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FACTORS PREDICTING ADOLESCENTS' TRUST IN THE POLICE IN LITHUANIA

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Abstract*. This study investigates the psychological and sociocultural predictors of adolescents' trust in the police within the Lithuanian context. Despite high public trust in law enforcement among adults, little is known about how institutional trust is formed during adolescence, a critical developmental stage. Drawing on legal analysis and psychological theory, this research examines how social trust (from parents, peers, and teachers), media influence, and information credibility affect adolescents' attitudes toward the police, with particular attention to the mediating role of perceived police effectiveness. The study used a quantitative cross-sectional design with a sample of 204 adolescents aged 15–17 from a public secondary school in Vilnius. Psychometric scales were applied, and data were analysed using factor analysis, multiple regression, and mediation modelling. The findings reveal that perceived police effectiveness is the strongest direct predictor of trust in the police. Social trust and exposure to positive narratives also predict trust indirectly through perceived effectiveness. In contrast, media influence and information credibility did not directly influence trust when perceived effectiveness was considered. Gender differences were identified, with girls reporting higher trust levels than boys. These results support the procedural justice framework and underscore the need for developmentally sensitive, performance-based strategies to enhance youth trust in law enforcement. The study offers both empirical insights and practical implications for legal reform, school–police partnerships, and community trust-building initiatives.*

Keywords*: Adolescents, Trust in Police, Procedural Justice, Perceived Effectiveness, Social Trust, Media Influence, Institutional Legitimacy*

Introduction

Trust in the police constitutes a cornerstone of institutional legitimacy and democratic stability, particularly in societies where law enforcement agencies act as primary gatekeepers of public safety. When individuals perceive the police as fair, competent, and respectful, they are more likely to comply with laws, cooperate with investigations, and engage in civic life (Tyler, 2006; Jackson et al., 2012). This trust is especially crucial among adolescents—a developmentally sensitive group whose early attitudes toward institutions may shape long-term patterns of civic engagement, authority perception, and lawful behaviour.

However, while extensive research has explored adult perceptions of police legitimacy, empirical data regarding adolescents remain scarce. Adolescents differ from adults in emotional maturity, cognitive reasoning, and sensitivity to peer and social context (Kohlberg, 1981; Saarni, 1999). Their views are heavily influenced not only by personal experiences but also by second-hand narratives and media representations, which often serve as the primary source of institutional imagery prior to any direct contact (Murphy, 2015; Hinds, 2007).

Problem statement: Despite growing concern about adolescents' relationship with authority, few empirical studies have addressed how social and informational contexts influence young people's trust in the police. The lack of data is particularly pronounced in Lithuania, where high public trust among adults contrasts with limited understanding of youth perspectives. There is a pressing need to investigate how trust is formed in adolescence and what factors (e.g., media, social environment, perceived effectiveness) predict its presence or erosion.

The aim of the study is to identify psychological and sociocultural factors that predict adolescents' trust in the police, and to explore the mediating role of perceived police effectiveness in these relationships.

The research objectives are as follows:

1. To what extent does adolescents' social trust (trust expressed by parents, peers, and schools) influence their institutional trust in the police?
2. How does media influence and perceived information credibility affect adolescents' trust in the police?
3. Does perceived police effectiveness mediate the relationship between adolescents' social environment and their trust in the police?
4. Are there differences in trust in the police based on adolescents' sociodemographic characteristics (e.g., gender, residence, academic performance, prior contact with police)?

The Lithuanian context adds further urgency to this inquiry. While adult trust in the police remains high by European standards—with Eurobarometer data placing public confidence at over 80%—there is a notable lack of research addressing how trust in the police is formed among Lithuanian adolescents. Particularly absent are studies exploring how sociocultural and media-based variables interact with adolescents' own cognitive and emotional development to influence their institutional perceptions.

