. However, given

the strong relationship between youth crime and childhood maltreatment, trauma, and statutory intervention (Baidawi et al. 2024; Malvaso et al. 2022), this framework may provide a unique insight into the function and meaning of youth violence against police.

The PTMF has four central components (Johnstone and Boyle 2018). These include

1. Power: *negative operation of power:* systemic and interpersonal power dynamics, which have impacted the individual's life and the situation that arises. This understanding of power includes physical, legal, economic, sociopolitical, cultural, interpersonal, coercive, structural and ideological (Paradiso and Quinlan 2021). Thus, microlevel experiences of abuse and trauma and macro-level systemic issues of oppression, injustice and inequity.
2. Threat: *threat(s) posed by power:* explicit or subtle exertion of power over the individual's experiences can trigger the sympathetic nervous system as a perceived threat to the individual's wellbeing, safety or autonomy.
3. Meaning: *subjective meaning of experiences:* the internal and broader cultural narratives endeavouring to make sense of their experiences.
4. Threat: *functional threat responses:* behaviours and reactions to restore safety and control, often adapted from survival mechanisms and learnt behaviours (Johnstone, 2018).

The PMTF offers a deeper understanding of these incidents, including underlying psychological and social factors that contribute to these incidents.

4 | The Current Study

The current study aims to evaluate the applicability of the PTMF in understanding youth violence against police in Australia. As the PTMF is a relatively new framework, its application to violence and criminal justice issues is still emerging. The study uses court findings and coroners' reports to explore elements of the PTMF and examines factors that contribute to youth assaults on police. Through this analysis, the study aims to assess the potential of the PTMF as a tool to provide insights that can inform the development of more effective, trauma-informed prevention strategies and improve police–community relations, thereby improving both police and community outcomes.

5 | Methods

This study aims to evaluate the applicability of the PTMF in understanding the underlying and circumstantial factors contributing to youth violence against police in Australia. Specifically, the study seeks to determine how power dynamics, childhood adversity, and trauma influence violent behaviour during police encounters and asks, (a) can the PTMF effectively describe the patterns and motivations behind youth assaults on police, and (b) what insights can the PTMF provide that can be used to develop more effective prevention strategies and improve police–community relations?

5.1 | Data Sources

Publicly available coroners' reports and court findings for all Australian states and territories were utilised. The court findings were sourced using the Westlaw database. They have been subject to rigorous legal scrutiny, enhancing their credibility and making them an accurate and reliable source for this study (Christensen and Tsagaris 2020). Databases were searched for all cases between 1 January 2010[1] and 31 December 2023, using the terms 'assault' and 'police'[2]. This search yielded 4263 cases.

5.2 | Sample Selection

Each of the 4263 cases was then screened for relevance. The initial search results were screened for relevance by at least two members of the research team. To ensure accuracy and reliability, all cases were independently reviewed with any discrepancies discussed and resolved through consensus. Cases were included if a determination of guilt was made for assaulting a police officer and the assault was committed by someone between the ages of 12 and 24. After screening, the sample totalled 40 cases, including 39 court findings and one coroner's report, with each report serving as the unit of analysis. The sample included cases from 2012 to 2023; Table 1 provides an overview of the sample's demographics and case characteristics. For quality assurance, a data codebook was developed to define and explain the intent of each variable, and all cases were reviewed by at least two research team members. Any discrepancies in coding were discussed and resolved, resulting in 100% agreement.

5.3 | Data Coding and Analysis

Content analysis was conducted in NVivo and focused on judicial and sentencing remarks in a verbatim format. Content analysis incorporates both quantitative (e.g., frequency counts of specific terms or themes) and qualitative (e.g., understanding the context and meanings behind the text) analyses, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the data (Drisko and Maschi 2015; Lattas and Davis 2023). Coding was informed by Gallagher et al., (2023) work; the documents were searched using the themes and subthemes in the Prisoner Interview Codebook. Gallagher and colleagues' existing themes were applied to our data, but the 'moderating factors' theme was adapted as 'ameliorating' factors were not evident in the data. Therefore, 'exacerbating factors' was used as a standalone theme rather than 'moderating factors'. Thus, we identified six themes and 20 subthemes:

1. Power
2. Threat
3. Meaning
4. Exacerbating Factors
5. Threat Response
6. Function of Threat Response

TABLE 1 | Sample demographics and case characteristics.

