



Foundations of empathy and resilience: Integrating trauma-informed policing from recruit training onward

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This article is directly related to the first global Trauma Informed Policing and Law Enforcement Conference held in Melbourne, Australia in February 2024.

ABSTRACT

In this article, the authors explore the early integration of trauma-informed policing into the training of police recruits in Tasmania since 2023. Trauma-informed policing is an approach that recognizes the psychological, emotional, and physical impact of trauma on individuals and supports a more compassionate and empathetic response from law enforcement at various stages of the policing process. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of mental health and well-being for officers themselves. A quick perusal of scholarly and grey literature seemed to identify a gap in training materials specifically designed for police recruits. This preliminary exercise led to a more thorough systematic literature review, which revealed the same. With a lack of consolidated materials for police training, a tailored curriculum was co-designed between the University of Tasmania, Tasmania Police, and experts in the field. The training aims to equip recruits with knowledge to recognize signs of trauma, understand its effects on behaviour, and respond appropriately. The survey evaluation of all training conducted in 2023 received a 70.8% response rate and indicated significant satisfaction with the training. After presenting the results of this evaluation, the authors discussed the benefits of trauma-informed policing training while acknowledging the challenges of implementation. However, in the Tasmanian context, strong police leadership support, a long-standing academic partnership, and a whole-of-government endorsement of trauma-informed practices provide a conducive environment for this initiative. Overall, the integration of trauma-informed principles into police training in Tasmania represents a significant step towards more empathetic, effective, and resilient policing, with potential for broader application and ongoing development.

Key Words Trauma-informed; policing; police training; recruits; trauma; well-being.

INTRODUCTION

Trauma-informed policing (TIP) has been mentioned in scholarly and grey literature since the mid-2010s (Thornton et al., 2021). However, it has recently become an approach to law enforcement hailed as the new operational and strategic pathway to formally embrace and recognize the potential impact of trauma on individuals who come into contact with police. TIP advances that to foster caring, productive, and effective interactions with vulnerable individuals, police must grasp the basic psychological, emotional, and physical

impacts of trauma on people, especially crime victims and witnesses (Goodall et al., 2023; Lathan et al., 2019). A further argument has been made that the approach is also beneficial for even police officers' own mental health (Alvarez et al., 2022; Blumberg et al., 2020).

This article, presented at the 2024 Trauma-Informed Policing and Law Enforcement Conference (February 2024, Melbourne, Australia), considers the core reasons for supporting the implementation and evaluation of the early integration of TIP into the training of police recruits in Tasmania since 2023. In this article, we argue that incorporating

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trauma-informed principles during the formative stages of recruit training should be front and centre of ongoing professional development on vulnerability issues. Additionally, this article emphasizes that a TIP approach promotes a transformative framework that establishes the foundation for more empathetic, community-focused, and resilient police organizations. By incorporating TIP principles early in training curricula, young officers are prepared to understand the prevalence and impact of trauma on individuals and in communities (Turney et al., 2023). Furthermore, introducing TIP at the recruit stage also establishes a foundation for officers to better care for themselves and their colleagues, normalizing awareness of mental health issues among police officers, as well as adopting precautionary measures to protect their well-being (Alvarez et al., 2022; Blumberg et al., 2020).

BACKGROUND

TIP aims to reduce the likelihood of re-traumatizing people during their encounters with police by considering their past experiences and creating a safe environment for them to interact with law enforcement (Lathan et al., 2019). It implies the training of police officers to recognize signs of trauma and respond in a way that is compassionate, respectful, and non-threatening and the creation of safe environments for community members and staff (Skinner-Osei et al., 2019; Turney et al., 2023).

