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Accepting the Challenge: Understanding Police Officers' Perceptions of a Community-Based, Youth Empowerment Program

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ABSTRACT

Some communities are choosing to implement programs that enable police and youth to engage with each other within voluntary and non-enforcement-related contexts, yet little is known about the impacts of such programs on officers. As part of a larger program evaluation, this study examines police officers' perceptions of participating in a community-based, youth empowerment program. In-depth interviews were conducted with eighteen police officers who participated in the Team Kids Challenge, a structured, voluntary, and community-driven program designed to empower youth to engage in community service in ways they find meaningful, while also exposing youth to working with police officers in a prosocial, non-enforcement context. Resoundingly, officers noted the (1) positive impact the program had on their opportunities to engage in prosocial interactions with youth, (2) improved relationships with children, and (3) an overall positive experience participating in the program. The paper draws implications for how agencies can work to improve their relationships with their communities when the communities so choose.

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Introduction

Stemming from the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014, and escalating through 2020 with the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, relationships between police officers and communities of color have become increasingly contentious. President Obama's Final Task Force Report on 21st Century Policing (2015) called for police officers and departments to "create opportunities in schools and communities for positive, non-enforcement interactions with police" (p. 15). Agencies heeded this call; with approximately 80% of departments in large cities utilizing community policing of some variation as of 2016, community-oriented policing programs have become a staple among many police departments across the country (Brooks et al., 2020). Simultaneously, many communities and community members

have chosen to participate in voluntary, non-enforcement-related programs with law enforcement.

Studies of community-oriented policing programs and practices have focused on crime (e.g., Crowl, 2017; Przeszlowski & Crichlow, 2018), the public's perceptions of crime and safety (e.g., Gill et al., 2014), and on youth participants (e.g., Fine et al., 2019, 2020a). What has been left relatively unexamined, however, is how programs implementing elements of community-oriented policing are perceived by the officers who participate in them. The present study explores police officers' perceptions of participating in the Team Kids Challenge program, a collaborative, youth-driven program aiming to empower youth to serve their community in ways they find meaningful. This qualitative study conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eighteen officers who either participated in or supervised others' participation in this program.

Community-oriented policing practices

Considering that serving the public is a fundamental role of law enforcement, Brown and Benedict (2002) aptly suggested that "police officers ought to be concerned about how they are viewed by the public, if for no other reason than preservation of their careers" (p. 545). In practice, building better relationships between police and their communities requires engaging in community-oriented policing (COP) programs and procedurally just practices. COP programs differ from traditional policing in three crucial ways (Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2012; Rosenbaum & Lurigio, 1994). First, COP emphasizes that both the community and their police share responsibility for crime reduction and public safety. As such, positive and supportive police-community relationships are crucial. Second, COP proffers the strategy of identifying specific issues that are negatively affecting the community and creating tailored plans to both resolve those issues and proactively prevent similar problems in the future. Third, counter to traditional policing strategies, COP encourages the use of officer discretion when addressing community problems, which allows for adaptive solutions based on the specific context the problem exists within (Goldstein, 1987; Greene, 2000). Altogether, COP enables police to not only enforce the law, but to serve as community problem-solvers and peacekeepers, largely propelled by strong, positive relationships with the community (Bittner, 1990; Gill et al., 2014; Goldstein, 1987).

Police officers and their role in COP programs have traditionally been examined from the perspective of the citizens with whom they interact (Ong & Jenks, 2004; Prine et al., 2001; Reisig & Giacomazzi, 1998). Considering the effectiveness of COP initiatives rests on the ability of "winning the hearts and minds of police officers" (Lurigio & Skogan, 1994, p. 315), it is imperative to examine the impact of such programs on the officers who participate in them. The failure to do so effectively neglects to consider one-half of those involved in fostering better police-community relationships. Though studies have increasingly examined police officers' perceptions of COP practices (Glaser & Denhardt, 2010; Uluturk et al., 2017), little is known about their perceptions of other types of community engagement programs.

Allowing law enforcement officers to solve traditional problems in new and innovative ways gives police officers more autonomy and creativity in their decision-making

process. As a result, research generally indicates that police view COP programs positively in terms of job satisfaction and motivation (Rosenbaum & Lurigio, 1994; Wycoff & Skogan, 1994). Considering the current contentious climate, finding ways to improve job satisfaction and the overall working environments of police officers is critical to improving community relationships between the police and the communities they serve.