	Percentage	Number
Gender		
Male	85.0%	34
Female	15.0%	6
Age		
Range	13–24 years old	
10–17	17.5%	7
18–24	82.5%	33
Ethnicity		
First Nations	37.5%	15
Caucasian	5.0%	2
Foreign nationality	2.5%	1
Not Stated	55.0%	22
Criminal history		
Yes	62.5%	25
No	37.5%	15
Criminal history with previous assault of police		
Yes	12.5%	5
No	82.5%	35
State/Territory		
Queensland	30.0%	12
New South Wales	27.5%	11
Northern Territory	12.5%	5
Australian Capital Territory	10.0%	4
South Australia	10.0%	4
Victoria	5.0%	2
Western Australia	5.0%	2
Assault Type		
Hitting/Kicking	45.0%	18
Biting/Spitting	20.0%	8
Weapon	15.0%	6
Scuffle	7.5%	3
Other	7.5%	3
Not Stated	7.5%	3
Injury to Officer		
Physical injury	32.5%	13
Fatal injury	2.5%	1
No injury sustained	30.0%	12
Not stated	35.0%	14
Psychological Injury to Officer		
Psychological injury	22.5%	9
No psychological injury sustained	50.0%	20
Not stated	27.5%	11

See Table 2 for the final themes and subthemes used. Definitions of themes and subthemes were written by the authors for cohesive coding, and all coding was identified by the research team. Random samples (12.5% of all cases) were blind double-coded by a member of the research team for quality assurance purposes.

6 | Results

Table 3 includes a summary of content analysis findings in themes and subthemes. These are reported in greater detail below.

6.1 | Power

Experiences of powerlessness and trauma were prevalent across the sample, with 92.5% ($n=37$) of the cases represented under the power theme, including interpersonal, social and cultural capital, economic, biological and legal power. *Interpersonal power* was primarily reflected in the strained and problematic familial relationships, with 50% ($n=20$) noting disrupted relationships between young people and caregivers/parents. This included parental death, statutory intervention, divorce/separation, domestic violence, abandonment, authoritarian disciplinary practices and parental substance dependency. The complexity of these situations is exemplified below, where grief, trauma, strained relationships and resentment are entwined.

> R v Michael: 'His father was violent towards his mother and the applicant believes that his violence contributed in some way to his mother's death. The applicant feels resentment towards his father'

In the court transcripts, young people characterised their home lives as 'unsettled', 'disrupted', and 'traumatising', with prolific exposure to violence, conflict, abuse, and lack of safety. For 10% ($n=4$) of cases, this was *legal power*, as their trauma and abuse occurred in statutory care. One noted resentment towards authorities because statutory care was worse than their family of origin. *Legal power* featured in 30% ($n=12$) of cases, including prolonged incarceration, witnessing violence, instability in living arrangements, and physical and sexual violence from statutory guardians. Institutionalisation from custodial settings and psychiatric hospitals was noted in 17.5% ($n=7$) of cases, with incarceration beginning as young as age 11. In one case, institutionalisation impacted a young Aboriginal man's social, emotional, cultural and spiritual wellbeing.

TABLE 2 | Themes, subthemes and definitions.

Domains and Themes		
Themes	**Subthemes**	**Definition**
Power *The negative operation of power in an individual's life*	Interpersonal power	Power dynamics in microlevel relationships, particularly with family, peers and community members.
	Economic and material power	Wealth and fiscal resources and its impact on social well-being.
	Social and cultural capital	The ability to access or actualise resources, opportunities, and societal power.
	Biological power	The biological, social, institutional, and cultural factors in shaping experiences of disability, particularly how differences are interpreted, pathologised, and used to justify inequality.
	Legal power	The exercising of legal power over someone and the experience of systemic injustice or abuse from legal administrators.
Threat *The situation and contextual factors of perceived threat in youth–police interaction, recognising the complex interplay between power exercised by police and experiences of disempowerment and threats perceived by young people*	Relational	The impact of power on the young person's ability to form relationships.
	Environmental	The safety, danger, and control dynamics of the situational context of police–youth interactions.
	Bodily	The use of physicality to restrain or reduce freedom to move or leave, and its impact on autonomy, control, and sense of threat.
	Social	The sense of injustice at the police actions, decision-making or assertion of authority.
Meaning *The subjective meaning attributed to the violence.*	Meaninglessness	The violent actions were noted as not remembered or were a product of substance misuse.
	Identifying the positives	The expressions of the young person's remorse, insight or personal growth related to the assault.
Exacerbating Factors *Moderating factors which influence or intensify the violent behaviour*	Substance misuse	The identification of intoxication with illicit and nonillicit substances, and/or problematic relationship with usage.
	Adverse childhood experiences	Occurrences of maltreatment and potentially traumatic incidents in childhood.
Threat Responses *Survival strategies designed to protect the individual from perceived threats.*	Behavioural responses	The actions and responses that youth exhibit when faced with threats.
	Psychological or thought responses	Cognitive processes and mental states that influence how youth perceive and respond to threats.
	Feeling responses	Dysregulation and emotional patterns when faced with threats.
Function of Threat Response *The function the threat response serves to the individual*	Stop unwanted behaviours	Use of violence to avoid or deter anticipated physical harm or control from police.
	Protection from perceived danger	Violence is used as a means of protecting oneself.
	Maintaining a sense of control	Using violence to maintain individual power and reestablish control in a situation or relationship.
	Upholding social or personal identity	Using violence to assert one's role or preserve social narratives related to identity

