

Police less proactive after negative public scrutiny, study says

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Public safety officers know that their profession could draw them into the line of fire at any moment, as it did recently for six officers wounded in a shooting standoff in Philadelphia.

Yet, in an age when cellphone videos of [police](#) misconduct can go viral, the new social phenomenon of "cop shaming" is causing performance

problems in [police departments](#) nationwide.

According to new research from the McCombs School of Business at The University of Texas at Austin, published in *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, [public safety](#) officers' proactivity declines when they perceive negative public scrutiny, even if they are deeply motivated to help people.

The study, " 'I Want to Serve but the Public Does Not Understand:' Prosocial Motivation, Image Discrepancies, and Proactivity in Public Safety," by McCombs Assistant Professor of Management Shefali V. Patil and R. David Lebel from the University of Pittsburgh, found that officers are less likely to proactively build relationships with [community members](#) and help solve their problems if they feel that the public does not understand the difficulties of their [jobs](#).

"In the vast majority of jobs, it is really difficult for other people outside to understand your job, but people don't realize how much this misunderstanding can actually influence the behavior of police officers," Patil said.

The researchers asked 183 police officers across six agencies and 238 firefighters across eight stations in the southern United States about whether they believed the public understood the difficulties of their jobs. The researchers also surveyed the officers' supervisors about their proactivity.

The police officers and firefighters who said the public did not understand their jobs were significantly less likely to be rated as proactive by their supervisors, even if their reason for doing their jobs is to help others.

"When proactive officers see something that's happening in a local

neighborhood, they get out of the patrol car and go to help somebody even though they don't need to and nobody's actually watching them," Patil said. "But being less proactive would mean taking a less active role while on a shift and basically only doing what your boss tells you."

Patil said that figuring out how to improve public perception is key to healing this rift. Officers who feel that the public respects and appreciates the difficulties and dangers of their profession are much more motivated to interact in positive ways with the people they serve.

"Our research is trying to show how important it is for us to take the next step to try to figure out how we can actually change the public image of law enforcement officers," she said. "It's also helping [police officers](#) believe that the public truly cares, and it's just not lip service."

More information: Shefali V. Patil et al, "I want to serve but the public does not understand:" Prosocial motivation, image discrepancies, and proactivity in public safety, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.obhdp.2019.07.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2019.07.002)

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