

# Keeping the code: How cultural beliefs affect police, court decisions

April 6 2017, by Kara Irby

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LL Cool J's 1991 rap lyrics in his song "Mama Said Knock You Out" are about defending yourself and making sure you are not messed with. Florida State University researchers have found that when individuals adopt this outlook—referred to as a "code of the street"—it can increase their probability of arrest or conviction.

The researchers found that individuals were more likely to be arrested and convicted when they adopted the [code](#) of the street or lived in areas where this belief system was more entrenched in the community. The FSU team included Daniel Mears, the Mark C. Stafford Professor of Criminology, Eric Stewart, the Ronald L. Simons Professor of Criminology, and Associate Professor Patricia Warren. Their findings are published in *Justice Quarterly*.

"You can find a 'street code' culture, or something analogous to it, in other parts of the world," Mears said. "In part, it says that if your toughness is questioned or if you feel threatened, it's almost mandatory that you react with violence. The reaction doesn't have to be physical; it can also be verbal threats. Either way, the response signals that you are not to be messed with."

The team also found that the two effects amplified one another.

"In the study, individuals who adhered to the code more strongly and who lived in an area where the code of the street was more strongly embraced were disproportionately more likely to be arrested and

convicted," Mears said.

In explaining the results, the researchers discussed how "cognitive heuristics" may play a role in [law enforcement](#) and prosecutorial or judicial decision making. These individuals must make rapid-fire decisions and may rely on what amount to "mental shortcuts" to interpret behavior and how to respond to it.

Prior criminal activity and evidence of residence in a disadvantaged, predominantly minority or high-crime area may lead officers or court actors to assume that an individual is criminal. Race, in particular, may play a role in contributing to such assumptions.

"If police or court actors rely on cognitive heuristics toward African Americans, they may look for cues that can tip them off that an individual is guilty of a crime. It may be that when individuals adopt the code of the street or live in areas where the street code is more common, the police may consciously or unconsciously use this information to determine that they are criminals," Mears said.

The researchers used the Family and Community Health study, which included a survey of black families in Iowa and Georgia. Participants in the survey were recruited from areas with black populations of 10 percent or more and where 10 percent or more of those residents were living below the poverty line. Data was collected several times from 1998 to 2011.

Participants were asked about their friends and how many of them engaged in criminal behavior during the previous year. For instance, one question asked how many close friends attacked someone with a weapon with the idea of hurting them. Other questions were geared toward the individual such as if they preferred doing something dangerous rather than sitting quietly.

Neighborhood disadvantage was also considered. Using Census data, the researchers controlled for variables such as people on public assistance, unemployment and households below the poverty level. Even after controlling for factors that might have influenced the estimated effects, the team still found that the street code effect persisted, suggesting that it, in fact, may play a role in the arrest and conviction of those who adhere to the code of the [street](#) or who reside in areas where it is prevalent.

Overall, the paper stressed the importance of focusing more systematically on culture in the understanding of law enforcement and court decisions. Mears said the study should be repeated to consider the culture in police departments and courts to see how it may influence the likelihood of arrest, conviction or sentencing for certain groups.

Mears, Stewart and Warren partnered in this research with Professor Ron Simons of the University of Georgia.

**More information:** Daniel P. Mears et al. Culture and Formal Social Control: The Effect of the Code of the Street on Police and Court Decision-making, *Justice Quarterly* (2016). [DOI: 10.1080/07418825.2016.1149599](#)

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