TABLE 3 | Content analysis results.

Themes	Percentage	No	Subthemes	Percentage	No.
Power	92.5%	37	Interpersonal power	50%	20
			Economic and material power	37.5%	15
			Social and cultural capital	35%	14
			Biological power	27.5%	11
			Legal power	30%	12
Threat	92.5%	37	Relational	35%	14
			Environmental	57.5%	23
			Bodily	57.5%	23
			Social	25%	10
Meaning	40%	16	Meaninglessness	22.5%	9
			Identifying the positives	35%	14
Exacerbating Factors	85%	34	Substance misuse	72.5%	29
			Adverse childhood experiences	45%	18
Threat Responses	92.5%	37	Behavioural responses	82.5%	33
			Psychological or thought responses	37.5%	15
			Feeling responses	30%	12
Function of Threat Response	82.5%	33	Stop unwanted behaviours	50%	20
			Protection from perceived danger	25%	10
			Maintaining a sense of control	30%	12
			Upholding social or personal identity	17.5	7

> Flentjar v The King: 'The applicant is an indigenous man who has been unable to engage in his culture because "most of his short life [has] been spent in custody... He spent most of his teens in and out of juvenile detention. He is institutionalised. He has rarely attended school and when he did, he struggled academically. There was an indication the applicant cannot read or write. He has never worked".'

Experiences of *social and cultural capital* and *material power* were inferred from discussions of educational disengagement (35%, $n = 14$), with institutional rejection and exclusion evidenced by suspensions/expulsions. Five young people were illiterate, and judicial concerns over their ability to understand and participate in legal proceedings (*social and cultural capital*) were noted. Educational disengagement also represented *material power* through the inability to obtain work and financial stability outside welfare payments. *Economic and material power* (37.5%, $n = 15$) was observed in their childhoods, represented by homelessness or transiency, impoverished conditions, or low socioeconomic status. In 27.5% ($n = 11$) of cases, educational difficulties were observed as *biological power*, with young people having cognitive or physical disabilities. The legal representatives in cases often linked neurodevelopmental and health-related conditions to academic underperformance and social integration. Six cases noted struggles in forming and maintaining peer relationships; this can be linked to *interpersonal power* when the young person experienced victimisation, bullying, and fighting with peers. Overall, the sample experienced substantial disadvantage and vulnerability, powerlessness, displacement, and trauma.

6.2 | Threat

The above experiences of powerlessness may prompt threats to agency, wellbeing, and safety. *Relational threats* were evident in 35% ($n = 14$) of cases, six of these related to caregiver bereavement and abandonment, identified as unresolved grief, and manifested in anger and aggressive emotions. The instability of housing and caregivers can be understood as a disruption in their attachments, meaning systems and an inability to establish safe and secure relationships. Six cases included an early introduction to substances by family members, which is both a *bodily* and *relational threat* as it reflects caregiver violence and the lack of safety in familial relationships. Institutional neglect, inadequate care and systemic failures contributed to the young people's problematic relationships with authority figures, including police, security guards, employers, educators, custodial staff and emergency workers.

> BEAA v Western Australia: 'using a machete to threaten a security officer at a shopping centre after the security officer had required him to clean the floor when he had knocked a bucket over and spilled its contents on the floor in the shopping centre'

> R v Blackburn (No 1): 'He was assaulted by his parents and experienced child sexual assault in afterschool care'

Material threats were observed from the young person's limited financial independence and employment opportunities, with crime being a method to gain finances and sustain substance dependency. Some cases cited feelings of rejection and a lack of belonging, which drove negative peer associations. Six young people were observed recreating cycles of violence in their current intimate and family relationships, with the young person as either perpetrator or victim.

