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Intersectional inequalities in trust in the police in England

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates intersectional inequalities in trust in the police in England using multilevel analysis of individual heterogeneity and discriminatory accuracy (MAIHDA) for the first time. We find that those who are non-White, from lower social classes, and reside in London show lower predicted trust levels than other people. While older people show higher predicted trust levels, younger people, especially those from marginalised backgrounds, have the lowest predicted levels of trust in the police. We also find intersectional effects. While middle-aged White males from lower social classes and living outside of London have lower than-expected trust in the police, older White females from lower social classes and living outside of London have higher than-expected trust in the police. We argue that ground-level, community engagement, coupled with extensive officer training on engaging with individuals from diverse backgrounds, are key to developing higher levels of trust in the police.

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Trust in the police; intersectionality; inequalities; MAIHDA

Introduction

Societies depend upon trust, and one of the most important institutions within society is the police. Yet we know that trust in the police is not uniform, both across societies, and within them (Kule *et al*. 2019). Trust levels in the police vary depending on many factors, such as sex, ethnicity, age, social class, location and prior experience of interaction with the police as a victim, offender or ordinary citizen (Pickering *et al*. 2024). Reputational damage to specific police forces arising from individual cases or the behaviour/actions of individual police officers can also lead to a reduction in trust in the police. For example, following a number of high-profile incidents, the MOPAC Trust and Confidence Dashboard reveals a decline in trust in the Metropolitan police across London since the end of 2016, with a more marked decline in multicultural and deprived parts of the Capital in recent years (MOPAC 2024). To foster higher levels of trust in the police, and to thereby contribute to better-functioning societies, it is necessary to understand the underlying dynamics which contribute to trust, or distrust, in the police. If we can identify the intersecting factors (or structural systems) which determine levels of trust in the police, instead of studying individual characteristics and locational factors that decrease trust in the police separately, then we can develop better policy tools to target initiatives to increase trust in the police.

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This article aims to make a substantial analytical contribution to the academic field of policing studies. It does so by employing a relatively new 'gold-standard' statistical method (Merlo 2018) developed by Evans *et al*. (2018, 2024): multilevel analysis of individual heterogeneity and discriminatory accuracy (MAIHDA) for the first time in this field. We use MAIHDA instead of conventional fixed effects regression models of intersectionality that include interaction parameters (e.g. Kule *et al*. 2019) due to their limitations explained in Evans *et al*. (2024). In its simplest form, MAIHDA helps us to understand how intersecting social identities contribute to various social phenomena: in our case, trust in the police. By adopting this approach, the current study: (i) maps average predicted scores of trust in the police for each stratum to identify inequalities across intersectional social strata, which are constructed by combining individuals' socio-economic and demographic characteristics such as sex, ethnicity, age, social grade, and whether living in London; (ii) quantifies heterogeneity of trust in the police within and between the intersectional social strata; and (iii) estimates interaction effects in a way that has not been investigated before. By doing so, we are better able to understand the exact dynamics behind trust in the police, and thereby develop appropriate strategies to tackle intersecting systems of oppression such as sexism, racism and classism. In line with this, our study addresses the following research question: **To what extent does trust in the police in England vary across intersectional social strata, defined by sex, ethnicity, age, social grade, and geography?** To situate this question, we now review existing scholarship on intersectionality, institutional trust, and the dynamics of policing.

Literature review

Trust is a key concept in the social sciences and influences a wide range of factors, from the stability of democracies (Uslaner 2002) to delivery of policing (Mason *et al* 2014, Barton and Beynon 2015). Trust in the police is specialised trust. That is, the trust that a person has based on their knowledge of and personal experience with a particular institution (see also Levi and Stoker 2000, Citrin and Stoker 2018). What is of key interest for this article is that specific trust can be seen as dynamic. For example, it changes with perceptions of performance and responsiveness, and while positive interactions can help build trust, failures can make it go away (see Hetherington 1998). When the public has a belief that the policing they experience is reliable, competent and acts with integrity, they become more likely to cooperate with the police (Jackson and Bradford 2010). However, if the public experience is negative, for instance through perceived discriminatory practices or ineffectiveness, then trust can be eroded (Samuels-Wortley 2021, Pickering *et al*. 2024). If anything, a negative experience with the police is likely to exacerbate negative views of the police (Skogan 2006, Myhill and Bradford 2012). It has also been noted that the social exchange between citizens and police and the procedural justice following from police interactions are important factors for understanding public trust in the police (e.g. Haas *et al* 2015, Nix *et al*. 2015). Madon and Murphy (2021) find a significant interaction effect between procedural justice and perception of police bias in a minoritised group. Experimental evidence corrobates this relationship (Murphy 2023).

