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Abstract

Recent debates over policing have centered on the proper role of policing in society. Using the lenses of democratic policing and police legitimacy, we suggest that individuals' willingness to call the police is one method for understanding the public's consent to be policed and their view of the appropriate role of policing. This simple relationship is further complicated by differential relationships between willingness to cooperate with the police and four typologies of police legitimacy: trustworthiness, normative alignment, obligation to obey, and traditional legitimacy. Using the pretest and posttest of a survey vignette, we show that (1) individuals who legitimate the police on the basis of their traditional role in society are more likely to call the police for benign issues, (2) officer-involved shootings negatively impact individuals' willingness to call the police, and (3) there is a greater reduction in willingness to call the police following an officer-involved shooting when individuals legitimate the police on the basis of perceived normative alignment.

Keywords Policing · Legitimacy · Democratic policing · Crime reporting · Call 911

The debate over the proper role of policing and police departments has long been a feature of policing conversations in the United States dating back to the Wickersham Commission in 1931 through the Kerner Commission in 1968 and even most recently

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in the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing which published its findings in 2015. These arguments have again risen to prominence in the wake of the murder of George Floyd (Fine & Del Toro, 2022; Thacher, 2022; Vaughn et al., 2022). With the goal of reducing incidents of excessive force, activists, policymakers, and scholars have argued for a need to reduce reliance on police activity and reinvest in alternative social programs. In part, these claims reflect the idea that these incidents break the social contract. That is, policing is an enforcement arm of the government, which is empowered with the authority to engage in various activities in exchange for certain societal benefits—namely, public safety. To the extent that police departments abuse their authority or fail to maintain public safety, the public may become dissatisfied with the arrangement and wish to take back that power. Dissatisfaction is expressed through democratic actions such as voting in local elections and organizing protests expressing discontent with the status quo. These ideas are consistent with a larger philosophy of democratic policing that emphasizes the need for police departments to be reflective of the will of the public (see e.g., Bayley, 2005; Manning, 2015; Miller, 1999; Pino & Wiatrowski, 2016).

Outside of these direct expressions of outrage at the police—for example, protests, tweets, or opinion pieces in magazines and newspapers—the public may also express withdrawal from the social contract that underpins policing through a retraction in cooperation with the police. Desmond et al. (2016) attempted to demonstrate a reduction in the number of 911 calls to report criminal activity following a high-profile incident of police brutality in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. While their findings were called into question (Zoorob, 2020; Desmond et al., 2020), the theoretical underpinnings of their argument—that police brutality leads individuals to question the legitimacy of police departments, which in turn leads to decreased cooperation with the police—is consistent with decades of research on police legitimacy and cooperation with the police (Bolger & Walters, 2019; Reisig & Lloyd, 2009; Tyler, 2006b). Furthermore, the salience of police brutality stories has been clearly demonstrated in prior academic work that finds stories of police brutality can impact citizens' attitudes towards the police in other jurisdictions—even in other countries (Laninyonu, 2022). Indeed, Ang and colleagues (2021) found significant reductions in calls regarding shootings in eight major US cities following the murder of George Floyd.

At the same time, these arguments miss an important consideration in the discussion of the size of the footprint of policing—that many calls to police departments are not necessarily related to criminal activity at all (Lum et al., 2022; Ratcliffe, 2021). With respect to calls to 911, individuals call the police for help when there is no one else to turn to, irrespective of assessments of the criminality of the activity. In other words, people call 911 when they feel there is a problem to be addressed, not when they have made an informed determination that a crime has been committed. While analyses by Desmond et al. (2016; 2020), as well as Zoorob (2020), excluded non-crime-related calls, within the framework of policing by consent and shrinking the footprint of policing, these may be the very calls that individuals are less likely to make in the wake of an incident of police brutality. For example, an individual whose home is burgled is very likely to call the police regardless of recent news stories, but an individual who sees someone behaving oddly and wandering in and out of traffic may be apprehensive about reporting the issue to avoid escalating the incident.

This paper aims to further the line of inquiry started by Desmond et al. (2016) by addressing two gaps in the prior studies using survey vignettes and a convenience sample of college undergraduates. First, we aim to further develop the theoretical relationship between police legitimacy and willingness to call the police by incorporating recent literature on the legitimation of police and considering variation in the perceived role of police and policing. Second, we suggest that just as there are variations in the reason for legitimating police departments and calling the police, there will also be variations in the extent to which the likelihood of calling the police changes following a news story regarding an officer-involved shooting.

