



Living near violence: How proximity to violence shapes perceptions of police effectiveness and confidence in police



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ABSTRACT

Living in close proximity to violent crime is associated with a number of negative outcomes including increased fear of crime and perceived risk of victimization. Living near violence may also undermine confidence in police. In this study we estimate fixed effects regression models to examine the association between spatial proximity to recent violence and perceptions of police while accounting for individual and neighborhood factors. Results indicate that living in close proximity to violence is associated with greater confidence in police and this relationship is mediated through perceived police effectiveness. We suggest people living closer to recent violent events are more likely to see police actively responding to crime and the coupling of seeing both the violence and police response results in people feeling more confident in police than those living further away from violence.

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1. Introduction

Living in close proximity to violence is associated with a number of negative outcomes stemming from both objective and perceived risk of crime victimization. While violence has declined in most advanced countries in recent decades (Goldberger & Rosenfeld, 2008), public anxieties about crime and perceptions of violence have not abated (Brown, 2016; Valera Pertegas & Guardia Olmos, 2014). Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that serious, violent events even if rare hold a high profile in an individual's crime consciousness and significantly influence one's public sense of safety (DeCou & Lynch, 2017; Innes, 2004). Violent events in the community can increase residents' fear of crime, perceived risk of victimization and lead to avoidance behaviors (Scarpa, 2001; Yuan & McNeeley, 2016). When residents do not feel safe in their community they are less likely to engage in social and physical activities (Foster, Giles-Corti, & Knuiaman, 2010) and are more likely to experience heightened feelings of anxiety (Foster, Hooper, Knuiaman, & Giles-Corti, 2016). Exposure to violence in the community can also lead residents to question formal and informal safety procedures. While the impact of exposure to violence, both direct and indirect, on fear of crime, perceptions of safety and

community engagement is well established in the literature, less understood is the impact of exposure to community violence on perceptions of police and, specifically on confidence in the police.

Public confidence in police is important for encouraging cooperation and instilling legitimacy (Jackson et al., 2012; Tyler, 2004; Weisburd, Hinkle, Famega, & Ready, 2011). Public confidence in police is highly dependent on perceptions of police effectiveness; when the public perceive police to be legitimate and effective they also report greater confidence (Weisburd et al., 2011). A large body of research highlights key individual and neighborhood characteristics that influence public confidence in police either directly or indirectly by informing perceptions of police effectiveness. At the individual level, age (Weitzer & Tuch, 2002); gender (Cheurprakobkit, 2000); race/ethnicity (Weitzer & Tuch, 2005); and socio-economic status (Murphy & Worrall, 1999) all influence confidence in police. Citizen contact with police, experiences of crime and victimization, feelings of safety and perceptions of neighborhood problems are also strongly linked to perceptions of police effectiveness and, in turn, confidence in police (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011; Rosenbaum, Schuck, & Costello, 2005; Weitzer & Tuch, 2002, 2005; Yuksel & Tepe, 2013). At the neighborhood level, confidence in police is lower in communities with high levels of disadvantage, diverse racial/ethnic compositions and higher levels of crime and disorder (Taylor, Wyant, & Lockwood, 2015; Weitzer, 2000).

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Confidence in police is also shaped by a person's exposure to crime and what they see police do within their local area. While studies have examined the association between crime at the neighborhood level and perceptions of police, the hot spots literature demonstrates that crime incidents vary even at the micro level (e.g., over a block or two blocks) (Weisburd, Bushway, Lum, & Yan, 2004). Thus, exposure to crime varies across individuals living in the same neighborhood. Research also suggests that while residents are well aware of crime problems within a very short distance (e.g., one block) from their residence (Skogan, 2009), they may be less familiar with crime events several streets away. Zhao, Lawton, and Longmire (2015) found that crime located within one block of a resident's home had a greater influence on their fear of crime than incidents located further away (see also Lai, Zhao, & Longmire, 2012). This suggests that proximity to crime is likely an important factor in understanding the processes that shape a person's perceptions of police.

In the current study we employ geocoded survey, census and crime data from 4000 residents living across 148 neighborhoods in Brisbane, Australia to consider how much of the individual variation in confidence in police is attributable to a person's geographic proximity to recent violent events after accounting for known correlates of perceptions of police including contact with police, perceived safety, recent victimization and perceptions of disorder. In this paper we go beyond previous research that has examined the correlation between neighborhood-level crime and perceptions of police to: 1) explore the link between physical proximity to recent violent events (exposure) and confidence in police and, 2) consider whether or not the link between proximity to recent violent events and confidence in police operates through influencing perceptions of police effectiveness (Taylor & Lawnton, 2012).