The challenge for understanding the dynamics of trust in the police is that there is strong variation across intersectional groups in their levels of trust. As noted by Panditharatne *et al*. (2021) the connection between the public and the police is complex when considering minority communities (Tyler 2005, Han *et al*. 2020) and by explicitly exploring the intersections between sex, ethnicity, social group, age and geographic location it is possible to achieve a better understanding of intersectional identities and their trust in the police in the United Kingdom. While the concept of intersectionality was originally developed from a feminist framework to highlight how the experiences of women of colour were shaped by overlapping systems of oppression (Crenshaw 1991), the term itself is not group specific and has since been applied more broadly across fields such as policing (Kule *et al*. 2019, Panditharatne *et al*. 2021), and trust in public officials (Reinhardt 2019). Indeed, Hancock (2007) emphasises that both the theoretical and the empirical dimensions of the topic concept are necessary. Intersectionality refers to the interconnected nature of social categories

such as gender, race, socio-economic status, and others such as sexual orientation, disability, religion, and geography that together shape individual experiences and outcomes. To achieve a better understanding of marginalised groups and their views, we need to recognise that these categories are interdependent and cannot be meaningfully analysed in isolation (see also Shields 2008).

Racial and ethnic minorities consistently report lower levels of trust in the police. This relationship appears to be universal across cultures with ethnic minorities having lower satisfaction and lower trust in the police in the US (e.g. Skogan 2005, Cochran and Warren 2011, Lee and Gibbs 2015), New Zealand (Panditharatne *et al*. 2021), Denmark (Kammersgaard *et al*. 2023) and the United Kingdom (Pickering *et al*. 2024). What is important to note in this regard is that the effects estimated are for the most part based on binary variables (i.e. white versus non-White), which does not cover the potential for differences within and across ethnic minority groups. It should be noted, though, that there are a few studies from the US which have attempted to extend the empirical approach to analyse different ethnic minorities (e.g. Cochran and Warren 2011) and have found similar relationships.

However, as noted by Cao *et al*. (1996), the socio-economic status of a respondent might have a stronger impact than ethnicity in shaping trust in the police. This is in line with the general findings that individuals who belong to lower socio-economic groups have lower levels of trust towards government institutions (Foster and Frieden 2017). Individuals living in wealthier neighbourhoods generally see lower crime rates and thus have less invasive contact with the police (Weitzer and Tuch 1999). It is also known that the policing styles used in poorer neighbourhoods are more aggressive (Cobbina *et al*. 2017). In countries such as the United States it is noted that there are race-class subjugated communities (Soss and Weaver 2017) where policing is not seen as a solution and could even be seen to exacerbate problems of law and order. Where people reside is also connected with age: wealthier neighbourhoods generally consist of older populations than poorer neighbourhoods (Office for National Statistics 2018). This introduces another element of intersectionality: age. Research has shown that there are different views towards policing dependent on age, but that this also interacts with other group belonging, for instance ethnicity (Saarikkomäki *et al*. 2021, Kammersgaard *et al*. 2023) or gender (Hurst *et al*. 2005).

In a recent study, Pickering *et al*. (2024) found that women in London had lower trust than women elsewhere in the United Kingdom but higher trust than men in general, which aligns with most prior studies of policing (e.g. Cao *et al*. 1996, Nofziger and Williams 2005, Mbuba 2010). Several reasons for this have been noted; for instance, that media reports male and female attacks differently (Mbuba 2010) and that women, in general, are less likely to interact with the police (Cochran and Warren 2011). However, as argued by Hurst *et al*. (2005) there are differing levels of trust between men and women depending on the ethnic status of respondents, which highlights the need for an intersectional approach. In the United Kingdom, there have been significant problems within the police force in London, the Metropolitan Police, with regards to women and their experience as discussed by Pickering *et al*. (2024). In addition, characteristics of place in London or elsewhere (e.g. concentrated disadvantage) along with other social identity characteristics of individuals might influence police officers' action negatively (Farrell 2024), which might then affect the levels of trust in the police. This suggests the need for an intersectional examination of trust in police in the United Kingdom to explicitly consider the geographical location of respondents.

Methods

Data sources

The data were collected by YouGov, a UK-based public opinion research firm that operates a large opt-in online panel. Respondents were sampled via quota sampling to approximate national distributions across sex, age, region, and social grade. We commissioned 20 monthly waves of data collection between July 2022 and February 2024. Each wave included around 580 respondents (total $N = 11{,}609$), and a wave variable (1–20) captures this temporal structure.

YouGov also supplied a post-stratification weight to improve representativeness. However, we did not apply this weight in our analysis due to uncertainty about how weights interact with MAIHDA models. Since our stratification already incorporates key sociodemographic dimensions, we opted for the unweighted data, while acknowledging this as a limitation (see Discussion).

Outcome variable

The outcome variable of the current study is trust in the police. Respondents were asked 'how much do you trust the police' using a scale of 1–7 where 1 means 'not at all' and 7 means 'completely'.