Legitimating the Police and Calling 911

Despite its popularity, police legitimacy has traditionally been ill-defined (see criticisms by Tankebe, 2013; McLean & Nix, 2022). Perhaps most succinctly, Tyler (2006a, p. 375) states that legitimacy is "a psychological property of an authority, institution, or social arrangement that leads those connected to it to believe that it is appropriate, proper, and just." Tyler's treatment of legitimacy is best conceptualized as a compromise between Weber's tripartite theory of legitimacy and Durkheim's more normative conceptualization of legitimacy (McLean & Nix, 2022). With respect to Weber, Tyler acknowledges that legitimacy results from the exercise of authority in a manner that is consistent with accepted rules and procedures—procedural justice. In deference to Durkheim, Tyler acknowledges that there is an aspect of legitimacy that rests on a sense of normative morality—that the authority is "proper and just." Despite this compromise, the operationalization of legitimacy has been much more complicated (Tankebe, 2013).

Still, the power of police legitimacy, especially with respect to willingness to cooperate with the police, lies in the idea of "dull compulsion" (Pósch et al., 2020). That is, respecting the authority of a police department creates a normative obligation to cooperate with police operations. In this sense, individuals who perceive the police as legitimate are more likely to call the police regarding even minor disorder concerns because the authority of the police to create order and enforce the law is proper. There may be other reasons for calling the police—for example, an individual who is in an automobile accident may call the police in order to get a police report regarding the incident that is required by an insurance company—but, on average, and especially with regards to marginal, benign incidents, we would expect individuals who believe in the legitimacy of policing to be more likely to call the police.

Measuring Legitimacy and Variable Impacts

The operationalization and measurement of police legitimacy may have a significant impact in its relationship with certain outcomes (McLean & Nix, 2022). Early studies of police legitimacy operationalized the concept as trust in the police and obligation to obey (see e.g., Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). Trust in institutional authorities is critical for acceptance of the institution's decisions, and ultimately, cooperating and com-

plying with the institution in future interactions (Jackson & Bradford, 2010; Torres, 2017; Tyler & Huo, 2002). While legitimacy is variably defined and operationalized in policing research, trust is seemingly always a core component that is affected by hypothesized antecedents of legitimacy and affects hypothesized outcomes of legitimacy in a variety of contexts (Hamm et al., 2017; Gau, 2014; Tyler, 2004; Reisig et al., 2012; Van Damme, 2017). On the other hand, obligation to obey is more heavily criticized as a measure of police legitimacy. Pósch and colleagues (2020), as well as Nix and colleagues (2020), note that a perceived obligation to obey the police may come from the normative "dull compulsion" of police legitimacy, but may also be an instrumental concern driven by fear of the consequences of failure to comply. That is, an individual may feel obligated to obey the police not because they view their authority as proper and just, but because they are afraid that failure to obey will result in the use of force or other negative consequences. Additionally, Tankebe (2013) criticizes this approach as defining legitimacy by its outcomes—in other words, legitimacy leads to trust and obligation to obey, rather than constituting trust and obligation to obey. Despite these controversies, obligation to obey is still commonly viewed as a core concept, whether as a component or outcome, of legitimacy.

Other subconstructs of legitimacy remain important, as well. Huq and colleagues (2017) take a more Durkheimian approach to argue that a comprehensive definition of police legitimacy should include normative alignment—the extent to which individuals feel the police reflect their moral values. For our purposes, it is notable that normative alignment is probably the element of police legitimacy that is most consistent with democratic policing given its focus on ensuring a police department that is reflective of the community. Additionally, McLean and Nix (2022) have recently argued for the inclusion of another element of Weber's tripartite—that some legitimation of the police involves a blind belief in the justifiability of police authority given their established position in society. In this manner, individuals feel the dull compulsion to cooperate with police departments because of their traditional status as a government institution.

We conceptualize legitimacy broadly applying Tyler's (2006) definition and considering trustworthiness, normative alignment, obligation to obey, and tradition-based legitimacy as subconstructs of police legitimacy (see also McLean & Nix, 2022). We expect each of these to be related to willingness to cooperate with the police, but we also acknowledge the potential for varying impacts across subconstructs. Specifically, concepts such as trust and normative alignment are commonly related to police cooperation, but also, by definition, are contingent upon the police department taking a role in society consistent with an individual's values and beliefs. Accordingly, trust and normative alignment should increase willingness to call the police regarding serious crime issues—which are rarely debated as being within the proper role of police and policing—but may not be related to willingness to call the police for issues of minor disorder—as these may not be consistent with the normative values of the individual. Conversely, we expect that tradition-based legitimacy will be related to willingness to call the police for both serious and minor issues as they are not constrained to normative values but are legitimated based on the department's place in society (tradition-based legitimacy). Finally, due to conflicting previous findings with respect to obligation to obey, we do not anticipate that obligation to

obey will be related to willingness to call the police (see e.g., Grant & Pryce, 2020; Pósch et al., 2020). In sum then, our initial hypotheses can be clearly stated as:

Hypothesis 1 (H₁) Trust and normative alignment will be positively associated with willingness to call the police for serious issues, but will not be associated with willingness to call the police for benign issues.

