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Public perceptions of courts and cooperation with police

Rylan Simpson^{1*} and Lacey N. Pappas²

Abstract

The police depend upon public cooperation to effectively control crime. Understanding factors that impact people's willingness to cooperate with the police is thus an important area of empirical research. Drawing upon survey data from a sample of adults ($N=364$), we employ a series of regression models to explore the relationship between participants' perceptions of courts and their willingness to cooperate with the police. Our analyses reveal that participants' perceptions of courts are associated with their willingness to report crime to the police, particularly minor crime, but not their willingness to assist the police if asked. We discuss our results with respect to discretionary crime reporting, the measurement of cooperation with police, and the nature of interventions aimed at enhancing criminal justice perceptions.

Keywords Cooperation with police, Courts, Criminal justice, Perception, Policing, Procedural justice

The criminal justice system consists of three interrelated branches: the police, the courts, and corrections. Each branch of the system relies on at least one other branch of the system. For example, in order to appear in criminal court, a defendant must first generally be arrested by the police. In order for a defendant to spend time in prison, they must first generally have contact with the court. Given their interdependent nature, each branch shares relevance for criminal justice practice and exhibits the potential to shape perceptions of – and engagement with – the broader system.

As a function of their gatekeeping role, the police are generally considered to be the most visible branch of the criminal justice system (Alward & Baker, 2021; Simpson, 2021a; Simpson & Bell, 2022; Sun & Wu, 2006). As

the first point of contact for most criminal justice work, the police are embedded in almost all aspects of the system. Such heightened visibility positions them to be the subject of much public opinion and empirical attention. Indeed, historical research has investigated factors that predict people's perceptions of police and their associated willingness to cooperate with officers. This research has predominantly found that people are more likely to cooperate with the police when they perceive the police as fair, trustworthy, and legitimate (e.g., Bolger & Walters, 2019; Bradford, 2014; Bradford & Jackson, 2016; Huq et al., 2011; Johnson et al., 2017; Maguire et al., 2017; Murphy & Cherney, 2011, 2012; Murphy et al., 2008, 2015; Peyton et al., 2019; Reisig & Llyod, 2009; Sargeant & Kochel, 2018; Sargeant et al., 2014; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Tyler, 1990; Tyler & Fagan, 2008; Tyler & Jackson, 2014; White et al., 2016). Public cooperation with police is necessary for effective and democratic policing.

With that being said, it is possible that other factors may also impact people's willingness to cooperate with the police. For example, the courts – which process more than 100 million cases annually in the United States

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alone (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2019) – may influence people's decision to cooperate with the police. As both receivers and interpreters of police-provided information, the courts often make decisions about the outcomes of cases based upon information that flows through to them via the police. In this vein, dissatisfaction with the courts could potentially manifest via reduced willingness to cooperate with the police: if people do not want to engage with the courts, particularly in a criminal context, then it is possible that they may not want to cooperate with the police as such cooperation could land them in the courtroom. Until recently, however, little attention has been paid to how court perceptions may impact cooperation with police, especially in its disaggregated form.

Drawing upon survey data from a sample of adults recruited via Amazon's Mechanical Turk ($N=364$), we employ a series of regression models to explore the relationship between participants' perceptions of courts and their willingness to cooperate with the police. Notably, we disaggregate willingness to cooperate with the police into three specific activities: (1) willingness to report minor crime to the police, (2) willingness to report major crime to the police, and (3) willingness to assist the police if asked. Our results reveal that participants' perceptions of courts are associated with their willingness to report crime to the police, particularly minor crime, but not their willingness to assist the police if asked. We discuss our results with respect to both research and practice.

Background

Cooperation with police

Police officers as agents of social control may be an especially influential element of the crime control nexus, however they are not the only element. The police's ability to effectively conduct their work depends upon the public voluntarily supporting and cooperating with the police (Murphy et al., 2008, 2015): most crime is reported to the police via the public and much crime is solved with the help of the public who provide information to the police. Given the importance of cooperation with police for policing and crime control, it is not surprising that a large body of research has sought to explore factors that can encourage cooperative behavior. Among this literature, procedural justice has emerged as particularly salient for people's willingness to cooperate with the police.

