

The Influence of Neighbourhood Characteristics on the Public's Confidence in the Police to Protect Them

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Abstract: Recent high-profile, video-recorded incidents have amplified years of social science research detailing the complex relationship between law enforcement and minority populations in the United States. The neighborhood and socioeconomic status of the citizen's policed have been shown to influence decisions made by law enforcement. The current study tests the relationship between residents' neighborhood characteristics and their confidence in the police to protect them from crime. Using data from the National Opinion Survey of Crime and Justice, respondents' confidence in the police to protect them from crime was significantly associated with the social and structural characteristics of their neighborhood. Consistent with previous research, African-Americans and individuals living in urban environments were less likely to report confidence in law enforcement controlling for other factors. This research helps explain the dynamics and interplay between police officers and people who reside in different communities where they patrol.

Keywords: Neighborhood Characteristics, Community, Police Relations, Community Policing

Introduction

Police Departments are public service organizations that must enjoy the confidence of the public if they are to be effective public institutions (Reiner, 2000; Corder, 2014). Police officers are sanctioned by the public to arrest individuals they suspect of being involved in criminal activity. At the core of their responsibilities, police officers are expected to protect and serve all citizens, irrespective of the neighborhood or community where they live. When the pact between the public and the police is

in question, the community becomes vulnerable to the power invested in the police and they lose confidence in the police's willingness to protect them. There is a body of research that confirms the notion held largely by minority populations that police officers do not treat all citizens with the same level of respect (Varano, Schafer, Cancino & Swatt, 2009). Moreover, there is evidence that decisions made by police officers are influenced not just by how people behave but also by their social status and where they live (Allen, 2005; Varano *et al*, 2009; Schaible & Hughes, 2012; Allen & Parker, 2013).

Research finds that minorities and people who are economically disadvantaged frequently receive inferior police protection and experience a disproportionate rate of police scrutiny, arrests, and use of force (Fagan & Davies, 2000; Kane, 2002; Mastrofski, Reisig, & McCluskey, 2002; Smith & Holmes, 2003; Terrill, Paoline, & Manning, 2003; Terrill & Reisig, 2003; Kane, 2005; Beckett, Nyrop, & Pfingst, 2006; Weitzer & Tuch, 2006; Allen & Parker, 2013). This is especially true among African Americans and people of low-income status where these differences have produced distrust and dissatisfaction with police job performance (Jones-Brown, 2000; Brunson & Miller, 2006; Carr, Napolitano, & Keating, 2007). A consistent finding in policing research is that legal cynicism is more prevalent among African Americans than among Whites. Distrust of the police is correlated with both concentrated neighborhood disadvantage and personal experience with negative involuntary police contacts (Weitzer & Tuch, 2006; Kirk & Papachristos, 2011). Indeed, the public's confidence in police officers to protect them is critical for officers to perform their duties with clarity and conviction. Therefore, studies that employ public opinion data are needed and necessary when queries are relevant to current social phenomena as is the case with the current study under consideration. The availability of public opinion data is scarce and requires a tremendous amount of resources and manpower to collect. When such data is accessible it should be used to the full benefit of the public as well as researchers, so long as it yields information germane to the public's interest.

This research adds to a growing body of work that seeks to understand what variables can best explain the dynamics and interplay between police officers and the communities they patrol. Social disorganization theory provides a framework for understanding how governmental resources are mobilized within and between neighborhoods. Local police departments can be conceptualized as social institutions with the capacity to provide a multitude of services that increase the overall quality of communities. They represent one of the most direct and immediate modes of accessibility to governmental services, particularly in disorganized communities otherwise lacking effective social institutions. It is important to understand how access to police services is distributed between and

within communities and how that influences the public's confidence in the police to protect them from crime (Varano *et al*, 2009).

In the remainder of this paper, we first review the literature on the history of community policing and the impact of neighborhood contexts on trust in police. We then describe our methods and sample. We used data from the National Opinion Survey of Crime and Justice (N=803). The sample included randomly selected adults from 533 different counties. Next, we describe our findings. We found that African Americans in urban areas are significantly less likely to trust the police to protect them, compared to other racial groups. We end with a discussion of the implications of our findings.

