

Researcher finds police killings can discourage engagement with local government

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Following police killings, residents of the surrounding community are less likely to engage with their local government, according to a new

study co-authored by a University of Massachusetts Amherst researcher.

The [findings](#), published in the *Policy Studies Journal*, highlight the complex relationship between policing and [civic participation](#) and underscore how the actions of one government unit can have spillover effects on other public services.

Kelsey Shoub, assistant professor of public policy at UMass Amherst, and Cody A. Drolc, assistant professor of political science at the University of South Carolina, analyzed administrative data from the City of Los Angeles to find communities that experienced a police killing made fewer requests for non-emergency services using the city's 311 hotline and internet portal, which allows citizens to report issues ranging from potholes to graffiti.

Using a national survey experiment, the study also found that respondents who read a hypothetical news report about a local police-involved death would be less likely to contact the police, compared with those who read other news coverage.

"The [local community](#) may go quiet after a police killing—and that's not a good thing," Shoub says. "Law enforcement actions extend beyond direct interactions with police and reverberate throughout communities. Officials need to collaborate between their agencies to overcome the tendency of citizens to disengage following a traumatic event."

Using the Los Angeles Times database of police killings and data published by the city from 2016 through 2020, Shoub and Drolc found that 311 requests for city services declined by an average of 14% during the same week of a police killing within one mile of the scene. However, they found no meaningful change in the number of 911 calls using the same criteria.

"We think this indicates that the relationship between the public and the police is already so bad in certain areas of L.A. that people are already contacting police at the lowest rates possible—only when they have no other choice, which we believe is why 911 calls didn't decline following a police killing," Shoub explains.

For a broader view, Shoub and Drolc designed and fielded a national survey experiment of 2,037 U.S. adults who were asked to read one of three randomly assigned hypothetical news reports about a police killing, a police food drive or a control story about an animal shelter encouraging residents not to adopt a rabbit for Easter.

The experiment found that respondents who were assigned the article about the police killing were less likely to say they would contact the police for help, viewing the local government as less representative and trustworthy.

The study follows [research](#) published by Shoub in 2023 showing a higher rate of voting following [police](#) killings.

"Voting can be seen as taking hold of and exercising your voice," Shoub says. "Whereas this study of engagement is based on the premise that government is there to help and, at the bare minimum, won't hurt you."

More information: Cody A. Drolc et al, The particular and diffuse effects of negative interactions on participation: Evidence from responses to police killings, *Policy Studies Journal* (2024). [DOI: 10.1111/psj.12541](https://doi.org/10.1111/psj.12541)

Provided by University of Massachusetts Amherst

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