Procedural justice is fundamental to enhancing public-police encounters. Procedural justice suggests that when people are treated politely and respected (*dignity and respect*) by a legal authority who exhibits genuine care for their well-being (*trustworthy motives*), engages in transparent decision-making procedures (*neutrality*), and provides them with an opportunity to explain their side of a situation (*voice*), they will exhibit more favorable

perceptions of the legal authority and exhibit greater propensity to cooperate with such authority (e.g., Maze-rolle et al., 2012; Murphy et al., 2008). As a process-based model, procedural justice focuses on the treatment of people by the police.

Research heavily supports procedural justice as a cornerstone philosophy in policing because of its positive impact on perceptions of police and cooperation with officers. In their seminal study, Sunshine and Tyler (2003) argued that procedural justice shaped participants' beliefs about police legitimacy and that such beliefs were related to participants' willingness to cooperate with officers. Many other studies have since found similar results. For example, White and colleagues (2016) found that a group of adults arrested in Arizona reported greater willingness to cooperate with the police when they rated the police as more procedurally just and legitimate. Reisig and Lloyd (2009) observed that Jamaican students who evaluated police practices as more procedurally just were more willing to report suspicious activity to the police. Peyton and colleagues (2019) found that positive, non-enforcement police contacts which emphasized the principles of procedural justice increased residents' reported willingness to cooperate with the police. Maguire and colleagues (2017) argued that observing positive, procedurally just interactions with the police increased participants' willingness to cooperate with the police. And Bolger and Walters (2019) reported as part of their meta-analysis that procedural justice and legitimacy are both directly related to public cooperation with police. Taken together, this literature suggests that experiencing a procedurally fair encounter with the police encourages people to work with the police. In this way, people's perceptions of police can impact their decision to aid the police in crime control.

This body of research has provided much insight into factors that can impact people's perceptions of – and willingness to cooperate with – the police. With that being said, it is important to recognize the implications of measuring cooperation with police for our understanding of these dynamics. In past research, cooperation with police has largely been assessed by an aggregate measure which combines separate items that otherwise reflect people's willingness to report crime and assist officers (e.g., Murphy & Cherney, 2011, 2012; Sargeant & Kochel, 2018; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). Although appropriate for much work of this genre, this aggregate measure is not suitable for the present research. Given that different levels of cooperation with police may infer different levels of consideration about the courts, which is a focus of our work, we disentangle this aggregate measure to explore participants' willingness to cooperate with the police as part of *self-initiated* versus *police-initiated* encounters as well as to *report different kinds of crime*.

As we alluded to above, and as we describe in more detail below, discretionary crime reporting may be influenced more by extraneous factors than non-discretionary crime reporting. Indeed, people's perceptions of courts may weigh more heavily on their decision to cooperate with the police via discretionary crime reporting, which would typically be the case for minor crime, than non-discretionary crime reporting. For example, a person may not call the police to report a minor crime if they do not wish to go to court regarding that crime because they perceive the courts negatively. On the other hand, the urgency of a major crime may require a person to call the police regardless of their perceptions of the courts to ensure immediate safety. As one example, a person being violently assaulted may not perceive much option but to call the police to stop the assault. In order to inform this conversation, we next turn toward a discussion of court perceptions.

Perceptions of courts

The primary role of the courts is to provide a forum for the public to obtain justice in legal disputes (Tyler, 2007; Tyler & Sevier, 2014). The responsibility of the courts is to handle these disputes in a procedural manner which encourages people to abide by – and adhere to – judicial decisions. Like the police, the courts represent a legal authority in which trust, fairness, and legitimacy are both salient and important. Similar to the field of policing, the literature regarding procedural justice in the courtroom suggests that the processes by which courts manage legal disputes are more influential than the outcomes of such disputes (e.g., Alda et al., 2020; Baker et al., 2014, 2015; Casper et al., 1988; Connor, 2019; Dollar et al., 2018; Fessinger et al., 2019; Gover et al., 2007; Hulst et al., 2017; Thibaut & Walker, 1975, 1978; Tyler, 2007; Tyler & Rasin-ski, 1991; Tyler & Sevier, 2014).

