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What influences public confidence in local policing? Case study in Avon and Somerset exploring the role of perceived knowledge of police education and training and other contributing factors

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Abstract

Public confidence in UK policing has declined recently. In 2023, UK police training and recruitment were reformed, but understanding the influence of this upon public confidence is currently limited. Sixty-seven participants in the Avon and Somerset Police District in the UK took part in a mixed-methods study, exploring self-reported perceived knowledge of police training and education and aspects influencing public confidence in local police forces. We found a positive relationship between self-reported perceived knowledge of police training and confidence in policing, but participants reported knowing very little about training procedures for police officers and that negative high-profile media stories influenced their confidence in local policing. Implications for police practice in the UK include improving communication between local police and communities, particularly around specialist skills, knowledge, and training undertaken by police officers, to raise public understanding about the professional nature of the role, potentially enhancing trust and confidence in policing.

Feeling confident that our police officers are capable, honest, and fair is integral to the criminal justice system (Jackson et al. 2012; Barton and Beynon 2015), but public confidence in UK policing has declined over recent years. The Crime Survey for England and Wales reported that the percentage of respondents who considered the police were doing a 'good' or 'excellent' job has dropped from 62 per cent in 2017 to 49 per cent in 2023/24 (ONS, 2025). In 2023, 48 per cent of respondents to an Ipsos survey described their local police force as trustworthy (Ipsos.com 2023), and in a large-scale survey of 8,000 participants in England and Wales between 2022 and 2023, only 41 per cent of respondents agreed they trusted the police (Pickering et al. 2024). Taken together, it seems there is an issue with public trust and confidence in policing in England and Wales.

Although definitions can be varied and nuanced, *trust and confidence in policing* can be understood to represent trust rooted in social alignment between the police and the communities that they serve (Jackson and Bradford 2010). Within England and Wales, the College of Policing defined trust as 'how well people believe the police are doing now or will do in the future', with confidence as the 'global assessment of the state of policing overall at a local, force, or national level' (College of Policing 2025a). Thus, trust and confidence relate to perceptions of police fairness and shared values, and the police as civic guardians (Tyler 2006). Procedural justice theory (e.g. Jackson et al. 2012) can provide a theoretical lens with which to examine public confidence in policing. This theoretical approach focuses on micro-level interactions and how these can shape public perceptions of the police as fair and legitimate, thus fostering trust and confidence in the institution. Procedural justice theory proposes that police should be neutral, objective, and impartial, and interact with the public that they serve in a

respectful manner. Further, this theory predicts that these aspects of police conduct are *more* important in fostering public trust and confidence in policing compared to the outcomes of investigations such as arrest rates (Sunshine and Tyler 2003; Tankebe 2010). Operating under a procedural justice policing model means taking a *guardian* stance in policing, emphasizing just and fair interactions with community members (Stoughton 2016) and encouraging greater trust and confidence in policing and perceptions of police legitimacy in communities (Cross and Fine 2024).

High-profile events in the UK, including the murder of Sarah Everard by a London Met police officer, could account for increasingly negative public perceptions of policing, and a feeling that policing in the UK needs reform (Lamble and McElhone 2023; Johnson et al. 2025). There have been calls in the media for greater police training on violence against women (e.g. End Violence Against Women.org.uk 2021; Mynenko and Ditcham 2022) and on diversity and unconscious bias following the murder of George Floyd in the US (Joseph-Salisbury et al. 2021; TheGuardian.com 2021). In response, new training for police officers has been introduced (College of Policing 2022), and most recently, the National Police Chiefs Council and the College of Policing in the UK identified lack of public trust and confidence in policing as a key issue to be addressed in a new 5-year culture and inclusion strategy (College of Policing 2025c). There is a rich literature around the factors that can increase or decrease public trust and confidence in policing (see, e.g., Tyler and Huo 2002; Tyler 2006; Bradford et al. 2009; Hohl et al. 2010; Merry et al. 2012; Myhill and Bradford 2012). However, currently, there is only limited research into one specific aspect that could be influential: public knowledge on police education, qualifications, and training. In this article, we explore the relationship between the extent of public self-reported knowledge about police training and educational entry requirements and public confidence in their local police force, in the Avon and Somerset area of policing in the UK.

Police training and entry qualifications

Police training has developed in recent years in response to high-profile incidents involving police misconduct or inefficiency. In 2023, police training in England and Wales was updated to cover contemporary issues such as cybercrime, emotional well-being, and diversity (College of Policing 2022), which have been raised by the public as aspects that affect their confidence in the police (The Police Foundation 2022). From the perspective of police officers, this new form of training has shown promising results with 75 per cent of the police officers who experienced the training saying they felt better prepared for their role, compared to 60 per cent satisfaction rates with the previous training. Further, 66 per cent of police officers under the old training believed it gave them the necessary skills to perform their duties, but the new 2023 training programme has yielded 82 per cent of surveyed police officers reporting they felt they were trained on all necessary skills (College of Policing 2022).