Hypothesis 2 (H₂) Tradition-based legitimacy will be positively associated with willingness to call the police for both serious issues and benign issues.

Calling the Police Following a Highly-Publicized Officer-Involved Shooting

Typically, we would expect legitimacy to decline in the aftermath of a highly-publicized officer-involved shooting. Procedural justice theory suggests that police treatment of individuals is related to individuals' views of police legitimacy and that this relationship exists for vicarious experiences as well as direct experiences (Harris & Jones, 2020; Tyler, 2006). This is consistent with studies that show declines in legitimacy, cooperation with the police, and 911 calls after excessive force incidents (Ang et al., 2021; Desmond et al., 2016; Laninyonu, 2022; cf., Zoorob, 2020). Despite the theoretical consistency that police legitimacy will decrease after excessive force incidents, evidence supporting this hypothesis has been relatively thin. In 2020, a Gallup poll found confidence in the police in the United States hit an all-time low following the George Floyd incident (Brenan, 2020). However, a natural experiment of neighborhood perceptions of the police in Baltimore, Maryland before and after the death of Freddie Gray revealed only minimal changes in residents' trust in the police (White et al., 2018). More complicated still, a natural experiment of residents' perceptions of the police in Chicago before and after a policing scandal found that trust in the police *improved* for black residents but *decreased* for white residents (Kochel & Skogan, 2021). Finally, the contrasting findings of Desmond and colleagues (2016; 2020), Zoorob (2020), and Ang and colleagues (2021)—that individuals may be less likely to call the police in the wake of a high-profile officer-involved shooting—were discussed earlier but remain relevant to the debate over the impact of high-profile police use of force incidents.

It is our assertion that the impacts of officer-involved shootings and potential excessive force may differ by type of police legitimation, as well. The above listed studies all measure police legitimacy in a variety of ways across a variety of populations, leaving open the possibility that differences in findings could be a result of differing measures and differing levels and types of legitimation among the study populations. Similar to the arguments of McLean and Nix (2022), controversial police shootings may represent a department overstepping the bounds of their authority in the perspective of trust and normative alignment. As a result, individuals who legitimate the police based on trust and normative alignment are more likely to reduce their likelihood of calling the police following a high-profile use of force

incident. Contrastingly, tradition-based legitimacy is predicated on an unquestioning belief in the police's claim to authority. Accordingly, individuals who legitimate the police based on tradition will be less likely to reduce their likelihood of calling the police following a high-profile use of force incident. Consistent with these ideas, we propose three final hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3 (H₃) Reductions in the likelihood of calling the police following a high-profile use of force incident will be greater for relatively benign incidents as compared to serious criminal activity.

Hypothesis 4 (H₄) Trust and normative alignment will be associated with larger reductions in willingness to call the police following a high-profile use of force incident.

Hypothesis 5 (H₅) Tradition-based legitimacy will be associated with smaller reductions in willingness to call the police following a high-profile use of force incident.

Current Study

The present study examines the differential impact of legitimacy on willingness to call the police across different types of legitimacy and different reasons for calling the police. Specifically, we hypothesize that individuals who view the police as legitimate on the basis of trust and normative alignment are likely to call the police when facing issues of serious crime. Conversely, individuals who view the police as legitimate on the basis of tradition will be more likely to call the police when facing both issues of serious crime and minor crime or disorder. Furthermore, after reading a story about a hypothetical questionable officer-involved shooting, individuals who legitimate the police on the basis of trust and normative alignment will have a larger reduction in willingness to call the police than individuals who legitimate the police on the basis of tradition. To test these hypotheses we collected data using a survey experiment with a sample of undergraduate students. We asked students about their perceptions of legitimacy and willingness to call the police, then presented them with a news story of a hypothetical officer-involved shooting. After reading the news story, participants were asked about their willingness to call the police following the incident.