Intersectional social strata dimensions

We specified social strata as a combination of five dimensions of social identities: sex, ethnicity, age, social grade and whether living in London. Sex is a dichotomous variable with categories of male (code as 1) and female (coded as 2). Ethnicity is a categorical variable with categories of White (code as 1) and Non-White (coded as 2). Age is a categorical variable with categories of 18–24 (coded as 1), 25–49 (coded as 2) and 50 plus (code as 3). For this categorisation, we use the ONS Census 2021 3c age classification (Age classifications: Census 2021 – Office for National Statistics). Social grade is a categorical variable where categories have been combined: A = Higher managerial roles, administrative or professional; B = Intermediate managerial roles, administrative or professional (coded as 1); C1 = Supervisory or clerical and junior managerial roles, administrative or professional (coded as 2); C2 = Skilled manual workers (coded as 3); and a combination of D = Semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers and E = State pensioners, casual and lowest grade workers, unemployed with state benefits only (coded as 4). For this categorisation, we follow the census data that uses a combined four class system (AB, C1, C2, DE; Approximated Social Grade, England and Wales – Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)). The monthly factor was captured in the form of a wave variable (1–20). Finally, we have a London binary variable, and those who live in London are coded as 1 and those living outside of London are coded as 2. See Table 1 for descriptive statistics.

Constructing the strata ID

The combination of sex, ethnicity, age, social grade and whether living in London resulted in 96 unique strata, which are results of every possible permutation of the categories of the social strata variables presented in Table 2 (2 categories of Sex * 2 categories of Ethnicity * 3 categories of age * 4 categories of social grade * 2 categories of London variable = 96 strata). We also label the strata

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the outcome and social strata variables.

Outcome variable			Frequency	Mean (SD), Min-Max
Trust in police			11,609	4.0 (1.6), 1–7
Social strata variables (reference: ref)		ID position	Frequency	Percentage
Sex	Male (ref)	1	5,243	45.2
	Female	2	6,366	54.8
Ethnicity	White (ref)	1	10,053	86.6
	Non-White	2	1,556	13.4
Age	18–24 (ref)	1	1,049	9.0
	25–49	2	4,661	40.1
	50+	3	5,899	50.8
Social grade	AB (ref)	1	3,639	31.3
	C1	2	3,397	29.3
	C2	3	2,070	17.8
	DE	4	2,503	21.6
London	Living in London (ref)	1	1,411	12.2
	Living outside of London	2	10,198	87.8

Table 2. Sample size of intersectional social strata, defined by respondent sex, race/ethnicity, age, social grade and living in London (n = 96).

Sample Size Per Stratum	Number of Strata	% of Strata
100 or More	20	20.8
50 or More	40	41.7
30 or More	57	59.4
20 or More	69	71.9
10 or More	89	92.7
Less than 10	7	7.3

with a five-digit ID code. For example, the digit code of an individual who is female, non-White, aged 18–24, social grade of DE, and living in London stratum would be 22141 (see Table 1).

To evaluate whether the sample size is sufficient across various intersections, we calculated the percentage of strata that have at least X respondents, where X is 10, 20, 30, 50, or 100 respondents (Evans *et al*. 2024). In our case, 92.7% of the strata have at least ten respondents, 71.9% have at least twenty, and 59.4% have at least thirty, suggesting that most strata have a sufficient sample size for reliable estimates (see Table 2).

Statistical analysis

Following the MAIHDA methodology, we estimate a series of linear multilevel regression models (or linear mixed effects models) to estimate the effect of social strata on the trust in the police, with individual observations (level 1) clustered within social strata (level 2; Evans *et al*. 2018, 2024). A technical explanation of the statistical analysis is included in the supplemental materials. Full replication data and code are available on GitHub, anonymised for peer-review: https://anonymous.4open.science/r/MAIHDA-Trust-in-the-police-1F9F/README.md.

Results

Table 3 presents the results of the linear mixed effects models, which include regression coefficients, 95% confidence intervals (CIs), *p*-values, within- and between-stratum variances, Variance Partition

Table 3. Results from MAIHDA models predicting trust in the police.

	Model 1A		Model 1B	
Social strata variables	Estimates	95% CI	Estimates	95% CI
(Intercept)	3.86 ***	3.79–3.93	3.86 ***	3.68–4.04
Female			0.02	−0.09–0.13
Non-White			−0.23 ***	−0.35–0.12
Age: 25–49			0.06	−0.09–0.20
Age: 50 +			0.25 **	0.10–0.40
Social grade C1			−0.07	−0.21–0.07
Social grade C2			−0.03	−0.19–0.12
Social grade DE			−0.33 ***	−0.48–0.18
Living outside of London			0.11	−0.01–0.23
Random Effects: Variances				
Individual	2.40		2.40	
Stratum	0.06		0.03	
Summary statistics				
VPC	2.47%		1.04%	
PCV			58.69%	
AIC ~	43201.97		43199.97	
BIC	43224.05		43280.92	
N strata	96		96	
N individuals	11,609		11,609	

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$.
AIC value for the simple null (intercept-only) linear regression is 43342.49, which indicates Model 1A fits the data better.