Aside from on-the-job training, the necessity of formal education in entering the police profession has been a topic of debate for decades (e.g. Regoli 1976; Paterson 2011).

The Police Education Qualifications Framework (PEQF), driven by the College of Policing, was introduced in 2018 in England and Wales, mandating that all officers should hold or be educated to degree level from 2020. This was overturned in late 2023 so that a degree is no longer a requirement, with non-degree entry still possible for officers in England and Wales (College of Policing 2025b). Prospective officers can either complete a 3-year police constable degree apprenticeship, enter via the degree holder entry programme (in which holders of a degree can enter the force), take a degree in professional policing, or apply directly to the police constable entry programme. The overturn of the mandatory requirement for new police constables to have a degree came after much discussion of the issue in the media by police professionals. Some welcomed the mandatory requirement for new police constables to have degree-level education (BBC News 2016), but others expressed the belief that holding higher degrees as a police officer is not necessary, as exemplified in this quote: '*You absolutely do not need a degree to be a police officer*' (Cumbria Police Federation 2021). Further, student police officers undertaking the police constable degree apprenticeship have reported negative perceptions of the experience (Andrews 2024a). Some police professionals have also asserted in the media that newly educated police recruits are ill-prepared for the role (Dailymail.co.uk 2021). However, university-educated police officers are reported to treat minority groups better and hold more ethical views (Paterson 2015). Telep (2011) found that the experience of completing a policing degree exposed police officers to minority groups, and they left with a more non-authoritarian outlook, suggesting the 'university experience' can be beneficial for police officers rather than the content of the degree education itself.

Despite media coverage, we currently have a limited understanding about how much the *public* in the UK know (or believe they know) or feel about police training and educational entrance requirements, or what impact this has on their trust and confidence in local police forces. Policing is a highly skilled profession, requiring a diverse range of cognitive skills including critical thinking and decision-making (Bennell et al. 2022), but it is unclear the extent to which the public is aware of this. When the PEQF was established, a consultation was undertaken with the public, but according to Andrews (2024b), only 161 responses in the consultation (from 3,045) were from the public. Thus, Andrews (2024b) was the first to publish public perceptions about police officer education, revealing two-thirds of their participant sample did not believe a degree was necessary to enter the police force. However, 59 per cent of the sample expressed the belief that some sort of post-A-level qualification was necessary, over and above standard police training. Further, when provided with information about the professional and skilled nature of policing, a small number of participants in this study changed their belief that post-A-level education is *not* necessary for the profession, to a belief that it *was* necessary (Andrews 2024b). This suggests that information about the level of education or skills required in policing has the potential to enhance public

understanding about the nature of the role and by extension, potentially, public trust and confidence in policing. However, we have limited information currently on what the public know, or believe they know, about this topic. Therefore, we ask the question: what does the public believe they know about police training and entry qualifications? Our overall aim was to explore the relationship between confidence and self-reported perceived knowledge and to provide insights about the nature of the relationship and suggestions for police practice to enhance public confidence in the police.

Case study: Avon and Somerset constabulary

Research into public trust and confidence in policing, and publicity in the media, can often focus on the London Met Police Force (e.g. Hohl et al. 2010; Pickering et al. 2024). However, the London Met is the UK's largest police force, serving 9 million people across 620 square miles (HMICFRS, 2025a) and thus should not be considered representative of local policing in the UK. Thus, we conducted a case study within the Avon and Somerset Area of Policing, exploring in-depth what influences public confidence in their local police force, including self-reported perceived knowledge about police training and educational entry requirements. Avon and Somerset Police serve 1.73 million people in Bristol, Somerset, and South Gloucestershire, covering 1,847 square miles and 103 miles of coastline in southwest England (HMICFRS, 2025b). The Avon and Somerset area provides an interesting and representative lens through which to study public confidence in local policing, as it encompasses both urban and rural areas and has a diverse socioeconomic profile, reflecting similar variations in regions across the wider UK. Although the area is generally affluent, with low unemployment and high educational achievement, it still contains pockets of deprivation. Approximately 47,000 residents of Somerset live in areas among the 20 per cent most deprived in England (Ministry of Housing 2019). Within Bath and North East Somerset, the neighbourhoods of Combe Down, Southdown, and Twerton are highlighted as areas of deprivation, with Twerton listed in the top 10 per cent most deprived areas in England (Bath and North East Somerset Council 2024). Demand for policing in the diverse area of Avon and Somerset is high, as evidenced by over one million calls made to the police via 999 (emergency calls) and 101 (non-emergency calls) and online in 2023 (HMICFRS, 2025c).