Numerous COP programs are implemented throughout the country, many with slightly differing goals. For example, Los Angeles Police Department's Community Safety Partnership (CSP) program works to both increase community perceptions of safety as well as reduce crime, with the ancillary goal of building trust and relationships between CSP officers and community members or stakeholders (Leap et al., 2020). The National Police Athletic/Activities League (PAL) aims to prevent juvenile crime and violence through mentoring, civic/service, athletics, and recreational and educational opportunities. Underneath this overarching goal of reducing juvenile crime involvement, PAL works to enhance and build relationships between youth and police officers (National PAL, n.d). Further, the Phoenix Police Department's Cadet Program works with youth aged 14 and up to expose them generally to careers in law enforcement through social activities, community service, leadership training, personal fitness training, and outdoor activities (Phoenix Police Cadet Program, n.d.). These community-based policing programs serve a primary or overarching goal related to 'enforcement,' whether it be crime reduction or law enforcement career exposure.

Youth empowerment programs

It is clear that there is an abundance of programs that adopt elements of COP (e.g., PAL, Explorer Programs, Coffee with a Cop). However, there are many other ways that police officers interact with their communities outside of enforcement efforts, and such programs and interactions are less studied. One such program that utilizes this approach is the Team Kids Challenge (TKC), implemented by Team Kids Inc., a non-profit based in Southern California.

The TKC is similar to many COP programs in one way, primarily that it operates in a manner consistent with the tenets of procedurally just policing. The procedural justice framework posits that if police conduct themselves with respect and dignity, in an unbiased manner, and give those they interact with the opportunity or voice to participate in their interactions, community members view them as trustworthy (Mazerolle et al., 2014; Tyler, 2017). Indeed, adults (Reisig et al., 2018; Skogan, 2006) and youth (Fine et al., 2020a) are likely to have more positive perceptions of and relationships with police they perceive to be procedurally just. The TKC program affords youth opportunities for leadership and decision-making as police officers and first responders serve a supplemental role by encouraging and assisting where needed without taking control over the youth activities. Indeed, while law enforcement are key participants in this program, it is not led by police departments, nor do officers act in any type of an enforcement capacity. What is more, a nascent realm of research suggests such interactions within a non-surveillance, non-enforcement capacity can improve the way youth view the police (Fine et al., 2020a), so one could posit that

youth empowerment programs might have a similar impact on the officers engaging in them. Therefore, the TKC serves as a uniquely focused program that may improve relationships between youth and police.

However, the TKC diverges from existing COP programs in key ways. First, it is not employed by police departments; it is designed and operated by a nonprofit at no cost to schools and communities that choose to deploy it. COP emphasizes that both the community and their police share responsibility for crime reduction and public safety, yet this program is purposefully designed so that conversations and actions are not about crime prevention, community safety, or law enforcement. Instead, the TKC is a structured youth empowerment program and has a primary goal to “empower kids to change the world” (Team Kids Organization, n.d.). This program creates the opportunity for repeated, prosocial interactions between youth and first responders in various communities, though typically in those with a marked history of negative police-community relations.

Further, contrary to COP programming, this community-based program is grounded in the tenets of positive youth development (PYD), a strengths-based approach to understanding youth behavior focused on promoting thriving (Lerner et al., 2015). This perspective stresses the importance of socio-ecological contexts, service-learning programs, and non-parental adult figures in fostering positive behaviors and healthy developmental outcomes, such as empowerment, constructive use of time, and positive values (Lerner et al., 2015; Wigfield et al., 2006). Prior studies establish that programs grounded in PYD can elicit positive outcomes for youth (Heinze, 2013; Sanders & Munford, 2014), including this one (Fine et al., 2021). As such, this program constitutes a substantial departure from traditional COP practices and programs. This program in particular focuses on youth empowerment, an aspect of PYD. Empowered youth believe that they have the skills, awareness, and opportunity to improve their own lives and the lives of others in their communities (Zimmerman, 1995).

Present study

The Task Force (2015) recommended that police should engage in non-enforcement interactions to become better integrated into the communities they serve. Some communities around the country are choosing to do so, yet the empirical literature identifying the effects of non-crime-related, community-police programming on police officers is scant. Leveraging a qualitative approach, the present study fills a gap in the literature by evaluating police officers' experiences participating in a structured, in-school community-based program providing youth (K-8th grade, with programmatic focus on 5th-8th graders) with voice and leadership opportunities within a non-crime and non-enforcement context. The present study makes a valuable contribution to the literature by (1) utilizing a geographically diverse sample spanning three large cities with historically poor police-community relations; (2) focusing on a program primarily implemented in predominately Hispanic/Latinx or Black/African American schools, groups that are more likely to develop worse perceptions of police (Fine et al., 2020a; Peck & Elligson, 2021); and (3) evaluating the effects of repeated, prosocial interactions between youth and police officers on the officers themselves.

