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Trust in the police in Iceland: Key influences and group differences

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Abstract
Trust in public institutions, particularly the police, is essential for effective governance and social order. This study investigates the factors influencing trust in the police in Iceland, focusing on perceived police effectiveness, experiences of police contact, and demographic variables such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, and residential location. Using data from victimization surveys conducted between 2016 and 2024, we find that trust in the police is generally high but varies significantly across demographic groups. Older individuals and females report higher trust levels compared to younger individuals and males. Trust in the police increases with age more steeply for females than for males. Perceived police effectiveness, including visibility, accessibility, and performance, strongly correlates with trust. Positive experiences with police contact enhance trust, while negative experiences diminish it. Demographic factors influence trust independently of perceived police effectiveness and police contact. These findings suggest that improving police effectiveness and the quality of police-public interactions can enhance trust. Understanding demographic differences in trust can help tailor policing strategies to address the specific needs of different groups, contributing to a more just and effective policing system in Iceland.

Keywords
age, efficiency, gender, iceland, police, police contact, trust

Trust in public institutions, particularly the police, is a cornerstone of effective governance and social order. The legal system relies on the cooperation of citizens, which is fostered by trust. Citizens are more likely to engage voluntarily with law enforcement when they perceive the police as legitimate and fair, thereby reducing the need for coercive measures to ensure compliance (Tyler, 2005) and enhancing the overall efficacy of the legal system.

Over the past two decades, research on public perceptions of the police, how these perceptions are formed, and their implications has expanded significantly (see Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012; Nix et al., 2015). This research has largely focused on the impact of perceived police effectiveness (Melkamu & Teshome, 2023) and the experiences of police

contact (Tyler, 2005) in shaping trust in the police and the public's willingness to cooperate (Bradford & Jackson, 2010).

The relationship between trust in the police and its underlying drivers is both complex and multidirectional. Trust is shaped by macro factors, such as economic conditions (Palmisano & Sacchi, 2024) and corruption (Kääriäinen, 2007), as well as perceptions of police performance and service quality (Boateng, 2017; Hinds & Murphy, 2007). Additionally, individual-level factors, including personal experiences (Pickering et al., 2024), legal socialization (the accumulated experience of legal and other social control authorities that shape the legitimation process) (Fagan & Tyler, 2005), and perceptions of police encounters (Tyler, 1990), also play a significant role. It is not only the frequency of police contact that affects trust (Dowler & Sparks, 2008) but the quality of these encounters (Bolaji & Metcalfe, 2024), particularly whether they are experienced as just and fair (Tyler & Fagan, 2008; Tyler & Huo, 2002).

Demographic factors, such as age, gender, and ethnicity, are also related to trust in the police (Brown & Benedict, 2002), partly because these factors are associated with the frequency of police contact and how such interactions are perceived (Fagan & Tyler, 2005). Younger individuals tend to exhibit lower levels of trust in the police compared to older individuals (Han et al., 2017), and most studies suggest that females are more likely to trust the police than males (Bolger et al., 2021). Socioeconomic status is also related to trust (Brown & Benedict, 2002), as it influences living conditions, which in turn can influence perceptions of and interaction with law enforcement (Bradford & Jackson, 2010). Importantly, these demographic factors should not be considered in isolation but rather as interconnected influences that collectively shape the social environment and impact legal socialization and experiences with the police (Panditharatne et al., 2021).

Although trust in the police has been measured in victimization surveys in Iceland for years (e.g. Gallup, 2024), there is limited research examining the key factors influencing trust or differences across demographic groups. Iceland's unique context—characterized by high overall trust in public institutions (Gallup, 2024), relatively low crime rates (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024), and a homogeneous yet diversifying population (Statistics Iceland, n.d)—provides a valuable opportunity to add to the external validity of the literature. Additionally, Iceland is one of the five Western nations where police officers are unarmed during regular patrols (Oddsson et al., 2021), reflecting strong societal trust and traditionally low levels of violent crime.

The current study builds on and extends previous research by examining whether perceived police effectiveness and experiences of police contact are associated with higher levels of trust in the police. We also test whether demographic factors, such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, and residential location, are associated with trust in the police. We further examine whether these group differences can be explained by variations in perceived police effectiveness and experiences of police contact, therefore going beyond previous research.

Finally, we analyze the interaction effect of age and gender, specifically testing whether age has a stronger influence on males than females. One reason age impacts trust in the police is that younger individuals are more likely to have police interactions (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2018), with young males being particularly likely to encounter law enforcement due to their higher likelihood of offending (Visher et al., 1986).

The current study has significant theoretical and policy implications. Understanding who trusts the police and why provides valuable insights for informed decision-making,

targeted interventions, and the development of a just, inclusive, and effective policing system in Iceland.

