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Position Paper

## Police recruits' attitudes toward the death penalty in Trinidad and Tobago

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## ABSTRACT

Knowledge, attitudes and beliefs of police officers are important in shaping public opinion on the death penalty. However, there is a paucity of research in the Caribbean on police officers' attitudes towards the death penalty and thus insufficient police scholarship on this topical issue. More specifically, there is a noticeable sparseness of scholarship on the death penalty using police recruits as proxies for such studies. As a result of this lacuna, the current study examined attitudes of police recruits towards the death penalty using a mixed-method approach to gather data on attitudes towards the death penalty as well as alternatives to the death penalty. Questionnaires were distributed to one hundred and seven individuals undergoing police recruit training at the Police Academy in Trinidad and Tobago. The data were distilled by gender, education level, marital status, and age range to determine attitudes towards the death penalty among the recruit population. The findings revealed: (1) high levels of support for the death penalty, (2) the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence for persons found guilty of murder, and (3) life imprisonment without the possibility of parole as the best alternative sentencing option to the death penalty. Three themes (consistent application of the death penalty, life imprisonment without parole, and murder only) emanated from the qualitative component of the instrument and these are discussed.

## 1. Introduction

Millie and Hirschler (2018) submit that while there is a long history of academic research in policing, very few studies have focused on the experiences of police recruits (see Boag-Munroe, 2019; Chan, 2001; Charman, 2017; Cunha and Gonçalves, 2017; Cunha et al., 2022; Donner and Maskály, 2023; Fielding, 1988 as exceptions). While there is a slew of local and international research conducted on the death penalty by lawyers and social scientists (Burnham, 2005; Harrington, 2004; Hood and Seemungal, 2006; Hood et al., 2009; Radelet and Akers, 1996), Hughes and Robinson (2013) assert that there are only a handful of studies examining the attitudes of police recruits towards the death penalty (see Mignon and Holmes, 1999 as an exception). As there are limited studies examining the attitudes of police recruits towards the death penalty and the available ones are generally conducted in the Global North, it is difficult to determine whether these factors have the same explanatory power in the Global South or 'regions outside Europe and North America, that are mainly low-income and culturally marginalized' (Dados and Connell, 2012). This is unfortunate and the author of this article is of the view that the opinions held by police recruits on the death penalty may be markedly different from those of social scientists and ordinary citizens.

At the beginning of their careers in policing, police recruits are more empathetic (Hughes and Robinson, 2013) and their level of

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empathy for others is at the highest level (Bringsrud Fekjær, 2014). Therefore, measuring their views on the death penalty at this phase of their career is important to gather their views before the ‘full impacts of police socialization’ sets in, as conventional wisdom suggest that attitudes, once formed, are relatively stable over time (Cunha et al., 2022). Further, as a result of the sparse literature exploring police recruits attitudes towards the death penalty, this study is critical as attitudes held by police recruits are crucial in the context of policy formulation, application, and imposition of the death penalty as a criminal sanction. Therefore, it is imperative to measure recruits attitudes towards the death penalty while they are still in recruit training. The current study adds to the limited scholarship on the topic under inquiry by investigating the beliefs of police recruits towards the death penalty. The results will highlight whether there is reinforcement or challenges to the assumed dominant culture of police officers who tend to support the death penalty.

In this study, attitudes toward the death penalty is conceptualized as ‘sentiments, beliefs, or opinions typically reflecting support for or opposition to the death penalty as a criminal sanction’ (Vollum, 2014). These attitudes are important as they often reflect underlying social, cultural, moral, and political sensibilities that relate to broader notions of punishment, retribution, and criminal responsibility (Vollum, 2014). To ensure that the term is neither mysterious nor esoteric to the readership of this article, the term ‘death penalty’ refers to ‘a form of capital punishment instituted by the constitution which requires that certain crimes as dictated by the law are punished by death’ (Awudja et al., 2021). The death penalty is therefore viewed as a sanction for criminal offending that is aimed at societal regulation, while the state, as a social contract, exists for the sake of social order (Potgieter et al., 2003). With this in mind, the current research effort revolves around a search for greater clarity about the death penalty due to its positionality as a sanction aimed at maintaining social order.

Emanating from this study are three research questions (RQs), namely:

**RQ1.** What are police recruits attitudes towards the death penalty as a criminal sanction?

**RQ2.** What is level of police recruit support for the death penalty?

**RQ3.** What is the preferred alternative to the death penalty from police recruits perspectives?

## 2. Overview of the study

This research was conceptualized as a response to two separate, yet, inter-related concerns. The first concern is premised on the lack of scholarship examining police recruits perspectives on a range of criminal justice issues, including, but not limited to, the death penalty. The second concern is related to the continuing debate on the efficacy of the death penalty as a crime reduction initiative in the Caribbean, but more specifically, police perspectives on the death penalty. The current study represents one of the first attempts to empirically examine police recruits’ attitudes towards the death penalty in the Caribbean.

