

Tom Tyler. Police and community relations: Fostering a shared vision for safe communities by applying principles from preventive science.

The issues dominating the high visibility of policing in America in the last decade have not been about crime control. The public is not generally critiquing the police because they believe that the police cannot or have not controlled crime.

It is hard to see why crime control would be an issue since crime in America today is at historically low levels. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics the violent crime rate in 2015 is 23% what it was in 1993; while the property crime rate is 32%. These declines are widespread and sustained. Even a city like Chicago which is in the news due to gang shootings has much lower crime rates than in the past.

Instead of focusing on crime, I believe that the current era of low crime provides an opportunity to reexamine the role that we want the police to play in our democratic society. In particular, it provides an opportunity to addresses issues of popular legitimacy.

What is popular legitimacy? It is the belief that the police are entitled to make decisions about how to manage crime in American communities. In the popular media it is often referred to as trust in the police.

A beginning point for the discussion is noting that declining crime rates have not influenced public trust in the police. In 1993 52% of Americans indicated that they trust the police and in 2016 the percentage was 56%. Since the police have generally defined their mission as crime control it is striking that declining crime has not enhanced popular legitimacy.

When we focus on popular legitimacy the key question is whether we can identify a vision for communities that leads to both public safety and trust in the police.

The first question is why there is a disjuncture between crime rates and popular legitimacy? Police leaders have generally assumed that the public primarily held them to account for lowering the rate of crime. They have been surprised that lower crime rates have not led to heightened public support.

Research explains this finding by showing that the rate of crime and even evaluations of police effectiveness in controlling crime are not primary factors shaping public trust. Consistent with that finding the widespread public discontent about the police we have seen in recent years has not been motivated by public concerns about the ability of the police to control crime.

What does produce public trust? The public focuses upon the fairness of the manner in which police officers exercise their authority. This is called procedural justice.

It refers to four aspects of the exercise of police authority:

First, voice. Whether the police allow people to express their views or tell their side of the story when making decisions.

Second, neutrality. Whether the police are viewed as acting in a transparent and impartial matter by making decisions based upon facts, not prejudices, and by explaining what their policies are and how they are being applied.

Third, respect. Whether the police treat people with respect. This includes respect for people's rights as citizens and for their dignity as people. People care about whether the police treat them in ways that communicate that they are either good citizens or conversely, as seen as suspects, deviants or marginal members of their community.

Fourth, trust. It is important to people to feel that the police are motivated to do what is good for the people in their community. They want to believe that the police are sincere and benevolent, focused on the needs and concerns of the public, and willing to acknowledge and affirm people's concerns.

Why do all of these things matter? They are the primary factors shaping police legitimacy. And police legitimacy influences a set of important public behaviors.

The first important behavior is following the law. Studies show that when people see the police, the courts and the law as more legitimate they are less likely to break the law. Hence trust in the police and controlling crime are not in conflict. Building popular legitimacy is a crime control strategy.

Further, studies demonstrate that legitimacy encourages cooperation. It first motivates people to follow the law even when the police are not around which lowers pressure on the police to observe and punish crime to deter future crime. People accept and defer to law rather than complying because they fear punishment. Their actions are more voluntary and consensual. Trust first promotes community safety by lowering the number of crimes.

When most of the people in a community follow the law because of their trust in legal authorities this frees up the police to focus their efforts upon high crime areas or high risk people. It is such focused deterrence strategies that are shown by research to be the most effective use of police resources in fighting crime.

Second, evidence shows that legitimacy motivates cooperation. Trusting people are more willing to report crime and criminals; to be a witness or juror and work on community efforts like block watch. The lack of public cooperation is a recurrent frustration for the police and a common report of police leaders is that high trust reduces crime because it heightens clearance rates due to greater public cooperation with the police. This is a second way that legitimacy promotes community safety.

Perhaps most importantly, trust based policing provides a long-term strategy for managing problems of crime. It does so in two ways. First, community development. Police leaders often say that you cannot arrest your way out of crime. To deal with crime in the long-term you need to promote economic and social development. Consistent with this is the finding that investments in good jobs are a more economically efficient way to lower the crime rate than is an equal investment in more police officers. In addition, studies indicate that when the public trusts the police to behave justly this creates a climate of reassurance which encourages identification with one's community and engagement within it. People show, eat and otherwise participate more in communities when they believe that the police treat members of the community fairly.

Second, trust-based policing reverses the damaging effects of aggressive force based policing on people. Research shows that contact with the police is generally damaging, especially to young people. Degree of contact is directly related to an enhanced future likelihood of criminal behavior. Why? One reason is that such contact undermines mental health. It is directly connected to both increased PTSD and higher everyday stress. People who have greater mental health issues are less able to engage productively with others and in the case of adolescents are less able to manage the pathways to normal adulthood.

This also illustrates a crucial difference between currently popular focused deterrence approaches and trust based policing. When the police concentrate themselves in high crime areas or toward the surveillance of high risk people they lower the crime rate in the short term. If the police are present crime goes down. But this is not a long term strategy because it requires the ongoing presence of the police. Trust based policing is designed to increase the safety of communities by first encouraging people to be motivated to obey the law because it is legitimate and second to engage in the type of economic and social activities which lift their community out of poverty and reduce the motivations to commit crimes.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that encouraging trust based policing is not only a win for people in policed communities. It is also beneficial to police officers. Policing is a stressful and dangerous job. Police officers have high levels of physical illness and stress. They have high rates of alcoholism; divorce and other lifestyle problems, including suicide. In addition, the police face the risk of injury and even death when dealing with the public. It is important to emphasize that the adoption of trust-based policing strategies would help to address both of these issues.

In the case of stress officer job stress comes from dealing with hostility and anger from the community and with internal department stresses. Trust-based policing deescalates public hostility and anger, leading to a more collaborative style of policing. For similar reasons it lowers the likelihood of conflict escalation into incidents in which either officers or members of the public are injured or killed.

An additional and important research finding is that most officers experience their own departments as lacking procedural justice. This is shown to be directly related to officer stress, and fairer departments promote both better job performance and higher levels of officer well-being. Officers who experience internal department fairness are also shown to treat members of the public more fairly when out on the street.

Hence, research points to a clear strategy forward for policing in the 21st century. That strategy is shown by research to be effective and to facilitate attaining the goals of both the public and the police. It is possible for the police to have both public safety and high popular legitimacy. The route to that end is trust-based policing.