This research contributes to the literature by integrating psychological, social, and media-based factors into a unified model of institutional trust formation among adolescents. Moreover, it offers practical insights for public safety agencies seeking to strengthen legitimacy and trustworthiness among younger populations. A quantitative research design was employed to test these relationships using validated psychometric measures, factor analysis, regression modelling, and mediation analysis.

Theoretical and Regulatory Foundations of Adolescents' Trust in the Police

This section outlines the interdisciplinary foundations of the study by combining legal analysis with theoretical insights from developmental and social psychology. The purpose of the section is to establish a dual-contextual basis for understanding how adolescents form attitudes toward police institutions in Lithuania.

Legal Context of Police–Youth Relations: Protective Provisions and Regulatory Gaps

The relationship between law enforcement and minors in Lithuania is formally regulated through a set of legal frameworks designed to protect the rights and well-being of children during interactions with police. These regulations are primarily derived from national laws, such as the Law on the Fundamentals of Protection of the Rights of the Child, the Law on Police Activities, the Criminal Code, the Code of Criminal Procedure, and international conventions such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the European Convention on Human

Rights. Collectively, these laws emphasize dignity, protection from harm, access to legal assistance, and due process in all stages of legal proceedings involving minors.

Specifically, Lithuanian law ensures that minors involved in legal processes—whether as witnesses, victims, or suspects—have access to legal representation and are entitled to age-appropriate, respectful treatment. The Criminal Procedure Code, for instance, mandates that all interactions with minors must consider their age and psychological condition. It also provides specific guidelines for conducting interviews and prohibits practices that may be harmful or coercive. In high-risk situations, such as juvenile delinquency or vulnerability due to family context, preventive measures are available, including community-based supervision and social reintegration programs.

Furthermore, the Law on Police Activities obliges police officers to adhere to elevated conduct standards when interacting with minors. Officers must prevent physical or psychological harm, ensure procedural fairness, and consider the child's best interests. These provisions reflect a broader international trend of integrating child-sensitive practices into law enforcement protocols, aiming to reduce retraumatization and stigmatization in contact with legal institutions.

However, while the legal architecture is protective in scope, it remains primarily reactive and focused on procedural justice in situations where the minor is already involved in the legal system. It does not comprehensively address preventive, relational, or developmental aspects of building trust between law enforcement and youth.

First, there is a lack of legal guidance on how officers should build communication based on emotional safety and interpersonal trust. Legal texts do not require or define methods for relationship-building, empathy-driven communication, or youth-friendly engagement outside of formal proceedings. As a result, early, informal contacts between police and adolescents—such as community events, school visits, or preventive outreach—are conducted in a legally unregulated space. These interactions, although critical for shaping perceptions of police legitimacy, remain highly variable in quality and tone.

Second, the legal framework does not specify how psychological characteristics of adolescents should be accounted for in routine police interactions. Factors such as emotional immaturity, stress reactivity, and developmental need for autonomy are not explicitly integrated into police protocols. Although officers are instructed to act "with respect" and consider the child's "individual needs," no structured training, psychological screening, or communication models are mandated by law. This legal omission creates a gap between legal protection and developmental responsiveness.

Third, there are no defined legal mandates governing cooperation between law enforcement and educational institutions with the goal of building trust-based relationships. Although schools often host police-led lectures or preventive talks, these efforts are largely informal and unsystematic. The absence of codified partnerships between schools and police reduces the continuity and quality of adolescent–police engagement, making it harder to promote long-term legitimacy and procedural fairness through consistent contact.

Taken together, these regulatory gaps indicate that the psychosocial dimensions of institutional trust formation remain underregulated and are typically left to individual officers' discretion. While legal frameworks provide strong protections for minors in judicial contexts, they fall short in supporting positive trust-building experiences outside formal legal processes. This gap justifies the inclusion of psychological and social constructs—such as perceived fairness, media influence, social trust, and emotional development—in empirical models seeking to understand adolescents' trust in the police.