The study takes a mixed-method approach. Participants in Avon and Somerset completed an online questionnaire which collected quantitative data on confidence in Avon and Somerset Police and self-reported perceived levels of knowledge about police recruitment processes, training, and education, and qualitative data in the form of open text responses about aspects that influence confidence in the police and how much the public believed they knew about police recruitment processes, training, and education. We explored three research questions:

> RQ1: How confident are the public in Avon and Somerset in their local police force, and what influences levels of confidence?

> RQ2: What does the public in Avon and Somerset believe they know about police recruitment processes, training, and education?

> RQ2: What is the relationship between self-reported perceived knowledge about police recruitment processes, training, and education, and public confidence in their local police force?

Method
Participants
Sixty-nine participants took part in the study, but two responses were removed due to failure to follow instructions (e.g. blank responses to all questions), leaving 67 participants (32 female, 32 male, 3 preferred not to answer) between 19 and 96 years old ($M = 56.69$, $SD = 21.43$). All participants confirmed that they were living in the Avon and Somerset area of the UK by providing the first part of their postcode (e.g. BA1), with 15 participants residing in the city of Bath, 32 participants in the wider surrounding Bath area, and the remaining 17 participants living in the city of Bristol and surrounding areas, or East Somerset.[1] The study obtained ethical approval from Bath Spa University Ethics Panel (ref D033). The questionnaire was advertised on social media pages specific to Avon and Somerset and shared by Avon and Somerset Police using the Nextdoor App and the BANES district Community Neighbourhood Watch Facebook group. Data were collected in February and March 2023.

Procedure and measures
Data were collected using a single online questionnaire for which there was no time limit for completion. The questionnaire had three sections. *Section A: Confidence in Policing* collected confidence in local policing with ten items adapted from a 2018 BMG research questionnaire, which measured the public's perception of policing and the fire and rescue services in England and Wales (BMG Research 2018). For *Section B: Self-reported perceived knowledge,* the lead author generated 10 new items to explore the public self-reported perceived level of knowledge about police training and entrance qualifications. Participants were also asked if they were aware of the College of Policing and of the 2023 updates to police training, to which they could indicate *yes* or *no*. Tables 1 and 2 present the questions and response scales, mean scores, and factor structure for the confidence in policing and self-reported perceived knowledge scales. Finally, *Section C* prompted participants to expand upon their perceived knowledge of police training and entrance qualifications, and to give their personal opinions about aspects that may influence their perception of Avon and Somerset police. In this section, participants answered the following nine questions:

1. What do you know about the qualifications required to join police training? E.g. Do you know how many routes there are to be able to become a police officer? Do you

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[1] 3 participants declined to give the first part of their postcode.

Table 1 Questions, scales, mean responses, and factor structure of the confidence in policing scale.

Question	Scale	Mean (SD)	Factor loading 1	2
Factor 1: Respect and confidence in policing. Eigenvalue: 5.16, variance explained: 48.7 per cent				
Avon and Somerset police have my respect.	1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Neutral 4. Agree 5. Strongly agree	3.70 (0.98)	0.88	−0.47
How satisfied are you with the Avon and Somerset police force?	1. Highly dissatisfied 2. Dissatisfied 3. Neither satisfied/dissatisfied 4. Satisfied 5. Highly satisfied	3.37 (0.78)	0.86	
Thinking about Avon and Somerset Police force: do you think they have a good reputation?	1. Never 2. Hardly ever 3. Some of the time 4. Most of the time 5. All of the time	3.32 (0.79)	0.81	
If asked about Avon and Somerset police, would you speak:	1. Be very critical of them 2. Be critical of them 3. Have mixed views on them 4. Feel indifferent about them 5. Highly of them	3.59 (1.08)	0.78	
Avon and Somerset police treat people fairly and with respect.	1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Neutral 4. Agree 5. Strongly agree	3.47 (0.85)	0.77	
How confident are you with police effectiveness in dealing with emergencies?	1. Not at all confident 2. Not very confident 3. Neither 4. Fairly confident 5. Very confident	3.46 (1.11)	0.77	
Avon and Somerset police would treat me fairly if I needed to contact them.	1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Neutral 4. Agree 5. Strongly agree	3.79 (0.81)	0.66	
Avon and Somerset police are dealing with important problems in the local area and are focusing on the correct things.	1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Neutral 4. Agree 5. Strongly agree	3.25 (0.94)	0.65	
Factor 2[a]: Opinions on police practices. Eigenvalue: 1.56, Variance explained: 11.4 per cent				
Avon and Somerset police use physical force appropriately.	1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Neutral 4. Agree 5. Strongly agree	3.35 (0.83)		0.66
There is the correct amount of visible police officers in my local area.	1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Neutral 4. Agree 5. Strongly agree	2.46 (1.14)		0.50

[a]Factor omitted from any further analyses

think any university degrees are required or helpful to become a police officer?