Age, gender, residential location, economic status, and trust in the police

Various demographic factors have been found to be associated with trust in the police. Research generally indicates that older individuals tend to have greater trust in the police than younger individuals (Han et al., 2017; Van Craen, 2013; Wu & Sun, 2009), though this relationship is not consistently found across all studies (Cao et al., 1996; Thomassen & Kääriäinen, 2016). One explanation is that younger individuals, who often prioritize freedom and autonomy, may be more critical of authority, whereas older individuals tend to place greater value on safety (Reisig & Correia, 1997).

Part of the reason younger people tend to trust the police less than older individuals is that they are more likely to be stopped by the police, and such encounters can have a lasting negative impact on trust (Skogan, 2006). However, research suggests that trust in the police by young people can be strengthened through positive non-enforcement interactions (Fine et al., 2022) and policing methods that are perceived as fair and just (Bolger & Walters, 2019).

Research on gender and trust in the police presents mixed findings. Most studies suggest that women are generally more likely to trust the police than men (Bolger et al., 2021), while others indicate that gender has no significant effect on trust in the police (Brown & Benedict, 2002). However, the relationship between trust in the police and gender seems to be contextual. For instance, in England, women tend to trust the police more than men, except in the London area, where men report higher levels of trust than women do (Pickering et al., 2024).

Several explanations have been proposed for this variation, but as Tura et al. (2024) argue, contradictory results may stem from differences in trust in the police among various social groups with intersecting identities. Applying intersectional theory, they emphasize that trust in the police is shaped by different social factors that should be viewed in combination rather than as separate entities. For example, while their study found no significant gender differences in trust in the police when measured independently, an intersectional analysis revealed that males aged 25 to 49, living outside of London, and working in manual labor (at any skill level), belonging to the lowest-grade worker category, or being pensioners or unemployed, had lower trust in the police than all other social groups (Tura et al., 2024).

Thus, demographic factors most likely do not influence trust in the police in isolation but are interconnected, shaping trust both directly through social status and indirectly through differences in police contact and perceptions of law enforcement across social groups. Research has supported this relationship (Brown & Benedict, 2002), even after accounting for ethnicity (Panditharatne et al., 2021). Socioeconomic status (SES) plays a key role as it is closely linked to living conditions, which, in turn, affect both the likelihood of contact with the police and how these encounters are experienced.

For instance, because lower-income areas tend to have higher crime rates than wealthier areas, individuals living in poor neighborhoods are more likely to have negative interactions with the police—both directly (e.g. being stopped and questioned) and indirectly (e.g. witnessing others being stopped)—than those in higher-income areas. As a result, trust in the police tends to be lower among residents of poorer neighborhoods compared to those in wealthier areas. Similarly, research from New Zealand has shown

that minority status has a stronger negative effect on trust in the police among individuals with lower SES than among those with higher SES (Panditharatne et al., 2021).

Building on prior research (e.g. Bolger et al., 2021; Brown & Benedict, 2002; Wu & Sun, 2009), we test the following hypotheses:

H1: Trust in the police increases with age.

H2: Females report higher levels of trust in the police than males.

H3: Higher socioeconomic status (SES) is associated with greater trust in the police.

H4: Trust in the police varies by residential location, with urban residents typically reporting lower trust than those in smaller, rural areas.

H5: Trust in the police varies by gender across age groups.

Perceived police effectiveness

Performance theory is based on the notion that trust is linked to individuals' perceptions of how well governmental agencies are performing (Bouckaert et al., 2002). In general, the theory suggests that people trust institutions they think are performing well and distrust institutions they think are performing poorly (Boateng, 2017).

Micro-performance theory builds on this idea, arguing that trust is shaped by individuals' direct evaluation of how well or poorly an institution is performing (Bouckaert et al., 2002). The theory assumes that perceptions of police efficiency and the quality of its service influence trust in the police (Boateng, 2017). Accordingly, trust in the police is driven by expectations and perceived performance levels of the police and the quality of service.

Research has supported this theory (Boateng, 2017; Hinds & Murphy, 2007)—for example, in Ethiopia, where police effectiveness in controlling crime and providing services was found to be the strongest predictor of trust in the police. The impact of perceived police effectiveness on trust in the police was three times greater than that of procedural justice (Melkamu & Teshome, 2023). Similarly, Tankebe's (2009) research in Ghana demonstrated that police effectiveness was the only variable associated with willingness to cooperate with the police.

As an indicator of police effectiveness, physical visibility and perception of police accessibility can influence public confidence and trust in the police (Hawdon et al., 2003; Tuffin et al., 2006). The more visible the police are, the more effective they are presumed to be, as their presence suggests that they are actively monitoring society (Jackson & Bradford, 2009). Although most studies support this relationship (Sindall & Sturgis, 2013), some have shown no relation between police visibility and trust in the police (Kääriäinen, 2008).

Perceived police accessibility can also be viewed as an indicator of police effectiveness and, as such, may enhance public trust in the police (Skogan, 2009).

In the current study, we test the hypothesis that perceived police effectiveness (visibility, accessibility, and performance) is associated with increased trust in the police (H6).

