Demonstrations, Demoralization, and Depolicing

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**NOTE**: Draft version 1.1, 8/10/2019. This paper has not been peer reviewed. This paper has not yet been published and is therefore not the authoritative document of record. Please do not copy or cite without authors’ permission.
Abstract

Research Summary

This study examined relationships between public antipathy toward the police, demoralization, and depolicing using pooled time-series cross-sections of 13,257 surveys from law enforcement officers in 100 U.S. agencies both before and after Ferguson and contemporaneous demonstrations. The results do not provide strong support for Ferguson Effects. Post-Ferguson changes to job satisfaction, burnout, and cynicism (reciprocated distrust) were negligible, and while Post-Ferguson officers issued fewer citations, they did not conduct less foot patrol or attend fewer community meetings. Cynicism, which was widespread both before and after Ferguson, was associated with less police activity of all types.

Policy Implications

Post-Ferguson protests in 2014 did not appreciably worsen police morale nor lead to withdrawal from most police work (with the exception of citations issued), suggesting that the police institution is resilient to exogenous shocks. However, officer cynicism (as one aspect of morale) appears to be an entrenched, enduring feature of police culture and independently accounts for reduced activity among individual officers, suggesting that agencies may need to address officer cynicism—irrespective of legitimacy crises—in order to promote proactive policing and community engagement.

Keywords

police morale, depolicing, police legitimacy, public attitudes, Ferguson Effect
Introduction

Does increased public criticism of police demoralize police and lead to depolicing? St. Louis Police Chief Sam Dotson answered in the affirmative when he suggested that public outcries following controversial police killings of citizens led to lower police morale, causing officers to withdraw from proactive policing and thereby encouraging criminals to act with impunity. He termed this the “Ferguson Effect” (Byers, 2014).

Others quickly seized on this claim. An influential op-ed in the Wall Street Journal written by journalist Heather MacDonald passionately argued that “agitation against American police” produced low morale and fear of discipline, which, in turn, led to a withdrawal from proactive strategies such as Broken Windows policing. The result, the op-ed claimed, was a “surge in lawlessness” (MacDonald, 2015a). When FBI statistics for the first quarter of 2016 suggested a dramatic increase in violence in many cities, FBI director James Comey, referring to videos of alleged police misconduct, suggested that a “viral video effect” led officers to engage less frequently in proactive police work for fear of being scrutinized (Lichtblau, 2016).

“Ferguson Effect” is a new term but its argument is not. The subtitle of MacDonald’s (2017) book—”How the new attack on law and order makes everyone less safe”—echoes police psychologist Lawrence Blum (2002) who, fifteen years earlier, wrote that “blanket condemnation of the police threatens the very liberties that make such condemnation possible, as well as the safety of the American public in their homes and lives.” Consistent with these claims, policing researchers have identified several plausible consequences of strained police-public relations,
including cynicism (Niederhoffer, 1967), emotional withdrawal (Skolnick, 2011), and a “lay-low” approach to police work (Reuss-Ianni, 2011; Van Maanen, 1974).

The Ferguson Effect, as it is described, consists of a multistep causal process wherein criticism of the police contributes to higher crime through its effect on morale and depolicing. The argument suggests that: (1) widespread criticism and protest of police demoralizes officers, (2) low morale leads to depolicing, and (3) depolicing leads to higher crime rates. The purpose of the current study is to assess whether widespread antipathy toward police following the police-related deaths of black men during late 2014 and early 2015 reduced police morale and whether low morale was associated with depolicing. The data come from two waves of completed surveys from 13,257 officers from 100 departments across the nation. The first wave was administered before the events associated with the Ferguson Effect and the second was administered in the midst of the rancorous discussion in this country wherein police were accused of excessive and biased use of force.

The following section provides historical context by describing the widespread rise in public criticism and protest that occurred after the deaths. The subsequent sections provide background information on the claims that (1) the widespread public antipathy led to lowered police morale and (2) the low police morale produced depolicing. In both sections, the Ferguson-Effect claims set forth by police officials and other commentators (mostly in media accounts) are documented, followed by a discussion of empirical literature supporting that claim.

**Literature Review**
The following review proceeds in several stages. First, public antipathy toward the police is reviewed, including several police-related deaths occurring in 2014 and 2015 which drew sharp scrutiny, as well as the nature and extent of the criticism which followed. The review then turns to police morale, and how it may have been influenced by public criticism. Finally, the review discusses depolicing, or the claim that officers withdrew from proactive police work following nationwide criticism.