2. To your knowledge, does the Avon and Somerset police take into consideration personal morals and views of an individual before allowing them to join police training? Do you think they should?

3. What do you believe should be included in the requirements for joining the police force? You can include academic qualifications and personal qualities.

4. What do you know about current police training? E.g. what do you know about how often do police officers receive training or how long are police officers in the training phase before becoming fully qualified, or how often they receive training on using equipment?

5. What areas do you believe are the most important for the police to be trained on? E.g. mental health, negotiation, physical health, cybercrime.

6. To your knowledge, when can a police officer choose a specialism? (e.g. firearms, public order, etc).

7. Do you think the media, or hearing about other police forces outside of Avon and Somerset (e.g. in London or the US) influences your opinion of the police? If so, how?

8. What kinds of things influence your opinion on the police the most? You can talk about anything that you feel influences your opinion here.

9. Is there anything else you want to add that the questionnaire has not covered?

Participants were given space to write free responses to the questions and assured that there were no correct or incorrect answers, and their personal opinions were welcome. All responses to the open-ended questions were fully anonymised if necessary, for example, if participants disclosed personal information such as names or locations, these were removed. We then conducted a thematic analysis, chosen for its flexibility in allowing us to generate themes and patterns in the data without a priori expectations (Clarke and Braun 2014), suitable for our exploratory study. The analysis proceeded following the steps outlined in Braun and Clarke (2019). The open-ended questionnaire responses were first read and re-read to facilitate familiarity with the data before initial code generation, capturing general repeated themes, which were iteratively revised and reviewed by the first author. An initial codebook was created by the first author based on the final set of themes and

Table 2 Questions, mean responses, and factor structure of the perceived knowledge of police training scale.

Question	Mean (SD)	Factor loading	
		1	**2**
Factor 1: Police training. Eigenvalue: 5.54, variance explained: 34.7 per cent			
I understand what aspects/field the police are trained in.	2.73 (1.18)	0.90	
I understand what training the police undertake.	2.65 (1.12)	0.85	
I trust that the police are trained enough about current laws and regulations to be able to perform their job properly.	3.49 (0.97)	0.76	
I trust that the police are correctly trained in the equipment they are allowed to use (e.g. handcuffs, baton, CS/PAVA incapacitant spray).	3.71 (0.89)	0.64	
I am aware of how often the police receive training.	2.26 (0.96)	0.57	
I understand the physical training the police must go through to join the police force.	3.03 (1.16)	0.52	
Factor 2: Police qualifications. Eigenvalue: 1.89, variance explained: 30.8 per cent			
I know what university courses are catered to/advertised to future/current police officers.	2.31 (1.06)		0.93
I know what university/universities Avon and Somerset police force utilise to train their cadets.	2.07 (0.93)		0.78
I understand what qualifications are needed to join the police force.	2.56 (1.12)		0.77
I know the different avenues someone can go through to join the police force.	2.57 (1.09)		0.50

Note. All questions were responded to on a scale from (1) Strongly disagree to (5) Strongly agree.

sub-themes. The second author then coded all responses using the codebook, with any questions around the interpretation of the codes resolved through discussion. We calculated inter-coder reliability using Cohen's Kappa (Cohen 1960), which indicated substantial agreement between raters on the coding scheme (Landis and Koch 1977), $k = 0.93$, $SE = 0.02$, 95 per cent CI [0.88, 0.96]. Where appropriate, we include participant quotes from the open-ended questions, referring to participants using an anonymous code, followed by their gender and age (e.g. P4, Male, 31 years).

Results

We present the quantitative and qualitative findings together, in three sections relating to our research questions. The first section speaks to our first research question about aspects that influence the public's confidence in their local police force (RQ1). The second section presents findings about public self-reported perceived knowledge about police recruitment processes, training, and education (RQ2). The final section explores the relationship between self-reported perceived knowledge and confidence in local police forces (RQ3).

RQ1: How confident are the public in Avon and Somerset in their local police force and what influences levels of confidence?

Firstly, we subjected the data from the confidence in local policing scale to individual exploratory factor analyses (EFA) to determine the existing subscales. The KMO statistic of 0.78 and Bartlett's test of sphericity, $\chi^2 = 430.75$, $df = 45.00$, $P < .001$, confirmed the data were appropriate for EFA. The number of factors extracted was based on parallel analysis and inspection of factor loadings. Items with factor loadings of 0.45

or higher were retained, in line with the recommendations of Tabachnick and Fidell (2012). The factor structure is outlined in Table 1.

The whole model explained 60.1 per cent of the variance in scores on the scale. Items on Factor 1 measured respect and confidence (8 items, $\alpha = 0.91$), and items on Factor 2 measured opinions on police practices (2 items, $\alpha = 0.30$). Given the very low Cronbach's α score for factor 2, it was dropped from further analyses. Factor 1 was retained, with the items on the subscale being used as a total score on the measure. Responses to these eight questions were summed to provide an overall confidence score, which could range from 8 indicating *low confidence*, to 40 indicating *high confidence*. The mean confidence in policing score was 28.06 ($SD = 6.05$), implying moderate overall confidence in Avon and Somerset Police.