Methods

Team kids challenge (TKC)

The Team Kids Challenge is a five-week, voluntary program that leverages non-parental adults who are first responders (e.g., police officers, firefighters) to empower youth to make a difference in their community. Prior to program implementation, officers complete a training grounded in the principles of positive youth development on how to mentor, encourage, and empower youth. Following parental consent, children are invited to participate and are told they can choose to not participate at any point. The TKC then begins with a school-wide assembly during which uniformed officers join Team Kids staff to interact with the students and share the message that children matter, that they are significant, and they are needed as leaders in their communities. This discussion is followed by a short video of school-aged youth sharing how they would like to help make the world a better place, and then students are asked to identify needs they see in their community. The assembly concludes with the first responders asking if they can help the youth and work together to make a difference in their shared community.

In the four weeks following the assembly, the entire student body participates in weekly, school-wide “challenges” to address the community needs they identified during the assembly. Meanwhile, all students in the two uppermost grades are invited to serve on the Team Kids Leadership Team (LT). These students meet once a week with Team Kids staff and first responders during their lunch periods to plan a carnival event to raise funds to benefit a local charity working on an issue they care about. The LT works in small groups that are each responsible for developing and implementing a homemade game or activity for the carnival. These regular meetings create the unique opportunity for first responders to repeatedly interact with youth in their community in a prosocial, non-enforcement capacity and work towards a common goal. The first responders attend the carnival, congratulate the students, and play the carnival games, further allowing for relationship building opportunities with youth without engaging in any enforcement-related behaviors.

The TKC is grounded in the positive youth development framework (Lerner et al., 2015) and its practices, such as giving youth a voice and treating them respectfully and in a trustworthy manner. These tenets are also consistent with the procedural justice framework (Tyler, 1990). At the same time, the weekly challenges, which benefit local 501(c)(3) Community-Based Organizations and have quantifiable goals (e.g., collect 300 cans of food for a nearby food pantry to help alleviate hunger in their community; collect 300 towels/blankets for a nearby animal shelter to help care for neglected pets), are designed to enable the youth to make a meaningful contribution beyond their own self-interest (Lerner, 2018). This program has, as its mission, the goal to “empower kids to change the world” (Team Kids Challenge, n.d.), utilizing tenets of the positive youth development framework. As such, this program will be referred to as a youth empowerment program throughout the manuscript. During a final debrief meeting, students present a check to the community-based organization they selected as the carnival’s beneficiary, and pictures taken during the month of service are shown and celebrated with their law enforcement partners.

Table 1. Sample demographics and participatory information.

| | Frequency or Mean |
|--|-------------------|
| Gender* (Male) | 72.2% |
| Age* | 45.9 years |
| Race* (White) | 90.1% |
| Ethnicity* (Non-Hispanic) | 66.7% |
| Education* | |
| Some College | 25% |
| Bachelor's degree | 50% |
| Graduate Degree or Higher | 25% |
| Tenure* | 13.9 years |
| Role in the TKC | |
| Participant Only | 72.2% |
| Supervisor Only | 11.1% |
| Both | 16.7% |
| Attended Kickoff Assembly (Yes) | 94.4% |
| Attended at Least 50% of LT Meetings (Yes) | 72.2% |
| Attended Carnival (Yes) | 77.8% |

Note:

*Full respondent demographics only available for Respondents 9-19.

Sample

To evaluate program effects on police officers, eighteen police officers¹ that had participated in the Team Kids Challenge (TKC) were interviewed between Fall 2019 and Summer 2021. The officers participated in the TKC program between 2016-2021 in one of seven cities located in Arizona, California, or New York. These data were collected as one part of a larger series of evaluations of the TKC (Fine et al., 2019; Fine et al., 2020; Fine et al., 2021), which to date have only evaluated the impact of the program on the youth involved across a variety of metrics (e.g., perceptions of the police and positive youth development). Respondents gained entrance into the TKC primarily through volunteering, with a majority being patrol officers that used their on-duty time to engage in the TKC when not responding to calls-for-service. Alternatively, some were assigned based on their previous work experience as a School Resource Officer (SRO) or working as a juvenile/community engagement officer. Table 1 provides demographic and participatory information for the respondents. Respondents' level of involvement varied from attending a single event to attending six events over the duration of the 5-week program, including repeated meetings working directly alongside youth. Three-quarters of the respondents were male ($n = 13$). All respondents had at least some college education, with 3 reporting post-graduate degrees (i.e., Master's degree or Juris Doctorate). Respondent tenure in law enforcement ranged from 3-37 years. Two respondents reported serving solely in a supervisory role in that they attended but did not actively participate in program activities. The remaining 16 respondents directly participated in some capacity. It is important to note that those serving solely in a supervisory role were not at the weekly LT Meetings and were less