Coefficient (VPC) and Proportional Change in Variance (PCV) values. The general contextual effect of strata in Model 1A, measured by the VPC, was 2.47%. This indicates that 2.47% of the total variance is explained by the clustering of social strata. When the variables that were used to construct the intersectional social strata were added in Model 1B as dummy variables, the VPC decreased to 1.04%. If we compare the between strata-variance from Model 1B to Model 1A by calculating the PCV, we see that more than half of the between-stratum variance observed in Model 1A (59%) is accounted for by the additive main effects. In other words, after accounting for the additive main effects, 41% (100%–59%) of the original between-stratum variance is still unexplained by the additive main effects, which is an indication of interaction effects (Evans *et al*. 2024). In short, although the majority of between-strata differences were explained by the additive main effects, the remaining 41% variance unexplained by the main effects shows us that inequalities between the strata exist, and there are significant interactions, which we will revisit later in the paper. Next, we focus on the main effects.

Looking at the coefficients from Model 1B, we can investigate the main effects that explain the trust in the police as 59% of the between-stratum variance is accounted for by these additive main effects. The average non-White stratum has a trust in the police score that is 0.23 lower than the average White stratum, holding all other variables constant. Similarly, compared to social grade AB strata, social grade DE strata have lower trust in the police score by 0.33. In contrast, compared to aged 18–24 strata, aged 50 + strata have greater trust in the police score by 0.25. However, these additive patterns can obscure important findings that become clearer when examining intersections, which involves looking at the average predicted trust in the police scores for each stratum and breaking it down into the portions attributable to additive main effects and interaction effects (Evans *et al*. 2024).

Figure 1 plots (ranked) predicted stratum random effects (i.e. the u_j from Model 1B), which are representations of interaction effects (Evans *et al*. 2024). In other words, we can observe patterns of higher-than-expected and lower-than-expected predicted trust in the police as the strata level residuals represent the difference between the observed mean trust in the police and expected mean trust in the police for each stratum based on the additive main effects. If the 95% CIs

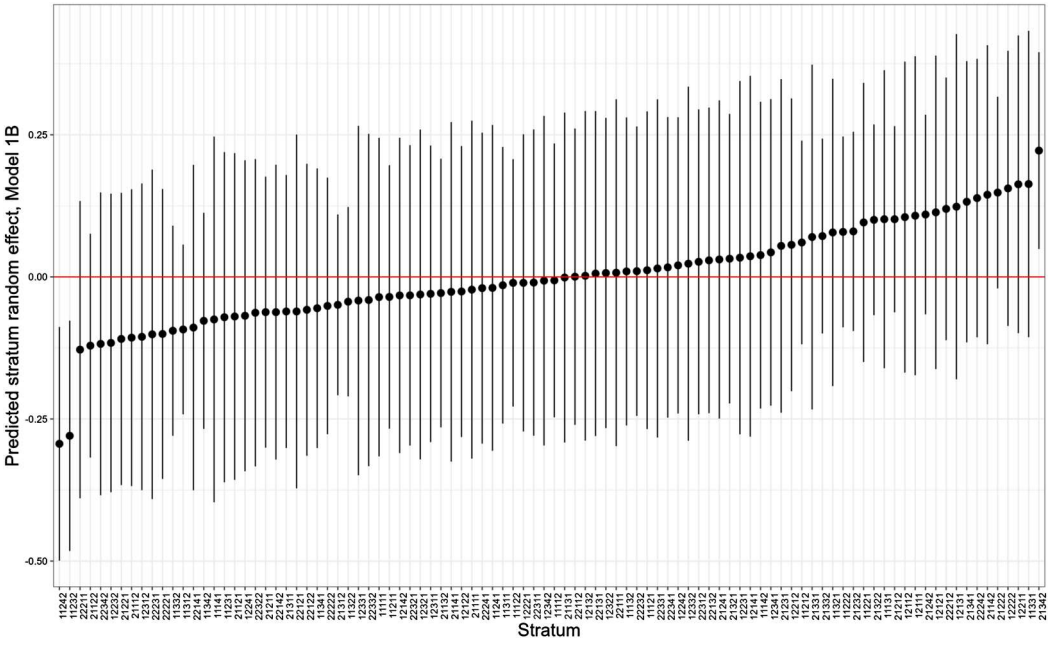

Figure 1. Interaction effects by stratum.

around the estimate of u_j for a stratum does not encompass 0 (such as strata 11242 and 21342), then it is a rough indication of statistically significant interaction effects (Evans *et al*. 2024).

Table 4 presents the 10 strata with the lowest and highest random effects values. In Figure 1 and Table 4, for example, we can see that stratum 21342 (female, White, aged 50+, social grade DE, and living outside of London) has higher-than-expected trust in the police, while stratum 11242 (male, White, aged 25–49, social grade DE, and living outside of London) and stratum 11232 (male, White, aged, 25–49, social grade C2, and living outside of London) have lower-than-expected trust in the police. Stratum 11242 has also one of the lowest predicted trust in the police scores (3.414, ranked 7th, see Appendix Table 1). Although Figure 1 and Table 4 include additional strata that are not statistically significant at conventional thresholds, they help illustrate the relative positioning of different intersectional groups. Overall, the intersecting effects of systems of oppression like ageism, classism and where you live (which might be an indication of economic inequality, limited access to services and resources, and over-policing) on trust in the police compound in a way that exceeds the effects of these systems, separately.