**Public Antipathy**

A series of policing-related deaths of men of color during 2014 and 2015 led to a renewed and passionate national discussion of race and police use of force. The deaths included Eric Garner in New York City; Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri; Tamir Rice in Cleveland, Ohio; Walter Scott in North Charleston, South Carolina; Freddie Gray in Baltimore, Maryland; San DuBose in Cincinnati, Ohio; and Laquan McDonald in Chicago, Illinois.

*Incidents drawing widespread public attention.*

On July 17th, 2014, in New York, police attempted to arrest Eric Garner, an unarmed black man, for selling loose cigarettes on the street. The incident was captured in a video, which was published by the *New York Daily News* (Murray, 2015). As officers attempted to arrest Garner, he pulled away. Despite the fact that he was unarmed, and despite a 20-year old NYPD policy banning the use of chokeholds, Officer Daniel Pantaleo puts his arm around Garner’s neck, pulling him to the ground and maintaining the chokehold. Eleven times Garner said, “I can’t breathe” as officers restrained him. After Garner lost consciousness, officers failed to administer CPR, choosing instead to wait for paramedics. Garner died at the scene.
On August 9th, 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri, Michael Brown, a black 18-year-old, was shot and killed by Darren Wilson, a white police officer (Bosman & Fitzsimmons, 2014). Although the police and the community agreed that Michael Brown originally had been unarmed, the police report stated that Michael Brown was trying to arm himself with the officer’s weapon when he was shot. A witness, later discredited, claimed that Brown’s hands were up at the time he was shot.

In Cleveland, Ohio, on November 22, 2014, Tamir Rice, a black 12-year-old, was shot by police while playing with a toy gun in a public park, after a person in the park called police. Although the caller said the gun was “probably fake,” the information was not relayed to responding officers. As shown on the subsequently-released video, the officers shot Tamir within two seconds of arriving at the park. He died the following day (Fitzsimmons, 2014).

Walter Scott was killed by police in North Charleston on April 4, 2015. The unarmed 50-year old, who was stopped by police for a traffic violation, fled the scene. The officer followed and the two engaged in a struggle before Scott freed himself and continued to run. The officer fired 8 rounds from behind, killing Scott. The officer’s official report of what happened was challenged when a community member’s cell-phone video of the encounter was publicly released on April 9th.

Freddie Gray, a 25-year old black male, was arrested by Baltimore PD officers on April 12, 2015, for carrying what the police alleged was an illegal knife. He was transported in a van and ultimately fell into a coma due to spinal cord injuries. He died seven days later. Critics attributed his fatal injuries to the unnecessary use of force during the arrest, the fact that he was not secured in the transport van, and/or a “rough ride” in the van.
On July 19, 2015, Samuel DuBose was stopped for traffic violations by a University of Cincinnati police officer. While the officer was next to the car, DuBose drove forward slowly. The officer’s claim that he was being dangerously dragged alongside the car when he shot into it was disputed by critics who viewed the video. DuBose died from a gunshot wound to his head.

On October 21, 2014, Chicago police shot and killed 17-year-old Laquan McDonald after responding to reports that he was vandalizing and burglarizing vehicles in Chicago’s Southwest Side. Officers were following McDonald, who was armed with a pocket knife and refused orders to stop and drop the knife. One officer eventually opened fire, alleging that McDonald lunged at him; a subsequently-released video of the encounter showed McDonald walking away from the officer.

**Public antipathy in response to in-custody deaths.**

Each of the events described above produced strong public reactions locally and nationally. Some of the events produced local and national demonstrations against police and some of those demonstrations turned into riots. Tensions were exacerbated in some jurisdictions by the initial police response to the protests, including SWAT teams, snipers, and the tear-gassing and arrest of journalists and clergy (Balko, 2014). This attracted the attention of journalists across the country. Night after night, television news programs featured the protests. Op-eds questioned not only the response to protests in Missouri, but the heavy-handed tactics of police more generally (Dansky, 2014; Douthat, 2014; The Los Angeles Times Editorial Board, 2014).

The death of Eric Garner drew national attention and became emblematic of black citizens’ complaints about the disproportionate use of force against unarmed minority men, and
the over-policing of black men for minor crimes. Locally, his death became a vivid illustration of longstanding complaints regarding NYPD’s aggressive-policing practices and their disproportionate minority impact (Southall & Santora, 2014). Protests on the streets of New York occurred when the prosecutors failed to indict the officer (Newman, 2014).