Psychological and Sociocultural Predictors of Adolescents' Trust in the Police

While legal frameworks emphasize the procedural and protective dimensions of police–youth interactions, they offer limited insight into the psychological, developmental, and sociocultural mechanisms that shape adolescents' attitudes toward law enforcement institutions. In developmental psychology, adolescence is widely recognized as a critical period for the formation of personal identity, moral reasoning, emotional competence, and the emergence of institutional trust (Erikson, 1968; Kohlberg, 1981; Saarni, 1999). These processes are particularly relevant when adolescents evaluate authority figures such as police officers, who represent social order, legitimacy, and societal control.

Cognitive development in adolescence enables abstract reasoning and critical reflection on institutional behavior. As adolescents move into Piaget's formal operational stage, they begin to question the legitimacy of authorities based on perceived fairness and consistency rather than unquestioned obedience (Piaget, 1972). Moral reasoning evolves concurrently, with many adolescents reaching Kohlberg's conventional and post-conventional levels, where institutional trust is evaluated against abstract principles such as justice, human rights, and equality (Kohlberg, 1981). This moral sophistication makes adolescents especially sensitive to perceived hypocrisy or procedural injustice in police conduct.

Emotionally, adolescence is marked by the ongoing development of emotional regulation, impulse control, and empathy (Saarni, 1999). According to Goleman (1995), emotional intelligence is crucial for interpreting authority figures' behaviour and for managing reactions to stressful interactions. Encounters with the police may evoke defensive or oppositional responses not necessarily due to anti-authoritarian beliefs, but due to limited emotional competence and heightened sensitivity to perceived disrespect or unfairness.

These internal processes unfold within a broader social context, and are strongly shaped by social learning mechanisms. Bandura's (1977) social learning theory emphasizes that attitudes toward authority are acquired through modeling, imitation, and reinforcement. Thus, adolescents' views of the police are influenced by their parents' attitudes, peer group norms, and school environment. Research has shown that when adolescents perceive their close environment as trusting toward the police, they are more likely to adopt similar attitudes (Hinds, 2007; Murphy, 2015).

In the digital era, media and social media play a critical role in shaping adolescents' beliefs about law enforcement. Adolescents are frequently exposed to negative portrayals of policing—such as excessive use of force, discriminatory practices, or institutional abuse—which may contribute to generalized distrust (Chermak et al., 2006; Lee and McGovern, 2014). However, the impact of such narratives is moderated by adolescents' critical engagement with information. Those who are capable of evaluating information sources, recognizing bias, and interpreting events within context tend to be less affected by one-sided media portrayals (Buckingham, 2003).

Drawing from these theories, this study conceptualizes adolescents' trust in the police as a multidimensional construct shaped by six interrelated factors. First, social trust encompasses the perceived institutional confidence expressed by parents, teachers, and peers, functioning as a proxy for value transmission. Second, media influence reflects adolescents' exposure to negative police representations in digital media. Third, information credibility captures the degree to which adolescents critically assess the objectivity and reliability of police-related content. Fourth, perceived police effectiveness involves adolescents' beliefs about law enforcement's capacity to maintain public order and control crime, which, in procedural justice theory, is a foundational predictor of institutional legitimacy (Tyler, 2006; Sunshine and Tyler,

2003). Fifth, positive background refers to the adolescent's broader informational and social exposure to positive narratives about the police. Finally, trust in the police—the outcome variable—encompasses adolescents' general evaluations of the police as fair, honest, and respectful.

These conceptual components are treated not as isolated variables, but as elements of a complex psychosocial model. The study hypothesizes that adolescents' social and informational context affects their trust in the police both directly and indirectly, via perceived police effectiveness. In other words, when adolescents are embedded in supportive environments and exposed to positive or credible police-related content, they are more likely to view the police as competent, which in turn reinforces their institutional trust. This integrative perspective highlights the importance of combining legal, psychological, and sociocultural analysis to understand adolescent–police relations.

