

Getting to know local cops could reduce crime rates

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Providing residents with information about their neighborhood police officers may reduce crime rates, suggests a *Nature* paper. The combined results from laboratory and field studies suggest that our sense of

anonymity depends not only on what people know about us, but also on what we know about them.

People often assume that their [social ties](#) with others are symmetrical, but that is not always the case. Anuj Shah and Michael LaForest use standard lab-based psychological studies to show that learning more about others might make us believe they know more about us, too. We might feel less anonymous, and believe that our thoughts and behaviors could seem more obvious to others than they actually are. Previous research suggests that perceived anonymity can increase dishonest or harmful behavior, but if people believe that others know more about them, and are more attuned to their actions, this could reduce some negative behavioral consequences of anonymity.

To understand how the social asymmetries that they found in the lab might affect perceptions and actions, the authors selected 69 public housing developments in New York City. Thirty-nine of these were provided with [information](#) about neighborhood police officers (such as their favorite food, [sports teams](#) and hobbies); the remaining 30 were used as a control, and not provided with any interventions. They then surveyed 1,858 residents to assess their perceptions of what officers knew about them, and how likely they thought it was that an officer would know whether they committed a crime. For the first three months after the intervention, the authors estimated an approximately 5–7% reduction in crime in the neighborhoods that received the information relative to those that did not, a similar reduction to that of increasing police presence in a given area.

The authors suggest that residents who had more information about local officers may have believed officers would be more aware of their [illegal activity](#), therefore reducing their criminal behavior. This could help to explain why door-to-door visits from officers are more effective at reducing crime than other components of community policing, such as

neighborhood watches or storefront officers. Although broader reforms are necessary to reduce disparities and increase trust in policing, one way to reduce [crime](#) could be to provide the community with more information about neighborhood officers, the authors argue.

More information: Anuj K. Shah et al, Knowledge about others reduces one's own sense of anonymity, *Nature* (2022). [DOI: 10.1038/s41586-022-04452-3](#)

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