

Stretched police branded 'unjust' by Australian youth battling mental health

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Criminologists have warned dangerous and fatal consequences will continue when overburdened and undertrained police respond to mental health incidents.

Australian Catholic University criminologist Dr. Matthew Morgan has proposed an overhaul of training, operational practice and interagency collaboration after his joint research project found 35% of young people with mental illness believed [police](#) were procedurally unjust.

The paper, published in the international journal *Policing and Society*, and co-authored by Associate Professor Angela Higginson from Queensland University of Technology, examined data from the Australian Youth Safety Survey (2020) that showed one-third of participants aged between 14 and 25 identified as having a [mental health condition](#).

There was a significant correlation between young people with mental illness, particularly those in the LGBTI+ community, and mistrust of police, according to the survey.

More than twice the proportion of young people with a [mental health condition](#) (9%) than without (4%) gave the lowest score possible on all procedural justice items and said that police almost never act in a procedurally just way with young people.

"The prevalence of mental illness in that community is alarming and there's not enough services to support them," Dr. Morgan said.

"That's important because police are often the only emergency response available and it's unfair to expect officers to be experts in mental health. Police need more training and partnerships with [mental health professionals](#) to safely respond to potentially dangerous situations."

Mental health has been a factor in a series of fatal police incidents across Australia and abroad in recent months, including a 29-year-old man fatally shot in Brisbane in May. He had been treated at hospital the previous day.

Days later on Sydney's lower north shore, police shot and killed a man after he allegedly lunged at them with large knives.

Management of potentially volatile situations involving young people with mental illness impacts their perceptions of police and procedural justice. Research has shown trust and confidence in the police underpins cooperation with law enforcement.

De-identified qualitative data in the survey revealed how negative interactions with authorities can lead to a loop of mistrust.

"As someone with [severe mental illness](#), if the police are called on me I have a meltdown," a respondent said. "They are more likely to respond in an aggressive and unhelpful manner, which makes me feel unsafe for myself and my friends with similar issues."

The study drew on Australian Bureau of Statistics data from a sample of 3,147 participants aged between 14 and 25.

A key finding was that young people with a mental illness had significantly lower perceptions of police in relation to procedural justice. This lack of trust in police was intensified when overlapping marginalities were considered such as LGBTIQ+ status.

"Sadly, those people are significantly more likely to encounter the police, either as a witness, victim or someone who is arrested, than their counterparts who do not identify as having a mental illness," Dr. Morgan said.

"It is then critical that police and other agencies have procedural justice principles woven through their training to improve the safety of [young people](#) with [mental illness](#)."

More information: Matthew M. Morgan et al, Police and procedural justice: perceptions of young people with mental illness, *Policing and Society* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/10439463.2023.2207714](https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2023.2207714)

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