Empirical Study on Predictors of Adolescents' Trust in the Police

This section presents the empirical component of the study, which investigates the psychological and sociocultural predictors of adolescents' trust in the police. Drawing on the theoretical model outlined previously, the research aims to test the relationships between social trust, media influence, perceived information credibility, perceived police effectiveness, and institutional trust. The study employs a quantitative cross-sectional design involving adolescents aged 15 to 17 from secondary school in Lithuania.

Method

Participants and Procedure. The present study was conducted in a public secondary school in Vilnius, Lithuania, and involved a total of 204 adolescents aged between 15 and 17 years ($M = 15.9$, $SD \approx 0.8$). The sampling approach was non-probabilistic and relied on full participation from selected grade levels within one institution. Data were collected during regular school hours at a scheduled time coordinated with school administration. The administration of the survey was carried out digitally via the Google Forms platform using school-provided devices. Students completed the questionnaire in a supervised classroom setting under the direct oversight of one of the study's authors, which helped ensure procedural consistency and minimize distractions.

The gender distribution of the sample was nearly balanced, with 51.4% ($n = 75$) identifying as male and 48.6% ($n = 71$) as female. Academic performance was self-reported based on most recent grade averages, with 34.2% indicating an average of 8.00, 24.0% reporting 9.00, and 16.4% reporting 7.00. The full distribution ranged from 6.00 to 10.00, indicating a moderately high-achieving sample.

Regarding family structure, 84.9% of participants lived with both parents, while 15.1% reported living in single-parent households. Socioeconomic status was indirectly assessed via self-reported access to free school meals, with 24.7% receiving such support. In terms of residential background, 20.5% of respondents lived in a large city, 46.6% in a city, 26.7% in a small town, and 6.2% in rural areas. Additionally, 50.0% of participants reported having had at least one direct contact with a police officer in the past.

This detailed demographic breakdown is consistent with the ethical research principles for contextualizing findings and ensuring interpretative clarity in studies involving adolescents (Harris, 2012; UNICEF, 2019).

Measures. The survey instrument consisted of multiple psychometric scales designed to capture adolescents' perceptions of and attitudes toward the police, as well as relevant social and informational influences. All items were presented using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Scale development followed guidelines for construct validity and reliability as proposed by DeVellis (2017). Normality tests using the Shapiro–Wilk method revealed that all scale distributions significantly deviated from normality ($p < .05$), prompting the use of non-parametric statistics in bivariate analysis.

Six composite scales were retained for final analysis, each supported by factor analytic structure and sufficient internal consistency:

The Social Trust scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$) captured adolescents' perceptions of trust in the police within their immediate social environment. Items included: "My teachers encourage trust in the police," "My parents or guardians believe the police act fairly toward all people," and "My friends trust the police," among others reflecting family, school, and peer contexts.

The Media Influence scale ($\alpha = .74$) assessed adolescents' exposure to and internalization of negative media content about police officers. Illustrative items included: "My opinion about the police is shaped by information in the media," "I often encounter negative posts or comments about police officers on social media," and "I do not check the sources of the information I see."

Trust in the Police ($\alpha = .84$) measured general institutional trust through four items addressing key legitimacy indicators: "The police behave respectfully toward people," "The police are honest," "The police do not abuse power," and "The police act fairly."

Information Credibility ($\alpha = .72$) assessed how adolescents engage with and interpret police-related information. Example items were: "I think the information I receive about the police is objective," and "I believe the information I receive about the police is credible."

Perceived Police Effectiveness ($\alpha = .83$) measured the respondent's belief in the institutional competence of the police. Items included: "The police investigate crimes effectively," "The police prevent crimes," and "The police maintain public safety."

Positive Background ($\alpha = .75$) captured adolescents' general exposure to favourable depictions of law enforcement, with items such as: "I often hear positive examples of police work in the media," "People in my community respect the police," and "My parents or guardians have a positive opinion about the police."