The current research effort is aligned to the views of Pagon (1996) who highlights the importance of ‘the four pillars of policing’, namely: (1) cooperation, (2) training, (3) education, and (4) research (policing research that is not conducted in a vacuum, but conducted for the benefit of policing stakeholders). In fact this study mirrors Pagon’s (1996) four pillars of policing as the current research effort is the result of cooperation between the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service (TTPS) and The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine that is aimed at evaluating attitudes toward the death penalty using an under-researched population, police recruits.

## 3. Importance of the study

Extensive research has been conducted on policing in Commonwealth jurisdictions, however, policing research on small Commonwealth jurisdictions, such as, Trinidad and Tobago, while not sparse, is limited when compared to research on policing in Western societies. For as Pagon (1996) points out, most of the research and academic literature on policing emanates from the West. However, as policing is increasingly becoming internationalized, there is a concomitant need for information on all aspects of policing from different parts of the world, including traditionally under-researched jurisdictions, for example, Trinidad and Tobago.

As a result of the relatively sparse literature on Caribbean police officers views on the death penalty (see Wallace, 2018b as an exception), this research has important considerations for policing research in jurisdictions that are not considered ‘mainstream’, such as, Trinidad and Tobago. Another valuable aspect of this study surrounds its ethical and political importance in the context of problems associated with the application of the death penalty and the ongoing attempts to reform the penal system in Trinidad and Tobago by potentially replacing the death penalty with other sanctions, including life imprisonment with and without the possibility of parole. Further, as scholars and legislators debate the efficacy of the death penalty in the Caribbean, research is significant in providing support for proponent and opponents of the death penalty.

There is a multiplicity of research measuring police attitudes towards crime and punishment (Bohm, 2008; Carevelis-Hughes and Robinson, 2013; Fagan, 1986; Hughes and Robinson, 2013; Vito et al., 2008; Wallace, 2018a) and the results generally highlight police officers as being harsh and conservative (Fielding and Fielding, 1991) and generally in support of the death penalty. Further, there is a long-held view by some seasoned police officers that the death penalty is a deterrent to murder (Wallace, 2018b).

Empirical research has noted that policing (socialization, performance, acculturation etc.) begins at the academy level (Basham, 2014) as this is the recruits’ first official encounter with the police department as well as their first step towards socialization into policing (Deans, 2019). Further, police recruits bring a fairly consistent set of attitudes, beliefs, and values concerning policing with them as they enter policing (Ellis, 1991) and it is important to evaluate these attitudes, beliefs, and values while they are at the recruit phase of their training and still ‘uncontaminated’. Therefore, as police recruits bring with them their own attitudes, values and beliefs

(Millie and Hirschler, 2018), this can either reinforce the dominant policing narrative surrounding the death penalty or challenge the status quo and this adds to the importance of the current study.

Police recruits are the future full-fledged police officers and understanding their views is important as socialization towards policing (punishment, crime control etc.) begins during the police academy training (Donner and Maskály, 2023) and is significantly influenced by superior officers (Miles-Johnson, 2019). In most police organizations, recruit police training is facilitated by police academies as an initial training programme for new recruits. Further, police academies provide newly inducted police recruits with foundational knowledge and skillsets that is necessary for policing and acts as rite of passage whereby police recruits are socialized into policing. As such, the police academies have the potential to instill knowledge that police officers will apply in the future. With the aforementioned in mind, the importance of recruit socialization towards the death penalty cannot be overstated (Chan et al., 2003; White, 2006).

According to Van Maanen (1974, p. 86) the process of socialization provides “the new member [police recruit] with a set of rules, perspectives, techniques, and/or tools for him to continue as a participant in the organization.” Van Maanen (1974) also submits that while many police recruits enter training academies with noble values and lofty ideals, many internalize aspects of police culture before they graduate and this is a function of the socialization process. Donner and Maskály (2023) also suggest that as a component of this socialization process, the existing police culture is transmitted to police recruits during academy training and this includes the culture of policing towards the death penalty.

While there is available research on the death penalty using established police officers and recruits in Western contexts, it is imprudent to ‘universalise’ (Milan and Treré, 2019) those results onto locales with a different culture, for example, Trinidad and Tobago. Based on the aforementioned pronouncements, it is important to understand the views, attitudes and beliefs of police recruits towards the death penalty in non-Western contexts. Additionally, understanding the attitudes of police recruits toward the death penalty has the potential to affect policymaking and can also operate as an opinion changing mechanism.