In terms of what influences levels of confidence, we generated two themes through thematic analysis of the open-ended participant responses, addressing the wider aspects that influence public confidence in local police forces. The main elements that we discovered were frequent mentions of the importance of media reporting about the police (social media, and more traditional forms of media reporting), both negatively and positively, and perceptions of the treatment of minorities by police officers.

Media and communication

One aspect that had both positive and negative effects upon participants' confidence in the police was communication between the public and police. Communication here refers to direct contact and media coverage of the police. Twenty participants stated that direct contact with their local police force was usually positive. Sometimes this was through a role which involved interacting with the police on a

professional level, for example: *'I've been involved in various ways with the police during my life… through being a long time Coordinator in my local Neighbourhood Watch scheme. I judge by how I find the respective officers and police setup and have never had reason to be disappointed in any of the officers I have met.'* (P26, Female, 77 years). This positive contact can also form through knowing police officers personally, *'Having friends in police training, from being a police cadet and seeing it from a civilian perspective definitely has made a massive impact on my opinion'* (P5, Female, 20 years), or via personal contact in the local community: *'My contact with my local 'Bobbies' is healthy and friendly'* (P61, preferred not to give gender, 88 years).

However, without that direct contact, media coverage of other police forces can have a negative influence on perceptions of the police, exemplified in this quote: *'…Media reporting at the national level is overwhelmingly negative, and it seems to me with good reason, but I have no reason to belief that things are any different in A&S.'* (P65, Male, 64 years). Twelve participants stated that hearing things about the London Metropolitan Police force has negatively affected their views of their own police force as, *'If other forces have 'rotten apples' why not Avon and Somerset'* (P58, Female, 76 years) and *'the way the Met police handled the Sarah Everard murder makes me distrust the police force in general'* (P49, Female, 23 years). This suggests that media reporting of the police, and particularly the London Met, has a strong influence over the public's perception of their own local police force. Participants also highlighted their belief that Avon and Somerset police would not be any different from the media coverage as *'presumably selection and training of prospective police officers is same for all forces….or should be'* (P19, Male, 96 years).

However, the media can also positively influence the publics' views of the police. Some participants stated that seeing what is occurring in the US via the media has made them grateful for the system that is implemented here in the UK: *'UK police are much more satisfactory than US police!'* (P37, Male, 81 years). Ten participants acknowledged that media coverage of UK police is skewed, with a preference to focus on negative cases: *'Most mainstream media coverage tends to concentrate on adverse criticism of the Police, mainly sensationalism based. Rarely do we hear otherwise.'* (P34, Female, 66 years) and *'the media love a juicy, negative story'* (P63, Female, 71 years). Many participants asked for more coverage of positive cases as they believed this could help the reputation of Avon and Somerset police: *'I think openness is important. we need to hear about the bad apples but could also do with more news about police successes. We MUST be able to feel confident about the service'* (P37, Male, 81 years). Thus, there is a need for positive media coverage, especially as one participant stated *'the media is the only source of information'* for them (P66, Male, 60 years).

Communication between the public and police may also help bridge the *'them and us division between police and community'* (P23, Female, 56 years). This statement was about an email sent out to the community which emphasized that Britain is policed by consent and that even though officers are paid and uniformed, they are members of the community too. This email was well received and aided the reputation

and view of police. There was also positive feedback about police officers speaking about their own experiences in the media, which can be seen as a way of informing the public about police activities and positively influencing perceptions: *'When a radio programme has a police officer on air relating experiences my opinion of the Police goes up'* (P39, Female, 65 years.)

The treatment of minorities and women. Another aspect that influenced participants' perceptions of police is the treatment of minorities, individuals with mental health difficulties, and women. When asked which areas were important priorities for police training, 23 participants mentioned mental health, which indicates that the public in this area is aware of the mental health crisis in UK society. Further, when asked what influences their opinions of the police, one participant mentioned, *'bad things happening to mental health sufferers'* (P25, Female, no age given). This implies a perception that police are not necessarily well equipped to handle mental health issues. However, two participants believed that police should not deal with mental health crises, for example, *'I don't believe police should be trained in mental health as I believe this is a role for the health services and police should not be called to deal with people going through a crisis.'* (P13, Male, 26 years). Another participant talked about how much time the police devote to mental health shows a *'…failure of government policy on health and community care and both PCCs and the police themselves should be more robust in publicly condemning this'* (P65, Male, 64 years). Both answers show there is a need for mental health help but not every member of the public believes it is the police forces' duty to give this help. Other areas of priority for police training identified by participants included cyber security (12 participants), communication (21 participants), and diversity (10 participants).