> DP v Rigby: 'His grandmother asked him why he was not at school and told him that she was not going to give him any money. The appellant swore at his grandmother and aunty saying, "Mother ****. **** you mob. You are not my family." Then he walked away. He returned about half an hour later, again asked for money, and again swore at his grandmother. He picked up stones and threw them at his grandmother'.

In these court documents, *material threats* were observed when he is denied requests for food or money; these can be understood as *emotional threats* related to his parent's death and abandonment, and feelings of rejection and not belonging. Twelve (30%) young people cited feelings of low self-worth and being overwhelmed with negative feelings of suicidality; this can be understood as *emotional threats*. Additionally, anxiety and hypervigilance were associated with chronic instability, exposure to threats, violence, and unsafety from *environmental threats*.

Analysis of the youth–police interaction offers insights into how threats manifest in specific situations and interactions. *Environmental threats* relate to unsafe, hostile or dangerous circumstances. Over half (57.5%, $n = 23$) of the assaults occurred in unsafe contexts, including police pursuit (25%, $n = 10$), group violence (17.5%, $n = 7$) and interpersonal or intimate partner violence (15%, $n = 6$). Across these scenarios, there is heightened danger and associated stress, which creates *bodily threats* linked to hyper nervous system arousal. This is exacerbated by threats to *identity* and *social* identity in group contexts or the presence of bystanders (45% $n = 18$). Five cases were observed as having *social threats* with a sense of injustice related to police actions, including unfair detention, unreasonable directions and misuse of power. The sample did not include excessive use of force and violence by police.

Bodily threats were seen in 57.5% ($n = 23$) of cases, mainly through a loss of function and threats to freedom and autonomy. Nearly half (42.5%, $n = 17$) of the assaults occurred during the arrest, specifically during handcuffing and entering the police vehicles, and 32.5% ($n = 13$) occurred during detention at the police station or watchhouse. The role of *bodily threats*, physical restraint or confinement can be seen in the cases below.

> DP v Rigby:

> 'They told him he was under arrest for breaching his bail conditions. One officer held him by each elbow. The appellant resisted. ... The appellant kicked two of the civilians and head-butted the other one. Eventually they got the appellant into the police vehicle, and took him to the Watch house cells. While he was in the cells he was kicking the glass Perspex door, yelling and screaming'.

Threats entwine, such as *environmental* and *social threats* as illustrated below. This *social threat* is rooted in the collective trauma and community victimisation of the Aboriginal community, creating a shared sense of injustice and driving the young person's behaviour.

> Ebatarinja v Dunne:

> 'Approximately 20 people reappeared and approached police. Another person smashed a front window of the police vehicle. The officers then released BE as they were in fear of their safety. They began calling for backup and commenced retreating from the police vehicle as people at the Larapinta Valley Camp were throwing rocks at them'.

6.3 | Meaning

Meaning is understood as sense-making processes in these situations. In this dataset, there is little inclusion of young people's perception of the assault in the sample. *Meaninglessness* was observed in nine (22.5%) cases where the young person referred to violence as a product of substance misuse and not in the conscious memory. For example, one person noted delusional thinking and perceiving their actions as within a game, and thus, without human harm. Two cases stated that violence was unintended, as they mistook the officer for a civilian. In both cases, the young person was in a heightened state and substance affected. In four cases, the young person rejected the police's representation of their mannerisms or affect, suggesting that they were less agitated or aggressive than presented in police facts.

Fourteen (35%) cases recorded youth remorse, *identifying the positives* from the violence. These included feelings of shame, disappointment, disgust and embarrassment for actions and harm caused. Remorse was evidenced through repentant actions towards the victims, such as a letter of apology or acceptance of wrongdoing. Positive outcomes included rehabilitation

actions, insight, or personal growth; R v Ridden states, 'her conscience had returned'. However, remorse must be contextualised within judicial proceedings; remorse is used to signify rehabilitation potential and as a mitigating factor in sentencing, release decisions, and plea negotiations.