Methods

Data for the present study come from a survey of 1,296 undergraduate students at a large public university in the Southeastern United States. Students were recruited into the study in one of two ways. First, instructors in the sociology department distributed the survey via email to their students and offered extra credit as an incentive for completion (n=418). Second, the communication department listed the study on its research participation portal. Students in introduction to communication are asked to

complete a number of credits in the research participation portal or complete an alternative assignment. This survey was one of many that students had the option of taking for a participation credit (n = 898). This recruitment strategy led to a convenience sample of college students from a diverse array of university majors with just 7.4% being criminal justice majors and 2.6% being communication majors. Other common majors included nursing (6.1%), marketing (4.0%), finance (3.5%), computer science (3.3%), and psychology (3.3%), though nearly every major in the university was represented in the sample.[1]

Upon entry into the survey, participants were asked to answer demographic questions regarding their age, race/ethnicity, gender, and major, as well as general attitudinal items regarding politics and self-reported activist behaviors (measures described in greater detail below). Participants were then randomly assigned to read a description of one of four police departments. These departments varied according to their size—small or large—and whether they were a municipal or county agency.[2] Following this description, participants answered a series of questions regarding the perceived legitimacy of the policing agency they had just read about and their willingness to call each agency with respect to one of seven different problems (measures described in greater detail below). Participants then read a randomly assigned vignette of a news story regarding an officer-involved shooting in that agency. These vignettes contained the same details regarding the shooting—a so-called "lawful, but awful" incident where officers shot an individual robbing a jewelry store who was armed only with a knife and standing a considerable distance away (see Appendix A for full vignettes). The vignettes then varied in the department's statement regarding the incident—either no comment, a deflecting "image repair" response (Benoit, 2013), and an apologetic "discourse of renewal" response (Ulmer et al., 2022).[3] Participants then answered a series of questions regarding their perceptions of the department's response and a repeat measure of their willingness to call the police department regarding the same seven behaviors that they responded to earlier in the survey.

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[1] As would be expected given the sampling strategy, criminal justice majors and communication majors were over-represented compared to the university population (criminal justice: 7.4% in sample, 1.2% in university; communication: 2.6% in sample, 0.6% in university). Additionally, nursing was over-represented in the sample compared to the university population (nursing: 6.1% in sample, 3.1% in university). Other majors appear relatively proportionally represented (marketing: 4.0% in sample, 3.1% in university; finance: 3.4% in sample, 3.5% in university; computer science: 3.3% in sample, 3.6% in university; psychology: 3.3% in sample, 3.5% in university).

[2] This randomization approach was taken to assess how individuals differentiate legitimacy across different types of law enforcement agencies but is not the focus of this study. Agency descriptions are included in Appendix A.

[3] The randomized responses by department were not the main focus of this study. An analysis of participants reactions to these responses can be seen in Pyle et al. (working paper).

Measures

Dependent Variables

Respondents were asked to rate their likelihood of calling the specific police department that they read about in regards to seven behaviors both pre- and post-vignette: (1) after a break-in (burglary) of your home, (2) if you saw vandalism or graffiti near your home, (3) if you noticed juveniles "hanging out" and drinking on the street near your home, (4) if you saw a suspicious person in your neighborhood, (5) after seeing a car accident, (6) to provide information to the police to help solve a crime, and (7) to assist a police officer in need of help. These items are consistent with prior approaches at measuring crime reporting (see Lawrence et al., 2023; Wu & Miethe, 2022) and were measured on a scale from 1 (extremely unlikely) to five (extremely likely). Wu and Miethe (2022) previously used these items to assess willingness to report crime. Lawrence and colleagues (2023) similarly used the items as a singular construct and explicitly rejected using these items as a two-factor construct with the first five items assessing willingness to report crime and the last two items indicating willingness to provide help to the police. It is unclear if either group of researchers tested the possibility of a two-factor solution split across the seriousness of the behavior in question, however, our data indicated a possible two-factor solution (Eigenvalues on pre-vignette measures: Factor 1 = 2.29, Factor 2 = 0.99; Eigenvalues on post-vignette measures: Factor 1 = 2.57, Factor 2 = 1.05) with items two, three, and four having loadings on the second factor greater than 0.3.

Accordingly, we constructed separate measures using a mean scale score of items related to a burglary, a car accident, solving a crime, and assisting a police officer (named *Call 911 – Serious*; pre-test α = 0.78) and a mean scale score of items related to graffiti/vandalism, juveniles drinking, and a suspicious person (named *Call 911 – Benign*; pre-test α = 0.73). We argue that these two factors are distinguished by the seriousness of the problem at hand. Call 911 – Serious represents incidents that involve potential harm—lost property, car accident injuries, harm from the criminal offense, and the officer potentially being harmed—while Call 911 – Benign represents incidents for which there is no obvious harm to an individual—graffiti/vandalism and underage drinking are typically thought of as victimless crimes, and suspicious person calls have no clear offense or harm involved.

