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The influence of the national government on confidence in the police: A focus on corruption

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Abstract

While public confidence in the police has long been addressed in the policing literature, most studies have explored a limited pool of correlates. In particular, concepts such as corruption and confidence in the government are noticeably absent from much of the research on confidence in the police. Also sparse are cross-national comparisons using country-level variables. Using a variety of data sources for both individual and national characteristics, the current study applied multilevel modeling for confidence in the police. Findings suggest that socio-demographic characteristics and perception toward politics are significant correlates when controlling for confidence in the government. At the country-level, while democracy initially predicted citizens' confidence in police, the relationship became nonsignificant when two country level variables, corruption and homicide rate, were included in the model. Conclusions and discussions shed light on previous findings and methodological limitations.

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Keywords: Confidence in the police; Public attitude toward the police; Corruption; Confidence in government; Cross-national; Multilevel model

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1. Introduction

Public confidence in the police has traditionally been an important topic of interest in police research (Skogan and Frydl, 2004). The lack of confidence in any public institution undermines the quality of service the institution is obliged to deliver to the public (Easton, 1965; Putnam, 2000). This is especially true in policing, considering that the police are tasked with enforcing government rules and regulations – however unpopular they may be. When members of the public are skeptical of the legitimacy of the police, they are less likely to contact the police for assistance, are less likely to support and cooperate with police and may even become hostile or antagonistic toward the police (Cao and Zhao, 2005; Jackson et al., 2012; Reisig and Parks, 2000; Tyler and Huo, 2002). In short, they have less confidence in the police. This has been demonstrated in recent events around the world, like citizen disobedience to Ukrainian police following the citizen push to rejoin Russia (BBC News, 2014), the police-public clashes since the protests of the “Arab Spring” and terrorist attacks targeting the police in many countries (Gibbs, 2013). With this in mind, the police are generally believed to strive for legitimacy in their enforcement and administration to bolster public confidence.³ The approach to facilitating public confidence has been a focal concern in advancing police practices, such as community policing (Cao and Zhao, 2005; Reisig and Parks, 2000; Tyler and Huo, 2002), which facilitates favorable interactions between the police and the public in order to promote community involvement in law enforcement (Goldstein, 1990; Skolnick and Bayley, 1986).

One barrier to improving public confidence in the police is citizens' dissatisfaction with the government. Because police are one of the most ubiquitous representatives of the government, citizens' confidence in the government likely affects their confidence in the police. Impacting both confidence in the government and confidence in the police is government corruption, which is generally understood as “the misuse [or abuse] of public office for private ends [or gain]” (World Bank, 1997, p.8). The wide range of matters in which the police intervene, coupled with frequent police-citizen contacts, renders the police immediate and usual suspects of corruption. However, measures of corruption or confidence in the government often are lacking from research on public confidence in the police. In fact, most studies of public confidence in the police concentrate on either the individual or neighborhood level (e.g., Correia et al., 1996; Huebner et al., 2004; Hurst and Frank, 2000; Jackson et al., 2012; Payne and Gainey, 2007; Reisig and Parks, 2000; Skogan, 1978; Tankebe, 2010; Van Dijk, 2001; Wu et al., 2009). A few recent studies, though, expanded their focus to the country level. In particular, the findings of Cao and colleagues suggest that there are political and cultural differences in the contributing factors across different countries (Cao and Hou, 2001; Cao and Zhao, 2005), but they failed to incorporate other factors that may be directly relevant to individual attitude toward the police – namely, corruption and citizens' confidence in the government. Also, only few explored both country-level and individual-level explanatory factors simultaneously (i.e., Ivkovic, 2008; Jang et al., 2010).

Accordingly, the current study was designed to further advance cross-national comparisons on public confidence in the police in two ways. First, given its high relevance to law enforcement, including a measure of national government corruption may enhance the internal validity of the findings. Second, a substantial amount of correlation between confidence in the

³In this regard, both rational choice theorists and conflict theorists agree that the police behave in accordance with public consensus in their jurisdiction in order to secure legitimacy (see Lee et al., 2013). However, the two parties show stark disagreement in how the consensus is defined.

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