

Perceptions of police using PPE during the pandemic

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A Simon Fraser University study on public perceptions of police officers wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) during the current pandemic finds that most PPE renders positive perceptions of police, while some equipment, including full-face respirator masks, may be viewed more negatively. The research was published January 9 in the *Journal of Experimental Criminology*.

Led by SFU criminology assistant professor Rylan Simpson and MA student Ryan Sandrin, the online experimental study drew on a sample of 117 participants residing in North America. The participants were randomly assigned to read one of three fictitious news articles that were either pro-PPE (highlighting [health benefits](#)), neutral or anti-PPE (lacking health benefits). Participants were then asked to rate 12 images of a uniformed male officer wearing various types of PPE alone, in combination or without any PPE.

The PPE surveyed include a surgical mask, an N95 mask, a full-face respirator mask, goggles, a

[face shield](#) and single-use medical gloves. The researchers note that some of these items of PPE (such as full-face respirator [masks](#), face shields and gloves) have been traditionally associated with negative messaging when used by police (including hostility and militarization).

"Seeing [police officers](#) routinely use what has traditionally been medical equipment is both novel and important for functionality and perception," says Simpson.

"Historically, we have seen police use full-face respirator masks and face shields during public disorder situations where tear gas and/or other chemical agents are deployed. Now, we are seeing police use this equipment in response to situations where carriers of COVID-19 may be present," he says.

The researchers found that most types of PPE did have an impact on perception. For example, wearing either a face shield, [surgical mask](#) or N95 mask enhanced perceptions of officer accountability and professionalism.

Full-face respiratory masks had more mixed results. While study participants perceived the officer wearing a full-face respirator mask as having greater accountability and professionalism, some felt it was more intimidating. For participants who read the anti-PPE article, using a full-face respirator mask also amplified perceptions of aggression and reduced perceptions of approachability and friendliness.

Study authors note that the Vancouver Police Department has supplied their officers with gloves and personally-outfitted respiratory masks and recommend their use whenever applicable. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has also recommended that officers use eye protection, such as face shields and goggles, to protect themselves from virus exposure.

More information: Rylan Simpson et al, The use of personal protective equipment (PPE) by police during a public health crisis: An experimental test of public perception, *Journal of Experimental Criminology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1007/s11292-020-09451-w](#)

Provided by Simon Fraser University

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