Finally, we then subtracted post-test scales from the pre-test scales to create two change scores (*Call 911 Δ – Serious* and *Call 911 Δ – Benign*). While similar analyses could be conducted with post-test values as the dependent variable and controlling for the pre-test values as an independent variable, our focus—consistent with the hypotheses of Desmond et al. (2016)—is on change and whether specific types of legitimacy protect or exacerbate changes in willingness to call the police after a publicized officer-involved shooting, so a change score is best for our study. The change scores were created such that they specifically measure the **reduction** in the likelihood of calling the police, so higher values indicate greater reductions in the likelihood of calling the police and lower values indicate smaller reductions in the likelihood of calling the police.

Independent Variables

There are four key independent variables: *trust*, *normative alignment*, *tradition-based legitimacy*, and *obligation to obey*. Consistent with prior research on police legitimacy and Tyler's (2006) conceptualization of normative legitimacy, trust is a mean scale score of three items regarding the trustworthiness of the local police department (e.g., "The police in [city/county] care about the people in [city]"; pre-test α=0.82). Consistent with work by Jackson and colleagues (2012), normative alignment is a mean scale score of three items assessing the perception that police had values consistent with the participant (e.g., "The police in [city/county] act in ways consistent with my own moral values"; pre-test α=0.86). Tradition-based legitimacy is a mean scale score of five items that draw on McLean and Nix's (2022) concept of blind legitimacy given through accepted status (e.g., "I would give [agency] the benefit of the doubt during controversial situations"; pre-test α=0.81). Finally, obligation to obey was a mean-scale score of two items regarding individuals' perceived obligation to do what police tell them (e.g., "You should do what [agency] tells you to do even if you do not understand or agree with the reasons"; pre-test α=0.77). Given debates over the proper measurement of legitimacy, these items were subject to additional scrutiny before constructing the mean scale scores. Specifically, parallel analysis was conducted and determined that four factors—consistent with this conceptualization—were present in the data. Furthermore, a four-factor exploratory factor analysis using principal axis factoring and an oblique (promax) rotation indicated that items loaded on the expected factors with all loadings>0.4 and minimal cross-loadings.[4] All items in this section were included within the same matrix on the survey, but the order was randomized to ensure these factor loadings were genuine and not an artifact of their ordering on the survey.

Control Variables

A few key control variables were also collected during the survey. First, given the importance of political ideology and identification in prior studies of legitimacy (see e.g., McLean & Nix, 2022), four items assessed individuals' political identity and political ideology (generally and on social and economic issues specifically). Unlike previous studies, these items loaded on a single factor and a mean scale score was created (α=0.94) with higher values indicating a greater level of *conservatism*. Additionally, given recent news and reactions to officer-involved shootings, a series of items asking individuals about their level of activism were used to create a mean

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[4] Notably, there are two key data-driven differences between this data and the results presented in McLean and Nix (2022). First, trust and normative alignment loaded on separate factors with a four-factor solution preferred over the three-factor solution indicated in McLean and Nix (2021). Second, one item that McLean and Nix (2022) included as obligation to obey, loaded on the tradition-based legitimacy factor. Despite this surprise, there is still a logical consistency to the measure as the item that switched factors is worded "You should **support** the decisions of [agency] officers/deputies even when you disagree with them" (emphasis added). The wording "you should support" rather than "you should do" results in this item having logical consistency with both obligation to obey ("you should do") and tradition-based legitimacy which emphasizes blind support for an agency's decisions and actions.

scale score of *activism* (α=0.83). Consistent with prior studies (see e.g., Norris, 2005; Nwak et al., 2018) items asked how often participants: (1) liked or shared social media posts about a political issue, (2) created social media posts about a political issue, (3) attended public hearings, town hall meetings, or city council meetings regarding a political issue, (4) called or mailed a public official or politician about a political issue, (5) physically posted or distributed signs, banners, buttons, or bumper stickers about a political issue, (6) participated in political demonstrations or protests, and (7) signed petitions regarding political issues.

Finally, demographic variables were collected to control for participants' *age*, *race*/ethnicity, and gender. Race/ethnicity was collected by asking individuals which category *best* described them: *White*/Caucasian, *Black*/African-American, *Hispanic*, *Asian*, Native American/Pacific Islander, and Other (either not listed or multi-racial). Less than 1% of respondents indicated they were Native American, so their response options were collapsed with other to avoid small cell issues during analysis. Gender was collected with response options of male, *female*, nonbinary, other, and prefer not to say. Less than 1% of respondents provided answers in any of the final three categories. Given the importance of power and social status in the United States, we collapsed nonbinary, other, and prefer not to say with female to represent gender minority individuals. Descriptive statistics for all variables are presented in Table 1.