One additional scale was excluded from analysis due to low internal consistency ($\alpha = .47$), aligning with the psychometric recommendation to retain only scales with reliability above .70 for research purposes (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994).

Data Analysis. Statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS 28 and the PROCESS macro for mediation testing (Hayes, 2018). To verify the structure of the constructs, principal component analysis (PCA) with Varimax rotation was performed. Sampling adequacy was confirmed (KMO = .894), and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2 = 2177.28$, df = 153, $p < .001$). Although eight factors initially met the eigenvalue > 1 criterion, a six-factor solution was retained based on scree plot interpretation and theoretical coherence, accounting for 49.6% of total variance.

Given the non-normality of scale distributions, Kendall's tau-b correlations were used to explore bivariate associations. Multiple linear regression with bootstrapping (5,000 resamples) was employed to identify statistically significant predictors of trust in the police. This method is robust to violations of normality and is recommended when using smaller samples or non-normally distributed data (Field, 2018). Results indicated that perceived police effectiveness was the only direct predictor with a statistically significant effect ($\beta = .436$, $p < .001$).

To further explore the relational structure, mediation analysis was conducted using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 4). The analysis tested whether perceived police effectiveness mediated the effects of social trust and positive background on adolescents' trust in the police. Significant indirect effects were identified in both pathways, as indicated by bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals not crossing zero. These findings support the hypothesis that adolescents' trust is shaped not only by social and informational factors but also by how effective they perceive the police to be.

Ethical Considerations. This study adhered to the highest standards of ethical research involving minors, in accordance with national guidelines and international protocols (UNICEF, 2019; British Psychological Society, 2021). Written informed consent was obtained from school administration, participants' legal guardians, and the adolescent participants themselves. Participation was voluntary, and all responses were anonymous; no personal identifiers were collected at any point. Special care was taken in the formulation of survey items to avoid inducing psychological distress, bias, or institutional suspicion. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw without consequence, and the data were processed in aggregate format only.

Results

Exploratory Factor Analysis. To explore the underlying dimensional structure of the questionnaire and validate the hypothesized constructs, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted using principal component analysis with Varimax rotation. Sampling adequacy was confirmed via the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of 0.894, indicating a meritorious level of suitability for factor analysis (Kaiser, 1974). Bartlett's test of sphericity was also significant, $\chi^2(153) = 2177.28$, $p < .001$, confirming sufficient intercorrelations among items to proceed with factor extraction.

Although eight components exhibited eigenvalues greater than one, a six-factor solution was retained based on theoretical coherence and scree plot interpretation (Cattell, 1966). The final six-factor solution explained 49.6% of the total variance. Items with primary loadings of $\geq .40$ and no significant cross-loadings were retained. One item was excluded due to low communality and conceptual incongruence.

The extracted components aligned with the pre-established conceptual framework and were labelled accordingly: (1) Social Trust, (2) Media Influence, (3) Trust in the Police, (4) Information Credibility, (5) Perceived Police Effectiveness, and (6) Positive Background. The rotated component matrix summarizing item loadings for each factor is provided in Table 1. These findings demonstrate the psychometric robustness of the measurement model, supporting the construct validity of the scales used (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Table 1. Rotated Component Matrix (Varimax) with Factor Loadings for Retained Items

Factor (items)	Loading
F1: Social Trust	
My teachers encourage trust in the police	.732
My parents believe police act fairly	.687
Most people I know trust the police	.659
I am exposed to positive opinions about police work	.615
Events with police officers take place in my community	.592

