Concern About Crime and Confidence in the Police: Reassurance or Accountability?

Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between confidence in the police and concern about crime. A large body of research on opinions about police treats confidence in the police as a dependent variable that is influenced by assessments of neighborhood conditions. These studies argue that people hold police accountable for local crime, disorder and fear. Another large body of literature on public perceptions of crime treats concern about crime as a dependent variable that is explained in part by the extent of confidence in the police. This research stresses the reassurance effects of policing. Both views cannot be correct, for they assume a different causal ordering among these two correlated factors. This paper addresses this theoretical ambiguity, using panel data and structural modeling to identify the proper causal ordering of concern about crime and confidence in police. The findings support the reassurance model: reductions in concern about crime flow from increasing confidence in the police, while the accountability link from concern about crime to confidence in the police was not statistically significant.

Introduction

This paper examines the relationship between confidence in the police and concern about crime. Virtually all studies of the two constructs find that they are robustly correlated. However, a large body of research on opinions about police treats confidence in the police as a dependent variable that is influenced by assessments of neighborhood conditions. These studies argue that people hold police accountable for local crime, disorder and fear. Another large body of literature on public perceptions of crime treats concern about crime as a dependent variable that is explained in part by the extent of confidence in the police. This research stresses the reassurance effects of policing. Both views cannot be correct, for they assume a different causal ordering among these two correlated factors. If the relationship between the two is instead reciprocal, with confidence and concern affecting each other, virtually all research on the two has incorrectly specified their relationship. This paper addresses this theoretical ambiguity, using panel data and structural modeling to identify the proper causal ordering of concern about crime and confidence in police.

The Reassurance Model: Confidence in Police Alleviates Concern About Crime

A great deal of research treats confidence in the police as the independent variable, and examines its impact on fear, worry or concern about neighborhood crime. This causal ordering lay at the heart of Charles Bahn’s early (1974) and influential description of what he dubbed “the reassurance factor” in policing. He argued that where formal social control is believed to be strong and the police “in charge,” the public is more confident that they will be protected as they navigate and negotiate public space. After reviewing the evidence of the day he noted that "the
need for reassurance, in fact, is behind both the public call for more police and the public acceptance of political cries for money for police. When the man in the street asks for more police, he is really asking for the police to be on hand more frequently and more conspicuously when he is going about his daily business" (Bahn, 1974: 340-341). Povey (2001) argues that perceived security and order are produced by policing that is visible, accessible and familiar to community residents. To achieve this he calls for deploying more officers to street duties, developing a “customer awareness” in policing, and getting to know the communities they serve. The reassurance model is so widely held that sustaining visible patrol drives the resource allocation decisions of all police administrators.

The reassurance model also provides a theoretical underpinning for community policing projects, which around the country have been mounted in an effort to restore police legitimacy in poor and minority neighborhoods. Community policing evaluations routinely employ measures of concern about crime as indicators of program effectiveness. For example, Skogan and Hartnett (1997) report that visible community-oriented police efforts were associated with reductions in fear of crime, especially among African-Americans and lower-income Chicagoans. Reisig and Parks (2004) found that neighborhood residents who believe that police-community partnerships are “healthy” (e. g., they report that police in their area work with residents and that residents cooperate with police) perceive lower levels of disorder and report less fear. Earlier quasi-experimental evaluations of the impact of foot patrol provide another set of findings supporting the reassurance model, for two of their most consistent findings were that foot patrol increased confidence in the police and reduced fear of crime (Pate, 1986). The famous Kansas City Preventive Patrol Experiment is often cited as a counter point, for the planned reduction in visible patrol there did not seem to increase levels of fear (Kelling, Pate et al., 1974). However, there have been challenges to the fidelity of the treatment in this study, and its results are in question (Fienberg, Larntz, et al., 1976; Larson, 1975).

Finally, the reassurance model of policing underlies a vast social experiment taking place in Britain, where policing reform has even adopted this label: the Home Office’s “National Reassurance Policing Programme.” The political impetus behind this is concern on the part of government that fear of crime, measured with some prominence by the British Crime Survey, has not fallen despite New Labor’s investments in safety and security. A Home Office report concluded that public confidence that crime is being effectively dealt with is linked to popular perceptions of the accessibility, promptness and efficiency of the criminal justice system (Povey, 2001). Much of the ferment in British policing today revolves around identifying strategies for enhancing the reassurance qualities of the police, in order to “begin to change the embedded culture of fear of crime” (Millie and Herrington, 2005, 41).