The killing of Tamir Rice produced national coverage and local protests. Initially, the killing of LaQuan McDonald drew little attention; the local protests and national outcry came after the video of the encounter was released on November 24, 2015. At least four demonstrations were held around the country following the death of Samuel DuBose, including a Black Lives Matter rally on July 31, 2015 at which six people were arrested.

The most powerful protests came after the deaths of Michael Brown and Freddie Gray. The claim by the officer that Michael Brown was going for his weapon was met with disbelief and indignation by the predominantly black community, owing in part to mounting tensions over racially-biased criminal justice practices in Ferguson (later confirmed in a Department of Justice investigation; (USDOJ, 2015), and in part because it came shortly after national attention to the death of Eric Garner. The outrage was exacerbated by the initial accounts given by Brown’s friend, Dorian Johnson, who described an execution in the street while Brown’s hands were raised (Bosman & Goode, 2014). Ferguson and the greater St. Louis area erupted into demonstrations, protests, and eventually riots (Bever, 2014) which soon spread nationwide (Bacon, 2014; Holpuch, 2014).

The protests following Gray’s hospitalization and ultimate death turned violent, including a major protest in Baltimore on April 25, 2015 that resulted in 34 arrests and injuries to 15 police
officers. Another protest after Gray’s funeral produced looting and burning; the governor declared a state of emergency and called in the National Guard.

The antipathy on the part of the public in response to the series of police-related in-custody deaths is indicated not just by the protests and riots described above, but also by surveys showing more negative attitudes toward the police. The results of Ferguson-era local surveys and national polls were consistent with academic research over the years that has documented the erosion in satisfaction with police following high-profile incidents involving perceived excessive force (Jefferis, Kaminski, Holmes, & Hanley, 1997; Kaminski & Jefferis, 1998; Sigelman, Welch, Bledsoe, & Combs, 1997; Tuch & Weitzer, 1997; Weitzer, 2002). As reported by Tuch & Weitzer (1997: 647): “…attitudes (toward police) are strongly affected by celebrated, well-publicized incidents of police brutality. Such events are followed by an erosion of support for the police at both the local level … and the national level.”

Kochel (2015a, 2015b) measured the views about police on the part of St. Louis County residents in high crime areas two years before and immediately after the events in Ferguson (which is in St. Louis County). She documented a 25 percent decline in “trust and a sense of procedural justice in policing” and a 10 percent decline in the perceived legitimacy of the police. Post-Ferguson, St. Louis residents also perceived a greater frequency of police misconduct. These changes were primarily among African American residents.

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1 Studies documenting impact at the local level include those by Kochel (2015; 2015), Lasley (1994), Sigelman, et al. (1997), Tuch and Weitzer (1997), and Weitzer (Weitzer, 2002); studies documenting impact at the national level include those by Sigelman, et al. (1997) and Tuch and Weitzer (1997).
At the national level, Gallup has been collecting data about respondents’ levels of confidence in police since 1993. In June 2015 (Jones, 2015), Gallup reported that the percentage of poll respondents (18%) who reported “little or no confidence in police” was the highest since 1993. (The first survey was conducted while the four officers involved in the Rodney King beating were being tried the second time.) The Pew Research Center reported on changes in views related to police bias between 2009 and late 2014 and stated, “the share of blacks saying they have ‘very little’ confidence in their local police to treat blacks and whites equally has increased, from 34% five years ago to 46% currently” (Stepler, 2017).

By the fall of 2014, critique of police practice and policy was pervasive. The tone had become so rancorous by the end of the year that two New York City police officers were ambushed as they sat in their patrol car by a man who openly sought vengeance against police (Mueller & Baker, 2014).

**Low Police Morale**

Pursuant to the Ferguson Effect argument, widespread public protest of police lowers police morale. Consistent with this demoralization hypothesis, as protests against the police expanded, there were a number of press reports that morale in U.S. policing had plummeted. The Dallas police chief reported the results of an internal survey of his officers: “72 percent of respondents rated morale as ‘low’ or the ‘lowest it’s ever been’” (Martin, 2015). Officers’ growing dissatisfaction with their work was linked to their leaving the profession in record numbers (Martin, 2015). Other news media reported increases in police departures in various departments around the nation, including St. Louis, San Diego, Camden, and Savannah (Boren & Wood, 2015; Byers, 2015; Coleman, 2015; Mento, 2014).
Journalist Sappenfield (2015) interviewed law enforcement personnel around the country on the heels of several deadly attacks on police—that were attributed by some observers to increased public antipathy—and reported that police feel “under siege.” Brian Luciano, president of the Virginia Beach Police Benevolent Association, told a local paper, “When you see officers in Baltimore going through what they’re going through—and in Ferguson and New York—that affects morale here.” (Sappenfield 2015). Conservative-leaning news outlets, long sympathetic to law enforcement, cited comments from numerous current and former law enforcement officers who reported plummeting morale (Picket, 2015). A “Blue Lives Matter” mantra emerged, competing with the Black Lives Matter movement, arguing that criticism of the police was as dehumanizing for the police as racism was for African Americans, and was leading to demoralization of police (Brownfeld, 2015).