Experiences of police contact

The theory of procedural justice is based on the idea that people obey the law and cooperate with the police when they view authority as legitimate (Tyler, 2011). Legitimacy, in turn, is a product of respectful and fair treatment by the police, which promotes more favorable attitudes towards the police (Tyler, 1990, 2005). Importantly, the outcome of the

encounters does not necessarily have to be favorable for the individual as long as they perceive the police as exercising their authority fairly (Tyler & Huo, 2002).

Tyler (2011) refers to these encounters as 'teachable moments', through which individuals learn about the legal system. If people perceive or experience interactions with the police as just and fair, these encounters lead to greater satisfaction with both the contact itself and the decisions made (Tyler & Fagan, 2008; Tyler & Huo, 2002). In fact, extensive empirical research indicates that satisfaction with police contact is not necessarily determined by the outcome of the encounters but rather by the perception that the police exercise their authority fairly (Bolger & Walters, 2019; Tyler & Huo, 2002).

Thus, it is not the frequency of police contact that shapes distrust (Dowler & Sparks, 2008), nor whether they are initiated by the police or the public (FitzGerald et al., 2013), but rather how these interactions unfold. When the quality of the encounters is considered, the relationship between the frequency of police contacts and distrust disappears (Bolaji & Metcalfe, 2024).

However, the impact of the quality of police contact is not symmetrical in shaping positive and negative attitudes. This phenomenon, referred to as *asymmetry* (Skogan, 2006), suggests that negative experience with police contact has a stronger effect on trust in the police than positive experience, which tends to have only limited impact (Skogan, 2006).

Testing this idea, Oliveira et al. (2021) used two-wave panel data to evaluate the effects of police contact over time. They found that negative experiences during contact with the police diminished trust in police effectiveness more than positive experiences enhanced it. However, in contrast to Skogan's (2006) findings, they found that the relationship between police contact and trust in procedural fairness was symmetrical, meaning that positive encounters with the police increased trust in procedural justice to the same extent as negative encounters decreased it (Oliveira et al., 2021).

Research on trust in the police and police contact has commonly been based on cross-sectional data. Testing for causality, Rosenbaum et al. (2005) found that direct contact with the police did not change attitudes towards the police, regardless of whether the contact was initiated by the police or the public. Moreover, the quality of the interaction only influenced public-initiated contact but not police-initiated contact. This may be because people generally have lower expectations of police-initiated contact, making the lack of quality less consequential compared to public-initiated contact (Rosenbaum et al., 2005).

Some research also indicates that having no contact with the police may be associated with the most positive attitudes towards them (Bradford et al., 2009). Building on this body of research, the present study tests the hypothesis that trust in the police varies depending on whether individuals have had police contact and, if so, their level of satisfaction with that contact.

Specifically, we examine whether those with no contact exhibit greater trust in the police compared to those who have had contact and how satisfaction with police encounters influences trust levels (H7).

Methodology

This study uses data from victimization surveys conducted by the National Commissioner of the Icelandic Police and Reykjavík Metropolitan Police from 2016 to 2024. The police victimization survey is largely based on the questionnaire from the International Crime

Victims Survey (ICVS), in which Iceland participated in 2005. This study uses data since 2016, as it contains all the relevant questions used in our analysis. While overall trust in the police has shown a slight decline over recent years, this should not meaningfully affect the outcomes of our regression analysis, as our primary aim is to identify factors associated with trust rather than describing absolute trust levels.

The data were collected by the Social Science Research Institute at the University of Iceland and Gallup. Each year, a stratified random sample of 4,000 individuals is drawn from a web panel based on a random sample from the national registry, consisting of individuals aged 18 and older across Iceland. The sample is evenly split, with 2,000 participants from the capital area and 2,000 from rural areas.

The response rate has declined over time, peaking at 64% in 2016 and dropping to 50% in 2022. To minimize respondent fatigue, individuals are not selected for two consecutive years. Data collection occurs annually in the spring (April–June).

Surveys are distributed via email, including a link to the questionnaire and information about the conducting organizations, data analysis procedures, and privacy assurances—stating that no personal identifying information is stored or analyzed.

In the results, the data are weighted to ensure that the sample reflects the population in terms of gender, age, education, and residence, preventing systematic bias from lower response rates in certain groups. The total sample size is 20,855, though the number of participants in the models is slightly smaller due to item non-response across measurements. Given that the proportion of non-response was relatively low and diagnostic checks did not suggest systematic patterns of missingness, we applied listwise deletion in the results below (dropout rate ranged from 4.1% to 9.6%).

Measures

To measure *trust in the police,* respondents were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: 'I trust the police and its work.' using a five-point scale: 1) strongly disagree, 2) disagree, 3) neither agree nor disagree, 4) agree, 5) strongly agree. Given our primary interest in identifying predictors of expressed trust and the substantial skewness of responses (approximately 80% either strongly agree or agree), we opted for a binary logistic regression approach. Responses were therefore dichotomized, coding participants who agreed or strongly agreed as 1, and other participants as 0.