The Accountability Model: Concern About Crime Undermines Confidence in the Police

Another prominent body of research treats concern about crime and related neighborhood conditions as the independent variable, and examines its impact on confidence in the police. These studies conclude that where residents perceive crime as high, where the official crime rate is high, and where fear of crime is high, confidence in the police is lower as a result.
Communities whose residents believe, for instance, that their neighborhood is afflicted by drug dealing and gangs are more likely than residents of other areas to be critical of the police (Jesilow, Meyer, and Namazzi, 1995). The same is true for those who believe that crime is a serious problem in their neighborhood (Weitzer and Tuch, 2004a, 2004b) and who report that a violent crime occurred in their neighborhood in the past year (Weitzer and Tuch, 2002). Other research in this category includes Maxson, Hennigan and Sloane, 2003; Reisig and Giacomazzi, 1998; Reisig and Correia, 1997; and Schafer, Huebner and Bynum, 2003.

An important group that has adopted the accountability model is researchers who embed survey respondents in their neighborhood context, including crime rates. For example, in studies in different cities, Reisig and Parks (2000) and Sampson and Jeglum-Bartusch (1998) both found that variations in neighborhood homicide rates (their independent variable) are linked to differences in assessments of the police, even when controlling for important neighborhood factors (such as poverty) and individual factors (including race and experience with the police). Sampson and Jeglum-Bartusch (1998: 801) concluded that cynicism about the law and dissatisfaction with the police are a routine part of the “cognitive landscape” of people living in high-crime, disadvantaged neighborhoods, for they are rooted “... in experiential differences associated with neighborhood context.”

Why should this be the case? One line of theoretical development in this vein consists of variations on the claim that people “hold the police responsible” in some fashion or another for neighborhood conditions. In this view, social conditions, including fear and helplessness with life, fuels cynicism toward police. Based on a sophisticated path model, Xu, Fiedler and Flaming (2005) concluded that fear undermines satisfaction with police. In their view, fearful people (who disproportionately live in high crime, disorderly, low quality-of-life neighborhoods) conclude that police are unable or unwilling to help them deal with their problems. Ren, et al (2005) argue that high levels of neighborhood social disorder signals to residents that law enforcement has lost its grip, and that police are not to be trusted to provide them with protection. Residents of higher crime areas are more likely to report that officers perform poorly in maintaining order and fighting crime, treat crime victims unsatisfactorily, and are not responsive to local issues (Reisig and Parks, 2000; Velez, 2001). Focusing on social disorder, Cao, Frank and Cullen (1996: 13) concluded that “[I]t appears that citizens hold the police at least partially responsible for the disorder – the “broken windows” – in their neighborhoods. . . . Our respondents appear to perceive the police as the government’s first-line representative, responsible for controlling neighborhood disorder.”

Method

A structural equation model was developed to addresses these two competing claims about the causal ordering of concern about crime and confidence in police. Structural equation modeling was used with data from a two-wave panel survey to test a reciprocal relationship between the two, in order to estimate the magnitude and statistical significance of contending “causal arrows” running between concern and confidence. Controlling for wave 1 measures enabled us to examine the relationship between changes in concern and confidence over time.
There was a quasi-experimental intervention between the two waves that involved a reorganization of policing in the study’s program areas, and the model accounts for its direct impact on confidence in the police.

Data and Measures

The surveys were conducted in conjunction with the evaluation of a community policing project in Houston, Texas. New policing projects were fielded in three neighborhoods; these included the formation of a community organizing team, opening a storefront office, and going door-to-door to gather information for a problem solving campaign (for a description of the programs, see Skogan, 1990). The areas were chosen because they were racially diverse and faced significant crime problems. An evaluation comparison area that matched the program areas demographically was also designated, and no new policing project was mounted there. Two waves of surveys were conducted in the program and comparison areas, the first before the program began and the second a year later. In-person interviews were conducted with randomly-selected adults in households sampled randomly from a complete listing of all residential addresses in each area. The first survey resulted in 1,733 completed interviews, with a 79 percent completion rate. The second wave survey recontacted 1,294 respondents, for a reinterview rate of 75 percent. After respondents were excluded if there were missing data on any of the measures for either of the two waves of surveys, there were a total of 933 complete-data cases. The data analysis and all of the descriptive information cited below are based on this subset.

The analysis presented here makes use of the panel design of the study in several ways. First, controlling for wave 1 levels of confidence and concern isolates the reciprocal influence of changes in confidence and concern between the two waves. The first-wave measures should also account for the effects of the many fixed characteristics of individuals – such as their race, age, and gender – that influence both concern about crime and views of the police. The panel design also factors in the effects respondents had with the police and with crime prior to the first interview, and the past level of police visibility in their part of town. Another design feature of the model is that it includes wave 2 recall measures of events which occurred between the two waves that could further influence respondents’ confidence and concern. These include victimization, police visibility, and positive or negative encounters with the police. Finally, the effects of changes that were instituted in the style of policing in three of the four study areas is represented in the model as well.