#### 4. Research context

The TTPS has responsibility for the maintenance of law and order in Trinidad and Tobago. The mandate and authority of the TTPS is found in the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago (Section 123: 91), the Laws of Trinidad and Tobago, The Police Service Act (2006) Chapter 15:01 and the Police Service Regulations (2007) (Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, 2017). According to Wallace (2012), contemporary policing in Trinidad and Tobago took its form and structure from its former colonial rulers, the British. Despite the fact that the island is in the post-colonial era, policing in the island still reflects British ideals due to the island’s colonial heritage (via the uniform, para-military rank and structure). Though the British have moved away from some traditional aspects (the death penalty, low education qualifications for entry into policing), several aspects of the CJS in Trinidad and Tobago still reflect the traditional British approach, for example, recruit training.

The TTPS has responsibility for policing in Trinidad and Tobago. The TTPS was established in 1592 during the period of Spanish colonization. However, with the advent of British colonialism, Trinidad as well as Tobago fell under British occupation for long periods of their history and the form of policing currently practiced in Trinidad and Tobago is reflective of the British Colonial Model of policing (Wallace, 2012). The TTPS operates under the provisions of the Police Service Act, Chapter 15: 01 of the Laws of Trinidad and Tobago. The TTPS has a hierarchical structure comprising of ten levels of ranks (Constable to Commissioner of Police), ten Police Divisions (one Division is currently split in two on a trial basis) and several Sections/Divisions/Branches/Units. The TTPS is headed by a Commissioner of Police (appointed by the Police Service Commission after approval by the National Parliament under the provisions of Section 123(5) of the Constitution of Trinidad and Tobago) and an Executive, which comprises three Deputy Commissioners of Police, eleven Assistant Commissioners of Police and eight civilian Heads of Departments. As of December 2016, the TTPS consisted of approximately 7000 police officers (TTPS, 2017).

In Trinidad and Tobago, recruit training is conducted at the Police Academy (the only police training academy on the island for national police officers), an arm of the TTPS that has responsibility for the recruitment, training and development of police officers at all levels and ranks (inclusive of police recruits). Since its inception, the Police Academy has delivered basic training to recruits through the Basic Training programme, now known as the Induction Program Training, through which every serving member of the TTPS must receive their initial training before entry into the organization.

#### 5. A brief look at the literature

The attitudes of police officers toward criminals and the CJS is critical to the justice system’s response to crime (Cunha and Gonçalves, 2017), yet, the attitudes of police recruits are hardly ever measured, while their views generally remain submerged in critical discourses, for example, on the death penalty. However, attitudes toward the death penalty are multifaceted (O’Neil et al., 2004) and include complex questions surrounding the underlying rationales for support/non-support. Measuring sentiment on the death penalty is not as easy a task as it might at first appear (Radelet and Akers, 1996) and this difficulty is attributed to the nature of questioning. For instance, when study participants are questioned on their support/non-support for the death penalty, alternative punishments are not suggested and this leaves participants confused as they consider what happens if convicted inmates are not executed. This study deviates from the existing norm which obfuscates a fuller discussion of the issue under consideration and does so by providing sentencing alternatives to the study’s participants in search for a greater understanding of recruits’ perspectives on the death penalty.

### 5.1. The death penalty in Trinidad and Tobago

The death penalty remains on Trinidad and Tobago's statute books due to its strong colonial legacy as on attaining independence from Britain in 1962, the death penalty was retained in the island's constitution via the Savings Clause. The historical context of the death penalty can be traced to Section 4 of the Offences Against the Person Act of 1925, Chapter 11.08 and is the criminal sanction for persons found guilty of murder by a court of competent jurisdiction. The death penalty has been implemented throughout the history of the island, though not within recent times. In terms of alternative sentencing for individuals found guilty of murder, life with and without parole are not options according to the criminal laws of Trinidad and Tobago.

### 5.2. Police recruits and the death penalty

While not the remit of this study, it is important to highlight that there are opponents (Donohue, 2014; Reiman, 2014) and proponents (Pojman, 2014; Rachels, 2014) of the death penalty as well as a plethora of arguments for and against its imposition. In the context of policing, the DPIC (2017) asserts that death penalty proponents have historically asserted that the death penalty advances public safety by deterring murders, and that this is especially true when it comes to protecting police officers. However, the assertion appears to be without merit as the DPIC (2017) points out that there is no evidence that the death penalty deters murder or protects the police. Additionally, while criminological understandings of attitudes towards the death penalty have been extensive, it is submitted by McCarthy and Brunton-Smith (2022) that persons residing in countries with higher homicide levels are more likely to support the death penalty. However, research by criminologists and other social scientists indicate that support for the death penalty is not as widespread as previously believed (Hughes and Robinson, 2013).

In a study conducted by Mignon and Holmes (1999), the findings reveal that police recruits favoured the death penalty and that they favoured the death penalty even more strongly than members of the public. The study by Mignon and Holmes (1999) also indicated that more than 80% of the police recruits strongly supported the use of the death penalty in cases of first degree murder. In this study, almost 90% of the study's participants supported the death penalty for persons who kill police officers, two-thirds of the participants supported the death penalty for juveniles in instances of first degree murder and the killing of police officers, while a minority of the study's participants supported the use of the death penalty for persons convicted of rape. There was limited support for alternatives to the death penalty as only one in five of the police recruits preferred life in prison without parole rather than the death penalty.