Community Policing and Historical Context

The idea that there is a relationship between public perceptions of the police and their ability to achieve goals and objectives is reflected in the British ideal of "policing by consent" (Reiner, 2000; Carter, 2002). This idea suggests that the police can only experience success when they have the public's support and cooperation. Although the idea dates back to the establishment of modern policing systems in 1829, it is only in recent decades that America has turned its attention to this relationship (Reiner, 2000; Schafer, Huebner, & Bynum, 2003). It has done so under the auspices of the community policing framework (Diamond & Weiss, 2009).

The policing paradigm is best explicated in the context of how services are delivered to the community and the way in which the community acknowledges and receives them. In recognition of the need to restore trust and confidence in the police, community policing is by design supposed to facilitate interaction between police officers and members of specific communities, most notably African American communities (Diamond & Weiss, 2009). Community Policing rests on three principal ideas, citizen input, broad function, and personal service, all three allow police officers to integrate into the community and become legitimate partners with community residents. Police Departments have a responsibility to be responsive and accountable (Cordner, 2014). They are more likely to gain the support and cooperation they need when they demonstrate an interest in input from the community. When they engage the community by serving on advisory boards, conducting community surveys, attending community meetings, and appearing on radio and television shows they improve their creditability. As a broad function community policing requires officers to work with residents to enhance neighborhood safety. This includes having a presence in the community and helping residents resolve problems in addition to reducing crime through apprehension and enforcement. By nature, policing is a multifaceted government function and should not be reduced to just handling calls and law enforcement which diminishes the objectives that the public expects police to achieve. And finally, the idea of personal service is

aimed specifically at the long-standing belief that police officers are insensitive and don't care about the people they are charged with serving, especially those who are poor and minority (Cordner, 2014). These principles provide the ideal framework from which police officers should interact with the community to deliver services. However, the social climate that causes the need for community policing can also stand in the way of its success.

Historical recollection of police actions in the United States is a backdrop to the current level of distrust that many African Americans have toward the police. High-profile media cases of alleged police misconduct and unlawful shootings like Sandra Bland in Waller Texas, Michael Brown in Ferguson Missouri, Tamir Rice in Cleveland, Ohio, Phailando Castile in Minneapolis Minnesota, Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge Louisiana, Laquan McDonald in Chicago Illinois, Stephon Clark in Sacramento California, Antwon Rose in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania and more recently Jayland Walker in Akron Ohio give context as to why many African Americans who reside in distressed, disorganized or poor communities lack trust and confidence in police officers. While community policing, theoretically is the appropriate approach it can only be effective when officers are willing participants who value the life and dignity of the citizens they interact with within the community. The nature of the interaction between citizens and police officers sets the tone for the quality of the relationship. Research shows that negative interactions result in low opinions and stronger effects on attitudes than positive interactions (Duck, 2017). When citizens are treated fair and with respect by the police their treatment has a more profound effect on their view of the police than the outcome of the encounter (Weitzer & Tuch, 2006). They are more likely to express favorable opinions of the police and cooperate with officers. On the other hand, when people experience verbal and physical abuse and carry the expectation of being treated unfairly and disrespectfully it distorts their psyche and attitude toward the police. These micro-level analyses give credence and context to understand the manifestation of the divide in the public's view and confidence across varying neighborhood types.

Neighborhood Culture

There is a notable variance when police behavior has been observed between and within communities. Studies have documented different views of citizens from different neighborhoods served by the same police force (Sampson & Bartusch, 1998; Reisig & Parks, 2000), implying a possible difference in community culture and context. Reisig & Parks (2000) separated these neighborhood effects into two distinct categories: cultural influences (e.g., individuals' perceptions of the collective beliefs, behaviors, and qualities of their neighborhoods) and contextual or "quality of life" influences (e.g., actual or perceived levels of crime and disorder). Like income and class, neighborhood

