

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Increasing trust on the law enforcement in rural communities: Lens from pro-active youth leaders

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## ABSTRACT

Trust in law enforcement is a critical factor in building safe and resilient communities, yet rural contexts often reveal fragile relationships shaped by fear, historical trauma, and unequal treatment. This study explores how proactive youth leaders in Eastern Visayas and Mindanao, Philippines perceive local police and what initiatives they employ to strengthen collaboration. Using semi-structured interviews with 20 youth leaders and a reflexive thematic analysis approach, the study examined two objectives: (1) to explore perceptions and experiences of youth leaders regarding police-community relations, and (2) to identify strategies they use to foster trust and collaboration. Findings show that trust remains tenuous due to fear-based visibility during raids, profiling, favoritism, and cultural or linguistic distance. However, youth also recognized moments of empathy, particularly during disaster response, where police acted as allies rather than enforcers. Youth-led initiatives such as community sports leagues, peer-facilitated dialogues, and rights education workshops created safe spaces for accountability and relationship-building. While the findings are exploratory and context-specific, they suggest that sustainable trust requires consistent police engagement in community life, youth-inclusive programs, and culturally responsive practices. Policy recommendations include institutionalizing youth-police councils at the barangay level, creating youth-accessible reporting mechanisms for misconduct, and supporting SK-led initiatives through local government and law enforcement partnerships.

**Keywords:** Trust; law enforcement; rural communities; youth leaders

## 1. Introduction

The relationship between law enforcement and rural communities in the Philippines is often complex

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and marked by mistrust, limited engagement, and a lack of collaborative mechanisms. Law enforcement agencies play a vital role in maintaining peace and security, yet residents frequently report feelings of alienation, unequal treatment, and limited responsiveness from the police<sup>[1]</sup>. This divide is shaped by systemic factors, including inadequate police presence in remote barangays, cultural and linguistic disconnects, and a lack of sustained platforms for dialogue<sup>[2,3]</sup>. In the Philippine context, the significance of trust in governance is underscored by both cultural values and constitutional principles. The country has been described as a progressive society in Asia that places strong emphasis on protecting the dignity and security of its people<sup>[4]</sup>. Moreover, the 1987 Philippine Constitution asserts that public office is a public trust, requiring officials to act with integrity, responsibility, and accountability<sup>[5]</sup>. These normative foundations heighten the importance of examining how trust in law enforcement is constructed in rural areas, where the police are often the most visible representatives of the state.

The Philippine experience is particularly shaped by its political history. Memories of martial law and counterinsurgency campaigns continue to influence how many rural residents perceive state security forces, transmitting intergenerational mistrust to younger populations. Despite ongoing reforms in community policing, most existing research has centered on urban contexts, leaving a gap in understanding how rural actors—especially youth—engage in trust-building with law enforcement<sup>[6,7]</sup>.

This study explores the role of proactive youth leaders in selected rural barangays in Samar province. Youth leaders, particularly those engaged in the Sangguniang Kabataan (SK) and community organizations, are often at the forefront of civic initiatives. Their participation in community policing dialogues, sports-based engagement, and rights advocacy reflects an emerging grassroots approach to bridging divides between communities and police<sup>[8,9]</sup>.

Key concepts examined include youth leadership, community trust, and collaborative policing strategies<sup>[10]</sup>. Specifically, the study investigates: (1) how youth leaders perceive law enforcement in rural Samar, and (2) the strategies they implement to foster trust and collaboration. By situating the analysis in this provincial context, the research contributes to both theoretical discussions of procedural justice and practical debates on inclusive, community-centered policing.

## 2. Literature review

*Trust in Law Enforcement: A Theoretical Foundation.* Trust in law enforcement is widely conceptualized as a perception of legitimacy, fairness, transparency, and procedural justice<sup>[11,12]</sup>. In rural communities, however, these principles are filtered through local realities where trust is often shaped less by institutional frameworks and more by interpersonal relationships, cultural norms, and visible engagement of officers<sup>[13,14]</sup>. Scholars note that when police are seen as outsiders, rather than embedded members of the community, trust deficits are amplified. In the Philippine context, religious values, patronage systems, and memories of historical state violence complicate the formation of trust<sup>[15]</sup>. Thus, while global theories on legitimacy are useful, they must be critically examined against the backdrop of Philippine rural communities, where trust is negotiated through lived experiences of both resilience and trauma.