As reported above, there is is research going back decades that has suggested that police attitudes are substantially influenced by the quality of their relationship with the public. Two academic studies conducted in the aftermath of the Ferguson events confirm an impact of public criticism on police morale. Deuchar, Fallik and Chrichlow (2018) conducted “in-depth semi-structured interviews” with twenty law enforcement professionals in two counties who reported lowered morale that they attributed to the Ferguson aftermath. Nix and Wolfe (2017) surveyed 567 sworn deputies in a single agency and report finding, “a sizable portion of the sample indicated they have become less motivated over the previous 6 months” as a result of negative publicity for law enforcement (2017: 94).

In 2018, Torres, Reling and Hawdon conducted a survey of over 2600 officers from all over the U.S. in 2017 and reported that the “post-Ferguson psychological impacts continued to affect current levels of cynicism, motivation, and apprehensiveness” (2018: 358).²
Depolicing

The posited third stage in the Ferguson Effect suggests that low morale leads to depolicing, which has been defined broadly as withdrawal from proactive police work (Shjarback, Pyrooz, Wolfe, & Decker, 2017). In the seminal formulation of this depolicing hypothesis, St. Louis Police Chief Sam Dotson described the “Ferguson Effect” as the fatigue and withdrawal officers experienced after demoralizing public demonstrations against them (Byers, 2014).

There were a number of media-reported claims of reductions in police activity following the shooting of Michael Brown (Hosko, 2018: 19–24). NPR reported a few months after the shooting of Michael Brown, “When morale dips, some cops walk the beat—but do the minimum” (Kaste, 2015). As previously noted, James Comey warned that there was a “viral video effect”—that is, an avoidance of police work for fear of being recorded and criticized on social media (Lichtblau, 2016). In Chicago, a decline in arrests was attributed to the widespread condemnation that followed the release of a video of the LaQuan McDonald shooting (Arthur & Asher, 2016). Even before the events in Ferguson, critics suggested that police in New York were retreating from their duties following controversy in the wake of Eric Garner’s chokehold death (MacDonald, 2015b).

A body of human resources literature suggests that job performance is frequently determined by work-related attitudes such as job satisfaction (Judge, Thoresen, Bono, & Patton, 2001), burnout (Taris, 2006), and perceptions of disciplinary fairness (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001). Examining police specifically, Brown in his book “Working the Street” (1981) reported that in the context of “a sometimes hostile community and a maze of
departmental regulations” officers feel underappreciated and mistreated by both their department and community. According to Brown, these attitudes produce disengagement from police work, especially proactive community-based policing.

Research not directly linked to the Ferguson era supports Brown’s early findings. Wolfe and Nix (2016a) found evidence of a link between public criticism of police and depolicing, reporting that officers whose motivation was lessened due to negative publicity about police were less willing to engage in community partnerships (see also Oliver, 2017). Mourtgos and colleagues found that officers’ trust in the public predicts their proactive activity and number of arrests (Mourtgos, Mayer, Wise, & O’Rourke, 2019). Shi (2009) examined police activity in the Cincinnati Police Department following a 2001 riot linked to an officer-involved shooting that led, in turn, to department oversight. The author reported reduced arrests in the post-riot/oversight period, stating, “the decrease was greater for offenses where police officers had more discretion and greater chance for errors, and in communities with a higher percentage of African Americans” (2009: 111).

Shjarback et al. (2017), too, found depolicing effects were greatest in areas with high percentages of minority residents. The team used data from 118 (of the 121) police departments in the State of Missouri that served populations of over 5,000 to compare police activity before (2014) and after (2015) the events in Ferguson. They reported “clear reductions in the number of [vehicle/traffic] stops performed by Missouri police departments” (2017: 46).