We follow previous research (Stanko & Bradford, 2009) and use three concepts to capture perceived police effectiveness: 1) visibility, 2) access, and 3) performance of duties. *Police visibility* was measured with the survey question, 'How often, on average, do you see a police officer or a police car in your neighborhood/community? (Do not include police appearances in the media.)' The original question used a nine-point scale, ranging from 'never' to 'many times a day'. For analytical purposes, we recoded this into three categories: 1) once a month or less (including hardly ever or never), 2) more than once a month but less than weekly, and 3) weekly or more often (including daily and multiple times a day).

Access to the police was measured with the question 'When you think about your access to the police, for example, to receive services or assistance when needed, how accessible or inaccessible do you find the police in your neighborhood/community?' Responses were on a four-point scale ranging from 1) very inaccessible to 4) very accessible. Participants could also choose the answer 'don't know' or 'don't want to answer', and 24.3% did. To

minimize missing values, we include this group in the analyses below and compare their trust to those who perceive the police as accessible.

The survey question, 'Overall, how well or poorly do you think the police in your neighborhood/community are doing in preventing crime?' was used to measure *performance of duties*. The response categories ranged from 1) very poorly to 4) very well. Approximately a quarter of respondents (25.4%) selected 'don't know' or 'don't want to answer' for this question. While the goal is to capture public perceptions of police efficiency, people likely lack actual knowledge of how effectively the police prevent crime and selecting 'don't know' may reflect their awareness of this gap. Again, to minimize dropout rates and enable comparisons with those who provided an opinion, we include this group in the regression analyses.

Personal contact/experience with the police was measured using two questions. First, participants were asked whether they had interacted with the police in the past year through various means, such as by calling, emailing, visiting a police station, or contacting emergency services (112). Second, respondents who had had contact were asked to rate their satisfaction with these interactions on a four-point scale: 1) very dissatisfied to 4) very satisfied. Since some had had multiple interactions within the same year, an average satisfaction score was calculated. For analytical purposes, a new variable was created with four categories to compare individuals based on their interactions with the police. The comparison group are those who did not have any contact with the police in the previous year, and we compare them to those who had contact and were on average satisfied with it, those who had contact and were on average dissatisfied, and those who had contact but did not report if they were satisfied or dissatisfied with the contact.

Information on participants' age and gender was obtained from the national registry. Age was categorized into six groups for the analyses. SES was measured using two indicators: education and income. Participants reported their highest level of education and monthly income. We created a dummy variable for university degree holders and another for those earning above the average monthly income in Iceland (600,000 ISK, or approximately 4,115 euros). While the average yearly income in Iceland increased between 2016 and 2024, housing prices have risen proportionally. Thus, minor income growth during this period is unlikely to have significantly affected residential patterns.

We also created a dummy variable for residential location, coding participants living in the capital area as '1' and those in rural areas as '0'. In Iceland, Reykjavík and its surrounding municipalities—home to approximately 74% of the population (Statistics Iceland, 2025)—constitute the only urban area comparable to cities in other countries.

Results

Figure 1 shows that overall trust in the police in Iceland was high between 2016 and 2024, with almost 82% of participants strongly agreeing or agreeing with the statement 'I have trust in the police.'

Table 1 shows descriptive group differences in the weighted sample and unadjusted associations between groups regarding trust in the police. Trust varied notably by age, increasing from younger to older age groups, and was slightly higher among females than males. Minimal differences emerged regarding income and education. Residents outside the capital area reported higher trust compared to those within it. Additionally, higher police visibility, perceived accessibility, positive perceptions of police performance, and