6.4 | Exacerbating Factors

Exacerbating factors are elements or circumstances that can intensify or worsen the experience of distress or violence, offering further insights into contributing environmental and circumstantial factors. Aligning with the previous research about adverse childhood experiences (ACE) and criminality, ACEs were common in the sample (45%, $n = 18$), including neglect and physical and sexual abuse. Additionally, the sample had high rates of alcohol and drug misuse; this included being substance-affected at the time of the police assault and wider addiction issues. The sample included 72.5% ($n = 29$) substance-affected at the time of the assault, with

- 35% ($n = 14$) affected by nonillicit substance use, such as alcohol,
- 27% ($n = 11$) affected by illicit substance use, such as methamphetamine,
- 10% ($n = 4$) affected by both illicit and nonillicit substances.

Further, 65% ($n = 19$) of the young people in the sample characterised their usage as addicted or dependent. Many court transcripts included details of their early introduction to substances by family members or caregivers, often between the ages of 10 and 13. For example, in one case, the young person was introduced to drugs by their family at age 11.

> Flentjar v The King: 'Family members introduced the applicant to drugs when he was 11'.

Many young people cited a lack of control around substance use, with an escalation in usage or drug type, such as moving from alcohol or cannabis to methamphetamines and increasing to daily or excessive use. Substance misuse was linked to emotional, relational, and interpersonal threats, including bereavement, loss, and trauma—as demonstrated in the case below.

> R v NQ: 'She reported commencing cannabis use between the age of 10 and 12. She commenced using methamphetamine when she was 14... At the time of the offences she was 17 years old. She is of Aboriginal descent. She had early involvement with New South Wales child welfare authorities due to her parents' substance dependency issues. She was made a ward of the State of New South Wales at the age of three. She described a traumatic childhood due to frequent placements in out-of-home care and no contact with her biological family. She described physical and sexual abuse during this time'.

6.5 | Threat Response

Threat responses are ways in which a person has survived the above experiences. Threat responses were reported through pathology, with nearly half (47.5%, $n = 19$) reporting signs of distress or mental health labels. Across the sample, 14 different diagnostic labels were used, with some young people having up to five diagnoses. *Psychological or thought threat responses* included paranoia, delusional thinking, psychosis and hallucinations. *Feeling threat responses* included emotional dysregulation and uncontrolled rage or anger, with several accompanied by *behavioural threat responses* of self-injury, suicidality and self-medication.

> R v Roberts: 'the applicant attempted to hang himself in prison and was transferred to hospital. He was returned to prison the following day and went on a hunger strike for about a week. ... he was admitted to another hospital. He attempted to strangle himself, he swallowed batteries, and he swallowed razor blades on another occasion. Following the attempted suicide by a fellow inmate, the applicant was admitted to hospital for self-harm, and he was subsequently admitted again for a heart attack'.

During the assault interaction, 82.5% ($n = 33$) of cases were observed as having a behavioural threat response, including violence, threat, flight, and resistance. Given the sample's inclusion criteria, violence and aggression were evidenced in every case, but the immediate fight reactions and use of violence upon police arrival were 17.5% ($n = 7$).

> Elwood v The King:
>
> The police officers announced themselves, in response to which the applicant said, 'I'm going to **** kill you' and threw a brick in their direction. He then picked up another heavy object, prompting one of the officers to get back into the passenger seat of their vehicle and use the radio to call for backup.

While 70% ($n = 28$) of assaults occurred during an exchange of dialogue between a young person and an officer, seven (17.5%) cases included flight responses where the young person attempted to avoid arrest, functioning to escape perceived danger or avoid confrontation. A police pursuit typically followed the flight response, increasing perceived threat and stress, and subsequent violence is a defensive reaction aimed at protecting oneself from perceived harm or asserting control in a high-stress situation.

> Campbell v The Queen: 'The offender took further flight on foot before attempting to hide in a construction site into which he was followed by pursuing police. In a futile attempt to avoid arrest he thrust his right hand down the front of his trousers

> screaming at police "I have a gun, I have a gun, I'm going to shoot"'.

Several young people resisted police by ignoring verbal commands, running away and not complying with directions, such as refusing to pour away alcoholic beverages and complying with move-on orders. These can be understood as *behavioural threat responses*, where oppositional and defiant behaviour is the response to stress.

