



# Third-person perceptions, hostile media effects, and policing: Developing a theoretical framework for assessing the Ferguson effect



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## ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** Policing in the United States has come under intense scrutiny following numerous deadly force incidents involving unarmed black citizens, which dominated the news media. Some have argued that consequently, a “chill wind” has blown through law enforcement, such that officers have become more distrustful of civilians, fearful of scandal, and are de-policing. To date, however, scholars have given insufficient theoretical and empirical attention to why and how media coverage of policing may lead to such outcomes.

**Methods:** We addressed this literature gap using data from a survey of officers in a metropolitan police department in the southeast.

**Results:** We found that officers perceive that media coverage of policing has a large effect on civilians, so much so as to impact crime rates. In turn, hostile media perceptions increase officers' 1) likelihood of believing that civilians' attitudes and behaviors toward police have worsened in recent years—that is, that there is a legitimacy crisis—and 2) fear of having false allegations lodged against them. Additionally, hostile media perceptions indirectly increase officers' likelihood of believing that crime is rising in their city, by increasing their perceptions of a police legitimacy crisis and fear of false allegations.

**Conclusions:** These findings have important implications for police-community relations moving forward.

## 1. Introduction

Policing in the United States has come under intense scrutiny from the public in recent years following numerous deadly force incidents involving unarmed black civilians in cities all across the United States (Weitzer, 2015). These incidents, along with subsequent Department of Justice investigations unveiling evidence of misconduct and racially biased policing in several agencies, have received a wealth of media coverage. Scholars have argued that the seemingly constant negative publicity in the news regarding questionable police practices has fueled a legitimacy crisis, such that a growing segment of the population has become less trusting of the police and less willing to accept their decisions (e.g., the results of internal investigations) (Rosenfeld, 2016). Many observers worry that, in response, officers have pulled back from proactive policing (i.e., they are “de-policing” – see Oliver, 2017; Shjarback, Pyrooz, Wolfe, & Decker, 2017), criminals have become more emboldened, and crime has started to rise (Canterbury, 2016; MacDonald, 2016).

Various labels have been used to describe this de-policing process,

including the “Ferguson effect,” the “YouTube effect” and the “viral video effect” (Davis, 2015; Lichtblau, 2016).<sup>1</sup> The potential consequences of such a phenomenon, if in fact it is real, could be far-reaching. Most notably, crime could indeed rise (Morgan & Pally, 2016; Rosenfeld, 2016). Police-civilian interactions could also become more volatile, as trust between the two parties erodes. If so, it could result in more injuries and fatalities to both civilians and officers. However, there remains considerable debate among both scholars and policy-makers about whether the effects of the recent negative police publicity on crime are real (Pyrooz, Decker, Wolfe, & Shjarback, 2016; Rosenfeld, 2016; Towers & White, 2017). But crime is only part of the story.

Even if the actual crime rates in cities are unaffected by media coverage, negative police publicity may affect both civilians' and officers' perceptions and behaviors. Desmond, Papachristos, and Kirk (2016), for example, found that residents of black neighborhoods in Milwaukee were less likely to report crime to the police for over a year following a highly publicized use of force incident involving an unarmed black man. Should officers perceive civilians (or segments of the community) as less cooperative, they may become more cynical of these

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, we consider the potential consequences of public discontent with police, fueled by Ferguson as well as other highly publicized fatal encounters between police and black civilians (e.g., in North Charleston, Baltimore, Chicago, Tulsa, Baton Rouge, and Falcon Heights).

civilians (Sobol, 2010), may change how they interact with members of the public—perhaps withdrawing from police/civilian cooperative efforts—and may even patrol their communities with less vigor (Klinger, 1997).

With such far-reaching implications, additional research is necessary that examines how media coverage is perceived by and affects police officers. There is also a crucial need for a better theoretical understanding of the different potential ways that the media may exert effects on policing. Preliminary evidence suggests that negative publicity can ultimately be harmful to officers' self-legitimacy (i.e., the confidence they have in their authority, see Nix & Wolfe, 2017), and that the media has played a key role in the legitimacy crisis (Wolfe & Nix, 2016a). Nix and Wolfe (2016) found that a sizeable portion of their sample of sheriff's deputies believed civilians' attitudes toward the police (both locally and nationally) had gotten worse in the six months following the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson. However, Nix and Wolfe (2016) did not measure deputies' perceptions of media coverage, and thus were unable to test whether officers' media perceptions explained their beliefs about civilians' worsening attitudes. Indeed, we are unaware of any research that has examined whether officers believe the overall tone of media coverage of the police has been unfavorable in recent years, whether this coverage has affected civilians' attitudes and behaviors, or whether it has led to higher crime rates. For example, officers' perceptions of crime trends, even if inaccurate, may influence the urgency they place on different policing styles, as they often view themselves as the "last best hope" for reducing crime (Bayley, 1995).