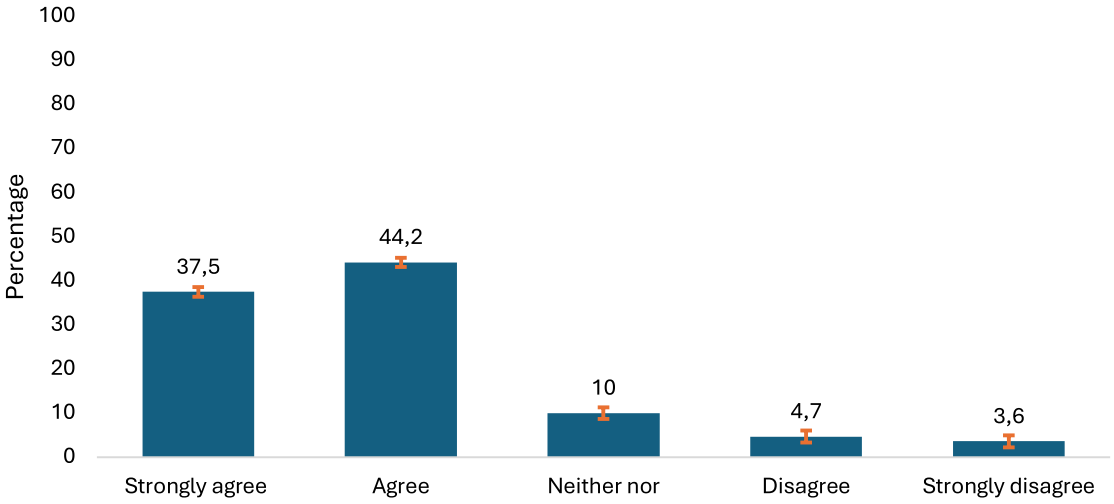

Figure 1. Trust in the police in Iceland, 2016–2024

satisfaction with previous police contact were clearly associated with greater trust in these initial, unadjusted comparisons, prior to controlling for other variables.

We began our main analysis by examining what demographic factors were associated with trust in the police (Model 1 in Table 2)[1]. The analysis revealed that older respondents generally reported higher trust levels than younger ones. Compared to the youngest group (18–25 years), all age groups—except 26–35-year-olds—showed significantly greater trust. The largest gap was between the youngest and oldest groups, with the latter being nearly four times more likely to trust the police (OR = 3.764, $p < .000$).

Males were significantly less likely than females to trust the police (OR = 0.617, $p < .000$). Higher income (above 600,000 ISK per month) was associated with greater trust, as was living outside the capital area. However, the difference in trust in the police between those with and without a university degree was not significant.

In line with the discussion on intersectionality (Tura et al., 2024), we tested the interaction effects of age and gender. In other words, in Model 2 of Table 2, we examined whether age had different effects on trust in the police for males and females. Indeed, the results showed a statistically significant interaction. While trust in the police increased with age for both men and women (as shown by the main effects of age), the interaction effects indicated that this increase was weaker for men than for women. In other words, younger men (18–25) had the lowest trust, but as men got older, their trust increased less steeply compared to women of the same age. This means that, while older individuals generally have more trust in the police, the development of trust by age starts later for males than females.

We also tested other interaction effects, such as age × residence, but none yielded statistically significant results (not shown). To illustrate the relationship between demographic factors and trust in the police, Figure 2 presents trust levels across different groups, incorporating all significant variables from Table 2 and displaying 95% confidence intervals. For ease of presentation, age has been grouped into two categories: young (18–35 years old) and older (36 and above). While a majority across all groups reported trusting the police, there were notable variations. Young males with low incomes in the capital area exhibited the lowest trust levels, with approximately 66% reporting trust in the police.

Turning our attention to the factors that influence why people trust the police, we present the results of our binary logistic regression analysis in Table 3. Model 1 illustrates the impact of factors related to police effectiveness on trust in the police. Interestingly, when

Table 1. Descriptive statistics. Proportion of total sample and proportion who stated they trust the police. Weighted sample

	Proportion of total sample	**Proportion of group reporting trust in the police**
Age		
18–25	14.2	70.4
26–35	18.2	72.9
36–45	17.1	82.8
46–55	16.3	85.6
56–65	15.7	86.2
66 years or older	18.5	90.0
Gender		
Female	49.7	85.1
Male	50.3	78.3
Income		
600,000 ISK or less	51.5	80.8
More than 600,000 ISK	48.5	82.7
Education		
Have university degree	34.4	81.7
Do not have a university degree	65.6	82.5
Residence		
Outside the capital area	36.8	84.6
Capital area	63.2	80.0
Visibility		
Monthly or less	42.1	78.1
Weekly or many times per month	27.9	83.3
More than weekly, daily, or often per day	30.0	85.5
Accessibility		
Very- or rather accessible	55.8	89.6
Very- or rather inaccessible	20.0	62.2
Did not report (don't know/no answer)	24.3	79.5
Performance of duties		
Very- or rather well	62.8	92.0
Very- or rather poorly	11.6	42.0
Did not report (don't know/no answer)	25.6	74.0
Personal contact with the police in the last year		
No contact with the police	67.0	83.0
Contact with the police – satisfied	24.7	87.4
Contact with the police – not satisfied	6.2	47.6
Contact with the police – did not report if satisfied or not	2.1	69.3
Total	100	77.8

Table 2. Binary logistic regression of trust in the police by demographic factors

	Model 1		Model 2	
	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)
Age				
18–25	1		1	
26–35	.078	1.082	.280	1.323**
36–45	.657	1.928***	.962	2.617***
46–55	.856	2.354***	1.111	3.038***
56–65	.915	2.497***	1.127	3.086***
66 years or older	1.325	3.764***	1.496	4.463***
Gender (male)	−.483	.617***	−.142	.868
Income (more than 600,000 ISK)	.181	1.199***	.195	1.215***
Residence (capital area)	−.302	.739***	−.304	.738***
Education (university)	.044	1.045	.032	1.033
Age X gender (male)				
18–25			1	
26–35			−.382	.682***
36–45			−.559	.572***
46–55			−.476	.621***
56–65			−.405	.667**
66 years or older			−.330	.719
X^2	847.263		870.075	
Nagelkerke R^2	.071		.073	
N	19,246		19,246	

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

factors related to police effectiveness were considered, there was a negative relationship between police visibility and trust in the police. In other words, the more visible the police are, the less likely the respondents were to say they trusted them. Those who saw the police more than weekly were over 30% less likely to report that they trusted them compared to those who reported never seeing the police (OR = 0.691, p < .000).