6.6 | Function of Threat Response

The function of threat responses was namely observed as *maintaining a sense of control* and protecting *the young person from perceived danger*. In 50% ($n = 20$) of cases, evasion is the evident motivation for violence, seeking to *stop unwanted behaviour* (apprehension by police). One case noted the young person had claustrophobia; the violence was a reaction to being forced into a fearful position. Additionally, two cases included delusional and paranoid thinking about corruption and persecution, with strong beliefs about police/government corruption and their own imminent danger. While oppositionality was used to gain control or power in a situation, often by demeaning or humiliating the officer, this primarily included bodily fluids, spitting, urinating, or intentional coughing. Similarly, twelve (30%) cases included threats of violence that functioned primarily to exert power over the officer and regain control and autonomy.

> R v Winters: 'After the interview, the Offender was put in a custody cell and he became aggressive and agitated and he wanted to make an additional phone call. He began kicking at the cell door, he said to the police: "You **** try to come in here and I'll kick your **** heads in. You should've just given me my phone call. Now I'm going to rush you **** if you come in here"'.

Threats predominantly involved verbal gender-based violence, with threats of sexual violence against the officer or their female relatives to assert dominance. Other threats included brandishing weapons, death threats, and physical violence. Seven (17.5%) cases were motivated by perceived defence of self, family, friends or partner, and *functioned to preserve social and individual identities*, such as the protective boyfriend or loyal friend.

> CI v Heath: 'The officer crouched down over the girl while attempting to control her. As he was doing so, and while he was fully occupied in the process, the appellant, who was nearby and had been consuming alcohol, ran past the officer at speed and punched him to the left side of his head'

7 | Discussion

This study explored the applicability of the PTMF in understanding the complex factors contributing to youth violence against police in Australia. This is the first study to explore youth assaults on policing using a novel perspective that reframes violent behaviour as functional survival responses to perceived threats and power imbalances. This approach provides valuable insights that could inform more effective, trauma-informed interventions and policy decisions. The research also provides practical insights for policing strategies, youth justice policies and community interventions, potentially leading to improved outcomes for police and vulnerable youth populations.

The results indicate that powerlessness is a central theme in the lives of young people who engage in violence against police. The majority of our sample experienced substantial interpersonal, legal and social imbalances, often stemming from disrupted familial relationships, exposure to violence and institutional failures. These experiences are compounded by systemic inequalities with reduced social and economic opportunities. These findings reflect broader research about youth crime, with high rates of social and economic disadvantage, parental incarceration, exposure to domestic and family violence, neuropsychological impairments, childhood maltreatment and substance dependency (Baidawi et al. 2024; Malvaso et al. 2024; Malvaso et al. 2022). The sample aligned with the extant literature on risk factors for youth violence, with high rates of intoxication and substance use (Papalia et al. 2014), child protection involvement (Moriarty et al. 2024), ACEs (Malvaso et al. 2022) and previous trauma (Peltonen et al. 2020). The PTMF's focus on the negative operation of power provides a valuable framework for understanding how these factors contribute to violent behaviour during police encounters. Similar to Blakemore et al. (2018, 64), where young people see violence as a means of 'being seen and heard', it voices their inexpressible emotional turmoil and allows them to redistribute power. Our findings suggest that for many young people, violence may be a way to reclaim a sense of control in situations where they feel threatened or powerless. This is particularly evident in the cases where physical restraint or confinement by police triggered intense, often aggressive responses.

The perception of threat, as outlined in the PTMF, plays a significant role in youth–police interactions. The study found that these perceived threats are multifaceted, encompassing relational, environmental, bodily and social dimensions. Environmental threats indicate high emotional arousal and aggression; the findings align with research that suggests that people displaying violent behaviour as part of another incident are at an increased risk to the attending officers (Bierie 2017). Early exposure to trauma, violence and ACEs can increase susceptibility to perceived threats and adversely impact emotional regulation skills which manage high-intensity interactions, such as police encounters (Mehari et al. 2021). Childhood trauma is strongly associated with behavioural problems and youth violent offending (Malvaso et al. 2022). ACEs and trauma can increase the young person's externalisation of behavioural problems, causing a greater risk for conflictual, adversarial, and aggressive interactions (Malvaso et al. 2022). This study highlighted the risk of violence towards officers when environmental threats (active danger/violence) and bodily threats (ground stabilisation) are employed, which emphasises the role triggering

hyper nervous system arousal and emotional dysregulation play in these encounters.