culture and context can be related to race; however, few studies have controlled “for the confounding effects of race and residential location on attitudes toward the police” (Kusow, Wilson & Martin, 1997, p. 658). It is possible that a citizen’s neighborhood culture and context could play a critical role in generating and maintaining their views of the police. This could be particularly critical for citizens who do not have contact with the police on a regular basis. Rather than basing their views on personal experiences, these individuals may evaluate the police using their neighborhood culture or context, which includes real or perceived rates of crime. Citizens may be predisposed to view the police in a particular fashion based on the collective experiences and norms within their neighborhoods. Those who do not have direct contact with the police on which to base their opinions may express opinions based on the experiences of their neighbors, friends, family members, and other acquaintances with a multiplier effect on larger neighborhood or subcultural beliefs about the police (Jacobs, 1979; Harris, 2002). Such “vicarious” contact can play a significant role in shaping the views and confidence of people in the police and police services (Brunson, 2007). Another type of experience that can influence one’s confidence in the police has to do with observations of police behavior. Watching an officer mistreat a person can have a profound and lasting impression on a person’s confidence in the police (Smith & Hawkins, 1973; Koenig, 1980; Son, In Soo, Tsang, Rome & Davis, 1997). This is especially true with children who witness or overhear discussions about interactions with police officers. These experiences help to shape their perceptions of police officers before they have any personal interactions with them.

Dunham and Alpert (1988) studied five ethnic and racially distinct neighborhoods and found a high degree of agreement within each neighborhood about the police and police practices. Residents of two very different Black neighborhoods (lower income versus middle income) held less favorable views on the issues of police use of discretion and overall demeanor than did residents of White and Cuban neighborhoods. Sampson and Bartusch, (1998) studied 343 neighborhoods in Chicago and found that negative attitudes toward the police presented by black residents could be explained by neighborhood differences in levels of violent crime and concentrated disadvantage.

Weitzer’s qualitative research in Washington D. C. provides some insight into how neighborhood composition can influence perceptions and experience with police bias (1999, 2000). Like Dunham and Alpert, his study population included middle and low-income Blacks in addition to middle-income Whites. He interviewed residents from three distinctly different types of neighborhoods. He found that residents in each neighborhood had similar perceptions and that the police engaged in racially biased practices, but each neighborhood had different explanations for this bias. For example, Black respondents thought that law-abiding Blacks were unfairly targeted by the police

because of the disproportionate involvement of Blacks in street crime. Surprisingly, Black respondents living in a middle-class community did not perceive racial bias by the police in their own neighborhood (Weitzer, 1999, 2000). This research underscores the importance of community composition in explaining the relationship between race and citizen distrust of the police, which can easily be translated into some level of confidence.

The Influence of Place on Policing

Researchers have emphasized the influence that the community where a police officer patrols have on his/her behavior, especially regarding criminality and victimization (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1981; Taylor & Covington, 1988; Eck & Weisburd, 1995; Weisburd, 2002; McLafferty, 2008). Early on, the Chicago School and scholars of social disorganization (Park, Burgess & McKenzie, 1925; Shaw *et al.*, 1929; Shaw & McKay, 1942), solidified attributes of neighborhoods and communities as an important factor in the explanation and study of crime and criminal justice. Since then, researchers have found that physical, social, and cultural aspects of communities can influence or mediate the connection between an individual's cognitions and actions. Police officers, especially those patrolling in socially disorganized communities, are certainly not immune from these environmental forces. Community-based cues, that are most noticeable to an officer (e.g., socioeconomic status, poverty, racial and ethnic makeup, disorder, crime, pedestrian and traffic density, and land use), may significantly affect and interact with an officer's perspective and thereby his or her discretion. Indeed, the effect of neighborhood characteristics on police behavior has led scholars to observe that in different neighborhoods police provide different services (Terrill & Reisig, 2003; Schaible & Hughes, 2012; Allen & Parker, 2013).

