

# **Evaluating the effects of experiences with the police and police legitimacy on criminal behaviour**

## **Aim**

To assess the theoretical causal pathways that link experiences with the police, legitimacy beliefs, and criminal behaviours.

## **Background**

A lack of police legitimacy has been linked to problems within communities across the world, including a lack of cooperation with the police, interpersonal violence, and even violent extremism. The scientific debate tends to focus on what *police* can do to improve relations in the community and thus prevent crime. Specifically, procedural justice theory proposes that rule-breaking and criminal behaviour are not motivated by the threat of punishment (i.e. deterrence), but by the belief that authorities are legitimate in their use of power over citizens. When people perceive the police to be legitimate, they are less likely to break the law because they accept that it is the right thing to do. However, some critics argue that existing research does not adequately establish that police actions alone can lead to meaningful and lasting changes in public attitudes and behaviours (Nagin & Telep, 2017).

More specifically, existing research on police legitimacy and criminal or violent outcomes is limited in at least two respects. First, studies rarely control for alternative explanations of criminal behaviour. It is important to evaluate theoretically whether procedural justice theory contradicts, extends, or ignores criminological theories such as social control, neutralization, or strain. Relatedly, we must clearly specify and test the mechanisms by which losses of police legitimacy lead to different criminal outcomes. The second limitation relates to the strength of causal evidence for this relationship. A reliance on cross-sectional surveys means there is little convincing evidence that experiences and changes in police legitimacy have any *causal* effects on criminal outcomes. An additional consequence is that the causal order and effect of experiences with the police on legitimacy and crime cannot be adequately determined (Trinkner et al., 2019).

This project is part of a the NWO Vidi project that aims to evaluate the effect of experiences with the police on legitimacy and crime. The PhD candidate will focus on examining to what extent experiences with police and changes in perceived police legitimacy cause changes in criminal and violent behaviours. This project will focus particularly on assessing the theoretical mechanisms and pathways linking experiences, legitimacy beliefs, and behaviours. In order to assess causal pathways, this project will utilize analytical techniques that can estimate causal order and effects using observational data, such as propensity score analysis.

This project will involve close collaboration with the Netherlands Institute for the Study of Crime and Law Enforcement [NSCR] within the programme ‘What works in policing: Towards evidence-based policing in the Netherlands.’ This may involve visiting one day per week or travelling occasionally to the NSCR in Amsterdam.

## **Research design**

This project uses a mix of secondary longitudinal survey and new experience sampling data. Secondary longitudinal data allows one to assess developmental sources and processes that influence changes in legitimacy beliefs and crime, and the experience sampling data allows for the assessment of situational, short-term determinants of attitudes and behaviours. Secondary sources include four longitudinal surveys conducted in the Netherlands, Switzerland, Scotland, and the United States that sample diverse populations of adolescents, adults, and offenders. The experience sampling data will capture “real time” experiences, emotions, and behavioural

reactions, allowing one to answer questions about situational, and short-term influences of legitimacy beliefs on criminal/rule-breaking behaviours.

### **Literature**

Nagin, D.S. & Telep, C.W. (2017). Procedural justice and legal compliance. *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, 13, 1.1-1.24.

Trinkner, R., Mays, R.D., Cohn, E.S., van Gundy, K.T., Rebellon, C.J. (2019). Turning the corner on procedural justice theory: exploring reverse causality with an experimental vignette in a longitudinal survey. *Journal of Experimental Criminology* [Online first].

### **Project initiators**

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### **Location**

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