¹There were twenty participants in total (out of 28 approached participants; 71% response rate). Two were excluded from these analyses because they were fire personnel (Respondent 4, Respondent 7). Full demographics were only available for Respondents 9-19. Respondents will be denoted with an assigned number (e.g., "R1," R2"). R20 was an additional, supplemental interview conducted with a participant of a 2021 iteration of the TKC, made virtual due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

likely to have attended the carnival, but the officers they supervised were in attendance at those events.

Procedures

Officers in this study were previously or actively involved with the TKC. With the assistance of the Team Kids organization, officers were recruited one of two ways: (1) those who had previously participated in an iteration of the TKC were recruited via email, and (2) those who were actively participating in an ongoing iteration of the TKC were recruited in person. Trained research assistants then conducted semi-structured, phone interviews that lasted between 20 to 45 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim using Otter.ai., and then checked for accuracy by the interviewers and study's authors. Officers were asked a broad range of questions to evaluate their experiences in the program including questions about their personal background, level of participation in the program, perceptions of the TKC, and perceptions of the youth they met through the program.

Analytic plan

This qualitative program evaluation employed an inductive coding approach. While a pure grounded theory approach can minimize the potential for previous research or preconceived notions to impact the findings of qualitative research (Glaser & Strauss, 2017), an inductive approach is often preferred when providing a foundation of knowledge for a topic such as this with little-to-no extant findings (Charmaz, 2016). As such, major areas of interest (police-community relations, program evaluation, and police practices) were identified a priori and transcribed interviews were coded for these particular themes in Microsoft Word (La Pelle, 2004) and Atlas.ti for Windows (Smit, 2002). The full interview guide is available upon request.

Results

The results of this program evaluation are organized according to the three thematic elements decided prior to the interviews being conducted: (1) police-community relationships, (2) program experiences, and (3) impact on police practices.

Police-community relationships

Within the context of police-community relationships, officers discussed three core concepts: (1) opportunities for prosocial interaction, (2) watching the youth grow in their leadership abilities, and (3) a bi-directional humanizing effect between officers and youth that improved relationships.

Prosocial interactions

A primary theme that emerged from the data was a resounding appreciation for the opportunity to build better relationships with the youth through their positive, non-

enforcement, and non-surveillance roles. At the kick-off assembly, the first responders make it clear that they are asking to be on the students' team to make a difference in their shared community. The officers make it known to the students that "you're in charge, and we as adults are here to help you do what you want to do" (R1). That is, the children set their weekly challenges, choose the philanthropy for their final carnival fundraiser event, and create the games for the final carnival. In line with the procedural justice (Tyler, 1990) and positive youth development (Lerner, 2018) frameworks, it was imperative that the TKC participants were afforded the opportunity to express their voice throughout the program and were empowered to take on meaningful leadership roles.

Every participant ($n = 18$) spoke to the ability of this type of program to provide first responders "a chance to build relationships with the community ... [and] help the children understand and respect law enforcement" (R2). A central component of the TKC is allowing first responders to interact with youth in a positive, prosocial manner rather than an enforcement or surveillance capacity, and while the Team Kids organization does not refer to the TKC as a COP program specifically, all of the respondents referred to it as such. In the words of Respondent 12, the TKC is:

...the definition of community-oriented policing. Police officers in the community, being part of the community, letting people know that they're part of the community and interacting with the community on a real level, not, not something that's fake or forced.

This indicates that officers felt like youth empowerment programs like the TKC fit within their departmental missions to employ COP programs.

The respondents noted that the focus on youth empowerment and development differentiated the TKC program from traditional COP programs like the Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.) or Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.) programs (Esbensen et al., 2011; Pan & Bai, 2009). Where the focus of those programs was on enforcement or crime prevention, the inherently pro-social, non-enforcement TKC program focused on building positive youth skills through encouragement and empowerment. Particularly diverging from the lecture-based curriculum taught by uniformed police officers in the G.R.E.A.T. and D.A.R.E. programs, the TKC approach does not simply talk "at kids ... this one here involves them and lets them make the decisions" (R11). As a uniquely situated program, this program allowed officers to work alongside and at the direction of the youth, allowing the children and the officers to be equals.