The treatment of women and 'misogyny' was mentioned, particularly the Sarah Everard case. Female participants often addressed the issue of women no longer trusting the police: *'The current national coverage of policing relating to exposed email trails and attitudes has damaged the police reputation severely. From a female perspective the police now appear to be a group from which they need protection.'* (P52, Female, 65 years). One participant spoke about always being wary of police officers but now feeling the need for extra safety precautions if male officers were to approach her: *'…I would always have been cautious in the past if pulled over while alone in the car, but now I would probably end up not opening the door or window until I had someone on the phone with me, as I wouldn't feel safe as a lone woman if there were two male officers—police no longer automatically means 'a trusted person' to me. I think I'd be fine if a female officer approached me'* (P41, Female, 32 years). Some female participants used phrases such as *'feeling scared'* and having *'no trust'* when speaking about police officers which shows that the relationship between women and police is damaged, at least from the perspective of some female participants in this study. The same participant said that recent reports of misogyny *'speaks to a basic level of not seeing women as worthwhile human beings'* (P41, Female, 32 years) which may suggest that some members of the public see a power imbalance between women and police officers.

RQ2: How much does the public believe they know about police recruitment processes, training, and education?

A second EFA with oblimin rotation was conducted on the 10 perceived knowledge of police training items. The KMO statistic of 0.83 and Bartlett's test of sphericity, $\chi^2 = 561.34$, $df = 45.00$, $P < .001$, confirmed the data were appropriate for EFA. The number of factors extracted was based on parallel analysis and inspection of factor loadings. Items with factor loadings of 0.45 or higher were retained, in line with the recommendations of Tabachnick and Fidell (2012). The factor structure is outlined in Table 2.

The whole model explained 65.5 per cent of the variance in scores on the scale. Items on Factor 1 measured perceived knowledge of police training (6 items, $\alpha = 0.86$), and items on Factor 2 measured perceived knowledge of policing entrance qualifications (4 items, $\alpha = 0.90$). Items were summed to create total scores on each factor. Scores on the perceived knowledge of police training subscale could range from 6 to 30, with the overall mean score being 17.84 ($SD = 4.98$). Scores on the perceived knowledge of police qualifications subscale could range from 4 to 20, with the mean score being 9.57 ($SD = 3.72$). Both scores suggest some uncertainty from participants about their level of knowledge. Further, many participants reported having no knowledge of the College of Policing, with only 40.6 per cent of the sample replying 'yes' to the question 'Have you heard of the College of Policing?'. Similarly, few participants reported having any knowledge of the 2023 updates to police training, with 92.4 per cent of participants reporting they had not heard about it.

Two main themes were generated from the open-ended responses regarding participant's opinions and beliefs about recruitment processes to the police, what qualifications were required (or should be required) to join the police, and training and education undergone by police officers. These can be summarized as a general *lack of knowledge* in the public about these aspects of the police, and mixed opinions regarding the role of a *university education*.

Lack of knowledge

Forty-eight participants reported they had no knowledge about police training, and similarly a lack of accurate knowledge about what qualifications were needed to join the force and when officers can specialize.[2] The phrases '*I assume*' and

'*I imagine*' were used often when talking about qualifications and training, which shows that participants may not feel confident in their knowledge but still hold beliefs about these topics. Twenty participants frequently used the phrase '*I hope*' when describing training and the qualifications needed to join the force which may show that the public has a standard for the police force and hope that that standard is met, for example: '*I hope they would take a year to qualify fully. I would expect training on equipment to be a min week and revision and quality control yearly.*' (P25, Female, no age given). Thus, participants were hopeful that police received the training they deemed adequate but were unsure whether this was correct. The answers given about when officers can specialize differed, from one participant believing that specialism occurs when you first join the force ('*No idea really. I would imagine after initial basic training.*': P26, Female, 77 years) to another thinking it was after ten years of service ('*After 10 years of police service? Or specialised training beforehand*': P9, Male, 28 years). Neither of these answers is accurate, with the correct answer being after successful completion of probation as a police constable (Joiningthepolice.co.uk 2025). Only five participants gave accurate answers about the various pathways available to become a police officer ('*You need a minimum of 3 A levels or equivalents, you can do an apprenticeship, some university degrees may be helpful but are not required, you can do a police specific level 3 college course*': P4, Female, 21 years). This could suggest that the various routes into the force and the level of education required could be advertised more widely to increase public knowledge and understanding about the knowledge and skills needed to qualify as a police officer.[3]

At the end of the questionnaire, when asked 'Is there anything else you want to add that the questionnaire has not covered?', some participants acknowledged their lack of knowledge about police training: '*I'm realising my lack of knowledge might be a problem and I will look into these things*' (P15, preferred not to give gender, 24 years). Some