Confidence in the police is measured by responses to questions that make up two subscales. Confidence in police performance was assessed by asking, “How good a job do you think police in this area are doing . . .” with respect to “preventing crime,” “helping people out after than have been victims of crime,” and “keeping order on the streets and sidewalks.” Responses were gathered on five point scales ranging from “very good job” to “very poor job.” Confidence that the professional demeanor of police was assessed on four-point scales, using questions asking “in general, how polite are the police in this area when dealing with people” (very polite to very impolite), “how helpful are the police in this area when dealing with people around here” (very helpful to not helpful at all), and “in general, how fair are the police in this
area in dealing with people around here” (very fair to very unfair). The subscales’ alpha reliabilities at wave 1 were .80 (performance) and .81 (behavior); at wave 2 they were .82 and .84, respectively. The two subscale scores are used in the structural equation model as indicators of the unobserved construct “confidence in the police.”

Concern about crime is measured by responses to four questions asking “how worried” respondents were “about things that might worry you in this area.” The response categories were “very worried,” “somewhat worried,” and “not worried at all.” The scenarios that were presented were “someone will try to rob you or steal something from you while you are outside in this area,” “someone will try to attack you or beat you up while you are outside in this area,” “someone will try to break into your hold while no one is here,” and “someone will try to break into your home while someone is here.” Responses to the four individual items are used as indicators of the unobserved construct “concern about crime.” In the second interview, the percentage of respondents who were “very worried” about these crimes ranged from 12 percent (assault) to 34 percent (burglary).

Criminal victimization is measured by responses to questions about individual and household experiences with crime. The property crime measures were prefaced with the explanation that respondents were being asked about “things which may have happened to you or your family” in the past year. The scenarios that followed inquired about actual and attempted burglary, theft from within the home, mailbox theft, household vandalism, auto theft, theft from autos, vandalism of autos, motorcycle and bicycle theft, and other thefts from around their home. Respondents were also asked about “things that may have happened to you personally.” This list included questions about actual and attempted robbery, sexual attacks, personal theft (pickpocket, purse snatch), physical assault, and threats or attempts to harm them that were not successful. In the analysis, a single dichotomous measure of personal and property crime is used as an indicator of criminal victimization. In the second interview, 32 percent of panel respondents reported being victimized.

Experience with the police is measured by responses to evaluative questions asked of respondents who recalled contacting or being stopped by the police in the preceding year. Respondents were asked about six different contexts in which they might have initiated contacts with the police, including reporting a crime or traffic accident, reporting “something suspicious” or “other problems,” and contacting the police for information about crime and other issues. Those who recalled such encounters were asked whether, in their most recent contact, the police they talked to clearly explained the action they would take in response, if the police where helpful and polite, and how fairly they felt they were treated. Respondents were also asked if they had been stopped by the police while driving, and if they were stopped and asked questions while they were on foot. Those recalling either experience were asked whether, in their most recent encounter, the police treated them fairly and politely, if the police explained whey they were stopped, and if police clearly explained what action they would take. For the analysis, dichotomous measures identify respondents recalling a positive experience with the police and those with a negative experience. Respondents who had not been stopped by the police constitute
the reference category. In the second interview, 26 percent of panel respondents reported having had a positive encounter with police, and 7 percent reported a negatively-rated contact.

Police visibility is measured by responses to the questions, “Have you seen a police officer in this area within the last 24 hours,” and (for those who reported they had not) “What about within the past week? Have you seen a police officer in this area?” Responses to these questions were combined to create a three-category ordinal measure of recent police visibility, ranging from in the past 24 hours (44 percent at wave 2) to not at all in the past week (20 percent at wave 2).

The community policing intervention that took place between the two waves of the survey is represented here by a dichotomous indicator of whether each respondent lived in the evaluation’s comparison neighborhood or in any of the program areas. The projects that were instituted there included opening a storefront police office, fielding a community organizing team, and conducting a door-to-door problem solving campaign. In total, 80 percent of panel respondents lived areas that were selected for these programs, and 20 percent lived in the designated comparison area.