Analytic Strategy

The analysis proceeds in three main stages. First, ordinary least squares regression is conducted using the pre-vignette measures of likelihood of calling the police. This

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics

	Mean (N)	S.D. (%)
Independent Variables		
Trust	3.45	0.66
Normative Alignment	3.17	0.67
Tradition-Based Legitimacy	2.82	0.66
Obligation to Obey	2.91	0.86
Control Variables		
Conservatism	4.38	1.47
Activism	1.46	0.49
Female	824	64.63%
Race		
White	1,055	82.68%
Black	67	5.25%
Hispanic	67	5.25%
Asian	46	3.61%
Other	41	3.21%
Age	19.30	1.80
Dependent Variable		
Call 911 – Serious (Pre-test)	4.25	0.72
Call 911 – Benign (Pre-test)	2.86	0.93
Call 911 Δ – Serious	0.08	0.54
Call 911 Δ – Benign	0.12	0.59

analysis examines whether, as stated in hypotheses one and two, the different types of legitimation vary in their relationships with calling the police based on the reason for calling the police. All control variables are included in this analysis. Second, a paired t-test is conducted to examine changes in willingness to call the police from pre-vignette to post-vignette. This will assess the third hypothesis' assertion that willingness to call the police will change after participants read the story about an officer-involved shooting. Finally, ordinary least squares regression is conducted on the measures of change in the likelihood of calling the police to examine hypotheses four and five—whether a potentially unnecessary officer-involved shooting differs in its impact on likelihood of calling the police across the different types of police legitimacy. Each model was examined for potential violations of the assumptions of ordinary least squares regression (e.g., normally distributed residuals, multicollinearity, etc.). Only one substantial violation was found with regressions where calling the police for a serious issue was the dependent variable had slight violations of the homoskedasticity assumption (Breusch & Pagan, 1979; Cameron & Trivedi, 1990; Cook & Weisberg, 1983). Accordingly, robust standard errors are utilized for these models and reported in the corresponding tables.

Results

Table 2 presents the results from the OLS regression of pre-vignette likelihood of calling the police. As hypothesized, the impact of legitimacy on calling the police varies by the underlying reason for calling the police. Specifically, trust ($\beta=0.363$, $p<0.001$) and normative alignment ($\beta=0.078$, $p=0.043$) are significantly and positively related to the likelihood of calling the police for serious issues such as burglaries or car accidents. On the other hand, tradition-based legitimacy ($\beta=0.275$, $p<0.001$) is significantly and positively related to the likelihood of calling the police for benign issues such as vandalism, graffiti, or juveniles drinking in public. Female and gender minority participants ($\beta=0.092$, $p=0.001$; $\beta=0.173$, $p=0.000$) indicated a greater likelihood of calling the police for both benign and serious reasons than male participants. Additionally, individuals who self-reported a greater degree of conservatism were more likely to call the police for benign reasons ($\beta=0.183$, $p<0.001$), but no more likely to call the police for serious reasons ($\beta=-0.025$, $p=0.468$). Finally, racial and ethnic minority participants were more likely to call the police for benign reasons than white participants (Black: $\beta=0.085$, $p=0.001$; Hispanic: $\beta=0.123$, $p<0.001$; Asian: $\beta=0.024$, $p=0.290$).

Table 3 examines the change in willingness to call 911 from pre-vignette to post-vignette for both benign and serious reasons. Both reductions are statistically significant in a paired t-test, however, two descriptive estimates stand out. First, the average values are substantively different for benign compared to serious calls for the police. Both pre- and post-vignette, the average willingness to call the police for benign reasons is below 3—less than the midpoint on the scale—yet the average willingness to call the police for serious reasons was above 4—higher than the value for the response option "Somewhat likely." Second, the absolute reduction in willingness to call the police was greater for benign calls ($\Delta=0.124$) than for serious

Table 2 Predictors of Calling Police by Seriousness (OLS)

