



## Sensitivity to the Ferguson Effect: The role of managerial organizational justice



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### ABSTRACT

*Purpose:* We argue that the police have been adversely impacted by Ferguson-related negative publicity in ways beyond the supposed increase in crime (e.g., reduced motivation and increased perception of danger). Further, we suggest that organizational justice is a key factor that influences officers' sensitivity to such Ferguson Effects. *Methods:* We used a sample of 510 sheriff's deputies surveyed 6 months after the incident in Ferguson. We explored whether organizational justice is associated with deputies' sensitivity to several manifestations of the Ferguson Effect using OLS and ordered logistic regression models.

*Results:* The results demonstrated that deputies who believed their supervisors were more organizationally fair were less likely to feel unmotivated, perceive more danger, believe their colleagues have been negatively impacted, or feel that US citizens and local residents have become more cynical toward the police in the post-Ferguson era.

*Conclusions:* Police supervisors who use organizational justice as a guiding managerial philosophy are more likely to shield their officers from the negative work-related outcomes that can follow recent Ferguson-type publicity. Supervisors should be fair, objective, honest, and respectful when dealing with their subordinates in order to communicate that the agency has their back even when it may appear the community does not.

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### 1. Organizational justice and sensitivity to the Ferguson Effect

Over the last eighteen months, there has been much debate about the so-called "Ferguson Effect" on US police. This idea holds that in response to heightened scrutiny of the police following the fatal shooting of unarmed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in August 2014, officers are less motivated to aggressively perform their duties and are pulling back from proactive strategies. Proponents suggest that this "de-policing" will result in increased crime rates throughout the US. The most robust empirical assessment of this argument to date recently revealed that the Ferguson Effect has not caused increased crime across the US (Pyrooz, Decker, Wolfe, & Shjarback, 2016; but see also Rosenfeld, 2016). While this evidence is good news and puts to rest any worries of a nationwide crime wave (see Mac Donald, 2015), there may in fact be other ways in which the Ferguson Effect manifests itself. For instance, research has shown that negative publicity surrounding the police in the aftermath of Ferguson was associated with lower levels of officer self-legitimacy (Nix & Wolfe, 2015) and reduced willingness of officers to engage in community partnerships (Wolfe & Nix, 2016a). These are important findings because extant research has demonstrated that officers with greater self-legitimacy are more

committed to using procedural justice with citizens (Bradford & Quinton, 2014) and less reliant on physical force to gain compliance (Tankebe & Meško, 2015), while community partnerships are an essential aspect of community and problem-oriented policing (Braga, Kennedy, Waring, & Piehl, 2001; Gill, Weisburd, Telep, Vitter, & Bennett, 2014). Thus, while systematic crime rate increases do not seem to be a direct consequence of the Ferguson Effect, there is reason to believe that police officers have been adversely impacted by the Ferguson controversy (and related incidents across the US), which in turn has implications for crime. In this way, sensitivity to the Ferguson Effect can be viewed as a negative work-related outcome for officers, their supervisors and agencies, and the communities they serve.

The problem, however, is that we know very little about what is associated with officers' sensitivity to such Ferguson Effects. In other words, what is it that makes a police officer more or less likely to feel affected by negative publicity and public discontent stemming from Ferguson? This is an important policy question for police agencies and command staff. What can supervisors do to help prevent their officers from being adversely impacted by negative publicity stemming from high-profile incidents like that in Ferguson? Organizational justice theory offers a sound framework for such an understanding (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Sheppard, Lewicki, & Minton, 1992). Within the business management literature, studies have shown that greater perceived supervisor organizational justice is associated with

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beneficial work-related outcomes such as increased productivity and greater organizational commitment among employees (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001). And although relatively few studies have applied the organizational justice framework to the study of police behavior, the available evidence suggests that officers who perceive their supervisors as being fair are more likely to identify with their organization, comply with procedures, and hold more favorable attitudes toward community policing, procedural justice, and the public more generally (Bradford, Quinton, Myhill, & Porter, 2014; Myhill & Bradford, 2013; Tankebe, 2014). On the other hand, officers who believe their supervisors are unfair express less trust in their agency (Wolfe & Nix, 2016b) and are more likely to engage in misconduct (Wolfe & Piquero, 2011). It is with these results in mind that we argue organizational justice may also be associated with less sensitivity to negative publicity stemming from Ferguson-related public discontent. Officers who feel fairly and respectfully treated by their supervisors may be partially shielded from the effects of negative press surrounding their occupation. This is particularly important in agencies across the US that may not have experienced a high-profile police shooting but are nevertheless dealing with the fallout of such events in other jurisdictions. Such organizational justice likely communicates to officers that they can trust their agency and supervisors and that they will be there to support them in the face of public scrutiny.