In contrast to visibility, there was a strong relationship between perceived accessibility of the police and trust in the police. Model 1 shows that those who perceived the police as inaccessible were significantly less likely to say they trusted the police than those who reported they perceived police accessibility to be rather or very good (OR = 0.381, p < .000). The same applied to those who did not report how they perceived police accessibility, that is, they were significantly less likely to report trust in the police than those who perceived police accessibility to be rather or very good (OR = 0.620, p < .000).

Those who believed that the police were doing a rather or very bad job performing their duties in their neighborhoods were more than 90% less likely to report that they trust the police than those who stated the police were doing a rather or very good job. Perceived police effectiveness explained close to 26% of the total variation in trust in the police in Iceland (Nagelkerke R^2 = .258).

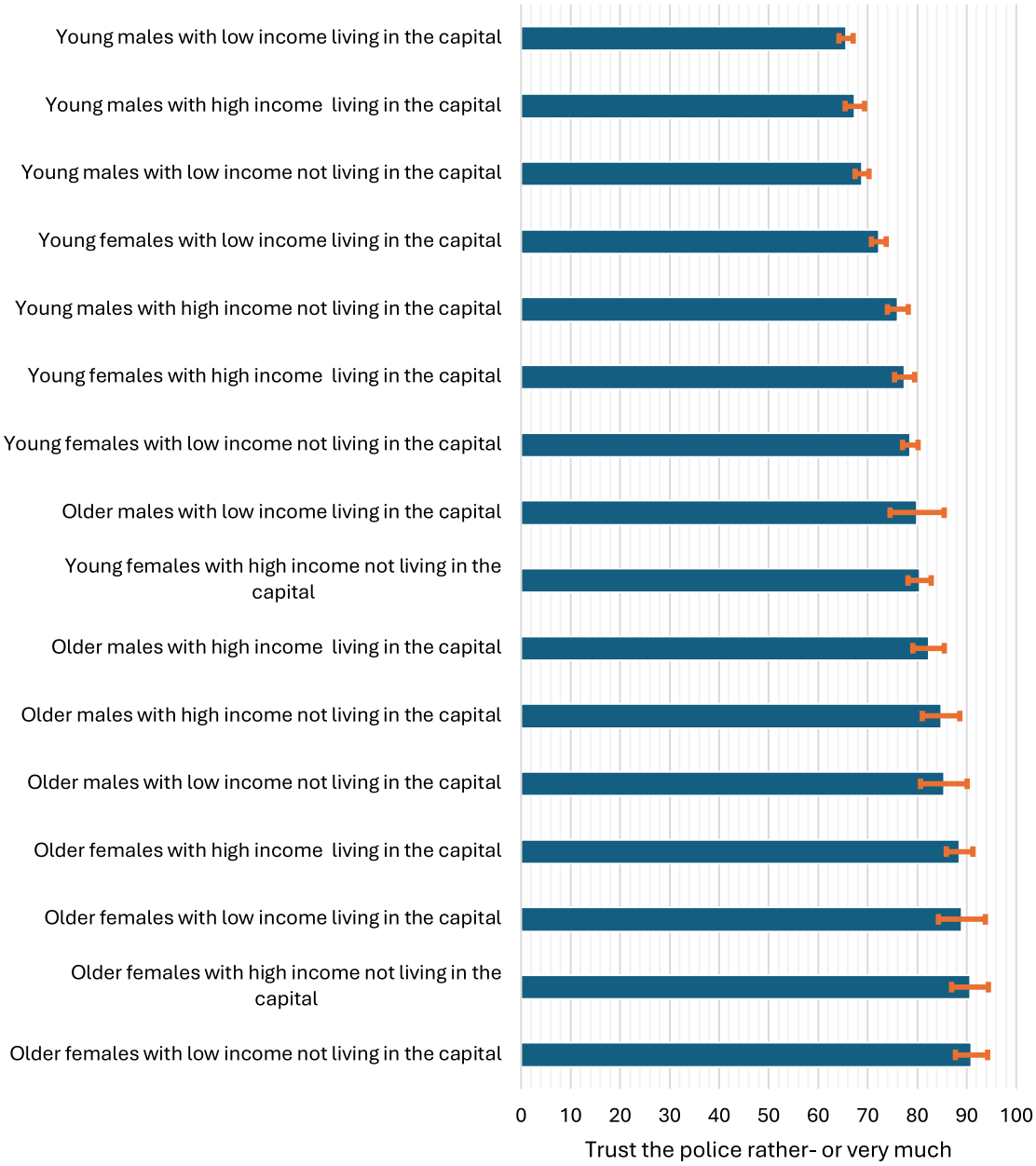

Figure 2. Proportion of participants who reported trusting the police by demographic background and 95% confidence intervals