ACEs correlate strongly with distress experiences and are recognised in the PTMF as formative and increase the risk of substance misuse, violence and criminal behaviour (Johnstone and Boyle 2018; Malvaso et al. 2022). Correspondingly, the sample saw high rates of substance misuse, affected by relational, economic and material threats. Substance use and intoxication at the time of the incident are known markers of violence (Papalia et al. 2014). In our sample, intoxication amplified threat response by lowering inhibition, impairing judgement, and increasing aggression, and as a response to emotional threat and being overwhelmed (self-medication). Several cases highlighted the intergenerational nature of substance misuse and ACEs, highlighting the role of social and environmental factors in perpetuating cycles of trauma, poverty and disadvantage, and contributing to the occurrence of youth violence against police officers.

The PTMF emphasises understanding the personal and cultural narratives that shape behaviour; while there was limited explicit discussion in our sample, subjective meanings are crucial to understanding this issue. Exploring youth crime as a group phenomenon highlights how masculinity affords status and group participation (Rice et al. 2024). This is exemplified by the young people's threats of sexual violence towards female officers and female family members. Power reflects gender-based violence, the expression of physical dominance, and sexual violence as a weapon against female officers and female family members. The violence serves to redistribute power (Blakemore et al. 2018). The young person attempts to reclaim power from a disempowered position. Additionally, masculinity was performed in cases where violence functions to protect social or group identity. Group dynamics influence youth violence, their motivation surrounding acceptance, belonging, strengthening social bonds, and validation of social identities (Baidawi et al. 2024; Blakemore et al. 2018; Rak and Warton 2023). As seen in Ebatarinja v Dunne, where violence operates beyond an individual level to have social and group meanings. The young person lives in a remote Aboriginal community; their violence is related to their role as brother/protector and induced by the collective violence towards authority figures. The collective violence is underpinned by current, historical, and symbolic racial inequity.

Overall, the study highlights the chronic negative operation of power in these young people's lives and fosters a sense of unsafety and adverse perceptions towards authority figures, entrenched by experiences of caregiver violence or failure to keep them safe. Feelings of betrayal by institutions contribute to a generalised mistrust of authority figures, including police officers. This sample aligns with PTMF pattern 3 '*Surviving disrupted attachments and adversities as a child/young person*' (Johnstone and Boyle 2018). The sample followed patterns of distrust, anxiety, impulsivity, emotional dysregulation, self-injury, disordered thinking and lack of safety.

Youth violence towards police occurs in a complex interplay of social, psychological, and structural factors. These findings highlight an inherent struggle for power and dominance in these encounters, with particular reference to those with a loss of freedom or function and experiences of vulnerability, unsafety or disempowerment, such as being arrested or in custody. The young people in this sample predominantly used violence to reclaim a sense of control. This is most evident in cases with oppositional behaviour and threats, which sought to disempower the officer through degradation or fear. There is an opportunity to explore police practices, including arresting or detaining and the alternatives, to consider trauma reactions and the risk of violence.

7.1 | Implications for Policy and Practice

Youth violence against police can cause physical and psychological harm to officers. Conversely, police have authoritative and power-over duties, such as making arrests, restrictive practices and personal searches which can trigger threat responses from distressed and traumatised persons (Gallagher et al. 2024). Previous PMTF research has highlighted the occupational risks involved with confining and restricting people with trauma backgrounds in prison environments (Gallagher et al. 2023). Embedding PTMF knowledge into such environments increases staff's recognition of the potential risks of re-traumatisation and promotes conversations about trauma-informed safety management (Nikopaschos et al. 2023).

Police are increasingly being used to manage a cohort with complex mental health and trauma needs (Demir et al. 2009). Many countries lack appropriate forensic youth mental health or early intervention programmes for young people in the child protection system (Malvaso et al. 2024; Rice et al. 2024). Holistic solutions to youth violence against police must balance the need for officer safety with the young person's vulnerabilities. Our findings support previous scholarship, which calls for developing trauma-informed and developmentally appropriate youth training in Australian policing (Green et al. 2020; Richards 2020). Strengthening officer familiarity and knowledge of developmental trauma, chronic stress, and childhood adversity can contextualise behaviour and prevent negative interactions which reduces the need for restrictive and control-based safety mechanisms. While PTMF is unproven in policing training, extant literature has shown that youth-specific training can help reduce the officer's hesitancy, anxiety, and fear related to engaging young people (Richards et al. 2019; Mehari et al. 2021).