Courts rely upon high levels of perceived credibility to effectively function (Alda et al., 2020). Certain elements of procedural justice, such as trustworthy motives and voice, are important predictors of people's perceptions of courts and compliance with legal actors (e.g., Baker et al., 2014, 2015; Connor, 2019; Gover et al., 2007; Hulst et al., 2017; Thibaut & Walker, 1975, 1978; Tyler, 2007; Tyler & Sevier, 2014). For example, when the public perceive the courts as genuinely concerned for their well-being, they are more likely to voluntarily defer to legal authority (Hulst et al., 2017; Tyler, 2007; Tyler & Sevier, 2014). This effect can be further moderated by citizen characteristics, including gender, ethnicity, and prior victimization (Alda et al., 2020; Baker, 2017; Baker et al., 2015). As one example, when defendants identify with court officials via shared race or ethnicity, they are more likely to perceive the courts as procedurally just, and, in turn, more likely to obey the law (Baker, 2017; Baker et al., 2015). These

antecedents of court perceptions are generally consistent across different court forums, including traditional courts and problem-solving courts (e.g., drug courts, domestic violence courts). The use of procedural justice improves people's perceptions of court legitimacy in both of these settings, which contributes to more favorable outcomes such as compliance and cooperation with court orders (e.g., Connor, 2019; Dollar et al., 2018; Fessinger et al., 2019; Gover et al., 2007; Hulst et al., 2017).

Similar to police perceptions, court perceptions are therefore important for understanding citizen behavior. Moreover, and again similar to police perceptions, people's perceptions of courts can be shaped by legal officials' use of procedural justice. Given these similarities in principle and perception as well as the potential implications of the courts for the police, it is reasonable to expect that people's perceptions of courts may be related to their willingness to cooperate with the police.

The relationship between the police and the courts

In addition to research which has evaluated people's perceptions of the police and the courts in their own contexts, some research has explored the spill-over effects between these two branches (e.g., Alda et al., 2020; Alward & Baker, 2021; Baker et al., 2014; Berthelot et al., 2018; Brown et al., 2018; Sun & Wu, 2006). These studies have largely addressed the spill-over effects from the police onto the courts (i.e., consistent with the notion of a criminal justice funnel) and focused on specific populations (e.g., females: Baker et al., 2014; sex offenders: Brown et al., 2018). For example, existing research has found previous experience with police to be significantly related to people's perceptions of courts, such that people with negative police experience report more negative attitudes about the courts (Brown et al., 2018; Sun & Wu, 2006). Existing research has also found that when the police are perceived as honest and procedurally just, it is more likely that the courts, and specifically judges, will be perceived as the same (Baker et al., 2014; Brown et al., 2018).

Attention toward the direction of this effect from the police onto the courts is largely warranted given that the police are often the public's first contact with the criminal justice system. The ways in which the police treat the public during these initial encounters can signal to people about the fairness of other legal officials in the criminal justice system, including the courts, which will later follow.

With that in consideration, people's perceptions of courts may also affect their perceptions of – and engagement with – the police. As previously introduced, people's perceptions of courts may impact their willingness to cooperate with the police for a number of reasons. Direct contact with any criminal justice entity is a strong

contributing factor to how a person perceives that entity, as evidenced by the body of research that exists on that topic in the contexts of both the police and the courts. However, the public does not derive their perceptions about the police and/or the courts entirely based on direct experience, and scholars traditionally credit the media as a primary source for how the public develop opinions about the criminal justice system outside of direct encounters (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011). Indeed, the police often receive public attention via news coverage of court cases, especially regarding high-profile incidents involving the police. How the news (or other media outlets) report on the court's processing of cases may thus shape how people choose to perceive – and then interact with – the police, which is especially relevant for self-initiated requests for police service.

For example, if people do not view the courts as fair, trustworthy, and/or legitimate, they may be less likely to proactively report crime to the police because they know that by providing information to the police, they (and their information) could inevitably end up in the courts (whom they do not perceive favorably). This effect may be particularly prominent in minor cases of crime (e.g., low-level fraud), where reporting crime to the police may be more discretionary and predicated by the anticipation that the courts will be fair and trustworthy in their decision-making. In more serious cases of crime (e.g., assault, robbery), the severity of the crime may leave people with little choice but to report it to the police, regardless of

how they think about the courts. The same logic could apply to requests for assistance by police – where people may not perceive much choice but to cooperate with the officer given the immediate circumstances. We explore all such possibilities as part of the present research.