Research has long advocated for different police procedural approaches to victims, particularly in the investigative interrogation of survivors of sexual assault (Campbell, 2022; Lathan et al., 2019; Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2023; Rich, 2019), and when behaviour has been heavily influenced by adverse childhood experiences (Bateson et al., 2020; Brodie et al., 2023; Goodall et al., 2023; Marans, 2023; Skinner-Osei et al., 2019). However, some of the most recent discourse surrounding effective law enforcement increasingly centres on the need for officers to possess a broader, yet nuanced, understanding of vulnerability (Bartkowiak-Théron & Asquith, 2017), including appropriate tools to evaluate such vulnerability (Bateson et al., 2020). Work has also become more prominent across many democratic policing jurisdictions in considering the generational trauma suffered within communities, such as ethnic, indigenous, or disadvantaged communities, as well as those communities that have suffered common traumatic events (Government of Canada, 2019; Janetta et al., 2019; Turney et al., 2023).

TIP recognizes that trauma can have a significant impact on an individual's behaviour and interactions with others, including law enforcement (Rich, 2019). It acknowledges and responds to trauma in a sensitive and supportive way, and the approach suggests that by employing a trauma-informed approach to their interaction with members of the public, police officers can improve their relationships with the communities they serve, promote greater trust and cooperation with law enforcement, and improve their collaborative work with public health agencies (Ford et al., 2019). The literature also proposes that trauma-informed approaches to policing can slowly chip at the significant stigma that is attached to police officer mental health and well-being (Alvarez et al., 2022; Blumberg et al., 2020), therefore promoting a cultural shift and a wrap-around approach to trauma in the community, as well

as trauma and vicarious trauma in the organization (Alvarez et al., 2022; Lathan et al., 2019; Thornton et al., 2021).

Recent efforts to increase officers' knowledge on TIP have not been systematically applied to police recruit training, and there is currently no such thing as "universal knowledge" about TIP (Ford et al., 2019). However, despite a lack of consistency across jurisdictions (Grewcock & Sentas, 2019; Janetta et al., 2019), in the case of Tasmania (which interests us specifically in this article), there is a marked effort to promote the critical analysis and assessment of vulnerabilities from recruit levels onwards.

Literature Review

Early engagement in 2021–2022 with colleagues from Deakin University, the Edinburgh Napier University, and the Violence Reduction Unit of Lancashire Constabulary (via Trauma-Informed Lancashire) highlighted three things:

1. There exists a significant amount of training material surrounding trauma-informed care and general practice.
2. There is a lack of material dedicated to specifically train police in TIP (by which we mean the deployment of trauma-informed practices within the confined and very structured operational requirement of law enforcement).
3. There exist even fewer resources specifically dedicated to training for police recruits (i.e., the training at the police academy, which prepares recruits for their first 12 months in their general duties functions).

In order to address 2 and 3, a systematic literature review (SLR, which will be published in full elsewhere) is being conducted to establish the current state of knowledge and research specifically pertaining to police training. The SLR began by searching for articles from Scopus and Web of Science, targeting literature related to "trauma-informed policing" and "train*." As very few results were returned through these two databases, the search was extended to include Google Scholar. Each search was meticulously carried out to ensure a broad capture of relevant articles, with search parameters set in Scopus and Web of Science to only include peer-reviewed academic articles. Through this process, 2 articles were identified in Scopus, 2 in Web of Science, and 110 results in Google Scholar. Following data collection, a screening process was employed to ensure that the results were appropriate for the review. Result titles were manually reviewed and edited to remove any special characters, and duplicates were then identified and removed. The refined list of articles was recorded in a new spreadsheet, consolidating the cleaned data for further screening. Following duplicate removal, 111 results remained. To ensure the collected data aligned with our specific research objectives, a keyword filtering stage was utilized to review the titles and abstracts of results for specific keywords relevant to "trauma-informed policing" and "train*." Once keyword screening was completed, 36 articles remained. Further screening was required to ensure that the included results from Google Scholar were peer-reviewed journal articles. Sixteen remaining articles form the foundation of our SLR into TIP and training.