Though not using police recruits, in one of the earliest studies measuring police attitudes to capital punishment, Fagan (1986) surveyed seventy-eight police officers and compared their views with a sample of the general public toward capital punishment. In this study, the results indicated that the police supported capital punishment for serious crimes and that these views were consistent with those of the citizens, though generally more strongly held. Further, in another study by Hughes and Robinson (2013) analysing the perceptions of police officers on capital punishment in the United States, the results indicated that while the officers surveyed were overwhelming in favour of the continued use of capital punishment, they concurrently agreed that innocent people have been executed and that there were innocent individuals awaiting execution on death row.

## 6. Methods and materials

This study employed a mixed methods approach using an embedded study design (collection of two sets of data on one instrument). Specifically, the descriptive-correlational quantitative research was used. The choice of the descriptive research method was premised on the fact that in this study, the researcher was only interested in the existing state of affairs (recruit attitudes towards the death penalty) and not the manipulation of variables. Additionally, the descriptive survey method was used as this method was deemed appropriate to accomplish the objectives of the study of describing the demographic profile of the police recruits and their attitudes towards the death penalty. Importantly, the descriptive approach offers systematic data regarding a phenomenon, while providing information on a population, circumstance, or phenomenon and attempts to accomplish the study's objectives in an accurate and objective manner (McCombes, 2022). The qualitative approach used in the study was aimed at gathering rich, thick, deep information that is incapable of being gathered using quantitative data collection as well as to triangulate the quantitative data.

### 6.1. Participants and procedures

The target population were male and female recruits at the Police Academy of the TTPS who were undergoing the final phase of their Induction Programme Training. Permission to use the police recruits as study participants was received from the Commissioner of Police (Acting) of the TTPS. Contact was then made with the Senior Superintendent of Police at the Police Academy to ensure that the distribution of the questionnaires did not disrupt the smooth operation of the institution. After the date and time for the distribution of the self-administered questionnaire was finalized, the researcher distributed the self-administered questionnaires to the police recruits and collected them immediately thereafter.

### 6.2. Data collection

The data used for this study were collected by way of a self-administered, twenty-two (22) item questionnaire to a cohort of police recruits within the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service who were purposively selected. The instrument incorporated prior literature on

the death penalty, a survey of capital punishment experts (Robinson, 2009) and questions from the work of scholars, for example, Chan (2001), Mignon and Holmes (1999) and Millie and Hirschler (2018). The questionnaire was distributed to the one hundred and seven (107) police trainees of Batch 2/2021 who were the only recruits undergoing induction police training programme at the Police Academy of the TTPS at the time of the study. Therefore, the sample size is representative of individuals who were undergoing police recruit training at the study of the being conducted. The measurement occurred at the Police Academy in October, 2022.

The questionnaire was divided into three sections. Section one collected demographic data of the participants, section two collected data on recruit attitudes towards the death penalty, while section three elicited qualitative data on issues that could not easily be captured using quantitative methods. Section one contained five questions, section two contained thirteen questions and section three contained four questions. In Section two, the responses were anchored on a five-point Likert-type scale where strongly agree was 1 and strongly disagree was 5. In order to gather qualitative data from the study's participants, a qualitative sub-section was embedded into the questionnaire at section three. This sub-section contained several open-ended questions that afforded the recruit participants the opportunity to present narrative views to the researcher.

The instrument was completed by police recruits on the same day at a large gymnasium located on the compound of the Police Academy. This was conducted in the absence of, and away from the glare of their trainers and this facilitated the voluntary nature of the study. The participants were recruited using purposive sampling as the study focused on police recruits to determine their attitudes toward the death penalty. The 22 item instrument took approximately fifteen to 25 min to complete and contained questions covering several categories related to support/non-support for the death penalty, including, but not limited to: (i) Is the death penalty the most important deterrent to murder in Trinidad and Tobago? (ii) Should there be categories of murder in Trinidad and Tobago? (iii) Should the death penalty be reserved for only the highest category of murder in Trinidad and Tobago, (iv) Are there enough legal safeguards within the criminal justice system to prevent discrimination in implementing the death penalty in Trinidad and Tobago, and (v) Which statement most closely represent your personal perspectives on the death penalty? The inclusion criteria for this study were as follows: (1) a current police recruit in the Police Academy, and (2) willingness to participate in the study. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous, and confidentiality was guaranteed to the participants.

### 6.3. Data analysis

After the questionnaires were collected, the data were collated, cleaned and interpreted. Prior to the analysis of the participants' responses, the questionnaires were checked for integrity and completeness in order to ensure validity. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to check for reliability. The result of reliability test indicated a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.85–0.90 (for the research questions) (with a mean of 0.88) and this signifies that the instrument had a high level of internal consistency. Therefore, the questionnaire was considered reliable and valid for purpose. Additionally, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted on the items in Section 2 of the instrument and this revealed that the 13 items in Section 2 (attitudes towards the death penalty) were loaded onto the same dimension. The Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) (26.0) was used to capture, code and interpret the data.