Data and methods

Participants

We analyze data from 364 adults sampled via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (hereinafter referred to as "MTurk"). MTurk is an online sampling platform that allows participants to self-select into eligible studies and then complete such studies using their personal devices. Although relatively new to the field of criminology, recent research has used this platform to collect data about a variety of different criminal justice topics (e.g., Miethe et al., 2019; Salerno & Sanchez, 2020; Sandrin et al., 2023; Simpson, 2021b). Existing research has found that participants recruited via MTurk are "more demographically diverse than standard Internet samples and significantly more diverse than typical American college samples" (Buhrmester et al., 2011, pg. 4) and provide quality data which "[meets] or [exceeds] the psychometric standards associated with published research" (Buhrmester et al., 2011, pg. 5; also see Casler et al., 2013).

In order to be eligible to participate in the study in which our survey questions were embedded, participants had to be registered on MTurk, at least 18 years of age, and able to speak, read, and write English. Although the entire study averaged between 15 and 20 min, the survey portion assessed here would have been brief in duration for most participants. In return for their participation, participants received \$2.00. All data were collected during 2017 and all procedures were approved by the university research ethics board.

Of our participants, 58% self-identified as female and 42% self-identified as male. Participants reported a mean age of 32 years and self-identified as Asian (7%), Black (10%), Hispanic (8%), White (70%), and other race/ethnicity (5%). Most participants reported no recent contact with police (68%); however, of the participants who reported contact with police, more reported positive contact (26%) than negative contact (4%). Most participants resided in the United States. See Table 1 for the descriptive statistics.

Variables

During the study, participants completed a series of self-report questionnaires that queried their perceptions of courts, perceptions of police, willingness to cooperate with the police, and sociodemographics. All questions, with the exception of the sociodemographics, were assessed via five-point Likert scales, with response options ranging from "Strongly Disagree" (-2) to

Table 1 Descriptive statistics for participants; $N=364$

Variable	%	Mean	Standard deviation
Gender			
Female	58	-	-
Male	42	-	-
Age	-	32	10
Race/Ethnicity			
Asian	7	-	-
Black	10	-	-
Hispanic	8	-	-
White	70	-	-
Other	5	-	-
Participant's Education			
No High School	<1	-	-
High School	6	-	-
Some College	37	-	-
Bachelor's Degree	40	-	-
Master's Degree	14	-	-
Doctoral Degree	3	-	-
Police Contact			
Negative	4	-	-
Positive	26	-	-
Both	2	-	-
None	68	-	-

“Strongly Agree” (2). The summary statistics for our primary variables of interest are presented in Table 2.

Perceptions of courts

Participants were asked to complete two questions regarding their perceptions of courts: (1) “I trust the courts in my community” and (2) “Courts try to be fair when making decisions.”¹ We collapsed the mean of participants’ responses to these two questions to create a composite measure for inclusion in our analyses. This measure exhibits strong reliability by field standards ($\alpha=0.881$). Higher scores on this measure represent more favorable perceptions of courts.

Perceptions of police

Participants’ perceptions of police were subdivided into four categories: procedural justice, trust, satisfaction, and moral obligation to obey. In the context of procedural justice, participants were asked to complete five questions: (1) “Police try to be fair when making decisions,” (2) “Police give people the opportunity to express their views before decisions are made,” (3) “Police listen to people before making decisions,” (4) “Police treat people with dignity and respect,” and (5) “Police are always polite when dealing with people.” These questions represent the four elements of procedural justice and are all consistent with the questions included in related research (e.g., Grant & Pryce, 2020; Mazerolle et al., 2012; Murphy et al., 2014). We collapsed the mean of participants’ responses to these five questions to create a composite measure for inclusion in our analyses.² This measure exhibits strong reliability by field standards ($\alpha=0.885$). Higher scores on this measure represent more favorable perceptions of police procedural justice.

Participants were asked to indicate their level of trust in police via a single question (“I trust the police in my community”). Participants were asked to indicate their level of satisfaction with police via a single question (“I am satisfied with the way police do their job”). Finally, participants were asked to indicate their feelings of moral obligation to obey police via a single question (“I feel a moral obligation to obey the police”). Higher scores on each question represent greater agreement with the statement in each question. We note here that we include these latter variables more for control purposes than

Table 2 Summary statistics for our primary variables of interest

Variable	N	Range	Mean	Standard deviation
Court Perceptions	364	-2 to 2	0.55	1.08
Police Perceptions				
Procedural Justice	364	-2 to 2	0.16	1.00
Trust	364	-2 to 2	0.70	1.24
Satisfaction	364	-2 to 2	0.40	1.25
Moral Obligation to Obey	364	-2 to 2	1.09	1.13
Report Minor Crime	364	-2 to 2	0.68	1.16
Report Major Crime	364	-2 to 2	1.75	0.68
Assist the Police if Asked	364	-2 to 2	1.25	1.00

for substantive purposes.³ Because they are also all only single items, we label them using the associated question wording and assess them in our models individually as opposed to collectively (so not to misrepresent them as more sophisticated measures). Although this approach may deviate from some other perceptual-based research, especially that regarding legitimacy, we note that the primary focus of our research does not regard police perceptions, but rather court perceptions and their relationship with cooperation with police.

