



# Perceptions of Police Practice, Cynicism of Police Performance, and Persistent Neighborhood Violence: An Intersecting Relationship



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## ABSTRACT

*Purpose:* A growing literature indicates that legal cynicism at the neighborhood level corresponds with retaliatory homicides and persistent homicide rates, net of controls. However, no study to date has examined: a) how cynicism of police performance might be influenced by specific experiences with and perceptions of the police, and b) whether neighborhood cynicism of police performance is associated with violent crime beyond homicides.

*Method:* This study analyzed citizen and neighborhood data from Cincinnati, Ohio in the late 1990s – a social setting that had antagonistic police-community relationships.

*Results:* The results revealed that perceived unjust policing was the strongest individual level correlate of cynicism of police services, and that aggregate levels of cynicism predicted both homicides and overall violence above and beyond social disorganization as well as previous levels of violence.

*Conclusion:* We speak to the importance of these findings in terms of identifying which police-community factors seemingly have the greatest likelihood to facilitate the association between cynicism and persistent neighborhood violence.

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## Introduction

Recent national attention has highlighted how tension between law enforcement and neighborhood communities can not only erode public confidence in legal institutions (see LaFree, 1998), but also can correspond with heightened levels of violence and potential retaliation (CNN, 2014). From a broader theoretical and empirical perspective, residents from disadvantaged communities are more likely to view the police as unfair and ineffective, and in such contexts violence is a chronic problem. A growing literature has begun to assess the intersection between neighborhood disadvantage, perceptions of police performance, and community violence.

This study is both a replication and extension of previous scholarship. The purpose of this study is threefold. First, prior research indicates that legal cynicism among neighborhood residents corresponds with retaliatory homicides (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003) as well as persistent and long-term homicide rates at the community level (Kirk & Papachristos, 2011). Replicating these important findings will help determine whether cynical views of the police translate into higher homicide levels across different social settings. Second, the prior literature has focused on how citizens from disadvantaged communities are more likely to experience inappropriate and forceful police behavior

(see also Kane, 2005; Terrill & Reisig, 2003). Thus, studies that have examined the relationship between cynicism and violence have relied upon neighborhood structural dimensions to account for potential differences in experiences with police among neighborhood respondents (Kirk & Papachristos, 2011). No study of which we are aware has directly examined how cynicism of police performance (which influences violent crime rates – see Kirk & Papachristos, 2011) is shaped by perceptions of crime control effectiveness, citizen familiarity, and perceived unjust practices (i.e., experiences with and perceptions of police performance). We attempt to unravel which factors have the greatest relative influence on cynicism of police performance that could potentially facilitate (and/or minimize) neighborhood violence. Third, this is the first study to date that examines the relationship between cynicism of police performance on violence beyond homicide. In this study, we examine the influence of cynicism of police performance on long-term patterns of overall neighborhood violence (i.e., pooled assaults, robberies, rapes, and homicides).

## Neighborhood violence and legal cynicism

Violent neighborhoods are more likely to be structurally disadvantaged, have low levels of social control, provide little institutional support for conventional values, and are populated by residents who are legally cynical (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Kirk & Papachristos, 2011; Peterson, Krivo, & Harris, 2000; Sampson & Bartusch, 1998; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). While considerable scholarly

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attention has focused on neighborhood structural, institutional and social control mechanisms, far less attention has been paid to legal cynicism and broader cultural perspectives until relatively recently. Classic ecological research typically viewed culturally transmitted legal cynicism within high crime contexts through the following lenses: 1) subculture of violence (e.g., see Heimer, 1997) or 2) anomie (Wolfgang & Ferracuti, 1967). The majority of studies demonstrate little to no evidence of a separate class neighborhood culture that openly supports violence, even within the most criminally persistent and delinquent communities (Kornhauser, 1978; Shaw & McKay, 1942). Thus, there is either inconsistent (at best) or more often failed support for a neighborhood subcultural explanation of violence.

From the perspective of anomie, a state of “normlessness” is culturally transmitted to neighborhood inhabitants who lose faith in official systems of justice due to increased isolation from mainstream values and opportunities (Horowitz, 1983; Warner, 2003). Horowitz (1983) illustrated that economic success was espoused by members of impoverished communities but negative experiences with lower class schools and limited employment availability often fail to incorporate citizens in such contexts to broader society. Sampson and Bartusch (1998) tested whether a normative state of powerlessness might lead to a broader tolerance of deviance, and they found that residents in disadvantaged communities were no more likely to tolerate or support violence than were residents from more affluent and less strained neighborhoods.

Disadvantaged neighborhoods can thus be characterized as having: (a) heightened levels of observed crime and neighborhood violence (Krivo & Peterson, 1996; Morenoff, Sampson, & Raudenbush, 2001; Sampson et al., 1997), (b) low community support for illicit and violent behavior (Carr, Napolitano, & Keating, 2007; Sampson & Bartusch, 1998), and (c) negative dispositions toward the police (Cao, Frank, & Cullen, 1996; Reisig & Parks, 2000). Thus, neighborhood level explanations of violence are forced to deal with a variety of competing dimensions as they relate to attitudes of police performance, tolerance of deviance, and violent crime. Kirk and Papachristos (2011) recently refined the conceptualization of legal cynicism to reflect a cultural framework where residents in distressed neighborhoods cognitively perceive the police to be *illegitimate, unresponsive, or ill equipped*. Kirk and Papachristos (2011: p. 1191) argued, “the antagonism toward and mistrust of the agents of the law may propel some individuals toward violence simply because they feel they simply cannot rely upon the police to help them solve grievances.” They found that individual level cynicism of legal agents was a product of neighborhood conditions; neighborhood homicide rates were higher in legally cynical neighborhoods above and beyond structural conditions; and, legal cynicism significantly explains the residual (or unexpected) change in neighborhood homicides.