*Challenges in Rural Policing.* Policing in rural settings presents unique challenges, including underfunding, understaffing, and geographic isolation, which collectively hinder effective service delivery and accountability<sup>[16,17]</sup>. Tight-knit social networks can strengthen cooperation but may also fuel mistrust when favoritism or unequal enforcement is perceived<sup>[18]</sup>. In the Philippines, socioeconomic barriers such as poverty, low educational attainment, and limited access to institutional support further erode public confidence<sup>[19]</sup>. Historical grievances, including abuses during martial law and anti-drug operations, also

create a legacy of fear that uniquely shapes how rural Filipinos perceive law enforcement—a factor rarely addressed in international rural policing literature.

*Role of Youth in Community Development.* Youth are increasingly recognized as agents of change in community resilience, peacebuilding, and civic engagement. Studies highlight that youth who are empowered can influence institutional trust, particularly in underserved areas<sup>[20,21]</sup>. Programs that foster leadership, advocacy, and civic responsibility—such as student journalism, campus activism, and barangay-based youth councils—demonstrate the capacity of youth to challenge institutional power imbalances<sup>[22,23]</sup>. Yet, despite global recognition of youth leadership, Philippine rural youth are often portrayed primarily as beneficiaries of social programs rather than as co-creators of trust-building strategies. This narrow framing overlooks their capacity to act as proactive mediators in fraught police-community relationships.

*Youth-Law Enforcement Engagement Models.* International models such as youth-police dialogues, peer mentorship programs, and participatory policing demonstrate the potential of co-designed initiatives to improve public perceptions of law enforcement<sup>[24,25]</sup>. These studies consistently underscore the importance of non-coercive communication, cultural sensitivity, and sustained engagement<sup>[26]</sup>. More recent findings also highlight the role of emotional engagement and language accessibility in bridging trust gaps, especially among marginalized youth<sup>[27]</sup>. However, most of these models emerge from Western or urbanized contexts, raising questions about their applicability in rural barangays where historical grievances, dialect diversity, and resource scarcity complicate implementation.

*Trust-Building Interventions in Rural Contexts.* Community-driven strategies such as town halls, restorative approaches by school-based officers, and culturally responsive outreach have proven effective in certain rural contexts<sup>[28,29]</sup>. In the Philippines, grassroots initiatives often align with broader policy frameworks such as the Magna Carta of Women, which promotes localized protection and empowerment strategies<sup>[30]</sup>. Yet, scholarship that examines youth-inclusive interventions in rural Philippine policing remains sparse. Brunson and Miller<sup>[31]</sup> noted that marginalized youth are often more likely to be subjects of police suspicion than partners in reform efforts. This imbalance underscores the need for research that foregrounds youth voices not as passive observers but as leaders of community trust-building.

While global scholarship has extensively examined trust in policing, little research explicitly centers on youth-led trust-building in rural Philippine contexts. Previous studies have either highlighted community policing from institutional perspectives or examined youth in urban activism. This study addresses that gap by analyzing the perspectives and initiatives of proactive youth leaders in Samar, demonstrating how youth-driven strategies such as sports programs, dialogues, and rights education can bridge relational divides and contribute to rebuilding trust in law enforcement.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research design

This study employed a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews with youth leaders in rural barangays of Samar province, Philippines. A qualitative approach was chosen to capture the lived experiences, perceptions, and initiatives of youth leaders in relation to law enforcement.

#### 3.2. Population and sampling

The study included 20 youth leaders (ages 18–27) from various rural barangays in Eastern and Mindanao, Philippines. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, targeting individuals actively serving in the Sangguniang Kabataan (SK) or in community-based youth organizations. Local

government units and barangay councils were consulted to help identify potential participants, and invitations were extended via official letters and follow-up communication. Participation was voluntary, and inclusion criteria required that participants: (1) Were currently serving as SK officers or recognized youth leaders, (2) Resided in a rural barangay in Samar, and (3) Had experience engaging in community initiatives that intersected with law enforcement activities.

**Table 1.** Demographic profile of participants

Variable	Range/Category	Frequency (n=20)
Age	18–21	8
	22–24	7
	25–27	5
Gender	Male	11
	Female	9
Leadership Role	SK Chairperson	6
	SK Kagawad (Council Member)	8
	Community Youth Org Leader	6
Barangay Classification	Remote (coastal or upland)	12
	Semi-remote (near town center)	8

### 3.3. Instrument

A semi-structured interview guide was developed, organized around two focal areas: (1) youth leaders' perceptions and experiences of law enforcement-community relationships, and (2) strategies and initiatives for trust-building. The format allowed participants to narrate experiences freely while enabling probing for clarification and depth. Table 2 presents the list of guide questions used by this research study.

