Negative publicity reduces police motivation

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Recent negative publicity surrounding police after several shootings of unarmed civilians appears to have diminished some officers' motivation to be in law enforcement but does not decrease willingness to carry out their duties, according to a study published by the American Psychological Association.

"It appears that officers in our sample have been affected by negative 'Ferguson-type' press," said lead author Scott Wolfe, PhD, of the University of South Carolina. "Some officers indicated being less motivated to perform their duties." The study appears in the journal *Law and Human Behavior*.

The research is notable in light of recent comments by FBI Director James Comey attributing the rise in homicides in some cities to police apprehension at the prospect of cellphone videos and the possibility that such recordings could go viral. As a result, he said, some police may be reluctant to engage in face-to-face encounters in their communities. The White House has disagreed with this assessment.

This so-called "Ferguson effect" refers to the hypothesis that recent increases in violent crime can be ascribed to negative publicity associated with police actions, such as the August 2014 shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and the subsequent riots. While there is no empirical evidence yet to support the "Ferguson effect," according to Wolfe, he and co-author Justin Nix, PhD, of the University of Louisville, examined whether the negative publicity surrounding these events might have had a negative effect on police willingness to engage

in community partnerships, where police work together with residents to identify local problems and develop strategies to combat them.

The study used data from a February 2015 survey of 567 deputies at a mid-sized sheriff's department in the Southeastern United States serving 393,000 residents. All sworn deputies were asked to complete a questionnaire on a password-protected website and were guaranteed anonymity. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed that negative publicity during the prior six months made them less motivated at work or caused them to be less proactive on the job than they were in the past.

"The results indicate that there appears to be a relationship between reduced motivation as a result of negative publicity and less willingness to work directly with community members to solve problems," said Wolfe. However, this effect appears to be spurious once participants' perceptions of departmental fairness and confidence in their authority as a police officer were taken into account.

Wolfe suggested that the reduced motivation attributable to the negative publicity may be counteracted if supervisors ensure fairness among subordinates.

"Little actions can go a long way. Fair treatment from supervisors sends the message to officers that 'we are here for you' regardless of how much the public or the media try to sully law enforcement," said Wolfe. "In addition, we saw that confidence in one's authority as a police officer appears to protect against the negative effects of media coverage of high profile incidents like Ferguson."

"This is important because it can help sustain community engagement, which ultimately will help reduce crime in the community," he added.

More information: "The Alleged 'Ferguson Effect' and Police Willingness to Engage in Community Partnership," by Scott Wolfe, PhD, University of South Carolina, and Justin Nix, PhD, University of Louisville, *Law and Human Behavior*, published online Oct. 12, 2015.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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