Analytic Model

Because the survey data were categorical (including both dichotomies and ordered categories) PRELIS was used to calculate a polychoric correlation matrix, which was then analyzed using LISREL 8.8 and an asymptotic covariance matrix, using weighted least squares procedures. The polychoric matrix estimates correlations between the continuous underlying variables that are realized as categorical indicators in the data, based on a normality assumption. This procedure produces consistent estimates of the model parameters and unbiased standard errors. There are many absolute and relative or incremental fit indices that can be used to assess model fit; here we focus on Bentler and Bonett’s (1980) Normed Fit Index (NFI), and Browne and Cudeck’s (1993) Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). In order to evaluate error in the model we examined standardized residuals and modification indices. This led to the specification of error covariances between two indicators of concern about crime, as indicated in the illustration of the findings. No theoretically appropriate, statistically significant modifications remained in the final model that is presented here.

Results

Figure 1 presents the structural coefficients for the model illustrated above. It presents standardized coefficients, so that their magnitude can be compared across constructs with different measurement properties. The figure also notes the statistical significance of the hypothesized linkages between the measured and unmeasured constructs that lie at the heart of the model. The model fit indices presented in Figure 1 are all good. An NFI value between .90 and .95 is generally seen as acceptable, above .95 as good, and below .90 signaling that the model can be improved; here the value is .95. Good models have a RMSEA of .05 or less; here
The value is .047. The Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI) is traditionally reported for SEM models; the value here is good, but the AFGI is uninformative with large sample sizes.

** Figure 1 goes about here ***

The central portion of Figure 1 illustrates the relative strength and statistical significance of the linkages representing “accountability” and “reassurance” models of attitudes toward the police. In these data, reductions in concern about crime flow from increasing confidence in the police; the link from concern about crime to confidence in the police was not statistically significant. This finding is net of the controls for how worried and confident respondents were when they were first interviewed. It also takes into account the increase in worry about crime that was linked to recent victimization, which was also significant. Both models of the concern-confidence relationship feature hypotheses about police visibility, which is commonly found to be linked to lower levels of fear and more confidence in the police. In this panel data, the extent of visible local policing between the waves of interviews significantly reduced concern. Respondents who recalled spotting police on patrol in their neighborhood recently grew less worried, as Bahn and others suggested. At the same time, recent police visibility led to increased confidence in the police, and this effect was more than twice as strong as the reassurance effect of police visibility. The survey also probed for reports concerning recent encounters with the police. Here, contacts with the police of any kind, both positive and negative, reduced confidence in them. This finding is consistent with the findings of many surveys, which often document that it is respondents with no recent experiences to report who are most positive about the police (Skogan, 2006). That said, having a poor experience with police had three times the impact of a good experience, and the effect of a negatively-rated encounter on confidence in the police was the most powerful in the model. Finally, respondents living in Houston’s three experimental policing areas grew more confident in the police, as anticipated by the program’s developers.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

This research addressed a theoretical ambiguity in the proper causal ordering of concern about crime and confidence in police. Many who study opinions about the police point to neighborhood crime and disorder to explain low levels of confidence in policing in troubled communities. On the other hand, many who study concern about crime and disorder point to public dissatisfaction with how well they are being served and protected by the police as one explanation for high levels of fear and worry about crime in troubled communities. Both views cannot be correct, for they assume a different causal ordering of the same factors. It is also possible that the relationship between concern and confidence is reciprocal, with each affecting each other. This has not been examined by either camp, but the analytic model developed here could also have affirmed that proposition.

The data strongly support the reassurance hypothesis. In the analytic model, the impact of confidence in the police on concern about crime was negative and significant. The more confidence in the police grew among respondents over time, the more their concern about crime
declined. This was net of the influence of recent victimization, which led to increased concern about crime, and visible neighborhood policing, which was associated with lower levels of concern. There was no support for the contention that respondents were holding police accountable for neighborhood conditions. The effect of changing levels of concern about crime on changing confidence in the police was statistically insignificant. This was net of the impact of the quasi-experimental reorganization of the police in four of the five areas studied, an exogenous factor that increased confidence. It was also independent of the influence of recent positively and negatively rated encounters with the police, and of visible neighborhood patrolling, all of which affected confidence as well.

For research, this finding supports the use of measures of concern about crime and disorder to evaluate the reassurance effects of changing policing strategies. It suggests the fear-reduction goal of Britain’s Reassurance Policing Programme may be attainable, if the police can be seen to be becoming more effective and closer to the community. To our normative commitment to fair and effective policing, it adds the empirical benefit of greater perceived safety and security, where the police are doing a good job and treating people professionally. It recommends against the accountability assumption underlying studies of fear and concern about crime. Bahn’s 1974 claim for the importance of the “reassurance factor” in policing thus may prove prophetic, if further tests of the confidence-concern nexus confirm that this is the direction of the causal link between them.

References


Figure 1: SEM Model of Reassurance and Accountability

Model Fit Indices
NFI 0.95
RMSEA 0.047
AGFI 0.98

Standardized Coefficients
** p<.01
* p<.05
( ) not sigf.