**Table 2.** Interview guide questions.

Objectives	Interview Questions
To explore the perceptions and experiences of proactive youth leaders regarding the current relationship between law enforcement and rural communities.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How would you describe the current relationship between law enforcement and the members of your rural community?</li> <li>Can you share a personal experience or observation that shaped your views about law enforcement in your area?</li> <li>What do you think are the main reasons behind the level of trust or mistrust between rural residents and local law enforcers?</li> </ol>
To examine the strategies and initiatives led by youth leaders that aim to foster trust and collaboration between rural communities and local law enforcement.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What initiatives or activities have you or your group undertaken to improve relationships between law enforcement and the community?</li> <li>What challenges have you encountered while trying to engage both the community and law enforcement in building mutual trust?</li> <li>In your opinion, what strategies are most effective in promoting sustained trust and collaboration between law enforcers and rural youth or residents?</li> </ol>

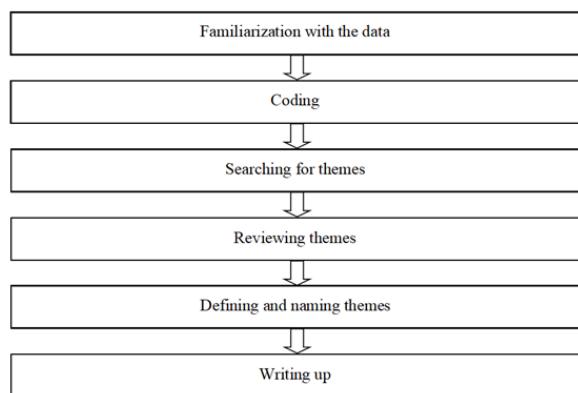
### 3.4. Data gathering procedure

Semi-structured interviews were conducted between October and December 2024. Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes and was conducted in Waray-Waray or Filipino, depending on participant preference. Interview guides included questions about: (1) Perceptions of law enforcement presence and behavior, (2) Experiences of trust or mistrust, (3) Initiatives youth leaders have implemented to engage police, (4) Recommendations for improving police-community relations. Interviews were audio-recorded (with consent),

transcribed, and translated into English for analysis. Data saturation was determined when no new themes emerged during the final three interviews. At that point, recurring patterns—such as concerns over profiling, favoritism, and the effectiveness of sports-based engagement—were consistently observed across participants.

### 3.5. Data analysis

Transcripts were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis<sup>[32]</sup>. The process involved: (1) Familiarization with the transcripts through repeated reading, (2) Initial coding of meaningful segments, (3) Collating codes into candidate themes, (4) Reviewing and refining themes to capture shared patterns, (5) Defining and naming themes, and (6) Producing a final thematic framework with supporting quotes. Coding was done manually by the lead researcher and later cross-checked by two research assistants to enhance consistency. Figure 1 presents the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis. The process is iterative in nature, and thus, researchers might build up their ideas by revisiting the previous phases.



**Figure 1.** Six steps in conducting reflexive thematic analysis

### 3.6. Ethical considerations

This study followed standard ethical guidelines for qualitative research. Before each interview, participants were informed of the study's purpose, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Written and verbal informed consent were obtained, including consent for audio recording and transcription. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned, and identifying details were removed from transcripts. Data were stored securely in password-protected files accessible only to the research team.

### 3.7. Researcher reflexivity

The lead researcher is a faculty member in criminology who has previously worked with youth organizations in Samar. While this insider perspective facilitated rapport with participants, it also risked introducing bias. To address this, reflexive journaling was maintained throughout the research process, and peer debriefing was conducted with colleagues who had no prior connection to the participants. This reflexive practice ensured that interpretations remained grounded in participant narratives rather than researcher assumptions.

## 4. Results

**Research Objectives 1.** To explore the perceptions and experiences of proactive youth leaders regarding the current relationship between law enforcement and rural communities.

**Question No. 1.** How would you describe the current relationship between law enforcement and the members of your rural community?

*Theme 1: Fragile Trust and Lingering Fear*

Ten respondents described the relationship as complicated, shaped by both fear and hope. While some officers were perceived as well-intentioned, the majority of youth associated law enforcement with intimidation, stigma, and anxiety. Past abuses created enduring trauma, and uniforms or sirens triggered feelings of threat rather than safety.