	Call 911 – Serious (Pre-test)			Call 911 – Benign (Pre-test)		
	β	S.E. (Robust)	p	β	S.E.	p
Trust	0.363***	0.050	0.000	0.003	0.055	0.938
Normative Alignment	0.078*	0.041	0.043	0.078	0.057	0.056
Tradition-Based Legitimacy	0.016	0.042	0.674	0.275***	0.056	0.000
Obligation to Obey	0.004	0.022	0.881	-0.042	0.034	0.179
Conservatism	-0.025	0.016	0.468	0.183***	0.021	0.000
Activism	0.008	0.041	0.773	-0.012	0.053	0.652
Female	0.092***	0.042	0.001	0.173***	0.052	0.000
Race						
Black	-0.027	0.105	0.401	0.085***	0.115	0.001
Hispanic	0.011	0.085	0.677	0.123***	0.108	0.000
Asian	0.024	0.087	0.290	0.093***	0.133	0.000
Other	0.007	0.145	0.848	0.001	0.138	0.959
Age	0.038	0.011	0.144	-0.052*	0.014	0.048
Agency						
CCSO	0.032	0.052	0.323	0.003	0.069	0.919
GCPD	0.022	0.053	0.494	0.009	0.068	0.780
SACSO	-0.019	0.055	0.569	0.013	0.068	0.693
F	14.25***			22.52***		
R-Squared	0.197			0.222		

*$p<0.05$, **$p<0.01$, ***$p<0.001$

Table 3 Paired T-test of Calling the Police

	Pre-Vignette Willingness to Call 911		Post-Vignette Willingness to Call 911		Difference	
Reason for Calling 911	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Δ	T-test
Benign	2.860	0.935	2.736	1.019	0.124	7.378***
Serious	4.258	0.717	4.176	0.773	0.083	5.310***

*$p<0.05$, **$p<0.01$, ***$p<0.001$

calls (Δ=0.083). Thus, individuals were more willing to call the police for serious than benign issues and the reduction in willingness to call the police was smaller for serious calls to the police than for benign calls to the police.

Table 4 presents the regression of change in likelihood of calling the police on the legitimacy variables and all control variables (including the variables randomly manipulated in the experiment). As with Table 2, there are some notable differences in the change in likelihood of calling the police following an officer-involved shooting by reasons for calling the police. With respect to legitimacy, individuals with higher levels of legitimacy based on normative alignment had larger reductions in their likelihood of calling the police for benign reasons following the news story (β=0.120, $p=0.008$). Individuals with a greater perceived obligation to obey the police, indicated smaller reductions in their likelihood of calling the police for benign reasons (β=-0.073, $p=0.037$). Turning to the experimental variables, the discourse of renewal response strategy slightly reduced the reduction in the likelihood of calling the police for a serious reason (β=-0.066, $p=0.032$). Furthermore, individuals self-

Table 4 Predictors of Reduction in Likelihood of Calling Police After OIS by Seriousness (OLS)

	Call 911 – Serious (Pre-test)			Call 911 – Benign (Pre-test)		
	β	S.E. (Robust)	p	β	S.E.	p
Trust	-0.015	0.040	0.757	0.024	0.038	0.584
Normative Alignment	0.068	0.033	0.099	0.120***	0.039	0.008
Tradition-Based Legitimacy	-0.016	0.035	0.718	-0.017	0.039	0.707
Obligation to Obey	-0.058	0.020	0.068	-0.073*	0.023	0.037
Conservatism	-0.110***	0.014	0.005	-0.158***	0.014	0.000
Activism	0.002	0.034	0.945	0.019	0.036	0.538
Female	0.020	0.032	0.493	0.058*	0.036	0.050
Race						
Black	0.018	0.074	0.535	0.030	0.080	0.316
Hispanic	-0.010	0.058	0.690	-0.023	0.074	0.430
Asian	0.060	0.101	0.082	-0.003	0.092	0.913
Other	-0.020	0.140	0.663	-0.052	0.095	0.073
Age	-0.036	0.006	0.086	0.001	0.003	0.910
Police Response						
Image Repair	-0.002	0.038	0.942	-0.012	0.040	0.705
Discourse of Renewal	-0.066*	0.035	0.032	0.006	0.040	0.865
Agency						
CCSO	0.018	0.045	0.614	-0.016	0.047	0.661
GCPD	-0.040	0.041	0.233	-0.039	0.047	0.281
SACSO	0.039	0.041	0.244	0.025	0.047	0.492
F	2.29**			3.65***		
R-Squared	0.035			0.050		

*$p<0.05$, **$p<0.01$, ***$p<0.001$

reporting higher levels of conservatism had smaller reductions in the likelihood of calling the police for serious reasons (β=-0.110, $p=0.005$) and for benign reasons (β=-0.158, $p=0.000$) following the news story. Finally, gender minority participants had larger reductions in their likelihood of calling the police for benign reasons following the news story (β=0.058, $p=0.050$).

Discussion

In the years following the murder of George Floyd, the discussion of the role and purpose of policing has dominated not only public debate over policing, but also academic discussions (Thacher, 2022). These debates typically focus on the proposition that a larger or smaller footprint is the right way or the best way to maintain public safety. However, we suggest that these debates should instead be considered as an exercise in policing by consent. To the extent that the public requests a larger or smaller footprint, they are exercising their rights under democratic policing to consent to the role of the institution of the police. This consent is reflected not just in public debates by scholars, activists, and politicians or during protests, but daily in the types of activities that individuals call 911 to report and ask for help regarding.