Morgan and Pally (2016) examined the arrest rate in Baltimore after the Michael Brown and Freddie Gray incidents compared to the previous year and found the Baltimore Police Department made 19 percent fewer arrests in the Ferguson Era period, which could not be
explained by reduced crime. As with previous research, the impact was greatest for high-discretion crimes; in fact, arrests for the more serious crimes were unchanged.

At the national level, the Pew Research Center reported on the results of surveys of over 1,700 officers from departments all over the U.S. (Stepler 2017). Eighty-six percent of the responding officers reported that “high profile incidents between blacks and police have made their jobs harder” and three-fourths claimed that their colleagues were now more reluctant to use force and conduct detentions. The Police Foundation (n.d.) surveyed officers nationally in the post-Ferguson era and found that the “increased scrutiny and attention from the media and the public” made them less willing to detain suspicious persons (see also Nix and Wolfe, 2016).

Current Study

The police-related deaths of several black men during 2014 and 2015 produced substantial antipathy for police. Some police leaders and editorialists expressed concern that this antipathy would reduce police morale and lead to depolicing, and researchers have reported a degree of support for these phenomena among post-Ferguson officers. There are several reasons these claims warrant further study, including application to other periods of civil unrest, the need to establish temporal order in the causal process, and the generalizability of these phenomena to all law enforcement officers.

As indicated in the previous review, controversial and highly publicized deaths at the hands of police contributed to nationwide riots and demonstrations, highly critical coverage on news media and social media, and erosion of public trust, according to public opinion polling. If this was unique historically, then there might be little need for in-depth study. However, the
nationwide criticism of police appearing after the aforementioned incidents in 2014 and 2015 is
not historically unique. U.S. history has been marked by other periods of widespread public
demonstrations against the police, especially in response to controversial use-of-force incidents
and claims of systemic racial disparities. Prominent examples of nationwide protests include
those in the context of the 1960’s Civil Rights movement, as well as those following the acquittal
of officers involved in the Rodney King beating in 1992. More isolated, localized examples
include the Cincinnati riots of 2001 and the St. Petersburg riots of 1996. Given the periodicity of
public demonstrations against the police, it is important to study its influence on police attitudes
and behaviors, because the implications are likely to apply to other events in the future. In short,
the core propositions of the Ferguson Effect are almost certainly implied in other periods of civil
unrest, warranting further study.

One of these core propositions includes the demoralization hypothesis. The
demoralization hypothesis suggests that antipathy toward the police reduces officer morale. As
mentioned earlier, some research documents negative officer attitudes after exposure to
widespread criticism in 2014 and 2015. However, this research suffers from some weaknesses
that this study intends to address. One substantial challenge to existing Ferguson Effect research
is a lack of systematic before-and-after comparisons. All extant studies of officer attitudes have
been cross-sectional and retrospective—for instance, asking officers how their attitudes have
changed since Ferguson, rather than comparing pre-Ferguson attitudes to post-Ferguson
attitudes. While they all support the demoralization hypothesis—that police morale has
worsened—it is also plausible that police attitudes have always been quite negative, or that
officers’ reports of their past attitudes are tainted by their current sentiments. Furthermore,
research on police morale in the Ferguson era has mostly been limited to surveys within one or a few agencies, limiting generalizability. The present study remedies these deficiencies through the use of pooled time-series data and the use of a large, nationally representative sample of law enforcement officers.

A second claim emerging from the Ferguson Effect concerns the relationship between low morale and depolicing. Specifically, some argued that demoralized officers were at risk of withdrawing from more discretionary, proactive police work, reverting to a purely reactionary approach instead. While some research supports these claims, the research on depolicing suffers from at least four limitations. First, studies that use temporal measures of activity (e.g., traffic stops, arrests) have been limited to one agency or state, raising the issue of generalizability. Second, these examinations of temporal change in activity do not simultaneously capture changes in officer attitudes, precluding any understanding of their covariation. Put differently, temporal changes in officer attitudes have yet to be established, precluding their ability to predict changes in police activity (if any). Third, studies that have examined the relationships between officer attitudes and activity have used retrospective surveys and/or used convenience samples. Fourth, depolicing research has been limited to stops and arrests, a narrow range of police work that neglects other important discretionary activities. For instance, foot patrol and community engagement are cornerstones of modern community policing, but depolicing research has yet to consider whether they also suffered reductions in the Ferguson era. This study improves the depolicing research through the use of pooled time-series data and large, nationwide surveys that measure covariation of attitudes and behavior over time, and considers additional types of police activity that could plausibly fall victim to depolicing.
An understanding of the ways police officers respond to widespread public antipathy is significant for several reasons. First, periods of intense criticism seem to occur with some regularity, suggesting that such processes have broader historical relevance and are likely to recur in the future. Second, processes of attitudinal and behavioral adaptation in response to substantial external pressures are highly relevant to theories of police culture and occupational adaptation. Third, the relationship between police and the public is inherently a reciprocal exchange, and an understanding of police responses to the public is just as important as an understanding of public responses to the police. Fourth, and perhaps most important, an evaluation of officers’ responses to criticism is of foremost social import. If protest and criticism are healthy features of American governance, then the reaction of public servants to such antipathy must be understood. The Ferguson Effect suggestion that officers may withdraw in response to widespread criticism—emotionally via demoralization, physically via depolicing—is a troublesome claim, and deserves thorough study.