Questions in section two were used to answer the research questions, while the open-ended questions in section three were used for triangulation purposes and to seek out common themes from the narratives of the participants. The data are presented in a descriptive manner as a major tenet of the study was to highlight phenomenon in its natural state and not seek relationships between variables as espoused in the methodological apercu of Park and Burgess (1921). While correlations between the variables were not sought, in an attempt to enhance the study's findings, the most significant correlations between variables in the data are reported. As the instrument also contained a qualitative component (open-ended questions) that was aimed at gathering rich, contextual data from the police recruit participants, the data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step thematic analysis to seek out recurring codes. As a result, themes are presented and discussed and narrative quotes from the participants are used to illuminate their voices (Higgins, 2021). The quotes used in reporting on this study were selected based on their applicability to the appropriate themes. As participants are quoted, some of the assertions are written in colloquial language.

### 6.4. The participants

One hundred and seven (107) recruits completed the instrument for a 100% response rate. While the response rate was unusual, participation in the study allowed the police recruits a break from the rigours of recruit training. Further, an introductory letter was sent to the recruits prior to the start of the study, and this perked their interest in a topic that is expressly relevant to policing. The participants included seventy-three males (68%) males and thirty-four females (32%). Forty-eight of the participants (45%) were between the ages of 26 and 30, thirty-two participants (30%) were in the 18–25 age-group, and twenty-seven participants (25%) were in the 31–35 age group. Fifty-nine of the participants (55%) reported their marital status as single, while forty-seven participants (45%) reported being in some form of relationship (visiting relationship ( $n = 26$ , 25%), marriage ( $n = 19$ , 18%) or co-habiting ( $n = 2$ , 2%). Thirty-three police recruits (31%) of the sample population reported that the highest level of education attained was the secondary school level. Thirty-eight participants (36%) reported having attained an undergraduate diploma or certificate, fourteen (13%) attained an associate degree, sixteen (15%) attained an undergraduate degree, and five (5%) held graduate or professional degrees.

## 7. Results

### 7.1. Recruits attitudes

The recruits' attitudes were measured using a Likert-type scale. The response codes ranged from 1 for strongly agree to 5 for strongly disagree. Therefore, a low mean implies high agreement and a high mean indicates low agreement. Both the mean response and the percentage of individual who agree with particular positions on the death penalty are reported. Agreement includes participants who indicated 'strongly agree' and those who indicated 'agree'. The recruits' attitudes are reported at [Table 1](#). The recruits' attitudes were also examined using their narratives and analysed via thematic analysis as espoused by [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#). Three themes emanated from their discourse and these are also presented.

### 7.2. Answers to the research questions

Three research questions form the basis of this study, and the quantitative data were used to answer these questions. As it relates to research question number 1 (police recruits attitudes towards the death penalty as a criminal sanction), more than half of the recruit participants ( $n = 61$ , 57%) ( $M = 2.30$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ) submitted that the death penalty was an important deterrent to murder in Trinidad and Tobago. Seventy-one (66%) participants opined that the death penalty was a specific deterrent to murder ( $M = 2.14$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ), while seventy-two (67%) participants were of the view that the death penalty is a general deterrent for murders ( $M = 2.11$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ). More than half of the participants ( $n = 65$ , 61%) submitted: (1) there should be categories of murder, and (2) the death penalty should be reserved only for the highest category of murder ( $M = 2.40$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ). Fifty-three participants (50%) were of the view that application of the death penalty can result in the execution of innocent persons ( $M = 2.41$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ), while thirteen recruit participants (12%) felt that there were sufficient legal safeguards within the judicial system to prevent discrimination in implementing the death penalty ( $M = 3.47$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ). Instructively, thirty-three participants (31%) were of the view that indigent individuals in Trinidad and Tobago are more likely to be sentenced to death ( $M = 3.20$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ).

The majority of participants indicated that if the death penalty was implemented in Trinidad and Tobago, the murder rate would decrease ( $n = 76$ , 71%), while twelve participants (11%) felt that the murder rate would remain the same. Further, eighteen participants (17%) were unsure and one participant (1%) felt that the murder rate would increase if the death penalty was implemented. Conversely, sixty-six participants (62%) were of the view that if the death penalty was abolished in Trinidad and Tobago, murders would increase. Other participants felt that the murder rate would remain the same ( $n = 26$ , 25%), while others were unsure ( $n = 14$ , 13%) if the murder rate would increase if the death penalty was abolished. Thirteen participants (13%) were of the view that the death penalty was cruel and unusual punishment, eighty-one participants (76%) were of the view that the death penalty was not a cruel and unusual punishment, and twelve participants (11%) were unsure if the death penalty was a cruel and unusual punishment.