Despite the potential importance that communities and neighborhoods may have on officer behavior, much of the existing research on officer discretion is surprisingly not community-based but instead focused on how characteristics of individuals (e.g., officer, victim, suspect, bystanders) and the specific nature of crime situations and police-civilian exchanges matter. Most notable is the literature on how the race of individuals influences traffic stops or arrests (Farrell & McDevitt, 2006; Schafer, Carter, Katz-Bannister, & Wells, 2006; Warren, Tomaskovic-Devey, Smith, Zingraff, & Mason, 2006; Alpert, Dunham & Smith, 2007). Yet, analyzing the impact that community characteristics have on officer decision-making is fruitful for several reasons. From a psychosocial perspective, their daily work environments can negatively affect patrol officers, like residents, which may be personally unfamiliar and abnormally high (or low) in crime and disorder. This effect may lead to systematic biases in their response based on extra-legal factors like the racial make-up or

socioeconomic status of an area, which in turn could reduce the legitimacy of a democratic police force.

Additionally, today's policing environment is marked both by a push for officers to consider more community-based, proactive strategies, such as hot spot patrol, problem-oriented policing, zero-tolerance enforcement, or anti-gang interventions. Such interventions reinforce the importance of viewing crime from a community-based perspective, as opposed to focusing on reacting to individual calls. More broadly, community-policing philosophies have long emphasized the conceptualization of fairness and legitimacy in policing. This has shifted both practitioner and researcher thinking from considerations about individual due process to community legitimacy and authorization, concepts that are very much attached in social geography.

In his seminal work on living in the inner-city Anderson (1999) concluded that the lack of faith in the police and overall judicial system among African Americans has contributed to the development of an oppositional culture or what he characterizes as "code of the street" which are a set of values reserved for survival on the street in urban communities that can be characterized as dysfunctional.

The police...are most often viewed as representing the dominant white society and as not caring to protect inner-city residents. When called, they must be prepared to take extraordinary measures to defend themselves and their loved ones against those who are inclined to aggression. Lack of police accountability has in fact been incorporated into the local status system: the person who is believed capable of *taking care of himself* is accorded certain deference and regard, which translates into a sense of physical and psychological control. The code of the street thus emerges where the influence of the police ends and where personal responsibility for one's safety is felt to begin (p. 34).

Essentially, Anderson argues that residents of poor, disorganized communities are unlikely to call the police because (1) they lack confidence in the police to protect them (2) the potential threat of abusive treatment and (3) loss of respect in the street. His focus is on cultural process whereby residents of inner cities learn to use their own and other peoples' experiences as a basis for how to handle specific situations they encounter on the streets, which often include violence. This point of view complements structural perspectives suggesting that the lack of informal social control mechanisms among socially disadvantaged and disorganized neighborhoods is exacerbated by difficulties that residents face in accessing public services (including the police) and in countering policies that worsen neighborhood conditions (Bursik, 1989; Bursik & Grasmick, 1993). Thus, how environmental characteristics affect officer decision-making is important to understand not only from an officer behavioral perspective but also because contemporary changes in policing lend even further significance to establishing confidence that all citizens will be treated the same in the officer's daily work.

Method

The current study tests the relationship between residents' neighborhood characteristics and their confidence in the police to protect them from crime. The data for this study is from the National Opinion Survey of Crime and Justice (1995) and distributed by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research. The NOSCJ was designed to capture American attitudes and behaviors (e.g., crime show viewership) pertaining to crime and justice issues. The sample included randomly selected adults representing 533 different counties. The response rate for the original telephone surveys was 65 percent.

The primary dependent variable examined was respondents' confidence in the police. Specifically, participants were asked three questions: how much confidence they had in the ability of police to protect them from crime, solve crimes, and prevent crime from occurring? The response options were "great deal," "some," "little," and "none." The key independent variables measured were neighborhood perception, perceived safety, and crime rate change. Neighborhood perceptions were measured by asking participants to assign levels of seriousness to community issues including litter, unsupervised youth, stray dogs, vacant housing, graffiti, abandoned cars, and public intoxication. Scale scores ranged from 8 to 32; lower scores indicated higher levels of perceived problems. Additional independent measures were gender, marital status, age, ethnicity education, familial income, and community urbanization.

Results

Table 1 describes the sample characteristics. More than half of respondents identified as male (52.14%) with an average age of 45 years.