My school hosts events involving police	.585
My friends trust the police	.570
My friends evaluate police work positively	.547
My parents trust police work	.519
F2: Media Influence	
My opinion is shaped by media	.719
I do not check the sources	.684
I see negative posts about police on social media	.618
F3: Trust in Police	
Police behave respectfully	.760
Police are honest	.711
Police do not abuse power	.704
Police act fairly	.684
F4: Info Credibility	
Information about police is objective	.712
I pay attention to what is being said about police	.651
I believe police-related information is credible	.630
I am interested in posts or stories about police	.617
F5: Effectiveness	
Police ensure public safety	.793
Police investigate crimes effectively	.774
Police prevent crimes	.756
F6: Positive Background	
I often hear positive police examples in the media	.782
My parents have a positive opinion about the police	.751
People in my community respect the police	.738

Note: Loadings < .40 are suppressed for clarity.

Associations Between Sociodemographic Variables and Trust in the Police. To determine whether trust in the police varied by sociodemographic characteristics, non-parametric tests were employed due to the non-normal distribution of the dependent variable. Mann–Whitney U tests were used for dichotomous variables, and Kruskal–Wallis H tests for variables with more than two categories.

The analysis revealed a statistically significant difference based on gender: female participants reported higher trust in the police than male participants ($U = 1942.5$, $Z = –2.279$, $p = .023$). This result is consistent with previous findings suggesting that women and girls are often more trusting of institutional actors than their male counterparts (Jackson et al., 2012; Hinds, 2007).

However, no significant differences in trust were observed with respect to other sociodemographic variables. Specifically, trust levels did not significantly differ based on family structure ($U = 1225.5$, $p = .510$), receipt of free school meals ($U = 1267.0$, $p = .503$), previous contact with the police ($U = 1481.5$, $p = .978$), academic achievement ($H(4) = 1.43$, $p = .839$), age group ($H(2) = 0.64$, $p = .728$), or place of residence ($H(3) = 5.81$, $p = .121$).

These results suggest that while gender may influence adolescents' attitudes toward the police, other background variables examined in this study do not have a statistically significant effect.

Predictors of Trust in the Police. To identify which psychological and social-perceptual variables predict adolescents' trust in the police, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples. The six scales derived from factor analysis—Social Trust, Media Influence, Information Credibility, Perceived Police Effectiveness, and Positive Background—were included as predictors in the model.

The model was statistically significant, explaining 31.2% of the variance in trust in the police ($R^2 = .312$, adjusted $R^2 = .285$, $F(6, 139) = 10.48$, $p < .001$). Among the independent variables, only Perceived Police Effectiveness emerged as a significant predictor ($\beta = .436$, $p < .001$). All other predictors failed to reach statistical significance at the $p < .05$ level.

This finding underscores the central role of perceived competence in shaping institutional trust during adolescence, consistent with procedural justice theory, which highlights effectiveness as a key foundation of legitimacy (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Tyler, 2006). Adolescents who perceive the police as capable of maintaining public order, preventing crime, and responding effectively are significantly more likely to express institutional trust.

Mediation Analysis. To test whether Perceived Police Effectiveness serves as a mediating mechanism between the social environment and adolescents' trust in the police, two mediation models were estimated using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 4) with 5,000 bootstrap samples and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (Hayes, 2018).

In the first model, Social Trust was treated as the independent variable (X), Trust in the Police as the dependent variable (Y), and Perceived Police Effectiveness as the mediator (M). The total effect of Social Trust on Trust in the Police was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.6300$, $p < .001$). When the mediator was included, the direct effect decreased but remained significant ($\beta = 0.2609$, $p = .0095$), and the indirect effect was also significant ($\beta = 0.3691$, 95% CI [0.2159, 0.5273]). These results support a partial mediation model, wherein the social environment influences institutional trust both directly and indirectly through perceptions of police competence.

In the second model, Positive Background was introduced as the independent variable. The total effect on Trust in the Police was significant ($\beta = 0.6108$, $p < .001$). With the mediator added, the direct effect was reduced ($\beta = 0.2226$, $p = .0272$), and the indirect path through Perceived Police Effectiveness was again statistically significant ($\beta = 0.3882$, 95% CI [0.2362, 0.5503]).