Seventy-four (71%) participants selected the death penalty as the most apt punishment for persons convicted of murder in Trinidad and Tobago when compared to thirty participants (29%) who supported life imprisonment with absolutely no possibility of a parole. The majority of participants ( $n = 72$ , 68%) indicated that the most effective sentence as a deterrent to murder in Trinidad and Tobago from three options (1. The death penalty, 2. Life imprisonment with the possibility of parole, and 3. Life imprisonment without the possibility of parole) was the death penalty. This was followed by life imprisonment without the possibility of parole ( $n = 30$ , 28%). A very small percentage ( $n = 4$ , 4%) viewed life imprisonment with the possibility of parole as the most effective deterrent for murder.

The mean scores for the seven variables used in the study are contained at [Table 1](#). These seven variables helped to capture the participants' attitudes towards the death penalty. All participants entered data for these variables except for variables labelled "Poorer People" and "Innocent Persons" which had missing data for one participant each. Each variable at [Table 1](#) was measured on a Likert Scale ranging from 1 to 5, with the minimum score being '1.00' and the maximum score being '5.00'. The values of the scores move from Strongly Agree "1" to Strongly Disagree "5". Therefore, a mean score of  $<2.5$  indicates that the sample is tending towards agreement, while scores which are  $>2.5$  indicates that the sample is tending towards disagreement.

The first variable in this study (see [Table 1](#)) sought to capture recruits belief regarding the death penalty as an important deterrent to murder. The mean score here was 2.30 with a standard deviation of 1.25 and this indicated that the sample tended towards agreement that the death penalty as an important deterrent. The sample also tended to agreement that the death penalty is a specific

**Table 1**  
Mean scores of recruits' attitudes towards the death penalty.

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Important Deterrent	107	1.00	5.00	2.3084	1.25451
Specific Deterrent	107	1.00	5.00	2.1402	1.15292
General Deterrent	107	1.00	5.00	2.1121	1.23110
Murder Categories	107	1.00	5.00	2.4019	1.37950
Poorer People	106	1.00	5.00	3.2075	1.35025
Innocent Persons	106	1.00	5.00	2.4151	1.23341
Legal Safeguards	107	1.00	5.00	3.4766	1.02189
Valid N (listwise)	105				

Source: [Fieldwork, 2023](#).

deterrent ( $M = 2.14$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ), a general deterrent ( $M = 2.11$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ), the creation of categories of murder ( $M = 2.40$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ) and that the death penalty can result in the execution of innocent persons ( $M = 2.41$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ). However, the sample tended to disagree with the notion that poorer people are more likely to be sentenced to death ( $M = 3.20$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ) and that there are enough legal safeguards to prevent discrimination in the implementation of the death penalty ( $M = 3.47$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ).

In the context of research question number two (What is level of police recruit support for the death penalty?), analysis of the data revealed that more recruit proffered support for the implementation of the death penalty in Trinidad and Tobago. Indeed, the recruit participants demonstrated overwhelming support for the death penalty as 103 participants (96%) indicated support, while only four participants (4%) indicated opposition to the death penalty. Of the participants who indicated support for the death penalty, eighteen participants (17%) supported it because they thought that it worked well, seventy-one (66%) supported it in specific circumstances only, and 14 (13%) indicated that they support the death penalty philosophically, but did not think that it is an effective tool in practice. Importantly, no significant differences were found between gender ( $X^2(3) = 2.46$ ,  $p > .05$ ), age group ( $X^2(6) = 0.402$ ,  $p > .05$ ), marital status ( $X^2(9) = 9.96$ ,  $p > .05$ ), ethnicity ( $X^2(6) = 10.92$ ,  $p > .05$ ), or highest level of education attained ( $X^2(15) = 19.07$ ,  $p > .05$ ) and support for the death penalty.

Data on support for the death penalty were distilled by gender, education level, marital status, age group and ethnicity. When distilled by gender, the results indicated that seventy male participants (96%) within the male population sample supported the death penalty, while thirty-three female participants (97%) within the female population sample supported the death penalty. When distilled by education level, the results indicated that one participant (1%) with some secondary school education, thirty-one participants (29%) who completed secondary school, thirty-six participants (34%) who held undergraduate Diplomas or Certificates, fourteen participants (13%) who had an Associate Degree, sixteen participants (15%) who held undergraduate degrees, and five participants (5%) who held graduate or professional degrees supported the death penalty.

Distilling the data based on marital status revealed that fifty-nine single participants, eighteen married participants, two participants in a co-habiting relationships, and twenty-eight participants in visiting relationships supported the death penalty. When the data were distilled based on age-range it was revealed that thirty participants in the 18–25 age range, forty-six participants in the 26–30 age range, and twenty-seven participants in the 31–35 age range supported the death penalty. When the data were distilled by ethnicity, the data revealed that forty-nine participants who identified as Africans, twenty-five participants who identified as East Indians, and thirty-two Mixed descended participants supported the death penalty. It should be noted that some participants omitted data and while the data reflects the totality of responses, this may not always equate to one hundred and seven participants.