Cooperation with police

Participants were asked to complete three questions regarding their willingness to cooperate with the police: (1) “I would call the police to report a minor crime,” (2) “I would call the police to report a major crime,” and (3) “I would willingly assist the police if asked.” It is important to note that we did not define “minor” and “major” crime as part of these survey questions. We recognize that the distinction between these two crime categories is subjective, and therefore we felt that it was more appropriate to allow participants to self-define these categories than to impose strict definitions upon them.⁴

We note that this broad approach accounts for the variability among participants’ individual perceptions of the severity of different crimes yet still allows us to explore the theoretical mechanism of severity. Consistent with this logic, we find that although these two crime reporting variables are correlated ($r=0.406$), nearly one-third of participants reported a difference of two or more points

¹ We labeled this measure, “perceptions of courts,” which – despite being arguably vague – we felt was best suited given that no specific court was referenced in the wording of either question.

² We conducted sensitivity analyses using principal factor analysis to construct this measure, however the substantive conclusions of our work did not change. We thus retained the structure of our measure – which has been employed in related research – for our analyses.

³ Consistent with this logic, excluding all of the police-related predictor variables, or all but the police procedural justice measure, both strengthened the magnitude of the coefficient for our court perception measure and reduced the total amount of variance explained by the model. Including these police-related predictor variables thus helped to ensure that we did not erroneously inflate the effect of participants’ perceptions of courts – which we recognize are related to their perceptions of police for the reasons described in our article – on their willingness to cooperate with the police.

⁴ For example, it could have been problematic to provide vignettes that specify particular crimes given that participants may have perceived the same crime in the same context with different degrees of severity depending upon unobserved factors.

on the five-point scale in their responses to these two questions. For such reason, we assume that major crime is at least perceptually more serious than minor crime. Higher scores on these questions represent greater willingness to cooperate with the police on each of the behaviors measured.

Sociodemographic characteristics

As part of the final questionnaire, participants were queried regarding their sociodemographics. Gender was measured via a single nominal variable. Age was measured via a single continuous variable. Race and ethnicity were measured via two nominal variables that we transformed into five mutually exclusive dummy variables for analytic purposes: (1) Asian, (2) Black, (3) Hispanic, (4) White, and (5) other race.⁵ Participant education was measured via a single ordinal variable with seven response options, ranging from no high school to Doctoral degree. Recent contact with police was measured via two dichotomous variables (positive and negative). For analytic purposes, we transformed these contact questions into four mutually exclusive dummy variables: (1) negative contact, (2) positive contact, (3) both negative and positive contact, and (4) no contact.

Analytic strategy

In order to explore the relationship between participants' perceptions of courts and their willingness to cooperate with the police, we employ a series of ordinary least squares multiple regression models. As part of these models, we include predictor variables for perceptions of courts as well as perceptions of police procedural justice, trust in police, satisfaction with police, and feelings of moral obligation to obey police. In order to help isolate effects, we also include control variables for participant sociodemographics. Although our modeling strategy is consistent for each of our three models, our dependent variable differs by model (i.e., *minor* crime, *major* crime, and *assist the police if asked*). We assess the statistical significance of coefficients at the $p < 0.05$ level.

Before proceeding to our results, we acknowledge that our variables are correlated (see [Appendix](#)) – as would be theoretically expected and consistent with past literature (e.g., see Johnson et al., 2014). Diagnostic analyses, however, indicated no multicollinearity concerns in our models, with variance inflation factors (VIF) of three or less for our key predictor variables and a mean VIF of 1.5 for all variables (which falls below the range of concern by field standards).

⁵ Due to low frequency, participants who self-identified as American Indian and Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, or two or more races were included in the other race/ethnicity category for analytic purposes.

