

When young people no longer see the police as procedurally fair, they are more likely to engage in risky behavior and be victimized.

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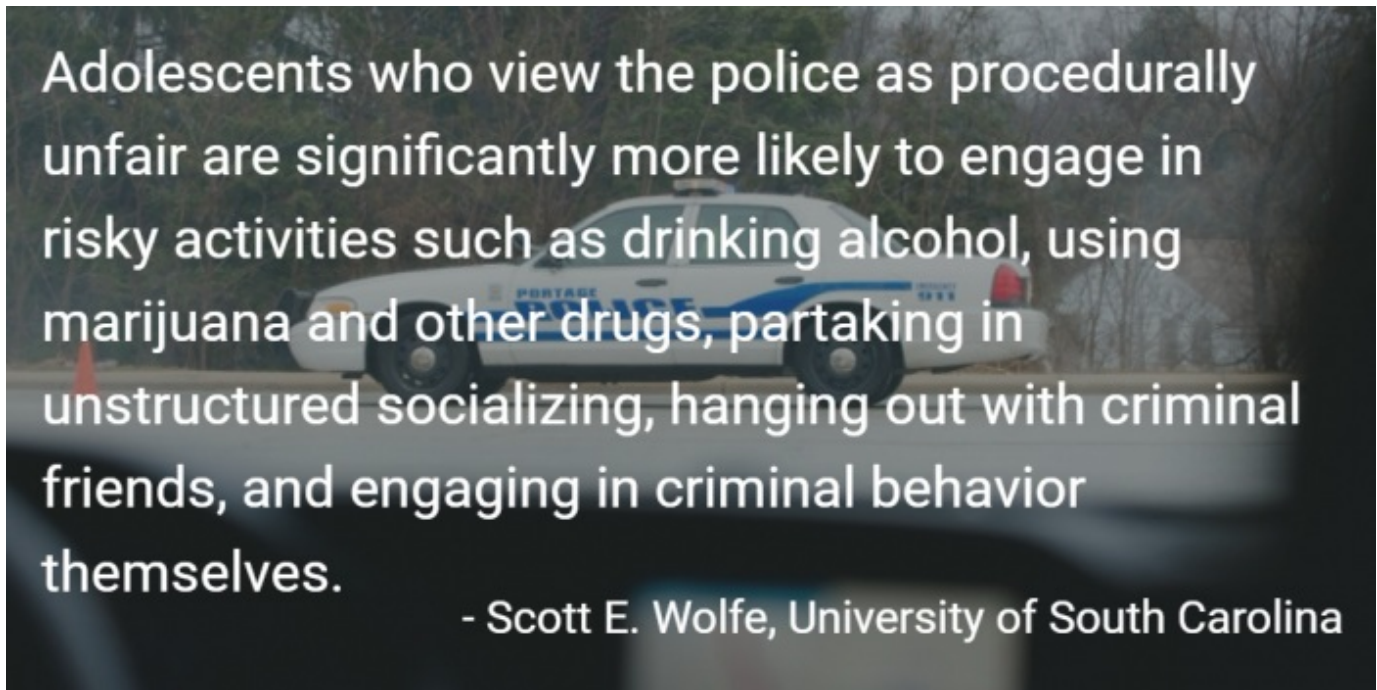
One school of thought suggests that people tend to obey the law because they see police and criminal justice officials as being legitimate. But recent events that have seen police kill unarmed African-Americans have undermined many citizens' belief in the procedural fairness of law enforcement. In new research, [Scott E. Wolfe](#) finds that the decline in trust in the police has consequences for adolescents; those young people who see the police as being procedurally unfair are more likely to engage in criminal behavior and engage in other risky activities which are more likely to lead to their own victimization.



Most people who are raised in disadvantaged neighborhoods or exposed to inadequate parenting —both of which have well-established links to criminal behavior later in life—do not engage in crime. Most criminals, for that matter, do not engage in crime *all* of the time. Given these facts, many criminologists do not seek to uncover what factors *cause* crime. Instead, they focus on a different question—why do people *refrain* from crime? In other words, why do people obey the law? [Tom Tyler's](#) version of procedural justice theory is one perspective that takes aim at this issue. The argument is straightforward—people obey the law when they believe criminal justice officials, such as the police, are legitimate. Police legitimacy represents an individual's view that the police have the right to exert power and that citizens have a moral responsibility to obey that authority. Research has consistently shown that people are more likely to view police as legitimate when they believe officers are procedurally fair—meaning that they treat people with dignity and respect, make decisions with the community's best interests in mind, engage in neutral decision making, and allow citizens a voice during interactions. In short, procedural justice generates legitimacy, which in turn elicits a host of helpful citizen behaviors, including decision acceptance, voluntary compliance with the law, and cooperation in the form of reporting crime.