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[2]We looked for convergence in participant answers to the quantitative and qualitative questions about perceived knowledge of police qualifications and training. We compared answers to the quantitative question 'I understand what qualifications are needed to join the police force' and qualitative responses to the related question 'What do you know about the qualifications required to join police training?'. The answers of 51 participants converged and indicated awareness of their lack of knowledge (i.e., if they answered 'strongly disagree' to the quantitative question, their qualitative response acknowledged their lack of knowledge, such as "not something I've ever looked into"), and five participant responses converged indicating some accurate knowledge (i.e., if they answered 'strongly agree' to the quantitative question, their qualitative response contained

some accurate knowledge at the time of publication, such as "You need a minimum of 3 A Levels or equivalents"). 11 participants displayed divergence in their answers (i.e., answering 'strongly agree' to the quantitative question but their qualitative response was vague, such as "I'm not sure.") Similarly, when we compared answers to the quantitative question 'I understand what training the police undertake' and qualitative responses to the related question 'What do you know about current police training?', the answers of 51 participants converged and indicated awareness of their lack of knowledge, 1 participant response converged indicating some accurate knowledge at the time of publication, and 15 participants showed divergence, where participants answered 'agree' or 'strongly agree' to the quantitative question but the qualitative response was blank, vague, or could not be verified (e.g., "I know a reasonable amount as an ex-officer"). In summary, in the main, we noted convergence in the quantitative and qualitative responses. Where divergence occurred, it was outside of the scope of this study to ascertain whether the divergence was due to inattention in completing the survey or disparity between perceived and actual knowledge, and we leave this for future research to explore further.

[3]At the time of data collection in early 2023, a degree was a mandatory requirement to enter the police force in the UK as per the PEFQ at the time, but this was overturned in late 2023.

participants expressed interest in learning about these aspects of the police force, and therefore, it is important that this information is readily available: '*Clearly many of us not part of the police force are very ill informed about police training. It might be good if we were more informed*' (P57, Male, 77 years).

Importance of university education versus life experience and morals

There was a divide in participants' responses about the importance of having a university degree as a police officer. The participants who believed a university degree would be useful or should be a requirement said that it may not necessarily be about the degree itself, but the fact that someone who goes through higher education demonstrates better communication and literacy skills: '*I believe a requirement should be that you are educated to a university level as it shows you can learn and listen.*' (P13, Male, 26 years). Many participants believed that showing appropriate literacy, communication, and numeracy skills was the main and only important educational requirement to be a good police officer: '*No requirement for a degree; some level of education that means they're capable of communicating clearly and reporting accurately*' (P41, Female, 32 years). One participant had strong views against recruiting individuals directly from full time education as they believed '*Experience of 'life' is a vital requirement*' (P34, Female, 66 years). Thirteen participants expressed the belief that a Higher Education qualification (e.g. undergraduate degree) may be useful but was not necessary or should not be required to enter the police, as exemplified in this quote: '*I don't think academic qualifications beyond Sixth form or college are necessary. As long as they've got a-levels, BTECs, some vocational qualification etc. And completed their mandatory education as having a degree doesn't necessarily mean you're a good match for the police.*'

Twenty-three participants emphasized that real-world experience would be more useful than a Higher Education qualification, and in particular, personal qualities are more important than education. Thirty-one participants specifically mentioned the importance of a strong sense of morality over educational qualifications: '*Good health, physical fitness, strong sense of morality i.e right and wrong. Academic qualifications seem largely unimportant except for desk jobs*' (P60, Male, 70 years).

RQ3: What is the relationship between self-reported perceived knowledge about police training, education, and qualifications, and public confidence in their local police force?

We conducted correlation analyses between each of the relevant subscales, controlling for participant age and gender. Self-reported perceived knowledge of police training and confidence in local policing were positively correlated, $r(56) = 0.55$, $P < .001$, implying that high levels of perceived knowledge in the training received by the police force increase an individual's confidence in their local police force. Alternatively, high levels of confidence could lead individuals to feel that they have a high level of knowledge about the police force. However, self-reported perceived knowledge of police entrance qualifications and confidence in local policing were not correlated, $r(56) = 0.06$, $P = .63$.[4]

Discussion

We explored public self-reported perceived knowledge about police training and entrance qualifications, and confidence in local police forces. We found a statistically significant positive correlation between the public's perceived knowledge about police training and their confidence, suggesting that the more participants believed they knew about police training, the more confident they felt in their local police force. It is important to distinguish between correlation and causation, as we cannot show how the two variables are connected, or the direction of the relationship (e.g. whether perceived knowledge influences confidence or confidence influences perceived knowledge); however, the qualitative data do suggest that public perceived knowledge and confidence are related and give a possible direction for interventions. If we can increase public knowledge about the training that the police undertake, this might have a positive impact on confidence in the police.