Growth, empowerment, & leadership

The value of watching the children grow throughout the program was another prominent theme ($n = 16$) amongst the police officers. Pointing out that the teachers and principals were able to sit back and watch the students brainstorm, Respondent 1 asked, "how many adults get to really listen to kids and see them do something like this?" The officers noted a sense of pride and appreciation for the level of engagement, as well as the students' accomplishments. Indeed, Respondent 20 highlighted the inspiration felt in being able "to watch these young people come up with some great ideas throughout the entire process of the program," even during the global Covid-19 pandemic that required their TKC iteration to go virtual.

The respondents also observed a positive impact on the community orientation of students involved in the program. For example, respondents noted that the youth appeared to learn that “part of [their] responsibility means looking out for others” (R10), to engage in “service beyond yourself” (R12), and to “be helpful and not be selfish” (R13). The officers reported that the children had a powerful desire to work towards a purpose beyond themselves—consistent with the aim of the positive youth development framework (Lerner, 2018). Moreover, respondents described a firm belief, stemming from participating in the TKC, that children can make a substantial difference in their communities if they are simply provided the opportunity. One respondent aptly summarizes a commonly reported takeaway from the program in saying “we need to give our kids a little bit more opportunities to take on these leadership roles, to work through these challenges, to work through problems, [and] work as a team to overcome these problems” (R10).

Several respondents hoped that the youth would take these new skills of empathy, leadership, and confidence, and translate them into their everyday lives. A respondent who had participated in multiple iterations of the Team Kids Challenge noted that the TKC seemed to continue empowering youth to step up and become leaders in their community after the conclusion of the program, though longitudinal data are needed. Similarly, another respondent noted “now this child knows, or has experienced this, and want[s] to do more” (R11).

Improved relationships

The respondents consistently and clearly conveyed that they believed the TKC program helped to build better police-community relationships, in large part because it changed the way the police and the children saw each other ($n=18$). One officer stated, “it’s always a good reminder to know the community that we serve and some of the real challenges that these kids are facing” (R15). Respondent 10 noted, “it reminds me that I’m just one piece of the community, [it’s] not the police and the community, we’re connected.” Another officer highlighted that the opportunity to work collaboratively with youth in a non-enforcement, non-surveillance capacity helped the police officers relate to youth in the program (R8). This translated into how they viewed youth during the course of their day-to-day duties, with Respondent 5 offering that now if they saw a TKC participant outside of the program they wouldn’t see them as “just a kid in the community,” rather they now had a name, and the officer *knew* the youth from participating in the program.

Reciprocally, respondents perceived that the TKC program served to humanize the officers in the eyes of the youth. In other words, the program allowed youth to “see that the police officer, that the fireman, that they are human beings, that they do have families, that even they have struggles, even they have ideas to help out other people, and they share that amongst themselves” (R14). To that end, the officers found that repeated prosocial interactions over the course of the program were a key tool in building rapport with the youth. Respondent 17 stated “we would see the same kids every week... [and] they got more comfortable around us.” The ability of this program to foster positive relationships with law enforcement is particularly important given that the officers we spoke to were participating in areas that have

significant histories of poor police-community relations where the “walls between us vs. them” (R8) may have been particularly difficult to overcome.

The respondents hoped that building relationships would also humanize them to the children outside of the confines of the program. Increasing opportunities for communication between both parties was one simple way for first responders to “bridge the gap” (R9) and ensure they felt supported and protected. One respondent remarked that they hoped that “[the kids] see the police officers as somebody that they can trust, they can reach out to” (R10). Indeed, Respondent 20 summarized:

I mean, that’s, that’s the goal ... when they think of calling 911, those specific kids that I dealt with, they think of calling and having someone like me respond to help them. Somebody who cares very much. Because that’s what they’re going to get.

This potential for increased cooperation with the police is further in line with the procedural justice framework (Tyler, 1990).

Beyond general hopes, several respondents provided specific examples of how participating in the program had already improved their relationships with the community and enabled them to better perform their job duties. One respondent (R6) described an instance when a young girl they had met through the program recognized them in public and ran up to the officer, gave them a hug, and enthusiastically explained to her parents about how she knew them. In this case, participating in the program not only created positive encounters during the program with the child, but also paved the road for future positive interactions with the child and her parents. Perhaps more poignantly, another respondent described how their participation in the TKC helped support a child through a traumatic call:

Oftentimes in these emergency situations, you have a bunch of police officers, a bunch of fire people showing up and these young people don’t know who these guys are. But then to see a uniformed police officer step into your house in a traumatic situation and know who that person is ... my face and name. It’s a bad situation, but they seem a little bit calmer. Because, you know, it’s me. They see me at their school and they participated in the program with me. So, it’s easy for them to cope with a bad situation (R10).