The average household size was slightly higher than the national average (2.79). Respondents were predominantly white (81.86%) with approximately even representation of Black (7.72%) and Hispanic (7.72%) individuals. Most of the sample had at least some post-secondary education, about 31% of the entire sample graduated college. Roughly one-tenth of the population did not graduate high school.

Regarding contextual factors, respondents identified low to moderate overall concerns about their neighbors and personal experiences in their communities. The mean neighborhood perception score was 11.80 with a standard deviation for 4.35. Overall, most respondents considered neighborhood conditions stable. When considering how much their neighborhoods have changed, residents identified their perception of safety to be about the same (71.47%). Residents' perceptions were consistent with the actual crime rate in their respective areas; over 66% of the corresponding neighborhoods experienced stable crime rates during the study period. All levels of urbanization were represented within the sample; most residents lived in suburban (26.94%) and small town (20.89%) areas.

Table 1: Sample descriptive statistics

	<i>Mean or % / (SD)</i>
Neighborhood Perception Scale	11.80 (4.35)
How Crime Rate Change	
Increase	22.63%
Stayed the Same	66.53%
Decreased	10.84%
How Safe Feel on Streets	
Safer	9.64%
Not as Safe	18.88%
About the Same	71.47%
Urbanization of Community	
Urban	15.94%
Suburb	26.94%
Small city	19.58%
Small town	20.89%
Rural	16.65%
Female	47.86%
Income	
Less than \$15K	14.90%
\$15-30K	25.83%
\$30-60K	37.20%
Greater than \$60K	22.08%
Household Size	2.79 (1.45)
Marital Status	
Married	54.31%
Widow/Divorce/Separated	24.25%
Never Married	21.44%
Education	
HS Grad	31.39%
Less than HS	10.36%
Some College	27.26%
College Grad & Beyond	30.99%
Race/Ethnicity	
White	81.86%
Hispanic	7.72%
Black	7.72%
Other	2.71%
Age	45.02 (17.24)

Table 2 presents results from the multivariate logistic models for the dependent variable: confidence in the police to protect them from crime. Respondents' confidence in the police to protect them from crime was significantly associated with the neighborhood perception scale and crime rate change.

Table 2: Logistic regression of respondents' confidence in the police to protect them from crime

(<i>N</i> =830)	<i>OR</i>	<i>SE</i>
Neighborhood Perception Scale	.952**	.020
How Crime Rate Change (Ref: Inc.)		
Stayed the Same	1.683**	.363
Decreased	2.161**	.778
How Safe Feel on Streets (Ref: Safer)		
Not as Safe	.426**	.164
About the Same	.774	.269
Urbanization of Comm (Ref: Rural)		
Small city or town	1.583*	.392
Suburb	1.640*	.450
Urban	1.354	.416
Female	1.118	.206
Income (Ref: Less than \$15K)		
\$15-30K	.731	.231
\$30-60K	.890	.290
Greater than \$60K	.566	.200
Household Size	.961	.067
Marital Status (Ref: Married)		
Widow/Divorce/Separated	1.731**	.457
Never Married	1.009	.287
Education (Ref: HS Grad)		
Less than HS	.583	.195
Some College	.723	.166
College Grad & Beyond	1.131	.276
Age	.999	.036
Age ²	1.000	.000
Race/Ethnicity (Ref: White)		
Hispanic	1.762	.682
Black	.486**	.148
Other	.514	.247
Log likelihood		-401.671
χ^2 / Pseudo R^2		77.36**** / .088

* $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$; **** $p < 0.001$.