Answers to the third research question (What is the preferred alternative to the death penalty from police recruits' perspectives?) revealed a high level of unanimity among the police recruit participants as they considered life imprisonment without the possibility of parole as the best alternative to the death penalty in Trinidad and Tobago.

### 7.3. Themes

All participants ( $n = 107$ ) completed the qualitative component of the instrument and this allowed for the retrieval of qualitative data in narrative form. When the narratives of the participants were thematically analysed, three major themes emerged. These themes are presented below.

#### 7.4. Theme 1 - consistent application of the death penalty

The most prevalent theme was 'consistent application of the death penalty'. This theme captured the participants' view that for the death penalty to be effective, it must be applied in a consistent manner. That is, on every occasion that an accused person is convicted of murder by a court of competent jurisdiction, the individual should be executed without fail. According to participant #43 (married, male recruit, African descent, 31–35 years), "I believe if the death penalty is consistently applied the criminal element will now have to think twice about committing murder." In a similar vein, participant #47 (single, male recruit, East Indian descent, 18–25 years) opined: "Consistent implementation of the death penalty would be an effective deterrent to murder and significantly reduce the murder rate as murderers would be more afraid of losing their life."

#### 7.5. Theme 2 - life imprisonment without parole

This theme captured the participants' views that the best alternative to the death penalty is life imprisonment without the possibility of parole. According to participant #12 (married, female recruit, African descent, 26–30 years), "Life imprisonment, no parole", while in a similar vein, participant #16 (single, male recruit, East Indian descent, 18–25 years) proffered the view that "Life imprisonment with no chances of parole or pardon" is the most apt sentence for individuals convicted of murder in Trinidad and Tobago. In a similar vein, the view that "Persons committing murder should be given life imprisonment without the chance of parole" was submitted by participant #83 (married, female recruit, Mixed descent, 31–35 years).

#### 7.6. Theme 3 – murder only

The third most prevalent theme to emanate from the analysis of the qualitative data was 'murder only' which captures participants' view that the death penalty should be used as a sentence for persons convicted of murder only and not for any other offences. In fact, more than half of the study's participants (54%) expressed this view. For example, participant #49 (single, female recruit, East Indian

descent, 18–25 years) submitted: “*I believe the death penalty should be reserved for murder only as murder is taking someone’s life.*” Participant #60 (single, male recruit, African descent, 18–25 years) stated: “*The death penalty should be reserved for murder only - it is the value of human life that justifies and demands similar penalty*”, while another participant opined: “*I think the death penalty should be reserved for murder only*” (Participant #96, single, female recruit, Mixed descent, 31–35 years).

## 8. Discussion

Recruits’ attitudes towards the death penalty were gathered from one hundred and seven (107) police recruits at the Police Academy of the TTPS who completed a self-administered questionnaire. This number is similar to that of a previous study conducted by [Mignon and Holmes \(1999\)](#) that used one hundred and three (103) police recruits. Importantly, [Radelet and Akers \(1996\)](#) point out that measuring sentiments on the death penalty is not an easy task. This difficulty in measuring sentiments to the death penalty is a pervasive problem in policing as well as in the public sphere. Despite this difficulty, understanding the views, attitudes and beliefs on the death penalty has been a topic of inquiry for practitioners and academicians alike. Despite the growth in research on police and policing globally, much of it has focused on established officers, with little to nothing known about the attitudes of police recruits and much less known about police recruits in the Caribbean. In the context of the death penalty, this is quite noticeable as research on police recruits attitudes towards the death penalty in the region is non-existent. In a similar vein to research conducted by [Fagan \(1986\)](#), [Hughes and Robinson \(2013\)](#) and [Mignon and Holmes \(1999\)](#), the author of this article evaluated attitudes of police recruits in Trinidad and Tobago towards the death penalty and the results are discussed below.

Consistent with empirical evidence on policing and the death penalty in the Caribbean ([Wallace, 2018b](#)), the results demonstrated that recruits’ preference for the death penalty as the most appropriate sanction for individuals found guilty of committing murder was unwavering. The findings of this study are supported by a similar study by [Hughes and Robinson \(2013\)](#) in the USA which found that the police officers surveyed overwhelmingly supported the use of the death penalty. Further support for the recruits’ position is found in the work of [Mignon and Holmes \(1999\)](#) whose findings reveal that police recruits favoured the death penalty. The study by [Mignon and Holmes \(1999\)](#) also indicated that between 80 and 90% of the police recruits strongly supported the use of the death penalty in all cases. While not the remit of this study, it appeared that the dominant police culture related to the use of the death penalty as a criminal sanction was already transferred to the police recruits in the context of support for the death penalty in Trinidad and Tobago or that they had entered the TTPS with those views.