Model 2 in Table 3 shows the relationship between personal experiences of police contact, satisfaction with the contact, and trust in the police. Supporting our hypothesis, how police contact was perceived by those who contacted the police affected the likelihood of reporting trust in the police. Those who said they were not satisfied with their contact with the police were more than 80% less likely to say they trust the police than those who did not have any contact in the previous year. On the other hand, those who reported they were satisfied with their contact with the police were more likely to report trust in the police than those who did not have any contact with the police (OR = 1.411, $p < .000$).

When the effects of perceived effectiveness and contact with the police were examined together, controlling for demographic factors in Model 3 (Table 3), we can see that the explanatory power of these factors was only slightly dependent on each other, except for police visibility and not being satisfied with police contact. Controlling for all other

Table 3. Binary logistic regression of trust in the police by perceived police efficiency and police contact

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	B	**Exp(B)**	**B**	**Exp(B)**	**B**	**Exp(B)**
Perceived police effectiveness						
Visibility						
Monthly or less	1				1	
Weekly or many times per month	−.190	.827***			−.078	.925
More than weekly, daily, or often per day	−.370	.691***			−.254	.776***
Accessibility						
Very or rather accessible	1				1	
Very or rather inaccessible	−.964	.381***			−.859	.424***
Did not report (don't know/no answer)	−.477	.620***			−.520	.595***
Performance of duties						
Very or rather well	1					
Very or rather poorly	−2.480	.084***			−2.353	.095***
Did not report (don't know/no answer)	−1.303	.272***			−1.326	.266***
Personal contact with the police in the last year						
No contact with the police			1		1	
Contact with the police – satisfied			.344	1.411***	.399	1.490***
Contact with the police – not satisfied			−1.688	.185***	−.853	.426***
Contact with the police – did not report if satisfied or not			−.771	.463***	−.647	.523***
Age						
18–25					1	
26–35					.147	1.159*
36–45					.877	2.404***
46–55					1.000	2.717***
56–65					1.092	2.980***
65 and older					1.480	4.394***
Gender (male)					−.484	.616***
Income (more than 600,000 ISK)					.246	1.279***
Residence (capital area)					.042	1.043
Education (university)					.051	1.052
X^2	3342.4		900.9		4095.9	
Nagelkerke R^2	.258		0.072		.323	
N	19,569		20,004		18,843	

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

factors in the model, there was no longer a significant difference in trust in the police between those who said they never saw the police and those who said they saw them weekly or many times a month (p = 0.162). The difference between those who did not have any police contact in the previous year and those who were dissatisfied with their police contact was also much smaller when all the other factors were taken into consideration.

The results in Model 3 (Table 3) also show that even after controlling for perceived police effectiveness and police contact, most demographic variables remained significant. In other words, age, gender, and income significantly impact trust in the police—not simply because they are linked to perceived police effectiveness and police contact but because they have independent effects. This suggests that other factors contribute to the relationship between these demographic variables and trust in the police.

However, residential location did not significantly impact trust in the police after controlling for other variables. This may indicate that differences in trust levels across locations are largely explained by variations in police effectiveness, contact experiences, or other social and economic factors, rather than by location itself.

Discussion and conclusion

Public trust in the police is a fundamental component of a well-functioning democracy and an essential determinant of police legitimacy (Tyler, 2005). This study represents the first comprehensive analysis of trust in the police in Iceland, addressing a significant gap in the existing literature. Iceland presents a unique case study within the broader field of police trust research. Unlike many Western societies, Iceland has a high level of trust in public institutions (Gallup, 2024), unarmed police (Oddsson et al., 2021), relatively low crime rates (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024), and a historically homogeneous population that has only recently begun to diversify (Statistics Iceland, n.d.). Examining trust in the police in the Icelandic context contributes to broader research by testing whether factors influencing trust identified primarily in the United States remain applicable in societies with significantly different institutional and cultural settings (Cao, 2001).

Our findings confirm that trust in the police is not uniformly distributed across groups. Consistent with prior research (Bolger et al., 2021; Brown & Benedict, 2002; Han et al., 2017; Van Craen, 2013; Wu & Sun, 2009), age and gender are key predictors of trust in the police. Older individuals report significantly higher levels of trust than younger people, suggesting that life experience, socialization, and a lower likelihood of direct police contact contribute to higher trust among older adults. Furthermore, as people age, their priorities tend to shift—whereas younger individuals may be more critical of authority and value autonomy and personal freedom, older adults are more likely to prioritize safety and social stability, which could contribute to greater confidence in the police as guardians of public order (Reisig & Correia, 1997).