Moreover, Respondent 20 posited that the TKC program “really can build some bridges with school districts, which has been a challenge for [our] police department.” At a time when perceptions of the police are at a decades-long low (Fine et al., 2020b), opportunities to engage with children in a non-enforcement, non-surveillance setting may provide a crucial way for police officers to begin mending or building relationships between themselves and the communities they serve, if the communities so choose.

Program experience

Interviews revealed three main themes related to respondents’ experiences participating in the Team Kids Challenge. First, there was a high level of *motivation* to participate and continue participating in the program. Second, respondents discussed the *generalizability* of programs such as the TKC. Lastly, officers discussed areas for *improvement* within the program.

Motivation, purpose, & experiences

Supervisors indicated that no one had to be coerced or ‘voluntold’ to participate; rather, “if we had an officer that wanted to participate, we would allow them” (FR12, echoed by FR14). Relatedly, the motivation to participate in the TKC program did not wane over time. Indeed, a supervisor (R1) described that their participating officer was ‘bummed’ out about having to miss an event and have another officer sent in their place. As such, a prominent theme amongst the officers was a high level of motivation to be a part of the TKC program before, during, and following implementation.

Notably, the initial desire to participate in the TKC appeared to often stem from two sources. First, respondents were motivated to be supportive of the department’s initiatives ($n = 10$). Second, they reflected on their initial motivations to become a police officer ($n = 13$). For example, one participant remarked that participating in the TKC program aligned with their “desire to help those that are at their most vulnerable moments and wanting to give back to [the] community” (R15). As a result, many of the officers had been interacting with the youth in their communities prior to participating in the TKC (e.g., being a community relations officer, community affairs officer, or member of the department youth services teams). These motivations also seemed to elicit a genuine interest and desire in partaking in the TKC and interacting with the youth. As described by Respondent 3:

I think for all officers, they get as much out of it as the young people do. They get to watch young people, often from challenged backgrounds, be able to take advantage of an opportunity to help others. They get to see children be creatively engaged in a way where they accomplish goals, build self-confidence, and grow as a person.

Respondents also indicated an appreciation for the novelty of participating in the TKC program. They described participating in the program as a break from the standard calls for service, which inundate their day-to-day, that enabled them to do something different. Respondent 18 noted that, “so much [of] our job entails us dealing with people on their worst days. So, when we get an opportunity to deal with somebody on a good day, in a positive way, it could only mean [we] can benefit from that.” For example, officers that supported the students’ efforts by attending the fundraising carnival spoke about getting to hang out and play games with the students for an afternoon. One respondent described “getting [their] forehead tattooed with a sparkly, glittery Superman emblem” (R17). Interactions like these – fun and prosocial – between uniformed police officers and youth in the communities would not have been possible, if not for the TKC acting as a conduit to bring these groups together.

While some respondents valued the “step outside of the daily... ‘normal cop life’ where it’s all about arresting bad guys” (R11), they also mentioned how the program created an opportunity to re-align with the reason or *purpose* behind why they sought a career in law enforcement. An officer remarks, “I think sometimes we get too involved in this job... a little bit too reactive to problems in the community instead of proactive, and I think this is one way to make a positive influence” (R18). Altogether, there was a high level of voluntary motivation to be involved in the program that was sustained through involvement and helped remind police of their initial motivations to pursue their career.

Program generalizability

Due to the diverse communities and geographic locales the Team Kids organization serves, the officers emphasized the potential generalizability of the TKC program. The officers believe the program could spread into increasingly socioeconomically and racially/ethnically diverse areas ($n = 9$). One officer remarked that “regardless of the demographics or any number of factors, kids are kids, they are looking for opportunities to grow. If you give them that, they will surprise you” (R3). Considering communities with histories of poor police-community relations often only engage with police within enforcement contexts, this sentiment showcases the officer’s belief in the applicability of the program to a variety of communities. Moreover, respondents expressed a desire to expand the program to more communities of color because “a lot of these kids don’t have the opportunity to do more” (R1). Given the importance of developing and solidifying these personal relationships, the officers wanted this program implemented at more schools and in more neighborhoods, noting that “a lot of principals are just waiting in line” (R1) for their school to get to experience the TKC.