Taken together, these results indicate that Perceived Police Effectiveness functions as a psychological bridge linking both the social climate of institutional trust and environmental exposure to positive law enforcement narratives with adolescents' trust in the police. This aligns with the broader theoretical framework of trust socialization and reinforces the idea that institutional legitimacy is, in part, internalized through adolescents' beliefs about police competence, rather than through social norms alone (Tyler & Huo, 2002; Murphy, 2015).

Discussion

Summary of Key Findings. This study aimed to examine the psychological and sociocultural factors that predict adolescents' trust in the police, using a multidimensional conceptual model. The findings reveal that among the six measured predictors, only perceived police effectiveness had a statistically significant direct effect on institutional trust. However, both social trust and positive background were shown to exert significant indirect effects on trust in the police, mediated through perceived police effectiveness. These results highlight the mediating role of adolescents' cognitive evaluations of institutional competence in translating broader social and informational contexts into trust-related outcomes.

Consistent with procedural justice theory (Sunshine and Tyler, 2003; Tyler, 2006), the results reinforce the central importance of perceived institutional performance in the formation of legitimacy perceptions during adolescence. Notably, other factors such as negative media influence or critical engagement with information—although theoretically relevant—did not significantly predict trust when included alongside perceived effectiveness, suggesting that adolescents may weigh functional competence more heavily than source characteristics or narrative tone.

Gender differences were also observed, with girls reporting higher levels of trust in the police than boys. This finding aligns with prior studies (e.g., Hinds, 2007; Jackson et al., 2012) and may reflect broader socialization differences in relation to authority, risk perception, or social conformity.

Theoretical Implications. The findings have several implications for theoretical models of institutional trust during adolescence. First, the mediating role of perceived police effectiveness supports the argument that adolescents' trust is not formed passively but involves cognitive appraisals of institutional performance. While social learning mechanisms (Bandura, 1977) contribute to trust development, these influences appear to be filtered through adolescents' judgments of institutional competence.

Second, the results point to a layered structure of trust formation. Adolescents may absorb attitudes from parents, teachers, and peers, but unless these are reinforced by perceived institutional performance, they may not translate into durable trust. This confirms previous assertions that legitimacy is constructed at the intersection of perceived fairness, competence, and contextual credibility (Tyler and Huo, 2002; Murphy, 2015).

Finally, the study underscores the need to differentiate between trust in interpersonal authority figures (e.g., teachers or school officers) and generalized institutional trust. Adolescents appear to distinguish between these layers, applying specific standards to their evaluations of police as institutional actors—particularly around effectiveness and procedural reliability.

Practical and Policy Implications. From a policy perspective, these findings suggest that efforts to strengthen adolescents' trust in law enforcement should prioritize enhancing perceptions of police effectiveness. Interventions could focus on increasing adolescents' awareness of how police maintain public safety, prevent crime, and engage with communities. For example, incorporating real-life case examples of police work into educational settings could provide concrete illustrations of institutional competence and mitigate abstract distrust.

Additionally, the findings emphasize the importance of social reinforcement. Schools and community organizations play a crucial role in shaping youth attitudes. Programs that involve parents, teachers, and law enforcement officers in joint activities—such as school visits, discussion panels, or youth-police forums—can help embed institutional trust within adolescents' social ecology (Flexon et al., 2009).

From a legislative standpoint, current Lithuanian legal provisions regarding minors and law enforcement interactions focus largely on procedural protections and due process rights (Law on the Fundamentals of Protection of the Rights of the Child of the Republic of Lithuania, 2003; Law on Police Activities of the Republic of Lithuania, 2000). However, they lack practical guidelines on how to build relational trust, address psychological needs, or foster emotionally secure police–youth interactions. Our findings point to the need for complementary policy frameworks that account for developmental psychology and emotional safety in institutional contexts.