Results

As shown in Table 3, we find several interesting patterns regarding participants' willingness to cooperate with the police. In our first analysis, we find a positive relationship between participants' perceptions of courts and their willingness to report *minor* crime to the police ($b = 0.180$, $p = 0.003$): when participants report more favorable perceptions of courts, they are more willing to report minor crime to the police. In the context of policing variables, we find that trust in police ($b = 0.247$, $p = 0.001$) and feelings of moral obligation to obey police ($b = 0.188$, $p = 0.001$) are both positively related to willingness to report minor crime to the police. Contrary to our theoretical predictions, we find a negative relationship between police procedural justice and willingness to report minor crime to the police ($b = -0.183$, $p = 0.046$). With that being said, this effect barely reaches the threshold for statistical significance, and hence should be interpreted with caution. We find no significant effects for satisfaction with police or any of the sociodemographic variables except gender. Overall, this model explains approximately 30% of the variation in participants' willingness to report minor crime to the police [Adjusted $R^2 = 0.295$, $F(15, 348) = 11.11$, $p < 0.001$].

In our second analysis, we find a positive relationship between participants' perceptions of courts and their willingness to report *major* crime to the police ($b = 0.117$, $p = 0.001$): when participants report more favorable perceptions of courts, they are more willing to report major crime to the police. We find that trust in police ($b = 0.166$, $p < 0.001$) and feelings of moral obligation to obey police ($b = 0.114$, $p < 0.001$) are also both positively related to willingness to report major crime to the police. Perceptions of police procedural justice and satisfaction with police are not significant in this model. In the context of sociodemographics, we find that Black participants ($b = -0.260$, $p = 0.014$) are less willing to report major crime to the police than White participants. We also find that participants with higher education are more willing to report major crime to the police ($b = 0.094$, $p = 0.008$) and that having a negative encounter with the police reduces willingness to report major crime to the police ($b = -0.676$, $p < 0.001$). Overall, this model explains approximately 28% of the variation in participants' willingness to report major crime to the police [Adjusted $R^2 = 0.279$, $F(15, 348) = 10.37$, $p < 0.001$].

Finally, in our third analysis, we find that participants' perceptions of courts are not significantly related to their willingness to *assist the police if asked*, although the effect trends in the same direction as our previous models. In contrast, we find that trust in police ($b = 0.156$, $p = 0.004$) and feelings of moral obligation to obey police ($b = 0.327$, $p < 0.001$) are both positively related to willingness to assist the police if asked. The coefficients for

Table 3 Results from our multiple regression models where y = cooperative behavior

Independent variable	Report minor crime			Report major crime			Assist the police if asked		
	Coefficient	Std. err.	p value	Coefficient	Std. err.	p value	Coefficient	Std. err.	p value
Court Perceptions	0.180	0.060	$p=0.003$	0.117	0.035	$p=0.001$	0.051	0.045	$p=0.250$
Police Perceptions									
Procedural Justice	-0.183	0.091	$p=0.046$	-0.053	0.054	$p=0.331$	-0.012	0.068	$p=0.860$
Trust	0.247	0.071	$p=0.001$	0.166	0.042	$p<0.001$	0.156	0.053	$p=0.004$
Satisfaction	0.096	0.072	$p=0.182$	-0.077	0.042	$p=0.071$	0.100	0.054	$p=0.064$
Moral Obligation to Obey	0.188	0.055	$p=0.001$	0.114	0.032	$p<0.001$	0.327	0.041	$p<0.001$
Age	0.003	0.005	$p=0.518$	-0.004	0.003	$p=0.197$	0.002	0.004	$p=0.672$
Male ^a	-0.274	0.107	$p=0.011$	-0.060	0.063	$p=0.343$	0.078	0.080	$p=0.332$
Race/Ethnicity ^b									
Asian	-0.060	0.205	$p=0.772$	-0.060	0.121	$p=0.623$	0.185	0.154	$p=0.229$
Black	-0.273	0.178	$p=0.126$	-0.260	0.105	$p=0.014$	-0.419	0.133	$p=0.002$
Hispanic	0.182	0.194	$p=0.348$	0.136	0.115	$p=0.235$	-0.184	0.145	$p=0.206$
Other Race	-0.272	0.248	$p=0.273$	0.125	0.147	$p=0.394$	-0.206	0.186	$p=0.267$
Education	0.087	0.059	$p=0.139$	0.094	0.035	$p=0.008$	0.087	0.044	$p=0.049$
Police Contact ^c									
Negative	-0.372	0.285	$p=0.193$	-0.676	0.169	$p<0.001$	-0.344	0.213	$p=0.107$
Positive	0.234	0.123	$p=0.058$	0.043	0.073	$p=0.558$	0.094	0.092	$p=0.308$
Both	0.262	0.386	$p=0.497$	-0.382	0.228	$p=0.095$	-0.568	0.289	$p=0.050$
Constant	-0.137	0.283	$p=0.628$	1.334	0.167	$p<0.001$	0.363	0.211	$p=0.087$
N	364			364			364		
Adjusted R^2	0.295			0.279			0.461		