As a brief overview of the SLR preliminary findings, the reviewed articles indicate that the adoption of trauma-informed training in police organization is in its early stages and that training programmes are different across all jurisdictions (Campbell, 2022; de la Fontaine et al., 2022). The evaluation of these training packages remains reactive, justifying a call for a thorough assessment of their impact on police attitudes towards trauma and overall practice. This is particularly important, as early evaluations of training programs to date indicate “promising results for improving officer knowledge, perception of survivors, and survivor engagement with investigators” (Campbell, 2022, p. 323; see also de la Fontaine, 2021; Ingarfield, 2021; Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2023). Furthermore, evaluations of the impact of short trauma awareness training sessions for police in Scotland indicate that these sessions considerably influence police officers’ attitudes towards trauma, including more positive attitudes towards victims and witnesses (Brodie et al., 2023).

Training Development and Evaluation Methods

In response to an initial brief perusal of literature and in collaboration with the aforementioned academic and practitioner colleagues, Tasmania Police instructors, and with the endorsement of the Police Commissioner, work commenced with the Department of Police, Fire and Emergency Management (DPFEM) People and Wellbeing Unit to develop the initial introduction to TIP for police recruits in February 2023. The training had to be tailored to the Intended Learning Outcomes of the recruit course and done in the spirit of delivering, in a very short amount of time, sufficient knowledge of trauma-informed practice so the recruits, as part of their encounters with members of the public, would:

- understand the effects of trauma on the brain,
- expect and understand behaviour in the aftermath of a traumatic event,
- recognize signs of trauma and respond in a trauma-informed manner,
- be familiar with the ways to use TIP, and
- apply these to good mental health and daily well-being habits.

As a result of these considerations, a short introduction to TIP was added to the university curriculum that Tasmania Police recruits receive as part of their Associate Degree in Social Sciences. This training is hosted in the Unit that explores the subject of law enforcement and public health and the specific interaction of police with vulnerable people. The training is composed of four elements: (1) the deconstruction of five prominent myths in trauma-informed practice,¹ (2) a potted introduction to neurobiology, (3) how trauma impacts encounters in the field (and needs to be considered in communication and procedures), and (4) how to recognize the signs that someone may have encountered a (or a series of) traumatic event(s).

¹These five myths are as follows: trauma as ACEs only; trauma only applies to victims (offenders can have experience of traumatic events too, first responders as well); trauma-informed practice only needs to occur in cases of domestic violence, child abuse or sexual assault; trauma only happens to women; a trauma-informed approach is an excuse for crime.

The training sessions are accompanied by an evaluation of teaching and learning co-run by the University of Tasmania and Tasmania Police; all evaluations of teaching and learning programs are covered under an umbrella ethics protocol (#29655). Two weeks after the end of the training, all attendees received a follow-up email inviting them to answer a very short, anonymous survey. The survey offered attendees the possibility to reflect on their training and their expectations of it using a Likert scale questionnaire accompanied by two free-text boxes, which allowed for further expression of their thoughts. Overall, it was intended for the survey to take no more than 3 minutes to complete.

At the time the Trauma-Informed Policing and Law Enforcement conference took place, three recruit courses and a one-off police mentor course had received the training and were asked their opinion about it.² Out of a total of one hundred and forty-four ($n = 144$) trained officers, 102 elected to respond to the evaluation survey.

Such a high response rate (70.8%) is not surprising in police education research, especially when evaluations are co-run or sponsored by the police organization. This is due to the perception that the evaluation is an exercise mandated by the hierarchy. In this case, all public documents (invitation email, information sheet, and survey link) sent to research participants were co-signed by the Commander of the Police Academy.

RESULTS

Responses to the evaluation survey indicated that 72%³ ($n = 71$) of training attendees responding to the survey were satisfied or very satisfied with the session, 15% ($n = 15$) of respondents indicated that they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, and the remaining respondents (13%; $n = 13$) either did not respond to the question or ticked N/A (not applicable). There were only three ($n = 3$) “dissatisfied” responses recorded.