Areas for improvement

Although the respondents generally viewed the program positively, the participants did note a common area for potential improvement. Several officers acknowledged concerns about officer time as a resource ($n = 10$). Specifically, asking police departments to give up an officer or two who “could be out handling calls for service ... for a school assembly” (R10) could pose logistical challenges for departments with limited workforces. Indeed, respondents expressed frustration with occupational time constraints that inhibited their ability to engage in the program. That is, the officers wished they had had the capacity to spend *more* time with the youth.

Potential impact on police practices

The final theme that was discussed among respondents ($n = 13$) was how participation in the Team Kids Challenge was changing the ways in which the officers interact with the youth in their communities. Because many officers volunteered to participate and often specialized in community engagement with youth, a number of respondents indicated their behaviors did not differ before and after the TKC. However, Respondent 20 recommended the utility for police departments to involve patrol officers:

I think it’s a great thing to get patrol officers in ... really any place who don’t spend a lot of time working with students. I think this would be an incredible thing to get, get them plugged into because it really would change kind of your perspective on the quality of human beings that exist in our pre-adolescent, young people.

For the officers in this study who have more interactions with youth than the typical patrol officer, many were excited about new ways to interact with youth in their communities. Participation in the TKC provided the officers with more tools in their toolkit, so to speak, and instilled the understanding that they could “give [kids] something to do, instead of just telling them what not to do” (R6).

Beyond changes that occurred during participation in the TKC, the officers reported a continued impact in how they dealt with youth after the TKC concluded. The respondents appeared to have an acute awareness of their potential as a role model for youth. As one supervisor stated, “you know when you have an impact on children” (R19). What is more, the respondents acknowledged their potential to act as a meaningful agent of change by creating a support system for the children in their community. This represents a poignant shift away from the typical warrior mindset, towards a guardian mindset (see McLean et al., 2020 for an overview). Respondent 15 eloquently described the shift from enforcement to encouragement when they stated:

[The TKC] created a space for both of us to be in, working together and not in an enforcement fashion, but rather a team environment where there wasn't the expectation that we were going to do any type of enforcement. I think that's usually what law enforcement is looked at, as being the ones that are going to tell you what not to do, where it was more like encouragement.

Moreover, the program seemed to instill an optimism towards youth in the officers. The respondents noted that “[seeing] the hope that's out there for the future” (FR3) provided officers with a renewed energy for their job. Several of the more seasoned respondents noted a particular nostalgia in “knowing that some of us are getting older, that we're turning over the world to a new generation of kids” (R14). Indeed, one respondent noted:

[The TKC] does help to change and remind you that even though everybody says young people are terrible and misbehave, and all these, you know you hear all these, these things that this generation is more disrespectful and everyone. There's so many, so many good kids and the vast majority of them, just given an outlet like this, can come up with some awesome, awesome stuff. (R20)

Discussion

This qualitative program evaluation presented an inductive analysis of police officers' perceptions of engaging in the Team Kids Challenge, a school-based youth empowerment program grounded in positive youth development that is consistent with the voice and participation aspects of the procedural justice framework. Considering relationship building requires investment from both parties, this study uniquely responds to calls from the community, practitioners, and policymakers—including the President's 21st Century Taskforce on Policing—by shedding light on law enforcement officers' perspectives of engaging in community programs. Specifically, the semi-structured interviews evaluated respondents' views of program implementation, participation, and impact.

The results indicated that the officers highly regarded participating in the Team Kids Challenge and engaging in prosocial interactions with the youth in their community. Most saliently, the respondents perceived that the program allowed the students and officers to view each other as human beings and was able to begin building positive relationships between the two groups. This is particularly relevant right now due to the current social unrest resulting from systemic bias and abuses of power by the police across the country, particularly in low-income, predominantly minority urban

locations, such as those in which the TKC operates. In fact, youth today are growing up within the context of the largest social movement in history, one that is focused on police brutality, bias, and violence (Buchanan et al., 2020).

The results also suggested that working alongside youth in a non-surveillance, non-enforcement capacity can improve the way police view youth from low-income, urban neighborhoods. Although the officers noted it was important for the children to view them as humans, the officers also reevaluated their perceptions of youth and their capabilities. The repeated prosocial interactions with youth provided powerful opportunities for officers to look for strengths rather than deficits of the children, consistent with the strengths-based approach of positive youth development (Lerner, 2018). The hope is that it has lasting impacts on how officers view the community they are supposed to be serving, though only longitudinal data involving official officer conduct records would be able to illuminate that objectively.