Finally, Figure 2 visually examines trust in the police by plotting the (ranked) predicted trust in the police scores for all strata from Model 1B. It illustrates the range, spread, and pattern of inequalities between strata (see Appendix Table 1 for predicted scores and 95% CIs for all 96 strata). In Table 5, we also present the 10 strata with the highest and lowest predicted trust in the police scores and their respective 95% CIs. The stratum with the lowest predicted trust in the police score is 22141: Female, non-White, aged 18–24, social grade DE and living in London. The stratum with the highest predicted trust in the police is 21332: Female, White, aged 50+, social grade C2, and living outside of London. Focusing on the 10 strata with the lowest scores, it can be said those who are non-White (7 out of 10), young (6 out of 10), from social grade DE (10 out of 10) and living in London (6 out of 10) have the lowest predicted trust in the police. These results indicate that while the intersection of racism, agism and classism may be an important driver of inequalities in the trust in the police, but for non-White individuals from social grade DE, racism may be the most important factor.

Table 4. 10 lowest and highest ranked strata for interaction effects (Figure 1).

		Model 1B			
Rank	Stratum	n	Mean	95% CI	
10 Lowest				Lower	Upper
1	11242*	276	−0.294	−0.500	−0.088
2	11232*	235	−0.28	−0.482	−0.078
3	22211	63	−0.128	−0.389	0.133
4	21122	148	−0.121	−0.317	0.075
5	22342	28	−0.118	−0.385	0.149
6	12232	48	−0.116	−0.379	0.147
7	21221	54	−0.109	−0.366	0.148
8	21112	77	−0.107	−0.368	0.154
9	12312	37	−0.105	−0.375	0.165
10	22231	18	−0.101	−0.391	0.189
10 Highest					
96	21342*	753	0.222	0.050	0.394
95	11331	30	0.163	−0.107	0.433
94	12211	47	0.163	−0.100	0.426
93	12222	68	0.156	−0.085	0.397
92	21222	594	0.148	−0.021	0.317
91	21142	63	0.145	−0.118	0.408
90	22242	52	0.139	−0.106	0.384
89	21341	56	0.132	−0.115	0.379
88	12131	14	0.124	−0.180	0.428
87	22212	107	0.12	−0.111	0.351

Sex:1 = Male, 2 = Female; Ethnicity:1 = White, 2 = Non-White; Age:1 = 18–24, 2 = 25–49, 3 = 50+; Social grade:1 = AB, 2 = C1, 3 = C2, 4 = DE; London:1 = Living in London, 2 = Living outside of London.

* 95% CI around the estimate of u_j (random effect) for this stratum does not encompass 0, meaning strata 11242 and 11232 have lower-than-expected trust in the police, and stratum 21342 has higher-than-expected trust in the police (see Figure 1 for all strata).

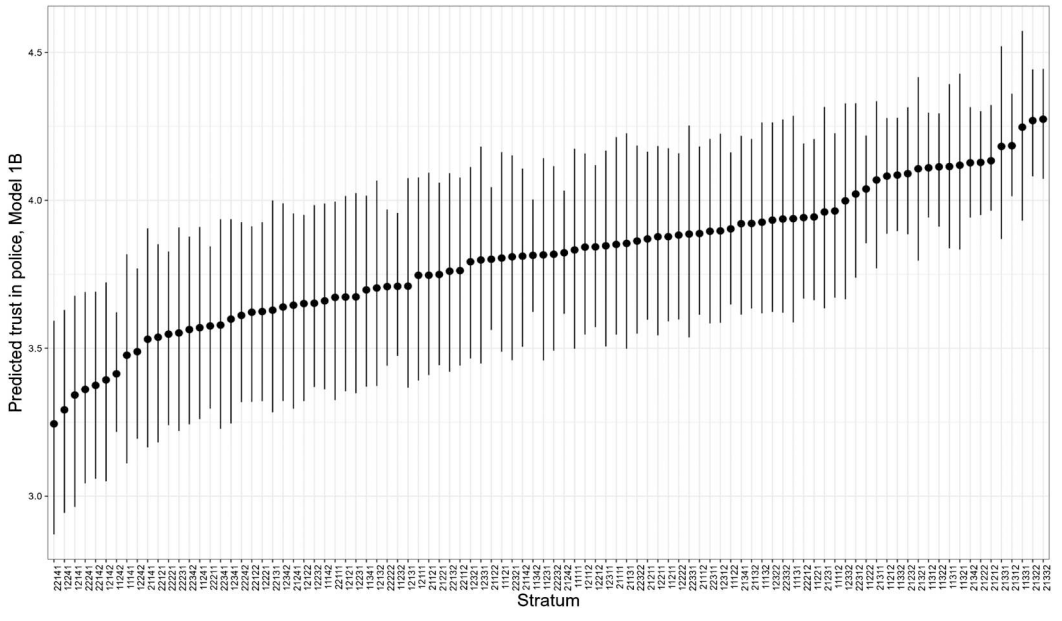

Figure 2. Predicted trust in the police scores by stratum.