The qualitative responses provided further information as to how the training, or portions of it, was received by some participants, particularly when these individuals already had a preliminary understanding of trauma. This qualitative feedback was either entered into the survey free-text boxes or sent spontaneously to lecturers or the police sponsor. In preparation for the February 2024 conference, all feedback was collated and pooled for further analysis. Some of the qualitative feedback is as follows.

“Thank you for your lecture today on Trauma-informed Policing. Most recently I have been employed in the health industry where trauma-informed care has become very topical. It has been my experience that training centred around the ACE scoring and victimising of ‘trauma affected people’ (...). [this never sat well with me, as] I feel they have the right to not be considered ‘trauma-affected’ until they are ‘trauma-affected’. I thought your presentation today was excellent. It was the first time I had seen trauma informed education delivered with empathy on what the person is experiencing and actual tools for how

²Since then, another 300 police officers have been trained in trauma-informed policing in Tasmania.

³All percentages are rounded up to the closest denominator.

we as Police Officers can help support the person, be it victim or offender. It was also the first time the explanation had centred around the effect trauma has on the brain and the analogy of the hand made it easier to understand. Thank you!" (Recruit, by email, November 2023)

"I believe today I have enhanced my abilities surrounding how well informed I am in regards to trauma and the impact that it can have on members of the organisation. This will enable me to potential be more able to identify what is occurring and how I am able to interact and intervene if required. Whilst also acknowledging and engaging other support services as required to assist with the wellbeing of myself and the recruit." (Mentor, survey response, September 2023)

"Trauma-informed training has enabled me to be aware of and accept all facets of an individual's story and provide them as much time as they need to provide their account, even if this is over a number of occasions and in a location that is comfortable to them. The ability to be open, non-judgemental, compassionate, and patient is something I have learnt through this training and experience in working cases, which is an asset to both my professional and personal life. I firmly believe that trauma-informed training should be offered to all members of Tasmania Police, at all ranks and areas of workplace." (Mentor, survey response, September 2023)

"To be trauma-informed provides an acute sense of empathy and understanding to be better prepared while working with victims, either children or vulnerable people, through something that has been often an extremely traumatic experience in their life, whether recent or historical in their reporting." (Recruit, survey response, November 2023)

"I got a lot out of the Trauma Informed Policing and Well Being module as well as the CISM component. I think that these aspects will be important for the recruit throughout their career." (Mentor, survey response, September 2023)

"The one main aspect that resonated with myself today would have been around the trauma informed police and the information and discussions it generated." (Mentor, survey response, September 2023)

"Trauma should not be part of police training, doesn't apply to the job." (Recruit, survey response, November 2023)

DISCUSSION

Research already indicates that trauma-informed training is beneficial to police operational duties, either in general duties work or in areas of specialization (sexual assault, child protection, youth justice, etc.; Gill et al., 2016; Ingarfield, 2021; Turney et al., 2023). Responses to the evaluation of the first iterations of the training for Tasmania Police confirm the professional

development benefits of delivering such training to recruits as well as serving police officers.

There remain some attitudinal, organizational, and cultural obstacles to the full deployment of trauma-informed knowledge in the policing profession, however. Resistance to new procedures and training is well explored in the policing literature that mentions the relative police "inertia" to emerging evidence-based practices (Kim et al., 2021; Rich, 2019). In Tasmania, however, cultural and organizational unwillingness to evolve according to the evidence-based recommendations is tempered by several factors.

First of all, a new, dynamic higher leadership in the police organization provides the imprimatur to develop and implement new evidence-led educational initiatives, which support the long-standing leadership position of Tasmania Police in the professionalization of policing. The fact that the partnership with the University of Tasmania is in its 28th year also fosters an environment of trust and curriculum co-design that is attentive to the needs of the organization (Bartkowiak-Théron et al., 2020).

Second, the training was delivered after feedback that the initial training that had been delivered by other organizations was "too generic" and not specific enough for police operations. The training that was developed by the team at TILES in partnership with the DPFEM was geared at taking into account the prescriptive police operational environment (police policy, legislation, powers, arrest, custody, etc.).