This study is the first step in exploring the applicability of PTMF for police education or training. Police are increasingly being used to manage a cohort with complex mental health and trauma needs (Demir et al. 2009). Many countries lack appropriate forensic youth mental health or early intervention programmes for young people in the child protection system (Malvaso et al. 2024; Rice et al. 2024). Holistic solutions to youth violence against police must balance the need for officer safety with the young person's vulnerabilities. Our findings support previous scholarship, which calls for developing trauma-informed and developmentally appropriate youth training in Australian policing (Green et al. 2020; Richards 2020). Further, our findings highlight that PTMF can be used to identify situational power dynamics and their manifestation in face-to-face encounters. As an educational tool, it offers a framework which can be

embedded within organisational systems as a way of thinking about encounters, behaviours and interactions (Bodfield and Culshaw 2024). Creating a shared understanding of how past experiences play a role in current circumstances to create more effective de-escalation strategies and prevention tools. In forensic mental health, embedding PTMF into safety management has been linked to a reduction in self-harm and restrictive interventions (Nikopaschos et al. 2023). Acknowledging it can be used to balance immediate safety concerns while addressing psychosocial vulnerabilities.

The introduction of punitive approaches, such as mandatory minimum sentences for youth who assault police, may not address the root causes of the behaviour and could potentially exacerbate the problem (Baidawi et al. 2024). Early contact with the justice system entrenches criminalised identities and promotes, rather than deters, future offending and justice involvement (Malvaso et al. 2024). The findings support a focus on the structural factors that contribute to youth violence, including poverty, intergenerational trauma and inadequate mental health and social services. By strengthening partnerships between police and the social service sector, we can integrate the expertise of mental health professionals with police to develop trauma-informed and power-conscious youth response strategies.

8 | Limitations

This study has provided a valuable exploration into the individual and situational factors of youth assaults on police officers. However, the study was limited by its sample. Only cases found within the Westlaw database were used for this study and, therefore, do not represent all cases of youth violence towards police, particularly those that go unreported, those with guilty pleas, or confidential and suppressed cases, which are particularly prevalent in cases involving youths. As such, it is skewed towards 18–24-year-olds. In addition, the reliance on secondary data limits the ability to explore beyond what is documented in the reports. While these archival data have many merits (Christensen and Tsagaris 2020), it lacks the inclusion of the narrative and perspectives of young people. Future research should aim to explore youth violence towards police by using various data sources, including interviews, to gain a more comprehensive understanding. Despite these limitations, this study allowed for an in-depth examination of the topic using a reliable and authoritative data source.

9 | Conclusion

The findings presented in this study support the use of the PTMF to understand youth violence. It contributes to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of youth violence towards police officers, paving the way for more effective policies and practices that protect both police officers and vulnerable youth populations. It highlighted the role chronic adversity plays in this cohort, including social and economic disadvantage, domestic and family violence, ACEs, neuropsychological impairments, and substance dependency. It is essential to disrupt narratives that these encounters are purely an individual's act of aggression and consider the role structural factors play. Violence operates as a learned coping strategy used to survive adversity and danger for these disadvantaged young people. In police encounters, it functions to regain control and power during interactions with perceived threats. The PTMF promotes a view of the root causes of the behaviour, and the experiences of childhood adversity and trauma impact one's perception of authority, danger and threat. The pathway to improving youth-police relations involves developing trauma-informed and power-conscious youth response strategies. Further exploration is needed to understand the subjective meaning given to violence by young people to inform policy responses that balance the protection of officers with addressing the vulnerabilities of young people.

Author Contributions

Dimitra Lattas: writing – original draft, formal analysis, methodology, investigation, conceptualization. **Kelly Hine:** methodology, funding acquisition, writing – review and editing, formal analysis. **Catherine Creamer:** writing – review and editing, methodology, investigation, formal analysis. **Kelley Burton:** writing – review and editing, formal analysis. **Katelyn Davenport-Klunder:** project administration, writing – review and editing, data curation, formal analysis.

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Conflicts of Interest

The research team has no financial, personal, or professional conflicts of interest that could have influenced the work reported in this manuscript.

Endnotes

[1]2010 marks a pivotal moment in Australian policing in which less lethal force options were introduced into routine policing and there was shift towards more community-oriented policing approaches (Hine and Davenport-Klunder 2024).

[2]Boolean phrase was used: assault/s police, which produced any court findings with the words assault and police in the same sentence. Additional searchers were conducted using relevant acronyms such as 'law enforcement officer' and 'grievous bodily harm'. However, no additional cases were identified. This is likely due to these terms being rarely used in legal and public discourse in Australia (compared to jurisdictions like the US where such terminology is more prevalent. Consequently, 'police' and 'assault' remain the dominate terms in Australian case law and legal databases.

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