Procedural fairness matters to people because such treatment supports their expectations about what is appropriate behavior for authority figures. The basis of our social contract with the government is that we give up some of our freedom in exchange for the protection of individual rights. This includes the assurance of a fair criminal justice process that is void of arbitrary or biased decision making. Police help maintain their end of the agreement by behaving in procedurally fair manners, thereby strengthening peoples' ties to their authority. This bond ultimately promotes social control as citizens are in turn more likely to uphold their end of the bargain by obeying the law. Procedural justice motivates people away from criminal behavior because it consolidates our collective conscience regarding appropriate police behavior and our responsibility to obey the laws the police represent. Research over the past few decades clearly demonstrates that procedural justice and legitimacy are associated with numerous beneficial outcomes including [legal compliance](#), [cooperation with the police](#), and [empowerment of police activities](#).

Unfortunately, US policing has been a beleaguered social institution over the past few years. A string of high-profile police killings of unarmed African Americans in cities across the country has galvanized public protest, the [Black Lives Matter](#) movement, and [Department of Justice](#) investigations in several police agencies. This demonstrates that a sizable portion of the American public believes that the police are procedurally unfair, particularly when it comes to the use of force against minority citizens. Public disapproval of this sort is critically important because it demonstrates that some people are less bonded to the police, less willing to afford them legitimacy, and more likely to willingly defy their authority. Unfair treatment (whether perceived or real) communicates to citizens that they are not valued members of society, which erodes identification with the police and law. In this way, procedural *injustice* is a breakdown of social control. [Research](#) has shown that [crime increases](#) may be one result of this [legitimacy](#)



[Kyle McLean](#), a doctoral student at the University of South Carolina, and I recently questioned whether more crime is the only negative outcome that stems from the perception of procedural injustice. If one's moral obligation to obey the law is weakened by a sense of police injustice, we may expect people to engage in other deviant activities that would normally be inhibited by effective social control. Using longitudinal data from the Gang Resistance Education and Training ([GREAT](#)) program, we showed that adolescents who view the police as procedurally unfair are significantly more likely to engage in risky activities such as drinking alcohol, using marijuana and other drugs, partaking in unstructured socializing, hanging out with criminal friends, and engaging in criminal behavior themselves. After controlling for other factors that predict teenagers' involvement in such risky activities (e.g., low self-control and parental supervision), our findings revealed that the suspended social control provided by procedural injustice helped open the door for adolescent involvement in risky lifestyles. Simply viewing the police as procedurally unfair was associated with greater risk for participation in dangerous activities. This finding is important in itself, but we also found that involvement in these activities placed the teenagers at considerable risk for criminal victimization. Procedural injustice appears to partially cut adolescents' bonds to the police, thereby loosening social control and helping pave the way for participation in risky activities conducive to victimization.

This is particularly important in light of the recent climate surrounding police-community relations. The social control potential of procedural justice extends beyond criminal behavior by helping protect people from engaging in activities that increase their risk of victimization. The very people who are questioning the legitimacy of the police may now be at greater risk for victimization given their weakened bond to the institution. After all, if I believe the police are legitimate, I will likely behave in ways that are consistent with my moral beliefs about right and wrong. This includes participating in less crime or behaviors analogous to crime that elevate one's risk of victimization.

Our findings suggest that procedural justice may be more promising than we even thought. However, we must be careful not to label procedural justice a new type of policing as [some have argued](#). Tom Tyler maintained many years ago that procedural justice should not supplant established policing strategies. Instead, procedural justice should augment policing tactics that have been shown to work at minimizing crime. We know that [hot spots policing](#), [intelligence-led policing](#), and, yes, sometimes [stop-and-frisk policing](#) can effectively reduce crime. Unfortunately, many people in minority communities that are exposed to such policing strategies often view them as unjust and excessive. Perhaps one reason for this sentiment is that officers fail to emphasize procedural justice when carrying out these strategies. If such policing tactics were used in tandem with procedural justice, the police could go a long

way toward encouraging voluntary compliance with the law. The police would be wise to seek community input regarding such tactics, clearly explain to the public the reasons for aggressive enforcement strategies, and ensure prejudicial treatment does not occur during such policing. This will help maintain trust in the enforcement efforts and increase long-term perceptions of legitimacy from the public. In the end, procedural justice incorporated into policing activities will help serve the community with the fairness it deserves and protect the community from crime and victimization.

This article is based on the paper, 'Procedural Injustice, Risky Lifestyles, and Violent Victimization', in Crime & Delinquency.

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