The above research questions are critical, regardless of whether crime rates have in fact increased recently. As W.I. Thomas emphasized long ago, "if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (cited in Merton, 1948, p. 193). Officers' perceptions of media, civilians, and crime may have a tremendous effect on their morale and policing style (Bradford & Quinton, 2014; Pickett & Ryon, 2017; Skolnick, 2011). Morin et al. (2017: 60), for example, found that more than 8 in 10 officers say that recent high profile events have made their job more difficult. Media coverage might furthermore affect officers in many ways that could influence their job performance—such as making them more fearful of being accused of misconduct, and thus potentially more hesitant to use force even when it is justified. These are important considerations in the post-Ferguson era of US policing.

In short, although there has been a sharp rise recently in the number of studies exploring officers' reactions to high profile incidents and perceptions of civilians (e.g., Nix & Wolfe, 2016, 2017), several fundamental research questions remain unexamined. As important, the research to date has proceeded without an organizing theoretical framework for understanding how media coverage may influence police officers. In this study, we draw on insights from the communication literature to outline such a framework, and we test several of its key predictions. We begin by first reviewing scholarship suggesting that recent high-profile events contributed to a contemporary crisis in American policing.

## 2. Negative police publicity and the current legitimacy crisis

On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown – an unarmed black teenager – was fatally shot by a police officer in Ferguson, MO. This incident sparked weeks of civil unrest in Ferguson, a Department of Justice investigation into the police department's practices, protests throughout the United States, and received enormous coverage by news media. In the months that followed, similar incidents ensued in other cities across the nation – including Cleveland, North Charleston, Baltimore, and Baton Rouge – some of which were captured on video and rapidly disseminated on the Internet and by news outlets. Each incident added to growing public outrage over seemingly excessive force by police officers (Weitzer, 2015). In December 2014, outrage over Brown's death in Ferguson became deadly when two NYPD officers were fatally

ambushed while sitting in their patrol car. Prior to the incident, the shooter posted on social media: "I'm putting wings on pigs today. They take 1 of ours...let's take 2 of theirs" (Mueller & Baker, 2014). Nineteen months later, five police officers were fatally ambushed in Dallas by a shooter who was angry about recent police shootings of black men in Falcon Heights, MN and Baton Rouge, LA. Ten days later, three officers were shot and killed in Louisiana.

Looking back, the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson undoubtedly was an environmental jolt to policing in the United States. An environmental jolt refers to "a sudden and unprecedented event" with an impact that is "disruptive and potentially inimical" (Meyer, 1982, p. 515; see also Campbell, Nix, & Maguire, 2017). Although allegations of excessive force against minorities are certainly nothing new, the quickness with which news of the Ferguson shooting spread through social media and mainstream news outlets was unprecedented. In the aftermath of Ferguson, Heather Mac Donald (2016) suggested that the increased scrutiny of law enforcement by the media and civilians would prove detrimental to US policing. Former FBI director James Comey (2015) later echoed her concern, stating: "Nobody says it on the record, nobody says it in public, but police and elected officials are quietly saying it to themselves ... a chill wind [is] blowing through American law enforcement over the last year. And that wind is surely changing behavior."

One of the potential consequences of this negative police publicity may be increased crime—officers may respond to added scrutiny by pulling back from proactive policing and criminals may be more encouraged to offend (Mac Donald, 2016; Rosenfeld, 2016). Of course, such an effect requires that officers are aware of the unfavorable media coverage, and, in turn, that it influences their perceptions of civilians and fear of scandal. As discussed in the next section, research in the field of communication lends theoretical credence to this possibility. However, preliminary evidence with respect to the effect of negative police publicity on actual crime rates is decidedly mixed. Pyrooz et al. (2016) concluded that crime did not significantly increase in the 12 months following Ferguson; however, Rosenfeld (2016, p. 2) suggested the contemporary police legitimacy crisis, spurred by negative police publicity, was a plausible explanation for a "real and nearly unprecedented" rise in homicides across 56 US cities.

Importantly, an increase in crime is just one possible outcome, and many different factors besides policing contribute to crime rates (Levitt, 2004; Rosenfeld, 2016). However, even if crime rates remained constant, negative police publicity might nevertheless affect officer morale (Nix & Wolfe, 2017), further exacerbate an "us versus them" culture within policing (Chan, 1996; Neiderhoffer, 1967), or influence the way officers carry out their day-to-day responsibilities. Morgan and Pally (2016), for example, found evidence of de-policing by Baltimore officers following the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson (an effect that was even more pronounced following the death of local resident Freddie Gray). Shjarback et al. (2017) similarly found that police departments across the state of Missouri made fewer traffic stops, searches, and arrests in 2015 compared to 2014. A recent nationwide survey of nearly 8000 police officers suggests de-policing might be a pervasive strategy in response to negative police publicity. Seventy-two percent of the sample indicated that officers in their department recently "have become less willing to stop and question people who seem suspicious as a result of high-profile incidents involving blacks and the police" (Morin et al., 2017).

Negative police publicity might furthermore lead officers to be more fearful of being accused of wrongdoing. Some reason that such fear might lead officers to hesitate during instances which require them to use coercive force (Reese, 2014). For example, in October 2016, a Chicago police officer was badly beaten by a suspect at the scene of a traffic accident. The Superintendent later told reporters that even though the officer feared for her life, she did not draw her firearm because "she didn't want her family or the department to go through the scrutiny the next day on the national news" (Gorner & Dardick, 2016).

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