^a Reference group=female participants

^b Reference group=White participants

^c Reference group=participants with no police contact

police procedural justice and satisfaction with police are not statistically significant. Lastly, we find that Black participants ($b = -0.419$, $p=0.002$) are less willing to assist the police if asked than White participants and participants with higher education are more willing to assist the police if asked ($b=0.087$, $p=0.049$). Overall, this model explains approximately 46% of the variation in participants' willingness to assist the police if asked [Adjusted $R^2=0.461$, $F(15, 348)=21.72$, $p<0.001$].

Discussion

Concerns regarding the criminal justice system remain at the forefront of much public, political, and scholarly discourse. Many of these concerns have been magnified by recent high-profile incidents involving violence by the police and the response to such violence by the courts. As part of the present research, we contribute to this discourse by exploring the relationship between participants' perceptions of courts and their willingness to cooperate with the police. We do so in such a way that untangles the otherwise broad definition of cooperation with police to explore the potential implications of court perceptions for specific cooperative behaviors, including willingness to report minor crime to the police, report major crime to the police, and assist the police if asked.

Overall, we find that participants exhibit generally positive perceptions of both the police and the courts.

We also find that most participants report at least some willingness to cooperate with the police. The nature of the relationship between these variables, however, is not the same for all cooperative behaviors. Consistent with our first prediction, we find that participants' perceptions of courts are more strongly associated with self-initiated requests for police assistance (i.e., reporting crime) than police-initiated requests for assistance (i.e., assisting the police if asked). Given that people have more discretion in their decision to proactively call the police than their decision to reactively assist an officer if asked, this finding makes theoretical sense. For example, if people do not perceive the courts as fair, trustworthy, and/or legitimate, they may be less likely to proactively report crime to the police because their awareness that such involvement with the police could land them in the courtroom. In contrast, if asked to assist the police during a dynamic situation, people may not be afforded the time or opportunity to thoroughly consider these kinds of court perceptions before making their behavioral decision.

Consistent with our second prediction, we find that court perceptions are more strongly associated with participants' willingness to report minor crime to the police than to report major crime to the police (as subjectively defined by participants). This particular finding further reaffirms our theorizing that people may have more variables to consider (and therefore more discretion) when

reporting minor crime to the police, where there is arguably less of a threat to personal safety, than when reporting major crime to the police. Indeed, in serious cases of crime, the severity of the crime may leave people with little option but to report such crime to the police, regardless of how they think about the courts. This logic is supported by our descriptive analyses which suggest that participants are overall more willing to report a major crime to the police than a minor crime.

Our findings exhibit important implications and directions for future research. In terms of implications, our findings add to the scholarly understanding of the relationship between the police and the courts. Previous research has demonstrated how the work of the police may “spill” onto the courts and we now suggest a potential conduit for how the work of the courts may “spill” onto the police. The relationship between the police and the courts may mirror more of a feedback loop than a funnel. Just as the police should be mindful of the effects of their work on the courts, the courts should be cognizant of the effects of their work on people’s engagement with the police. It is possible that the court’s treatment of people, decisions to approve police requests, and processing of police-submitted information may influence people’s willingness to engage with the police about crime-related matters that could eventually reach the courts.

Future work may wish to consider interventions that target the criminal justice system in its entirety as opposed to bifurcating it into individual streams of interventions. For example, by enhancing the police’s handling of particular sets of cases, and the courts’ receptivity to such cases, people may perceive the efficacy of the police and the courts as well as treatment by both more favorably. A similar logic could also be made for corrections, which was outside the scope of the present research, but should be examined in future work. A total system approach may present both tangible and perceptual benefits for the criminal justice system.