Accordingly, the present study considered whether perceived organizational justice was associated with several different indicators or manifestations of the Ferguson Effect. We accomplished this using a survey of sheriff's deputies ( $N = 510$ ) employed by an agency in a south-eastern US metropolis. Multivariate regression equations were estimated to determine the extent to which organizational justice was associated with sensitivity to the Ferguson Effect and to rule out the possible confounding influence of other individual traits (e.g., self-legitimacy). Our findings provide valuable insight for police executives who wish to protect their officers from the public outrage surrounding their profession in the post-Ferguson era of policing. In this way we are not interested in finding ways for officers and their agencies to skirt accountability for wrong-doing. Rather, the overarching goal of this study was to provide empirical evidence concerning the type of police supervisor actions that can help ensure officers do not become less motivated, withdraw from their duties, or become less effective cops because of the threat of media scrutiny and cell phone video recording. The implications of this study are important from a police policy standpoint but also because internal fairness within a police agency may ultimately impact public safety by creating better street cops.

## 2. The Ferguson Effect

Dating back to the summer of 2014, there have been several highly publicized fatal encounters between white police officers and unarmed black citizens. The first occurred in Staten Island, NY, when Eric Garner died after being placed in a choke hold by NYPD officers. A bystander captured the incident on video – which included Garner saying multiple times “I can't breathe” – and it ultimately went viral on the internet. Shortly thereafter, in Ferguson, MO, unarmed Michael Brown was shot and killed by Officer Darren Wilson. This encounter was not captured on video, but several witnesses claimed that Brown had his arms raised over his head as if to be surrendering when he was shot. Although the officer's use of force was later ruled justified by the US Department of Justice (i.e., evidence suggested that Brown attempted to grab the officer's gun), the incident sparked civil unrest that lasted several weeks in Ferguson and captured extraordinary media attention.

Eight months later, in North Charleston, SC, cellphone video emerged of Walter Scott being shot five times in the back as he was fleeing Officer Michael Slager, who has since been indicted for murder and is awaiting trial. Just one week after Scott's death, Freddie Gray went into a coma while being transported by a Baltimore Police van for possession of an illegal switchblade. The media suggested Gray (who died

from his injuries one week later) had been the victim of a “rough ride,” and six officers were ultimately indicted for various charges including false imprisonment (the knife turned out to be a pocket knife) and manslaughter.<sup>1</sup> Days after Gray's funeral, televised protests in downtown Baltimore turned violent: rocks were thrown, fires were started, patrol cars were destroyed, and many people (including police officers) sustained injuries. The rioting eventually forced the governor of Maryland to declare a state of emergency and call in the National Guard.

Though allegations of excessive use of force against unarmed black citizens are nothing new (e.g., Rodney King in Los Angeles), these and related events have resulted in unprecedented levels of police scrutiny in recent months (Weitzer, 2015). This is due in large part to the advent of social media and the ease with which citizens can record police behavior on cell phones and upload to the Internet for millions to view. Such continuous negative publicity surrounding the police at a national level has led some to argue that the police are withdrawing from their duties in order to avoid being the next viral video on YouTube (Martinez, 2015; Sutton, 2015) – an argument that has become known as the “Ferguson Effect.”<sup>2</sup> One month after the Baltimore riots, the *Wall Street Journal* published an op-ed by Heather Mac Donald (2015), in which she argued that crime increases being experienced in several major US cities were precursors to a nationwide crime wave that is the direct result of the Ferguson Effect and de-policing. Top law enforcement officials such as St. Louis Chief Sam Dotson (who coined the term “Ferguson Effect”), FBI Director James Comey and DEA Chief Chuck Rosenberg, city mayors such as Rahm Emmanuel, and others have all echoed concerns over de-policing stemming from the Ferguson Effect.

### 2.1. The evidence concerning the Ferguson Effect

Until recently, the Ferguson Effect debate has been “long on anecdotes and speculation and short on data” (Pyrooz et al., 2016:3). For example, the FBI Director warned of the Ferguson Effect and President Obama argued it may not exist, but both suggested we need data to answer such questions. To determine whether Ferguson was associated with changes in crime rates at the national level, Pyrooz and his co-authors analyzed monthly UCR Part I offenses in 81 large US cities 12 months before and 12 months after the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson. They found no evidence of a post-Ferguson change in overall, violent, or property crime trends – although disaggregated analyses suggested that robbery rates were on the rise in the post-Ferguson era. Importantly, they did reveal that a handful of cities—those with higher than average crime rates, larger African-American populations, and greater police per capita—experienced increases in violent crime starting at about the same time as the Ferguson incident. Substantively, however, the magnitude of such crime rate changes was quite small. For example, in the “Ferguson Effect cities” it would take nearly two years to witness a one-unit increase in homicides, on average. A Ferguson Effect? Probably – but certainly nothing to sound alarm bells over.<sup>3</sup>

What Pyrooz and colleagues' analyses could not speak to, however, was whether Ferguson and related events have resulted in de-policing. In a recent report for the 21st Century Cities Initiative at Johns Hopkins University, Morgan and Pally (2016) explored this possibility in Baltimore by examining trends in both crime and arrest data from 2010 to 2015, which captures the deaths of both Michael Brown and Freddie Gray. With respect to crime, the authors found that shootings, homicides, robberies, carjackings, and automobile thefts all increased in the three months following Gray's death. Yet despite these crime increases, the arrest count over the same period declined by 30% (in fact, arrests had been declining during the 8 months prior to Gray's arrest, which is perhaps attributable to the events surrounding Brown's death in Ferguson). Thus, the authors found that negative publicity surrounding Gray's death in Baltimore was associated with both increases in crime and a slowdown in police activity. Together, these studies

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