Table 5. 10 lowest and highest ranked strata for predicted trust in the police scores (Figure 2).

		Model 1B			
Rank	Stratum	n	Mean	95% CI	
10 Lowest				Lower	Upper
1	22141	7	3.245	2.871	3.593
2	12241	16	3.292	2.944	3.630
3	12141	12	3.342	2.964	3.677
4	22241	34	3.361	3.044	3.690
5	22142	31	3.375	3.059	3.691
6	12142	15	3.393	3.050	3.723
7	11242	276	3.414	3.217	3.622
8	11141	4	3.477	3.111	3.818
9	12242	42	3.489	3.194	3.770
10	21141	4	3.531	3.165	3.906
10 Highest					
96	21332	528	4.274	4.073	4.444
95	21322	713	4.27	4.081	4.443
94	11331	30	4.247	3.931	4.573
93	21312	735	4.185	4.014	4.361
92	21331	30	4.182	3.869	4.521
91	21212	598	4.134	3.965	4.322
90	21222	594	4.128	3.95	4.301
89	21342	753	4.127	3.942	4.315
88	11321	41	4.119	3.833	4.428
87	11311	91	4.114	3.838	4.393

Sex:1 = Male, 2 = Female; Ethnicity:1 = White, 2 = Non-White; Age:1 = 18–24, 2 = 25–49, 3 = 50+; Social grade:1 = AB, 2 = C1, 3 = C2, 4 = DE; London:1 = Living in London, 2 = Living outside of London.

Discussion and conclusions

In this section, we reflect on the findings and their policy implications for enhancing trust in the police. We also note a few limitations of the study and note future research opportunities. In this study, we investigated disparities in the trust in the police between intersectional social identities

using a novel statistical approach, the MAIHDA framework (Evans *et al*. 2018, 2024). This approach has several advantages over the traditional regression models with interaction parameters and for a greater understanding of the methodology interested readers can read Evans *et al*. (2018, 2024). This approach allowed us to test intersectional effects of a few social identities indicating both privilege and disadvantage. To our knowledge, this is the first study to estimate the general contextual effect of social identity on the trust in the police, as most studies which use multilevel models to explore contextual effects consider the effects of geographic clusters, like neighbourhood (Hawdon 2008, Yesberg *et al*. 2023) or use interaction parameters (Kule *et al*. 2019) which have limitations (Evans *et al*. 2024). The theoretical implication of the study is that using sex, ethnicity, age, social class, and location of residency as separate predictor variables masks the complexity of the oppressing systems, such as sexism, racism, and classism, affecting the trust in the police.

Therefore, by considering intersectional social strata as a level 2 variable in the analysis, we were able to apply intersectional theory and estimate the effect of interlocking systems, rather than individual characteristics, that create inequalities. In particular, we were able to investigate the unexplained between strata variance by additive effects (i.e. random/interaction effects). We found that 41% of the strata-level variation in trust in the police remains unexplained after the main effects are controlled for. This finding supports the necessity of an intersectional analysis that suggests that intersection of sex, ethnicity, age, social class and area of residence as proxies of privilege and disadvantage plays a role in the patterns of inequalities observed in trust in the police.

Visualisation of the strata-level random effects from Model 1B (see Figure 1) enabled us to investigate the variation within intersectional social strata and identify patterns in the intersectional results. For example, while there is no difference between males and females in terms of trust in the police according to the main/fixed effect results presented in Table 3, Figure 1 and Table 4 suggest for example that stratum 11242 (male, White, aged 25–49, social grade DE, and living outside of London) and stratum 11232 (male, White, aged, 25–49, social grade C2, and living outside of London) have lower-than-expected trust in the police. This shows us that these factors/systems are intersecting in a way that negatively influences trust in the police. Moreover, Figure 1 indicates that only three social strata show statistically significant interaction effects. Although Model 1A provides a better fit than the simple null linear regression, which demonstrates that interaction effects are present, the challenge in identifying exactly which intersections are affected may be due to limited statistical power. Given the structure of the data, larger sample sizes within each intersection are likely needed to obtain the precision necessary to detect where these interactions are taking place (we discuss further limitations of the study later in the section).