“The relationship between law enforcement and our community is complicated. Some officers try to do their jobs well, but many people, especially youth, feel afraid of them.”

“Many youths still associate the police with intimidation rather than protection. Uniforms and sirens trigger anxiety, not relief.”

*Theme 2: Inconsistent and Personality-Based Engagement*

Five youth leaders noted that interactions with police varied greatly depending on the individual officer. Some were approachable, even joining barangay activities such as clean-ups or forums, while others remained disengaged and visible only during law enforcement operations. This inconsistency made trust fragile and dependent on personalities rather than institutional practices.

“It really depends on the officer. In our barangay, we have a few police officers who are involved in community events, and that helps.”

“Some are approachable and even join community clean-up drives or youth forums. Others just stay in the station.”

*Theme 1.3: Fear-Based Presence*

Five respondents emphasized that police visibility was often tied to law enforcement operations such as anti-drug raids. This reinforced fear among youth, especially those who had witnessed violent arrests or wrongful accusations.

“The police presence here is mostly visible during operations like anti-drug raids. That creates fear, especially among young people.”

“When you only see police during raids, you start to associate them with fear, not safety.”

**Question No. 2.** Can you share a personal experience or observation that shaped your views about law enforcement in your area?

*Theme 2.1: Positive Encounters and Emerging Empathy*

Seven youth leaders recalled moments when police acted not as enforcers but as allies, particularly during natural disasters such as Typhoon Paeng and local landslides. In these instances, officers assisted in rescue operations, distributed relief goods, and coordinated with youth volunteers. These experiences momentarily reframed the police as protectors rather than sources of fear.

“Our local police actually helped with rescue efforts and relief distribution. For the first time, we saw them not as enforcers but as people who could protect and support the community.”

### *Theme 2.2: Bias and Unequal Treatment of Youth*

Conversely, 13 respondents described experiences of profiling, wrongful accusations, and appearance-based discrimination, which reinforced mistrust. Some recounted cases where young people were detained without due process or treated suspiciously based on clothing or physical appearance. Others highlighted favoritism, where youth from poorer families faced harsher treatment compared to those with influential relatives.

“When I was 16, my cousin was wrongly accused of being involved in drugs. He was detained overnight without explanation.”

“My older brother was stopped and frisked just because he wore a hoodie and earbuds. They assumed he was a ‘tambay.’”

**Question No. 3.** What do you think are the main reasons behind the level of trust or mistrust between rural residents and local law enforcers?

### *Theme 1: Unequal Treatment and Perceived Favoritism*

Eight Youth leaders consistently highlighted favoritism as a major driver of mistrust. They observed that wealthier or well-connected individuals were treated more leniently, while poor youth faced harsher consequences.

“Mistrust often comes from unequal treatment. People see how those with connections or money are treated more leniently, while ordinary youth or farmers are quickly judged or even harassed.”

### *Theme 2: Community Involvement as a Trust Builder*

Conversely, eight participants emphasized that trust was described as stronger when police actively participated in community life, such as coaching youth sports teams, attending barangay clean-ups, or responding with compassion during disasters. These actions humanized officers and strengthened bonds.

“That kind of visibility made people feel safe and respected. It showed us that officers could be part of the community, not separate from it.”

### *Theme 3: Language and Cultural Barriers*

Four respondents emphasized that cultural and linguistic differences often deepened mistrust. Officers assigned from other provinces struggled to communicate in local dialects, leading to misinterpretations and alienation.

“Some officers assigned here don’t speak our local language or understand our customs. It feels like we’re policed by outsiders.”

**Research Objectives 2.** To examine the strategies and initiatives led by youth leaders that aim to foster trust and collaboration between rural communities and local law enforcement.

**Question No. 1.** What initiatives or activities have you or your group undertaken to improve relationships between law enforcement and the community?

### *Theme 1.1: Sports as a Bridge*

11 Youth leaders organized community basketball and volleyball tournaments where teams included both youth and police officers (or barangay tanods). These events reduced intimidation and encouraged informal interactions.

“We organized a community basketball league where teams were mixed youth, tanods, and police officers. It helped break down barriers.”

“That small gesture created new friendships. Now when youth see those officers, they greet them by name, not in fear.”

*Theme 1.2: Dialogue as a Tool for Accountability*

Six respondents facilitated listening circles and feedback sessions where youth shared personal experiences, including instances of profiling. These dialogues were often tense but allowed honest conversations that pushed officers to reflect on their practices.