In terms of future research, our work highlights gaps in the current literature as well as serves as a catalyst for follow-up studies. Compared to police perceptions, little scholarly attention has been paid to the complexity and nuance of court perceptions. Courts and court officials are diverse in function and form. It is imperative that future research understand how people think about the courts in all of their varieties and the mechanisms that may drive such opinions. For example, how do public perceptions vary between criminal and civil courts? How does media coverage of court processes and/or court outcomes impact public perceptions of courts? Constructing and validating scales specifically related to public perceptions of court types, court processes, and court officials could be particularly fruitful on this front.

In terms of follow-up studies, the findings from our work suggest that future research should consider the nuance among measures of cooperation with police. Previous research has often treated cooperation with police as an aggregate measure. Parsing cooperation with police into specific behaviors may provide additional insight into the mechanisms that link perception with cooperation. As observed in the present research, defining cooperation as the likelihood of assisting the police if asked versus reporting crime – and reporting minor crime versus major crime – can exhibit implications for inference. People may be more attuned to perceptual variables when deciding to proactively report crime, generally, and report minor crime, specifically, than when deciding to reactively assist the police if asked.

Limitations

The present research exhibits three primary limitations. First, our analyses used cross-sectional data, and therefore we recognize that there could be bidirectionality in our findings. For example, we could not establish whether participants’ experiences with the police came before or after their experiences with the courts. The relationships between criminal justice branches may be fluid and dynamic – and it is for these very reasons that we suggest court perceptions may relate to cooperation with police. Future research would benefit from longitudinal analyses that would allow for the identification of temporal ordering and potential testing of causality (which we could not do).

Second, we could not confirm the source of our participants’ perceptions. Most of our participants reported not having any recent contact with the police, which suggests that they would not likely have had much contact with criminal courts, unless in the case of jury duty or other activities where they were not required to directly interact with the police. It is also possible that participants may have had experience with non-criminal courts and/or vicarious experience with the courts (including via media), but we could not assess that as we did not ask participants about their prior court contact. To be sure, this limitation could apply to participants’ perceptions of police as well, although we had more measures related to the police than the courts.

Third, our measure of court perceptions was constructed using data from only two survey items. It is possible that had more items been included in this measure, we may have observed more variance among participants’ perceptions of courts. More items would also have allowed us to better untangle the nuance that may exist regarding participants’ perceptions of different types of courts, court processes, and court officials. For example, participants may have felt differently about local community courts versus the supreme court. Participants

may have also had different opinions about criminal courts versus civil courts and/or prosecutors versus judges. Given the vague wording of our survey items, we unfortunately could not assess questions of this nature. Nonetheless, we believe that our items were theoretically-informed and helpful for achieving the exploratory goal of our research.

Conclusion

The findings from the present research supplement existing research regarding people’s perceptions of – and engagement with – the criminal justice system. Our results reveal that participants generally exhibit positive perceptions of both the police and the courts. Our results also reveal that participants’ perceptions of courts are significantly related to their willingness to report crime to the police. In this respect, negative perceptions of courts could potentially manifest via reduced cooperation with police. Without awareness of this possible effect, there exists the risk that one could assume that the cooperation dilemma lies exclusively with the police, when the issue could be linked at least partially to the courts. Given the importance of public cooperation for effective and democratic policing, this subject warrants continued attention.

The criminal justice system may represent more of a feedback loop than a funnel: the police and the courts influence each other and the work of one may implicate itself in the work of the other. Conceptualizing the relationship between these branches as a feedback loop is useful for understanding how people’s perceptions of courts may influence policing outcomes and vice versa as well as for crafting interventions that target joint behaviors like cooperation. The time is ripe for future research to further explore the relationship between the police and the courts.

Appendix

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Report minor crime	1							
2. Report major crime	0.406	1						
3. Assist the police if asked	0.463	0.542	1					
4. Court perceptions	0.384	0.368	0.411	1				
5. Police perceptions: Procedural justice	0.348	0.318	0.497	0.518	1			
6. Police perceptions: Trust	0.468	0.420	0.552	0.540	0.744	1		

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
7. Police perceptions: Satisfaction	0.422	0.298	0.531	0.510	0.766	0.746	1	
8. Police perceptions: Moral obligation to obey	0.404	0.368	0.576	0.356	0.479	0.492	0.490	1

All correlations are statistically significant at the $p < 0.001$ level

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