Police legitimacy theory represents perhaps the leading theory of understanding cooperation with the police—including willingness to call 911. In short, individuals

call 911 when they believe the police are trustworthy and have values that align with their own. Yet the complexity of police legitimacy, including the idea that not all legitimacy stems from procedural justice (Nagin & Telep, 2017, 2020), coupled with competing ideas that the police should be called for some situations, but not others, suggests that the relationship between police legitimacy and willingness to call 911 may be more complex than first considered. We used a survey vignette experiment to test this hypothesis and examined variations in willingness to call 911 across typologies of legitimacy, seriousness of the reason for calling 911, and before and after a hypothetical police shooting. To better understand who consents to what types of policing, we examined the relationship between police legitimacy and willingness to call 911. Utilizing various measures of police legitimacy and an experimental survey vignette design, we also examined how a controversial police shooting impacted individuals' willingness to call 911.

Our findings indicate that the typology of legitimacy matters for understanding when individuals will call the police. Individuals who legitimate the police through normative means—that is, through an assessment of trustworthiness and normative alignment—are more likely to call 911 if their reason for calling involves a serious incident or criminal activity. At the same time, individuals who legitimate the police through traditional means—a blind acceptance of authority due to the police's established place in society—are more likely to call 911 if the reason for calling is a more benign incident or involves public disorder. Additionally, there was an overall reduction in individuals' likelihood of calling 911 after a hypothetical controversial police shooting, but this reduction was larger if the reason for calling 911 was relatively benign. Finally, individuals who legitimated the police on the basis of normative alignment experienced larger reductions in willingness to call 911 for benign reasons.

Limitations

Our study comes with a number of limitations. First and foremost, the study uses a convenience sample of students at a single university in the Southeastern United States. Thus it is unclear how generalizable these results would be to other regions of the country, non-college educated individuals, or even individuals outside the age range of the typical college student. Second, we attempted to maximize the realism of the vignette used in the study. We pulled articles of recent police shootings from various local news sources and attempted to follow the same paragraph structure and information layout of a breaking news story. Nevertheless, it was a hypothetical news story which may not have the same impact as a real news story with individuals' social networks amplifying the story and various viewpoints on the incident. Assessments of willingness to call 911 were taken immediately before and after the participant read the vignette of the police shooting. This may have exaggerated the effects produced by the news story as individuals in the real world are unlikely to be prompted about their willingness to call 911 immediately after they become aware of a police shooting. To account for this in future studies, researchers could use a Solomon four-group design that randomly assigns participants to complete the pretest measure or not, which would enable exploration of any test-retest bias. Finally,

our operationalization of willingness to call 911 is notably different than prior operationalizations using the same scale by Wu and Miethe (2022) as well as Lawrence and colleagues (2023). We would encourage future researchers to examine the factor loadings and measurement characteristics of this scale in future studies to better understand these variations.

Conclusions

At the end of the day, we hope this study sheds greater light on the complexity of police legitimacy and the importance of reflecting on individuals' consent to be policed. In democratic societies policing, like the government itself, should be done at the will of the people. Concerns over the proper role of policing in society should not *only* be seen as a question of what works best, but also as a method of feedback from the community on their consent to be policed. Reductions in willingness to call 911 reflect a withdrawal of consent from the policing process for certain issues and concerns. While police departments must act with the consent of the public, it remains unclear how they should react to this withdrawal of consent. Should the withdrawal of consent be permanent, departments may most appropriately re-align their resources with the activities the public does consent to having policed. On the other hand, these reductions may be temporary, and the department may be better suited by working to regain the trust of the community and thereby re-obtain consent for policing activities for which there is reduced demand. Future studies may shed light on this issue by studying this topic using longitudinal methods.

Additionally, a body of research over the past 30 years has clearly demonstrated that police legitimacy is important for understanding individuals' willingness to cooperate with the police and call 911. Yet, a narrow focus on procedural justice has limited our understanding of the methods through which individuals legitimate the police. Procedural justice is undoubtedly important, but individuals also develop perceptions of the legitimacy of the police through other means (see also Nagin & Telep, 2017, 2020). Our study demonstrated that the types of normative legitimacy most likely to be related to procedural justice were related to a consent to being policed with respect to more serious issues of crime, while a measure of traditional legitimacy that is unlikely to be related to procedural justice empowers a more expansive police role with consent to being policed involving mundane "disorder" type issues.

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