Likewise, Kubrin and Weitzer (2003) previously illustrated that cultural retaliatory homicides (i.e., homicides that are retaliations due to compromised notions of honor) are a prevalent form of violence in distressed neighborhoods that might be explained by two potential mechanisms that are driven by the police: (1) through inadequate crime control, and (2) through abusive treatment of residents. In both cases, they expected greater community alienation from the police. The literature indicates that *either* of these two mechanisms is possible and likely.

The primary empirical focus of prior research has been to assess whether and how legal cynicism through the process of cultural attenuation influences violent crime. However, the apparatus by which cynicism of police performance emerges in such contexts, and its subsequent relationship with violent crime levels, has yet to be specifically tested. We hypothesize that citizen attitudes toward police performance are linked with their own personal and vicarious experiences, and that perceptions based upon negative experiences will likely shape community cynicism of police performance. A more detailed review of the factors that shape attitudes toward police performance follows.

## Experiences with and perceptions of police performance

The literature suggests that perceptions of police performance stem from the following: 1) perceived risk of criminal victimization; 2) contact with police; 3) familiarity with police; and, 4) quality of treatment by the police. Concerns related to fear of crime are in line with the “reassurance factor” in policing (Bahn, 1974). From this viewpoint, increased confidence in the police (often through increased patrols) reduces fear of crime (Pate, Wycoff, Skogan, & Sherman, 1986). In short, the public has more confidence in the police if they feel protected due to heightened levels of formal social control – leading people to feel safer. Fear is a significant correlate with confidence in police performance (Cao et al., 1996; Reisig & Parks, 2000; Smith & Hawkins, 1973). Using multi-wave panel data, Skogan (2009) found support for the “reassurance thesis” in that increased confidence in the police preceded a decrease in concerns about crime, net of other individual level factors. In contrast, when confidence in the police to protect the public is low, there are higher levels of fear.

Unfavorable views of police performance often arise from negative (involuntary and voluntary) direct police contacts (Decker, 1981; Huebner, Schafer, & Bynum, 2004; Lai & Zhao, 2010; Webb & Marshall, 1995). Scaglion and Condon (1980) found that personal contact with police matters more so than socioeconomic variables in determining attitudes toward the police. Within the U.S., African-Americans are typically more cynical about the police and are more likely to report negative contacts (Schafer, Huebner, & Bynum, 2003; Tuch & Weitzer, 1997), as are younger respondents (Reisig & Correia, 1997). General attitudes about the police also frame the way police-citizen interactions are assessed by citizens (Brandl, Frank, Worden, & Bynum, 1994). As noted by Brandl et al. (1994: p.122), “not everyone who is stopped by the police is dissatisfied with the contact, and not everyone who calls the police is satisfied.”

An equal proportion of negative and positive experiences do not counterbalance one another. In a cross-national study, Skogan (2006) illustrates that a negativity bias exists among citizens in that negative police contacts are given considerably more weight than are positive experiences – for both citizen and police-initiated encounters (see also Brandl et al., 1994; Bradford, Jackson, & Stanko, 2009). Citizens within disadvantaged communities are also more likely to view the police more cynically based on their own likelihood of increased personal police contacts (Brunson, 2007; Carr et al., 2007).

Conversely, citizen familiarity with police has the potential to lead to a higher level of satisfaction with police performance. Scaglion and Condon (1980) found that respondents who knew the police were often less critical of police services (however, see Smith & Hawkins, 1973). Skogan (1998: p. 187) hypothesized that personal familiarity with an officer is likely to have positive influences on assessments of the police in terms of their relations with the community. Skogan argues that personal familiarity is a potential surrogate for enhanced communication with police (e.g., chatting, eating lunch, patrol, or off duty). Finally, Reisig and Parks (2000: p.621) likewise showed that familiarity with police consistently and significantly corresponded with higher levels of satisfaction with police services, above and beyond other individual and contextual factors. We therefore anticipate that personal familiarity with police within respondents’ neighborhoods will correspond with higher perceived police performance.

Perceptions of the quality of police treatment helps at least partially facilitate (or minimize) perceptions of procedural justice (Tyler, 1990). Sunshine and Tyler (2003) illustrated that perceptions of police effectiveness and the willingness of people to comply and cooperate with the police are most heavily influenced by judgments of how fair the police exercise their authority. Reiss (1968) illustrated long ago that residents from disadvantaged neighborhoods are more likely to perceive police as acting in a brutal and disrespectful fashion when officers use profane or abusive language or stop citizens on the street without due cause (i.e., harass residents). Citizens are more likely to characterize

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