We add to previous research showing how crucial communication between police and public is when it comes to enhancing confidence and trust. When given relevant information about police operations the public's views tend to steer more positively (Higgins 2020), and the same is true for local crime levels and how their police force is dealing with these issues (Myhill and Beak 2008). Some members of the public can hold views of the police which are overshadowed by false or outdated information (Higgins 2020), but being given relevant, correct information can allow for more positive perspectives on the work of the police (Higgins 2020; Andrews 2024b). Interestingly, we found no relationship between self-reported knowledge about entrance qualifications and confidence, suggesting that public awareness of entrance requirements to the police and the role of a university education is less influential in shaping public confidence than awareness of the training police officers receive once in post. This underscores the importance of accurate and up-to-date information about the police in shaping attitudes, and we highlight the key role of accurate information about how police training procedures operate. Similar to Andrews (2024b), some of our participants felt that aside from the educational content, a university education can 'broaden the mind' and yield holistic benefits for police officers. However, we echo the sentiment that '*people outside of policing have only a limited understanding of what the role actually entails*' (Andrews 2024b, p. 7). Participants in our study admitted having only a very limited knowledge of the policing role and training involved and expressed a desire to be better informed about these topics. Thus, there is growing evidence of the need for greater communication and education for the public about the professional nature of policing.

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[4]As would be expected, self-reported perceived knowledge of police training and self-reported perceived knowledge about police entrance qualifications (controlling for participant gender and age) were positively correlated, $r(58) = .59$, $P < 0.001$.

We found that media coverage can have a negative effect on the publics' perception of police, similar to previous research (Donovan and Klahm IV 2015; Péloquin et al. 2022). Some participants in our study believed that the media is skewed, as they only focus on negative stories; however, other participants were afraid of the fact that the majority of police stories they read were negative. Even if the negative stories being published are not necessarily untrue, if coverage is not evenly spread between negative stories and success stories, this could have potentially damaging impacts on the relationship between the public and the police (Hobbs and Brown 2023; McCaffree 2025). Countering the negative impact of the media, some of our participants reported that reminding the public that police officers are members of their community can help to bridge the 'them vs us' mentality that some people can hold. Further, police communicating knowledge of community matters (such as local crime levels) can have a positive impact on public perceptions (Bradford et al. 2009; Myhill and Bradford 2012). In our study, participants who worked with the police, such as in Neighbourhood Watch groups, held positive opinions about the police. In line with procedural justice theory and the idea of police officers as community 'guardians' (Schuck 2024), our research suggests that highlighting the work done by officers within communities could be an effective way to improve relationships between public and police (Colover and Quinton 2018).

Locals in Avon and Somerset also hold some of the same negative views reported in other research in respect of police treatment of minority groups such as those who are mentally ill, and of women (Hobbs and Brown 2023; Andrews 2024b). Recent events, such as the murder of Sarah Everard, have affected what the public believes are important areas of training for police forces, with many participants in our study believing a priority for police training includes mental health, violence against women and girls, and diversity. Given the College of Policing's recent focus on addressing policing culture (College of Policing 2025c), we suggest that wide publicizing of the new measures to address police wrongdoing and create a more inclusive policing culture would go some way to reassure the public that they are being addressed and shape perceptions of trust and confidence in a more positive direction.

Future directions

We explored participants self-reported *perceived* knowledge rather than their *actual* knowledge. Going forward, it will be important to examine actual knowledge of police training and entrance qualifications with an objective test, along with collecting confidence in local police forces, in a large and representative sample of the UK public. This would add validity to our initial findings and yield further evidence on whether actual knowledge, as well as perceived levels of knowledge, influences confidence and whether participants who felt confident in their knowledge were genuinely well informed. This could provide the police with useful information on what the public is informed in and what areas need to be better communicated. We acknowledge that the prompts we included in some of our open-ended questions could have influenced the nature of participant responses, for example, in

terms of important training areas for police. Thus, in the future, we recommend expanding the methodology to encompass interviews or focus groups, so participants can be prompted for further insights in a non-directive way. Further, our participant sample was diverse in terms of age and gender and so could be considered representative of Avon and Somerset, which is a socioeconomically and geographically diverse region of the UK. However, trust and confidence in policing can vary across regions in the UK, with trust reported to be higher for people in the south-east of England compared to in London (Pickering et al. 2024). Thus, our findings with respect to people living in Avon and Somerset may not be representative of people in England and Wales as a whole. Our mixed methods approach could be replicated to explore these topics and generate in-depth insights in other policing districts.

Summary of implications for police practice in the UK

- Improving knowledge in the public about police training and the skilled nature of the policing profession might have a positive impact on confidence in local police forces.
- Changes to police training and measures taken to enhance and improve police culture and inclusivity should be advertised and promoted at a national level.
- A greater number of positive success stories related to local and national policing efforts should be released and promoted in the media to counteract negative high-profile cases.

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Conflicts of interest

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