Another notable revelation that emerged from this study was the reinvigoration of the officers' purpose and meaning for pursuing a career in law enforcement. The novelty of this type of program focusing on positive, prosocial encounters with the community allowed officers to remember why they became officers in the first place. The program, at least temporarily, worked to reduce some of the cynicism and decreased job satisfaction that can accompany an extended tenure in law enforcement (Burke & Mikkelsen, 2005). While outside of the immediate scope of this study, this finding lends itself to further investigation into how these positive types of programs can improve officer well-being.

The overwhelmingly positive response by police officers to the TKC program might lead one to speculate that we are advocating for the placement of officers in schools. After all, the program quite literally takes place on school grounds, during the school day, and involves police officers. However, the placement of officers in schools, including traditional school resource officers, is far more complex and requires continued investigation as it relates to their potential to manage or mismanage student behavior (see Ryan et al., 2018 for an overview) or effects on creating or sustaining racial/ethnic disparities in discipline (Crosse et al., 2022; Turner & Beneke, 2020). School resource officers are charged with enforcing laws and rules within schools, the precise antithesis to the interactions that occur during the TKC, which are designed to be pro-social and non-enforcement based. To be clear, the results of this study do not suggest law enforcement officers do or do not belong in schools.

Further, communities are currently calling for reforming, defunding, or abolishing the police following the deaths of minority youths and young adults such as Daunte Wright Jr., Xavier Hill, and Frederick Cox. The program we evaluated is not a procedural justice training program, and it does not aim to substantially change on-the-ground policing practices. Rather, the program aims to improve youth empowerment, an aspect of positive youth development. The findings from this study should not be misinterpreted to support any notion that programs like these are more important or should replace programs and trainings that attempt to eliminate unjust or biased policing practices. Indeed, many departments across the country require a fundamental overhaul in the procedurally just (or unjust) ways in which the police operate. Relatedly, although we are the external researchers conducting the evaluation and not

the implementation, we find it important to note that we believe these programs should never be forced upon a community. They must be implemented only within communities that specifically call for them, and even then, they must be evaluated carefully so as to ensure there are no iatrogenic or retraumatizing effects for those who choose to participate, especially children.

An interesting finding also emerged pertaining to officers' perceptions of the program. A nonprofit designed and leads this program; it is not an official police program. COP programming emphasizes that both police and the community share responsibility for reducing crime and enhancing public safety. This program is specifically designed such that conversations and police actions are not about preventing crime, surveilling the community, or enforcing law. Instead, it is a structured youth empowerment program with the primary goal to "empower kids to change the world" (Team Kids Organization, n.d.). Nonetheless, officers often perceived it to be a COP program. Future studies should examine why police officers often perceived it as a COP program. This suggests they may misunderstand what COP programs truly are.

Despite the novel findings presented in this study, a number of limitations exist. While our team was able to conduct interviews with numerous officers who participated in the TKC from a variety of states, questions remain regarding generalizability. That is, officers who participate in the TKC, or other community-based/community-oriented programs in areas with different racial/ethnic demographics or less tense histories of police-community relations, may not have similar perceptions or experiences as those in this study. Additionally, the very nature of qualitative research brings reliability into question (see Pratt et al., 2020), but this should not discount the rich and informative data on police perceptions of participation in community programs. Finally, there is a clear potential for selection bias due to the voluntary nature of participation in these programs. Indeed, several of the officers involved in the TKC volunteered for participation due to their previous experiences working with children, frequently as an SRO. It is possible, then, that the responses shared in this study might be a conservative representation of the potential impact, in that those with lower general perceptions initially might have more to gain from a program such as this. In the future, these programs should expand beyond officers who have previous experiences working with children. What is more, while most respondents attended all or a majority of the events included within the TKC, it is entirely possible that those who attended all components (the Kickoff assembly, the LT meetings, and the carnival) had more positive perceptions of the program and its impact on the community as compared to those who attended fewer components of the program.

With the limitations in mind, this program evaluation still has several implications for policy and practice. First and foremost, engaging in interactions that are grounded in aspects of PYD, COP, and PJ can be beneficial for police. Officers report enjoying participating in the current program and rediscovering meaning in their job performance. Next, engaging with youth in a non-surveillance, non-enforcement capacity on community service projects can improve the way police regard young community members. Considering that police officers often view people at the worst moments of their lives, the repeated prosocial encounters with youth serve a critical role of

reminding the police of the best that youth have to offer their communities. As such, these types of interactions may lay the foundation for more positive, collaborative relationships between the police and those they serve. Stronger relationships with youth, in turn, should ideally pave the way for police officers to more effectively deescalate and protect youth in their community.

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