

Study finds community-oriented policing improves attitudes toward police

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Brief, friendly door-to-door visits by uniformed police officers substantially improve people's attitudes toward the police and increase their trust in law enforcement, according to a new study of community-oriented policing in New Haven.

The study, published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of*

Sciences, is the first randomized, controlled field experiment to test the effects of community-oriented policing on people's opinions of their local [police](#). The researchers found that a single, positive, nonenforcement-related encounter enhanced the legitimacy of police officers and increased people's willingness to cooperate with the police.

The positive effects of the unannounced door-to-door visits were durable as residents continued to report improved attitudes toward police 21 days after the initial encounters, according to the study, which was conducted in partnership with the New Haven Police Department. The researchers found that the visits were effective across racial and [ethnic groups](#) and that the long-term positive effects were strongest among non-white residents and people who held negative views of the police prior to the intervention.

"Policy makers promote community-oriented policing as a means to build trust between police officers and the communities they serve, but there has been little evidence on whether the nonenforcement interactions at the heart of community policing actually cause people to view the police differently," said Kyle Peyton, a Ph.D. candidate in political science at Yale University and lead author of the study. "We found that a single, positive nonenforcement interaction with a police officer improved residents' attitudes toward police, including perceived legitimacy and willingness to cooperate."

In response to nationwide unrest following the fatal shooting of Michael Brown by a [police officer](#) in Ferguson, Missouri, the Obama administration established the President's Task Force on 21st-Century Policing to study ways to improve police-community relations throughout the country. In its May 2015 final report, the committee emphasized the need to adopt community-oriented policing—a [law-enforcement](#) strategy that focuses on positive, non-punitive, and nonenforcement contact with the public as a means to build trust and

promote safety.

The researchers initially mailed surveys to New Haven residents containing questions about policing combined with unrelated queries concerning city government, local politics, and national politics. Of the people contacted by mail, 2013 individuals in 1,852 households completed the survey and provided contact information to participate in follow-up surveys.

The researchers assigned 926 households (1,007 individuals) to a treatment group, which received the community-policing visits, and 926 households (1,006 individuals) to a control group that was not visited. Of the treatment group, 412 people engaged with police officers during an announced visit to their homes in which the officers introduced themselves, solicited feedback, and provided personalized business cards with their work cell-phone number. Following the visits, all 2,013 people who participated in the original survey were invited via email to participate in two follow-up surveys that occurred 3 and 21 days after the visits.

Those surveys measured people's attitudes in four categories: legitimacy, perceived effectiveness, cooperation, and compliance. In both follow-up surveys, the positive effects of the door-to-door visits were evident across all four categories and the strongest effects were in legitimacy and perceptions of police effectiveness, according to the study. The researchers also found the encounters reduced negative beliefs about police (e.g. they are "cold-hearted") and increased support for a policy to hire more patrol officers through a 10% funding increase to the police department.

"We're grateful to the New Haven Police Department for partnering with us to conduct this study," said Peyton, a graduate resident in Yale's Institution for Social and Policy Studies (ISPS). "We hope these findings

prove useful to police departments across the country as they consider adopting community-oriented approaches like the ones in New Haven to build trust, particularly in communities where police-community relations have been damaged by longstanding conflict and distrust."

Michael Sierra-Arévalo, assistant professor in the Rutgers School of Criminal Justice and a co-author of the study, emphasized that the study's findings should not be interpreted as a wholesale solution to persistent problems in policing.

"It would be a mistake to interpret our study as having found some magic solution to distrust in police that is often rooted in a history of mistreatment," Sierra-Arévalo said. "Positive, respectful police-community interaction should be the norm in all police departments; but community policing isn't going to solve police brutality or a lack of police accountability. Those problems demand their own attention and their own solutions."

More information: Kyle Peyton et al., "A field experiment on community policing and police legitimacy," *PNAS* (2019).

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