Our analysis of predicted trust in the police across 96 social strata (Model 1B) revealed substantial variation. Figure 2 illustrates the full range and distribution of predicted trust scores, while Table 5 highlights the 10 strata with the highest and lowest predicted levels of trust. Among the 10 lowest-scoring strata, 7 included individuals who were non-White, 6 included those aged 18–24, all were from social grade DE, and 6 were based in London. This pattern suggests that low predicted trust in the police is most common among those who are younger, non-White and socioeconomically disadvantaged. The intersection of these identities appears to produce a compounding effect which highlights how disadvantage operates along multiple, interacting axes. On the other hand, the highest predicted trust score was observed among individuals who hold comparatively more privileged social positions which suggests that trust in the police is unevenly distributed and closely linked to structural inequality. Identifying the most and least trusting strata helps move beyond average effects to reveal which specific social positions are most affected which demonstrates the need for an intersectional approach in both research and policing policy.

Our findings cannot be directly compared with previous studies given the innovative application of the MAIHDA methodology within this paper. However, our analysis confirms that individual factors such as being from an ethnic minority and belonging to a lower social class is associated with reduced trust in the police as in previous studies (Foster and Frieden 2017, Pickering *et al*. 2024). This suggests that while intersectionality of multiple dimensions of social identity is critical

to understanding inequalities in trust in the police, racism and classism are perhaps the most influential systems of oppression influencing trust in the police negatively.

What are the practical and policy implications of our findings then? Berg and Mann (2023) suggest that the intersection of various social identities and characteristics presents significant challenges for policing at various levels. For example, micro-level interactions between police officers and individuals with intersecting social identities can have profound positive or negative effects. The importance of this is emphasised within Objective Four of Pillar One of the Strategic Policing Partnership Board's Policing Vision 2030 (College of Policing 2023a). At the meso-level, institutional factors such as police culture, resources, specialised training, and the presence of dedicated teams or programmes can either alleviate or exacerbate negative interactions with individuals possessing intersecting identities. The need for more effective police leadership that can bring about changes in organisational culture and practices to address lack of trust in the police has also been recently prioritised by the College of Policing (2023b). Plans such as the Police Race Action Plan (College of Policing 2022) which has been developed jointly by the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) and the College of Policing should be embraced by police leaders as a recent report by Independent Scrutiny & Oversight Board (2024) found that the plan is not applied as it was envisaged. Finally, macro-level considerations might involve broader structural influences and power dynamics under which the police operate. These influences, shaped by both historical and contemporary contexts such as legislation, policies, political climates and public expectations, can disproportionately affect certain groups (Berg and Mann 2023).

Therefore, engaging with communities directly via for example establishment of community outreach programmes, community advisory boards can help identify specific issues affecting trust and better manage micro-level interactions. Programmes could include community policing initiatives (Hawdon 2008) in which the police officers act as protectors and collaborators, and feedback mechanisms to build trust at the ground level. Police officers should undergo extensive training that would shift a police force model to a police service model (Tyler 2017), such as unconscious bias (Dario *et al*. 2019) or procedural justice principles which should result in a cultural change in behaviour (Van Craen and Skogan 2017, Ghezzi *et al*. 2022) or awareness, recognition and sensitivity training (Pickles 2020, Hutson *et al*. 2022) to understand and respect the diverse backgrounds of the communities they serve. Training should address the specific intersectional characteristics identified in the current study (e.g. handling interactions with young non-White individuals or White males from lower social grade differently based on their unique challenges). The Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) describes this as 'cultural competence' and it means 'the ability of individuals and systems to work or respond effectively across cultures, in a way that acknowledges and respects the culture of the person being served' (Williams 2001 cited in IOPC 2022, p. 3). IOPC particularly acknowledges the importance of intersectionality in their Equality, Diversity and Inclusion strategy for 2022–25 (IOPC 2022). They mention that intersectionality is a framework they use, particularly when focusing on marginalised groups and their confidence in policing. However, it should also be noted that recent research (Burnett *et al*. 2020) found compassion fatigue among police officers and therefore these forms of training might not be effective if not well planned and sourced as the police themselves are vulnerable to stress. Another important barrier might be the police culture that exhibits machismo and/or exclusionary heteronormative values (Pickles 2020) like in the Met (Casey 2023).

Another effective policy could be rolling out specialist policing teams and initiatives, as part of which liaison officers are established to support their colleagues including marginalised ones and citizens with intersecting identities, which would eventually help improving police-community relations (Pickles 2020). However, concerns have been raised about the effectiveness of specialist policing in general due to marginalised individuals not engaging with liaison officers (Fileborn 2019) and in rural areas particularly due to limited resources (Rural Services Network 2023).

Scholars also argued that the police workforce should be more diverse (Black and Kari 2010, Pickles 2020) and a recent report by Police Foundation (Hales 2018) shows that diversity among

police workforce (particularly PCSOs and police staff) has been increasing but varies across the police forces. Therefore, it is suggested that discussions of police ethnic diversity at a national level are arguably rather meaningless (Hales 2018). Instead, police force workforces should represent their communities and recruitment should be carried out applying an intersectional lens.

