

NPIA research briefing

It's a fair cop? Police legitimacy, public cooperation, and crime reduction

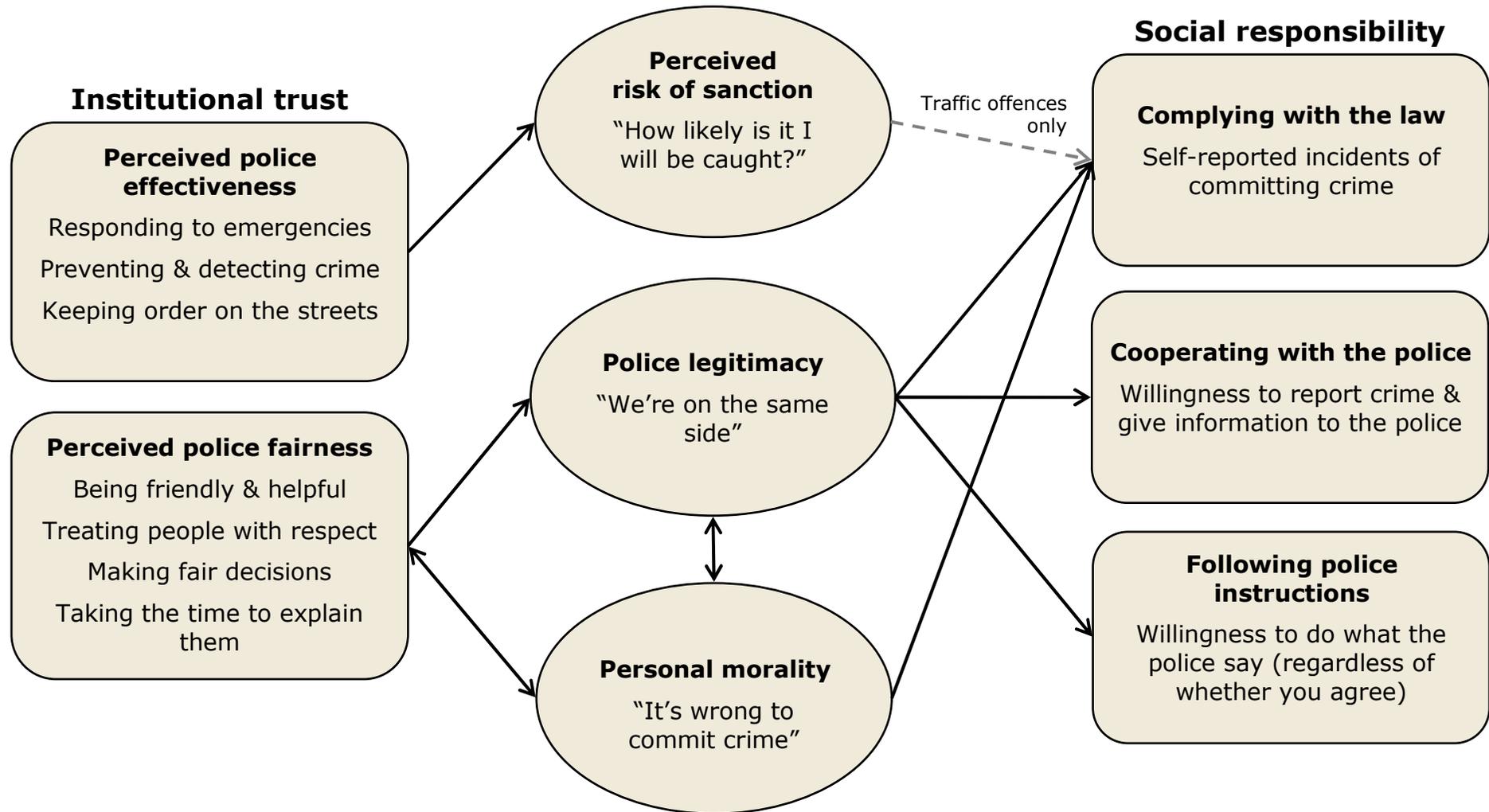
- The next few years will be challenging for a police service expected to reduce crime with fewer resources. Forces will inevitably have to make hard choices on what to prioritise in order to achieve this goal. Ideally, these decisions should be based on a clear understanding of how crime can be prevented, and which policing activities are cost-effective.
- New research by the National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA) and London School of Economics suggests a policing approach that motivates the public to cooperate with the police and to not break the law could have significant benefits. As this approach seeks to encourage people to become more cooperative and socially responsible on a voluntary basis, by 'winning hearts and minds', it potentially offers a cost-effective way of reducing crime.
- The NPIA study is in line with a growing international body of research. This research arguably has particular relevance to England and Wales because the relationship between the police and public has historically been defined in terms of 'policing by consent' – the idea that the police can only function because of the support given to it by the public. As public support is conditional and unlikely ever to be universal, 'policing by consent' raises important questions about the role the police are expected to perform and how officers are expected to act. This idea has continuing relevance to present day policing as it helps define the remit of the police service and mark out an important way in which it can fulfil its 'core mission'.
- The NPIA study – based on a robust national survey of the public – explored what motivated people to cooperate with the police (e.g. reporting crime and suspicious activity, and providing information to help catch offenders) and not breaking the law. Analysis found that the most important factor motivating people to cooperate and not break the law was the **legitimacy of the police**. When people thought the police were on the 'same side' as them, they were significantly less likely to say they had committed an offence and more inclined to say they would help with the police. Crucially, police legitimacy had a **stronger** effect on these outcomes than the perceived

likelihood of people being caught and punished for breaking the law.

- **Trust and shared values** were found to be key aspects of legitimacy. These attitudes were largely fostered by the perception of **police fairness** and not by the perception of **police effectiveness** (in terms of responding to emergencies, preventing and detecting crime, and keeping order). In other words, the legitimacy of the police in the eyes of the public was primarily based on people thinking officers would treat them with respect, make fair decisions and take time to explain them, and be friendly and approachable.
- These findings have important implications for the police service. They show that **fair decision-making** and **positive public interaction** are not only important in their own right, but are also crucial for crime reduction in the longer term. The research suggests that the way officers behave is central to policing as it can encourage greater respect for the law and foster social responsibility. As the effect on crime would be largely **preventive** and rely on **voluntary public cooperation**, improved public encounters could help the police avoid the financial costs associated with enforcing the law, detecting crime, and processing offenders.
- When forces decide how best to reduce crime with fewer resources, they should consider whether their proposed approach would enhance or undermine police legitimacy in the eyes of the public. While a narrow focus on enforcing the law might appeal to traditional 'cop culture', it was not found to have the strongest effect on cooperation and compliance, and might even be counter-productive in the longer-term if it is perceived to be unfair.
- Widespread cultural change is likely to be required if the police are to capitalise on public cooperation. Other research by the NPIA on the police use of time, for example, has highlighted a prevailing view among officers that visible patrol is key to being effective, and that less value was placed on interacting positively with the public. To help address these wider issues, the NPIA is currently providing support to two forces to understand the role leadership plays in shaping the values of frontline officers, and to evaluate the impact of innovative training on police contact with crime victims.

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Note: Adapted from the work of Tyler and colleagues.
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