As studies demonstrate living in close proximity to violence is associated with greater fear of crime (Zhao et al., 2015) and residing in a high crime neighborhood is associated with poorer perceptions of police (Taylor et al., 2015), we hypothesize that individuals living closer to recent violent events will report lower confidence in police. Further, we suggest that the relationship between proximity to violence and confidence in police will be mediated by perceptions of police effectiveness. We suggest that residents living nearer to recent violent events may perceive higher crime and disorder in their neighborhood, attribute this to ineffective policing (Bradford & Myhill, 2014; Cao, Stack, & Sun, 1998; Huebner, Schafer, & Bynum, 2004) and, in turn, report lower confidence in police (Taylor & Lawnton, 2012).

2. Background literature

Exposure to violence in the community has a number of negative effects for individuals. Exposure can occur either directly, through victimization or witnessing an event, or indirectly by hearing about an event from other residents or through media outlets. When exposure to violence is experienced through the media, some research suggests greater exposure is associated with heightened perceptions of crime prevalence and greater fear of crime victimization (Chiricos, Eschholz, & Gertz, 1997; Romer, Jamieson, & Aday, 2003). Similarly, residents living in or near neighborhoods with high levels of violence report greater fear of crime and perceived risk of victimization (Barton, Weil, Jackson, & Hickey, 2016). That exposure to violence in the local community influences perceptions of crime and safety suggests that it may also affect perceptions of police effectiveness and confidence in police.

A good deal of research has explored correlates of public perceptions of police and in particular confidence in police (Bradford & Myhill, 2014; Bridenball & Jesilow, 2008; Taylor, 2001; Weitzer & Tuch, 2002). Confidence in police can be considered a by-product

of an individual's perceptions of the current effectiveness and good intentions of the police combined with their assessment of the extent to which officers will be effective and well-intentioned in the future (Bradford & Myhill, 2014, p. 4). As such, confidence in police is not related to an assessment of specific police actions but instead captures public perceptions of police more broadly (Bradford & Myhill, 2014).

Two contrasting models of public perceptions of police are described in the literature: the 'expressive model' and the 'instrumental model' (Jackson & Sunshine, 2007). The expressive model suggests that the public perceive police as being responsible for crime management, social control and the maintenance of moral order in the community. As such, citizens evaluate police performance based on their satisfaction with the physical and social conditions of the local community. The instrumental model contends that the public recognizes that the core functions of police are preventing and managing crime to secure safety for the community. From this perspective, confidence in police is linked to how well police are doing their job and perceptions of police effectiveness are a reflection of a police department's capacity to reduce crime and minimize crime risk (Bradford & Jackson, 2009; Bradford & Myhill, 2014; Jackson & Sunshine, 2007). Empirical evidence finds support for both perspectives (Bradford & Myhill, 2014; Jackson & Bradford, 2009).

When individuals have direct contact with police the expressive factors play a larger role in determining confidence in police (Jackson & Bradford, 2009). Citizens value quality treatment such as fairness, respect and being heard over instrumental factors such as making an arrest or 'getting the job done' (Bradford & Myhill, 2014). That police can positively influence public opinion through procedurally fair, face-to-face contacts with citizens is well established in the literature (Bradford, Jackson, & Stanko, 2009; Mazerolle, Bennett, Davis, Sargeant, & Manning, 2013; Murphy, 2009). Yet, in any given year, only a minority of citizens come into direct contact with police. Therefore, the majority of the public base their perceptions of police on indirect or vicarious experiences with police or on contextual factors (Bridenball & Jesilow, 2008).

For many citizens who do not have direct contact with police, their perceptions reflect indirect experiences – hearing about the police from others or through the media (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011; Weitzer & Tuch, 2002; 2005). There is a significant association between public perceptions of crime, attitudes towards the criminal justice system and reliance on the news media as a source of information (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011; Dowler, 2010). Scholars have also highlighted the role of contextual factors, such as perceived neighborhood safety, in shaping public perceptions of police (Dai & Johnson, 2009; Zhao, Tsai, Ren, & Lai, 2014). Residents perceiving higher neighborhood crime and disorder see police as less effective and report lower confidence in police when compared to residents who perceive less neighborhood disorder (Dai & Johnson, 2009; Taylor & Lawnton, 2012). In a cross-sectional study of public attitudes towards police in the United Kingdom, Jackson and Bradford (2009) found that expressive value judgements about neighborhood disorder and social cohesion were more indicative of confidence in police than concerns about crime risk. These results held when the same expressive and instrumental factors were used to examine changes in confidence in police over time (Bradford & Myhill, 2014; Cao et al., 1998). The presence of visible disorder may be perceived by residents to symbolize a police department's inability to control neighborhood problems and more serious crime (Taylor, 2001).

Perceptions of neighborhood crime and disorder are consistently identified as playing an integral role in public evaluations of police (Huebner et al., 2004). Some research also demonstrates a considerable correlation between *actual* neighborhood crime and

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