Women are more likely to trust the police than men, a finding that remains significant when controlling for other variables. However, our analysis reveals an interaction effect between age and gender, demonstrating that growth in trust towards the police starts later among males than females. This finding may suggest that young men, particularly those in lower socioeconomic positions, have more frequent and longer-lasting, potentially negative interactions with the police, contributing to lower levels of trust (Fagan & Tyler, 2005; Skogan, 2006).

The limited impact of resident location and socioeconomic background when considering age and gender is not surprising in Iceland, as crime rates are low and concentrated in small areas of downtown Reykjavík. Living conditions are also very similar across the country and, therefore, might not impact interactions with the police in the same way as in larger societies (Bolger & Walters, 2019).

This study also highlights the importance of perceived police effectiveness and personal experiences with the police in shaping trust in the police. Prior research has emphasized

that trust in the police and police legitimacy are mostly based on ideas of procedural justice, where police legitimacy is shaped by fair and just policing (Tyler, 1990, 2005). Police performance or police effectiveness has also been shown to play a role in levels of trust in the police in society (Boateng, 2017). This research indicates that in Iceland, perceived police effectiveness has a stronger association with trust in the police than police contact and satisfaction with the contact. Perception of how well or poorly police are doing their work has the strongest relationship with trust in the police, showing that those who perceive that the police are not performing their duties well are 90% less likely to say they trust the police than those who perceive the police to be doing a good job. This is in line with prior research (Tankebe, 2009) showing that perceived police effectiveness has an impact on trust in the police.

Police visibility was used as one of the measures of police effectiveness, as prior research has indicated that police visibility might be seen as a sign of police effectiveness (Hawdon et al., 2003). Interestingly, in the current study, police visibility was negatively related to trust in the police when other factors related to police effectiveness were considered. This might support the notion that in countries where the level of crime is very low, people do not expect to see the police and, as such, police visibility might signal that something bad is happening (Holmberg, 2005) instead of evoking the feeling that the police are watching over society (Jackson & Bradford, 2009).

Following research that emphasizes the importance of the quality of police contacts on trust in the police (Tyler & Huo, 2002), we tested if participants contacted the police in the previous year and if they were satisfied or dissatisfied with their contact. Our results show that those who were satisfied with the contact were more likely to report trust in the police than those who did not contact the police. Those who reported that they were not satisfied with their police contact in the last year, on the other hand, reported less trust in the police than those who reported no contact. The stronger impact of negative contact than positive contact compared to those who did not have any contact with the police is in line with Skogan's (2006) and others' (see, e.g., Oliveira et al. (2021)) observations of asymmetry of police contact, where negative contact was shown to have a stronger negative impact on trust in the police than positive contact has. Controlling for perceived police effectiveness and demographics largely diminishes this difference. This might be due to prior attitudes and experiences, as Rosenbaum et al. (2005) showed that prior experience and attitudes play a large role in how police contact is viewed.

While this study offers valuable insights into the factors influencing trust in the police in Iceland, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study relies on self-reported survey data, which may be subject to social desirability bias and recall errors. Additionally, the survey is only available in Icelandic, excluding immigrants in Iceland who do not read Icelandic. Furthermore, individuals with disabilities, such as limited or no vision, limited mobility, or other disabilities requiring support for participation, are also excluded due to the data collection structure. Consequently, marginalized groups in Iceland are underrepresented in this data.

Despite these limitations, the study provides an important foundation for understanding trust in the police in Iceland and highlights key avenues for future research. Future research could delve deeper into the nuances of these relationships and examine other potential factors influencing trust in the police. It is also important to track changes in public trust over time and identify long-term trends and influences among different social groups. By continuing to investigate and address the determinants of public trust, law

enforcement agencies can work towards building stronger, more positive relationships with the communities they serve.

In conclusion, this study offers valuable insights into the factors influencing trust in the police in Iceland and has important implications for police practices and policies. To enhance public trust, it is essential for the police to focus on improving the quality of their interactions with the public, ensuring fair and respectful treatment, and maintaining high accessibility. Additionally, understanding the demographic differences in trust can help in tailoring policing strategies to address the specific needs and concerns of different groups.

Data availability

This study is based on data from the Icelandic Crime Victim Survey, an annual survey conducted by the National Commissioner of the Icelandic Police and the Reykjavík Metropolitan Police. It is a comprehensive study that explores individuals' experiences with crime and their attitudes toward police services. Access to the full dataset is restricted, but access to parts of the data can be requested by contacting the corresponding author.

Note

1. Given the number of independent variables in the models and the limited variance in the outcome, a large sample size is needed to obtain reliable estimates. It should, however, be noted that even small differences between groups may become statistically significant with such a large sample. Therefore, emphasis should be placed on the magnitude of the odds ratios, rather than solely on their statistical significance.

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