“After some complaints about profiling, we organized a feedback session with officers and youth leaders. It was tense but powerful.”

“At first, the officers were defensive, but after hearing stories directly, they acknowledged the pain caused.”

*Theme 1.3: Rights Education as Confidence Building*

Three youths partnered with lawyers and police officers to conduct seminars on legal rights, due process, and respectful engagement. This empowered young people to interact with police more confidently and helped shift perceptions of officers as partners in education.

“The ‘Know Your Rights’ seminar made us see officers not just as enforcers, but as resource persons.”

“After the legal literacy workshop, youth felt more confident engaging with police, not just fearing authority.”

**Question No. 2.** What challenges have you encountered while trying to engage both the community and law enforcement in building mutual trust?

*Theme 2.1: Mutual Distrust and Fear of Reprisal*

Nine respondents emphasized that both youth and officers were reluctant to participate in forums. Young people feared being tagged as troublemakers if they spoke out, while officers worried about being criticized.

“One of the hardest parts is convincing young people to attend forums with police present. They’re scared they’ll be watched later.”

“Some officers also feel like they’re only being gathered to be criticized.”

*Theme 2.2: Lack of Consistency in Engagement*

Six respondents emphasized that engagement was described as irregular, often dependent on the personality of the police chief or tied to election cycles. This inconsistency undermined long-term trust.

“There’s no consistent program for police-community partnerships. Everything feels temporary.”

“Every time a new police chief comes, there’s a lot of promise, but after a few months it fades.”

*Theme 2.3: Historical Trauma and Community Apathy*

Five respondents said that older residents' memories of martial law and anti-insurgency operations created a culture of caution and mistrust. These attitudes influenced the younger generation, making it harder to change perceptions.

"Older community members still carry trauma from past abuses. They tell us not to trust the police."

"Our grandparents taught us to stay silent and avoid getting involved with law enforcement."

**Question No. 3.** In your opinion, what strategies are most effective in promoting sustained trust and collaboration between law enforcers and rural youth or residents?

*Theme 3.1: Consistent and Humanizing Presence*

Eight respondents emphasized that regular, informal participation of police in community activities—such as clean-ups, feeding programs, or fiestas—was key to building trust.

"When police regularly join barangay clean-ups or sports leagues, it shows they care beyond their uniforms."

"They become part of the community, not outsiders."

*Theme 3.2: Youth-Led Dialogues and Safe Conversations*

Eight participants found that youth-facilitated discussions encouraged openness. When police attended as guests rather than authority figures, conversations felt less intimidating.

"Youth are more open to share when dialogues are led by fellow youth, with police attending as guests."

"One participant opened up about profiling because it didn't feel like a formal interrogation."

*Theme 3.3: Joint Capacity-Building Workshops*

Four respondents emphasized that workshops on conflict resolution, communication, and emotional intelligence created empathy and broke down barriers between youth and officers.

"We held a training with both youth and officers on conflict resolution. It created mutual understanding."

"By the end of the workshop, everyone was laughing and reflecting together. It reminded us we're on the same side."

## 5. Discussion

This study examined how proactive youth leaders in Samar perceive their relationship with law enforcement and what initiatives they pursue to strengthen trust and collaboration in rural communities. The findings reveal a dual reality: while mistrust is fueled by fear, profiling, favoritism, and cultural distance, meaningful opportunities for rebuilding trust emerge when police engage consistently, respond empathetically, and collaborate with youth-led initiatives.

### 5.1. Perceptions of law enforcement: between fear and hope

The results indicate that rural youth leaders view the police with ambivalence. Fear and intimidation remain dominant, particularly when police are most visible during anti-drug raids or coercive operations.

This reflects broader findings in Philippine scholarship that link policing to historical trauma, such as martial law abuses and punitive anti-narcotics campaigns<sup>[33]</sup>. Similar to Brunson and Miller's<sup>[31]</sup> work on marginalized youth in the United States, respondents associated profiling and unequal treatment with erosion of trust. Favoritism toward wealthier or politically connected residents deepened perceptions of injustice, echoing Miller's<sup>[18]</sup> argument that tight-knit rural networks can reinforce inequality.

At the same time, youth leaders described moments of empathy—particularly during disaster response—when police acted as protectors rather than enforcers. These instances resonate with research suggesting that procedural fairness and positive interpersonal contact are key to rebuilding legitimacy<sup>[11-12]</sup>. In Samar, where disasters are frequent, such actions hold symbolic power by reframing police as allies embedded in community resilience. Thus, the findings suggest that mistrust is not absolute but conditional, shaped by whether interactions emphasize coercion or collaboration.

