



The code of the street and cooperation with the police: Do codes of violence, procedural injustice, and police ineffectiveness discourage reporting violent victimization to the police?

[Hyounggon Kwak](#)^a , [Rick Dierenfeldt](#)^b  , [Susan McNeeley](#)^c 

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2018.11.001> 

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Abstract

Purpose

Few quantitative studies have tested [Anderson's \(1999\)](#) suggestion that reliance on codes of violence and mistrust in the police reduce the likelihood of cooperating with the police after being victimized. We examine whether perceived codes of violence, perceived police effectiveness, and perceived procedural injustice influence the decision to report crime to the police. We also examine whether these relationships interact with individual or situational characteristics.

Methods

This study applies binary logistic regression to a sample of 687 [victims of violence](#) from the Seattle Neighborhoods and Crime Survey.

Results

The results indicated that procedural injustice had significant effects on crime reporting, though this relationship was conditioned by victim injury. Codes of violence and police effectiveness were related to crime reporting, but only among Black crime victims.

Conclusions

Taken together, the results underscore the importance of police-community relations, as poor perceptions of the police and reliance on oneself for protection and justice reduce cooperation with the police, especially

Introduction

Public cooperation with police is imperative: citizens act as the eyes and ears of law enforcement (Bennett & Wiegand, 1994; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1988). Victim reporting is a crucial form of public cooperation in modern policing, as it is the primary resource that brings crimes to the attention of the police (Bennett & Wiegand, 1994). However, a substantial number of violent incidents are not known by law enforcement (Baumer, 2002; Goudriaan, Lynch, & Nieuwbeerta, 2004). For example, according to the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), approximately 52% of all violent victimizations were not reported to the police between 2006 and 2010 (Langton, Berzofsky, Krebs, & Smiley-McDonald, 2012). Victims' unwillingness to notify the police may result in failure to arrest perpetrators and increased violence in the community (Kirk & Papachristos, 2011; Skogan, 1984). Thus, it is essential to identify factors that affect victims' decisions to report.

Elijah Anderson's *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City* (1999), in addition to outlining a popular explanation of violent offending, describes poor relationships between the police and residents of disadvantaged communities. In particular, high violence, racial discrimination, and mistreatment by the police lead to a reliance on violence to solve problems and a lack of confidence in and cooperation with police. Accordingly, a limited number of qualitative studies suggest that perceived entrenchment of the code negatively influences crime reporting (Clayman & Skinns, 2012; Rosenfeld, Jacobs, & Wright, 2003). Relatedly, prior research has shown that neighborhood structural characteristics such as disadvantage affect victims' decisions to report (Baumer, 2002; Goudriaan & Nieuwbeerta, 2006). However, quantitative studies have not explored how the existence of codes of violence in the community affect crime reporting.

While not designed to study the code of the street, the policing literature is in line with Anderson's observations. Procedural justice – defined by Sunshine and Tyler (2003) as citizens' judgment as to whether they are treated fairly by the police and police decisions are made objectively – affects citizens' willingness to cooperate with the police (Carr, Napolitano, & Keating, 2007; Goudriaan et al., 2004; Tankebe, 2013; Tyler & Fagan, 2008), as do factors related to police effectiveness such as fear of crime (Kochel, 2016; Kochel, Park, & Mastrofski, 2013; Tankebe, 2009). Yet, much of this work has been limited to citizens' *intentions* to report crime and *willingness* to cooperate with the police (Khondaker, Wu, & Lambert, 2017; Skogan, 1984). Largely absent from this research has been an explicit focus on victims' *actual* reporting behavior (Tankebe, 2013; Wolfe, Nix, Kaminski, & Rojek, 2016).

Using a subsample of the Seattle Neighborhoods and Crime Survey (SNCS), we test Anderson's (1999) hypothesis that factors associated with the street code – perceived codes of violence, police ineffectiveness, and procedural injustice – influence decisions to report victimization to the police. As such, this study is the first quantitative examination of the relationship between codes of violence like those described by Anderson (1999) and crime reporting. In addition, we contribute to the code of the street literature more broadly by considering aspects of that subculture beyond the support for violence – namely, the perceptions of police held by the residents of code-stricken communities. We also contribute to the literature by examining actual reporting behavior, rather than willingness to report hypothetical crimes to the police,

controlling for situational characteristics that affect decisions to report (e.g., victim injury, weapon use), and testing whether situational or individual characteristics moderate the influence of the independent variables.

Section snippets

Review of the literature

The decision to report victimization to the police has been explained as stemming from a cost-benefit/rational choice model in which victims' decisions to report are contingent upon their assessments of the costs and benefits of reporting the crime (Felson, Messner, & Hoskin, 1999; Goudriaan et al., 2004). In other words, victims are more likely to contact the police if they believe that the benefits of reporting (e.g., police protection, perpetrator brought to justice) are greater than the...

Data and methods

To test these hypotheses, we use the Seattle Neighborhoods and Crime Survey (SNCS), conducted in 2002–2003 by computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) of 3759 respondents from all 123 census tracts in Seattle. Two sampling frames were employed: the first randomly selected two block groups in each census tract, then selected nine households for each block group, resulting in a sample of 2220 households. The second oversampled within census blocks with disproportionately high percentages...

Results

The results for the logistic models predicting crime reporting are provided in Table 2. The first model examines the main effects of the independent variables and crime reporting. Interaction terms are then included in the estimation of subsequent models; only significant interactions are shown. To help provide a meaningful interpretation of the findings, the average marginal effects (AMEs) are reported.¹¹...

Discussion and conclusions

This study was the first to quantitatively examine the relationship between the street code and victims' decisions to report crime to the police. In contrast to Hypothesis 1, perceived codes of violence were not significantly associated with reporting behavior. Our null finding may be due to sample characteristics; the sample included few disadvantaged Blacks relative to college-educated Whites. In line with this idea and consistent with theory (Anderson, 1999; Rosenfeld et al., 2003), the...

Declarations of interest

None....

R.B. Taylor *et al.*

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S. McNeeley *et al.*

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E. Anderson

The code of the streets: Decency, violence, and the moral life of the inner city

(1999)

E.F. Avakame *et al.*

“Did you call the police? What did you do?” An empirical assessment of black's theory of mobilization of law

Justice Quarterly (1999)

S.W. Baron *et al.*

Male street youths' conflict: The role of background, subcultural, and situational factors

Justice Quarterly (2001)

E.P. Baumer

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Criminology (2002)

R.R. Bennett *et al.*

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Criminology (1994)

M.T. Berg *et al.*

Illegal behavior, neighborhood context, and police reporting by victims of violence

Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency (2013)

M.T. Berg *et al.*

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...Discussions of a welcoming or hostile police station typology would be incomplete without an acknowledgement of the racial and ethnic dynamics at play in policing. Studies on public perceptions of police demonstrate that the racial category with which one identifies significantly predicts their affinity for law enforcement (Schuck et al., 2008), which has downstream effects on willingness to cooperate with the police and likelihood of reporting crime (Kwak et al., 2019). It is therefore not hard to imagine that perceptions of police buildings are also racialized...

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