Feelings of safety on streets, urbanization, marital status, and race also significantly influenced respondents' confidence. For each point respondents graded on the neighborhood perception scale, they were 4.8% less likely to report confidence in the

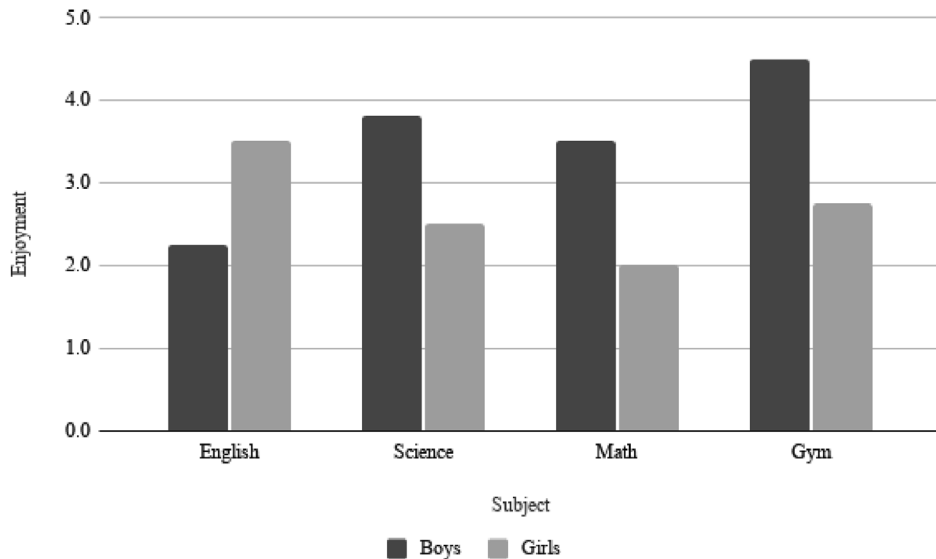


Figure 1

Note. Number of boys = 30, number of girls = 31, total $N = 61$.

police. When specifically considering how safe residents feel on the street of their neighborhoods, those who reported feeling not as safe were 58% less likely to have confidence in the police to protect them from crime. Regarding actual fluctuations of local crime rates, the respondents in areas with stable crime rates were 68% more likely to report confidence in the police as compared to those in areas where crime increased. Those respondents in areas of decreasing crime were more than 2 times more likely to feel protected by law enforcement. Controlling for other factors, individuals living in small towns (OR: 1.58) and suburban (OR: 1.64) areas were significantly more likely than those in rural areas to report confidence in the police. Previously married respondents were also more likely to report confidence. Controlling for the perception of safety, crime rate fluctuations, income, age, and gender, Black respondents were 51% less likely to report confidence in the police to protect them from crime.

Discussion

The results of the study show the combined impact of neighborhood conditions and personal experience on perceptions of police effectiveness. African Americans reported less trust in the police controlling for socioeconomic and contextual factors. Racial differences regarding perceptions of law enforcement are consistent with the findings from previous studies (Brunson & Miller, 2006; Weitzer & Tuch, 2006; Carr, Napolitano, & Keating, 2007). Actual experiences with law enforcement, often instigated

by disproportionately proactive, aggressive police tactics (Weitzer & Tuch, 2006), may exacerbate historic distrust between both communities. Qualitative and quantitative research on the relationship between African American and law enforcement suggest contextual neighborhood factors have as large of an effect as actual interactions (Brunson and Miller, 2006).

Living in areas with increasing neighborhood disorder led participants to report reduced confidence in the police's ability to protect them. This effect was significant both when disorder was measured as perceived crime and with actual crime rates; participants' views on law enforcement were consistent with their evaluation of threats to safety. A limitation of the study is the inability to quantify the different pathways in which neighborhood disorder impacts the lived experience of participants. The interplay of neighborhood social factors would add perspective to these findings, particularly regarding the persistent racial differences.

Social networks within neighborhoods are considered interdependent (Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 2006) and individual, social and economic resources influence the strength of these networks. Individuals with more social and economic resources tend to move to areas where their neighbors will have similar characteristics. Over time, families without such resources are isolated in distressed areas. Neighborhood cohesion, generally conceptualized as the shared expectations neighbors have for their community (Markowitz *et al.*, 2001), has been shown to be highly influential in protecting urban areas from crime (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). For families, lack of safety within the neighborhood and having limited expectations that your neighbors will look out for your children accentuates the importance of community-police relations. Confidence in the police to protect one's family would be another much-needed social resource amongst socioeconomically marginalized communities.

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