Third, the political conditions in which the training took place have emphasized trauma-informed practice as a blanket approach to vulnerability (particularly young people; Ford et al., 2019; Gill et al., 2016) as a whole-of-government practice throughout the state. This is the result of the recommendations of the 2020 Commission of Inquiry into the Tasmanian Government's Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. The expression "trauma-informed practice(s)" appears 41 times in Volume 1 of the Inquiry report, which contains all recommendations to the government (Naeve et al., 2023). In May 2024, the Tasmanian Government endorsed all 191 of these recommendations (Rockliffe, 2024). Therefore, the recommendations of the Commission of Inquiry into the Tasmanian Government's Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (Naeve et al., 2023) paved the way for first responders to reconsider the harmful practices that were unveiled as part of the Commission's investigation. The fact that the Inquiry was heavily prominent in the media also helped sensitize community members and practitioners to the effects of iatrogenic vulnerabilities, which were known before, but less prominently displayed than other vulnerabilities.

CONCLUSION

The early integration of TIP into police recruit training in Tasmania marks a significant step forward for the wide adoption of trauma-informed practices across the organization. The support from leadership and the "stamp of approval" that was given by the Commissioner at the beginning of 2023 demonstrate a noticeable forward-thinking shift in law enforcement practices in the state. The training and its evaluation, to date, have demonstrated promising results, both in terms of enhancing the understanding and sensitivity of police recruits towards trauma and in providing a new level of sophistication

to their interactions with vulnerable people. High satisfaction rates indicate a successful reception and an appreciation for the approach's depth and practicality. Since the February 2024 Trauma-Informed Policing Conference, an additional 300 members have been trained through a new iteration of the program, which has been further developed in light of the feedback and now involves delivery by both a policing scholar and a psychologist specialized in sexual assault, child protection, and violence. Evaluation of the new iteration of that training is underway.

Further research needs to be conducted to evaluate the extent to which the introduction of this training also addresses the mental health and well-being of the officers themselves, as argued in the literature (Janetta et al., 2019). At this early stage of deployment, it is too early to assess the psychological impacts of the training on vicarious trauma awareness and the impact on mental health self-reporting behaviours. However, we could expect that the training contributes to a normalization of discussions of the psychological impacts of police work, especially since the new iteration of the training insists on practitioner self-care and processing (which will be the subject of another paper).

The implementation of TIP is not without challenges, however (Goodall et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2021). In addition to already packed training and professional development schedules, cultural resistance to 'anything new', the ingrained cultural attitudes within police organizations, and the need for ongoing adaptation of training programs pose significant hurdles (Ford et al., 2019), regardless of how conducive the Tasmanian context remains. The support from higher leadership, the long-standing partnership with the University of Tasmania, and the broader governmental endorsement of trauma-informed practices provide a robust foundation to overcome these obstacles. To date, though, the early integration of trauma-informed principles into police training represents a transformative step towards a more compassionate and effective policing model (Thornton et al., 2021). Continued efforts to refine and expand training and professional development as part of the continuing implementation of the Commission recommendations and alongside a commitment to addressing organizational and cultural barriers will be essential in sustaining and enhancing the benefits observed so far in Tasmania.

LIMITATIONS

The context in which this training and evaluation took place needs consideration. The long-standing educational and research partnership between the University and Tasmania Police (Bartkowiak-Théron et al., 2020) provides a relatively stable environment of trust and confidence in education and research that stands out in the usual cultural distrust of academia and is well documented by others. In our case, although no educator involved in the training administered the research (avoiding conflict of interest or a possible perception of coercion), the research team is usually made up of well-known police and academic staff. The evaluation was therefore conducted in conditions that are difficult to reproduce elsewhere.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE

The Tasmanian Institute of Law Enforcement Studies (University of Tasmania) and Tasmania Police work in partnership to provide higher education to police in Tasmania.

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