Approximately eight in ten of the police recruit participants preferred the death penalty to life in prison without the possibility of parole. Interestingly, while the recruit participants almost overwhelmingly indicated their preference for the use of the death penalty as the most appropriate sanction for individuals found guilty of committing murder, fifty per cent of the sample were of the view that application of the death penalty can result in the execution of innocent persons. This finding mirrors the finding of [Hughes and Robinson’s \(2013\)](#) study which analysed the perceptions of police officers on capital punishment in the United States and which found that while there was overwhelming support for the usage of capital punishment, there was agreement that innocent people have been executed and that there were innocent individuals awaiting execution on death row. Not surprisingly, the majority of the police recruits preferred life in prison without parole as the best alternative to the death penalty in Trinidad and Tobago.

An interesting finding which emanated from this study was that the males and females were almost equally supportive of the usage of the death penalty as the main sanction for persons found guilty of committing murder in Trinidad and Tobago. This finding is both novel and divergent from previous scholarship of the death penalty as the available literature submits that men are more oriented toward rights, while women are more concerned with responsiveness and caring ([Whitehead and Blankenship, 2000](#)). Therefore, men tend to favour the death penalty based on concern for rights and accountability, while women are less supportive of capital punishment due to their sense of compassion and empathy ([Gault and Sabini, 2000](#); [Stack, 2000](#); [Whitehead and Blankenship, 2000](#)), an effect that remains when potential confounding factors (gender socialization differences, variations in social values between men and women, and differential experiences of victimisation and fear) are accounted for ([Cochran and Sanders, 2009](#)).

## 9. Limitations and directions for future research

As with most studies, there are limitations to this study that must be acknowledged. First, this study relied on police recruits’ attitudes rather than their behaviours. Future research on this issue should consider conducting similar studies by placing recruits in scenarios and asking them to indicate potential sanctions for persons convicted of murder. Second, this study was restricted to evaluations of the attitudes of one hundred and seven police recruits during their academy tenure. It would be interesting to conduct a longitudinal study in the future with the same one hundred and seven participants to determine whether there are changes in their attitudes towards the death penalty as they progress throughout their careers and are further immersed into the culture of policing.

Third, as the study utilized a sample of one hundred and seven police recruits from a single police academy, the results may not be fully generalizable. Therefore, future research should build on the current study by utilizing a wider pool of recruits, maybe, from other Caribbean countries or conduct a longitudinal study with the police recruit participants in this study to determine if there are changes in their ontology towards the death penalty as they progress through their careers as police officers. Despite the aforementioned limitations, the study is important as it provides an initial foray into understanding police recruits’ attitudes towards the death penalty and does so from a perspective that is non-Western in orientation.

## 10. Practical study implications

This study has practical implications for policing in Trinidad and Tobago. Instructively, as the views of police officers can be used as change agents for existing opinions and can also be used to inform policy, the results of this study can be used to inform new legislation as there are continuous debates regarding reforming laws on the use of the death penalty as a sanction for individuals found guilty of murder. Further, as the recruits intimated the use of life imprisonment without parole as the main alternative to the death penalty, police executives in Trinidad and Tobago may be apt to use this to influence legislators on the island to implement alternative sanctions to the death penalty.

## 11. Conclusion

This study set out to understand police recruits' attitudes toward the death penalty in Trinidad and Tobago. The results of this study indicates wide consensus among the police recruits regarding their attitudes towards the death penalty. The recruits generally supported the use of the death penalty as the most applicable sentence for persons convicted of murder. The recruits also opined that the death penalty was both a specific and a general deterrent to the commission of murders, that the murder rate would decrease if the death penalty was consistently implemented and that a sentence of life imprisonment without parole is the recruits preferred choice as the best alternative to the death penalty in Trinidad and Tobago.

Three themes (consistent application of the death penalty, life imprisonment without parole, and murder only) emanated from the qualitative analysis of the narratives of the participants. The theme 'consistent application of the death penalty' indicated the participants' views that for the death penalty to be effective, it must be consistently applied. The recruit participants also submitted that life imprisonment without parole is the best alternative to the death penalty and that the death penalty should be used as a sentence for persons convicted of 'murder only' (theme three).

While the sample population for this study was relatively small (N = 107), this was a result of the recruit training at the time of conducting the study. Despite the small sample for a quantitative study, the research can be viewed as a starting point for further research on the police/police recruits/death penalty nexus and may be used by policymakers in their deliberations on the death penalty as the police recruit population is often overlooked and under-researched. Importantly, as police officer are responsible for maintaining law and order, enforcing the law, and preventing, detecting, and investigating criminal activities, they play a key role in protecting the public from criminals and it is important to understand the value they place on criminal sanctions, including the death penalty.

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## Declarations of interest

The author(s) reported that there are conflicts of interest to declare.

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