Furthermore, cooperation between schools and police institutions remains largely informal and under-regulated. Introducing clear protocols for respectful engagement, trust-

building, and mutual support could improve relational dynamics and reduce mistrust in the long term.

Limitations of the Study. Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study relied on data from a single secondary school in Vilnius, limiting the generalizability of findings to the broader adolescent population in Lithuania. The sample, while diverse in terms of socioeconomic and residential background, may not capture regional or institutional variations in police–youth relations.

Second, the study employed a self-report design, which is susceptible to social desirability bias and may not fully reflect adolescents' private attitudes or emotional responses to police. The digital format, although efficient and consistent, may also limit participants' ability to elaborate on their experiences or contextualize their views.

Third, the cross-sectional nature of the study precludes any causal conclusions. While mediation pathways were statistically supported, longitudinal data would be required to confirm the directionality of relationships and assess developmental trajectories in trust formation over time.

Lastly, the internal consistency of one additional scale fell below acceptable thresholds and was therefore excluded. While this reflects methodological rigor, it also suggests the need for further instrument development and validation in Lithuanian adolescent populations.

Directions for Future Research. Future studies could address these limitations by expanding the sample across multiple schools and regions, including rural and minority youth populations, and testing for potential moderating variables such as prior experiences with police, cultural background, or family dynamics.

Longitudinal research designs would also provide more robust insights into how trust evolves during adolescence and how institutional events (e.g., scandals, policy changes, or publicized incidents) influence young people's trust trajectories.

Moreover, qualitative or mixed-methods research could enrich the understanding of adolescents' lived experiences, emotional perceptions, and symbolic meanings attached to law enforcement. For example, focus groups or narrative interviews could reveal how adolescents reconcile abstract institutional norms with concrete police encounters.

Finally, comparative studies across countries or legal systems—particularly within the Baltic region or across post-Soviet societies—could illuminate how historical and cultural legacies influence institutional trust and legitimacy.

Conclusions

This study set out to explore the psychological and sociocultural predictors of adolescents' trust in the police within the Lithuanian context. By integrating legal, developmental, and social perspectives, the research aimed to fill a notable gap in empirical knowledge regarding youth–police relations in a post-Soviet European society.

First, the analysis confirmed that perceived police effectiveness is the strongest direct predictor of institutional trust. Adolescents who viewed police officers as competent in maintaining public safety, investigating crimes, and preventing offenses were significantly more likely to report higher trust levels. This supports the foundational premise of procedural justice theory, which emphasizes institutional performance as central to legitimacy formation (Tyler, 2006).

Second, while social trust—comprising parental, peer, and school-based perceptions—did not directly predict trust in the police, it exerted a significant indirect effect via perceived police effectiveness. This suggests that adolescents internalize the attitudes of their close social

environment but evaluate these perspectives against their own judgments of institutional competence.

Third, the study demonstrated that exposure to a positive informational background also indirectly predicted trust through the same mediating mechanism. Adolescents who encountered favourable narratives about police in media and community settings were more likely to perceive the police as effective, which in turn enhanced institutional trust. This highlights the importance of constructive media representation and its psychological processing in adolescence.

Contrary to expectations, media influence and information credibility did not emerge as direct predictors when entered into multivariate models alongside perceived effectiveness. These findings suggest that, during adolescence, cognitive assessments of institutional performance may override both uncritical media exposure and reflective media literacy in determining levels of trust.

Lastly, among sociodemographic variables, gender was the only significant factor: girls reported higher trust in the police than boys. Other factors—such as place of residence, family structure, academic achievement, or prior contact with police—did not show significant associations.

In summary, the research confirms that adolescents' trust in the police is shaped less by abstract social influences and more by how effectively the institution is perceived to function. This insight carries implications for both public safety strategy and legal reform, emphasizing the need for performance-driven trust-building efforts and developmentally sensitive engagement with young citizens.

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