## **5.2. Youth-led trust-building strategies**

Consistent with global scholarship that highlights youth as agents of civic engagement<sup>[20-21]</sup>, the study found that proactive youth leaders in Samar employ multiple strategies to reduce fear and strengthen community-police ties. Sports programs humanized officers by creating shared spaces where uniforms were set aside and relationships were rebuilt on camaraderie. Dialogues and listening circles provided platforms for accountability, allowing youth to voice grievances in structured, less intimidating settings. Rights education initiatives empowered young people to understand due process, thereby shifting engagements with police from fear to confidence.

These practices parallel youth-police engagement models in other Global South contexts, such as South Africa and Latin America, where young leaders mediate tensions through dialogue and participatory initiatives<sup>[34-35]</sup>. However, this study extends the literature by situating such strategies in a rural Philippine province where structural barriers—such as language differences, political favoritism, and historical trauma—make trust-building uniquely challenging. By highlighting these grassroots, youth-driven efforts, the study contributes an important perspective to debates on community policing that are often dominated by top-down institutional reforms.

## **5.3. Barriers to sustained collaboration**

Despite these efforts, respondents emphasized persistent barriers. Mutual distrust limited participation in youth-police forums, with young people fearing reprisal and officers perceiving criticism as hostility. Inconsistent engagement from police leadership also undermined momentum, as programs were often tied to the tenure of particular chiefs. Finally, intergenerational trauma from martial law and counterinsurgency campaigns continued to discourage trust, demonstrating the long shadow of historical state violence in shaping rural policing perceptions. These barriers echo international findings on the fragility of community policing initiatives in marginalized settings<sup>[17,29]</sup>, while underscoring their distinct resonance in the Philippine rural context.

## **5.4. Implications for rural policing and youth leadership**

Taken together, the findings suggest that trust-building in rural areas requires both institutional reforms and grassroots engagement. For law enforcement, consistency of presence, cultural sensitivity, and accountability mechanisms are crucial to moving beyond fear-based legitimacy. For youth leaders, initiatives grounded in sports, dialogue, and rights education illustrate the power of local agency in creating safe spaces for collaboration. Importantly, these results support calls for reimagining policing not only as law enforcement but also as a form of community partnership embedded in social resilience.

## 5.5. Limitations

The study is limited by its small, localized sample of 20 youth leaders in Samar, which restricts generalizability. Perspectives of police officers and older community members were not included, limiting triangulation of data. Furthermore, findings are based on self-reported experiences, which may reflect individual biases. Future studies should expand to other provinces, include law enforcement perspectives, and explore long-term outcomes of youth-led initiatives.

## 6. Conclusion

This study examined the perceptions and initiatives of proactive youth leaders in rural barangays of Samar regarding their relationship with local law enforcement. The findings suggest that while trust remains fragile due to historical trauma, profiling, favoritism, and inconsistent police engagement, there are also meaningful opportunities for rebuilding collaboration. Youth leaders highlighted how moments of empathy, particularly during disaster response, transformed their view of the police from intimidating enforcers to potential allies. At the same time, youth-led initiatives such as sports programs, community dialogues, and rights education have served as important avenues to reduce fear, humanize officers, and promote mutual accountability.

Although these findings are exploratory and context-specific, they highlight several important implications for practice. Trust-building can be strengthened by institutionalizing youth-police partnerships at the barangay level, ensuring consistent community presence of officers beyond law enforcement operations, and providing cultural and linguistic training to improve communication with local residents. Equally important is the establishment of youth-accessible reporting mechanisms to address concerns about profiling and favoritism, as well as targeted support for youth-led initiatives such as legal literacy workshops and community sports leagues. Joint capacity-building activities for both police officers and youth leaders, particularly on communication, emotional intelligence, and conflict resolution, may further sustain collaboration and break down long-standing barriers of mistrust.

Future research should incorporate the perspectives of police officers and older community members to enable triangulation of findings, as well as comparative studies across other rural provinces to determine whether similar themes emerge in different contexts. Longitudinal research may also be valuable in assessing the sustainability and long-term effects of youth-led initiatives in strengthening police-community trust. Ultimately, this study underscores the vital role of young leaders as active partners in governance, demonstrating that trust-building between rural communities and law enforcement requires not only institutional reforms but also consistent engagement, mutual respect, and recognition of youth agency.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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