While these initiatives are promising in principle, significant implementation challenges remain. A consistent theme in both academic and policy literature is the presence of institutional inertia and cultural resistance within policing organisations. For instance, the recent Casey Review (2023) revealed pervasive cultures of misogyny and racism within the Metropolitan Police, which are likely to undermine reform efforts unless explicitly addressed. Similarly, evaluations of the Police Race Action Plan suggest a gap between strategic commitments and meaningful implementation across forces (Independent Scrutiny & Oversight Board 2024). Resource constraints (such as funding, personnel shortages, and competing operational priorities) further limit the feasibility of sustained training or community programmes. Prior research also shows that officers may experience compassion fatigue and cynicism, which can reduce the effectiveness of initiatives such as unconscious bias training if not embedded in wider cultural shifts (Burnett *et al*. 2020). Any policy response must therefore reckon not only with what should be done, but with how deeply ingrained institutional factors might obstruct even well-intentioned reforms.

The coexistence of the importance of individual factors and interaction effects highlights the complexity of trust in the police and managing it. Effective policies need to address both or might constitute micro-, meso-, and macro-level engagement with and beyond the police (Berg and Mann 2023) as Hankivsky and Cormier (2019) argues that 'one size fits all' policies do not work. By combining these approaches, policies can be more comprehensive and effective in building trust in the police across different segments of the population.

While enhancing trust in the police faces several embedded challenges which will take time to overcome, further enhancement of the existing evidence base around policing, trust and community engagement is also required. More research is required to understand the importance of local contextual factors in shaping the intersectional nature of trust in the police in relation to specific incidents, neighbourhood policing practices, and the effectiveness of community engagement initiatives. The role of community stakeholders, rather than the direct involvement of police officers, in driving community engagement and trust-enhancing activities also merits further academic attention. Likewise, the consideration of procedural justice as a confounding factor should be explored more in detail, ideally in experimental design such as Murphy (2023).

This study is not without its limitations. First, trust in the police was measured using a single survey item: 'How much do you trust the police?', with responses on a 1–7 scale (1 = not at all, 7 = completely). While this is a widely used approach in survey-based research on institutional trust (e.g. Jackson and Bradford 2010), we acknowledge that trust is a multidimensional construct that may also encompass perceptions of procedural fairness, legitimacy, and effectiveness. The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW), for example, uses a broader set of items to capture these dimensions. Recent work by Timukaite and Buil-Gil (2025) has shown that these items form distinct but interrelated factors. We therefore recommend that future research applying MAIHDA models consider using datasets such as the CSEW to unpack these facets of trust in greater detail.

Another important limitation of the study is using a binary ethnicity variable due to strata sample size issues. We attempted to use a more detailed ethnicity variable in our strata construction, but the resulting models did not improve upon our simpler specification. This is likely due to small numbers within many intersectional combinations of minority ethnic identities, despite the overall sample size being relatively large. This under-representation is a well-known challenge in survey-based research, where minoritised populations are often proportionally under-sampled relative to their share of the population (Kayani *et al*. 2024).

Furthermore, another geographic limitation relates to our use of a binary London/non-London variable. This choice reflects both London's unique role in policing discourse (particularly in light of recent institutional trust concerns surrounding the Metropolitan Police) and the need to limit

the number of strata for model stability. However, we acknowledge that other English regions have distinct policing dynamics as well, and future research could usefully explore more granular geographic divisions where sample size permits. In addition, the data we used did not capture gender or sexual orientation. Future quantitative research using larger sample sizes can also further unpick the complexities of the interaction between gender, ethnicity, social class (as measured by income) and location in shaping disparate trust in the police outcomes across different social groups and neighbourhoods through the inclusion of more refined categories in the construction of the strata contained within empirical analyses.

Finally, while YouGov provided a post-stratification weight to improve national representativeness, we chose not to apply this in our analysis. MAIHDA models operate on stratified data structures, and current methodological guidance on the use of weights in multilevel frameworks is mixed. Given that our strata already incorporated key sociodemographic dimensions (sex, ethnicity, age, social grade, and geography), we opted for an unweighted approach to preserve model stability. Nonetheless, we acknowledge this as a limitation and recommend further research exploring the implications of weighting in intersectional multilevel models.

The findings presented in this study have confirmed the importance of understanding the interplay between different individual characteristics in shaping trust in the police. Implementing initiatives designed to enhance community relations and trust in the police that only target individuals or communities solely based on gender, ethnicity, social class or location are likely to produce only limited improvements. Holistic approaches which acknowledge the interaction of these factors, and which develop bespoke programmes of action that address the interplay of these characteristics in shaping trust in the police are likely to prove more successful.

Statement on ethics approval

Approval was granted for this study to be carried out by the College of Business, Arts and Social Science Research Ethics Committee, Brunel University London. Approval reference: 35290-LR-Jan/2022-37313-1.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Ferhat Tura:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Steven Pickering:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Martin Ejnar Hansen:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **James Hunter:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Data availability statement

Full replication data and code are available on GitHub: https://github.com/CrimFerhat/MAIHDA-Trust-in-the-police.

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