The current study builds and improves upon prior research by examining whether claims associated with the Ferguson Effect hold up empirically, using a large, representative sample and measuring changes over time. The research questions are as follows:

RQ #1: Did police morale worsen following widespread public dissent?

RQ #2: Is low police morale associated with depolicing?
Method

This study draws on large, longitudinal samples of police officer surveys in order to explore several core claims of the Ferguson Effect. The following sections describe the data, sample, measures, and analytic techniques in detail.

Data

The data come from two waves of officer surveys—one of which was administered before the key incidents described above that produced widespread public dissent, and one of which was administered in the midst of the widespread dissent. A total of 13,257 surveys were completed by officers from 100 U.S. law enforcement agencies. As described in more detail below, morale was measured with survey items reflecting job satisfaction, burnout and cynicism; depolicing was operationalized as a reduction in foot patrol, attendance at community meetings, and/or citations issued. The multi-wave surveys constitute a pooled time-series cross-section (Raffalovich & Chung, 2015).

Sample

The data used in this study come from survey responses from law enforcement employees in 100 agencies participating in the National Police Research Platform (Rosenbaum et al., 2016). The 100 agencies reflect a random sample of agencies with 100 or more sworn officers that were drawn from Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics (LEMAS). The set of agencies includes a mix of sheriff’s offices (20%) and police departments (80%), closely resembling the national distribution of law enforcement agency types. To survey the officers within each of the agencies, the chief executive (e.g., sheriff, chief) distributed email
invitations to complete the survey to the population of employees in the department. To promote response rate, recipients were assured anonymity on these web-based surveys that were delivered via Qualtrics. Researchers periodically followed up and/or visited with agency leaders to facilitate distribution and completion of the surveys (Rosenbaum et al., 2011). The mean agency-level response rate of sworn officers exceeded 37%, which is among the highest reported for web-based officer surveys (Nix, Pickett, Baek, & Alpert, 2017).

Surveys were administered to all department employees, resulting in an initial sample of 32,308 surveys. However, for inclusion in this study, three criteria must be met. First, the respondent must be a sworn law enforcement officer. Second, the respondent must not be a supervisor, given evidence that supervisors and rank-and-file officers demonstrate substantial differences (Reuss-Ianni, 2011). Third, the respondent’s assignment must involve discretionary field activities that are theoretically relevant to the Ferguson Effect; therefore, officers assigned to patrol, traffic enforcement, gang enforcement, and similar activities were included, whereas officers in non-field activities such as communications, courts, civil process, and similar assignments were not. The inclusion criteria resulted in final pooled sample sizes of between 12,762 to 13,257 for univariate analyses, and between 8,096 to 11,230 for multivariate analyses after listwise deletion.

Two waves of surveys were collected within these 100 departments, except that 13 agencies participated in just the first or second wave (but not both). The first survey used in this study was administered between September 9, 2013 and January 1, 2014. The second survey was administered between October 20, 2014, and February 14, 2015. Thus, many of the flashpoints for police protests—including the police-related deaths of Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tamir
Rice, and Laquan McDonald—occurred between each wave of survey responses. Because of the
timing of the two waves, the data are therefore particularly well suited for addressing issues
related to the Ferguson Effect.

**Measures**

Although the surveys were not prospectively designed to measure Ferguson Effect
variables related to demoralization and depolicing, they nonetheless contain a multitude of
measures directly related to police attitudes and self-reported discretionary activities. The
measures used in this study fall into one of four general categories: measures of morale,
measures of police activity, demographic control variables, and a temporal indicator. Further
details are provided in the following sections, organized by research question.

**Research question 1: Demoralization.**

Question 1 examines whether Post-Ferguson public antipathy toward police is associated
with various dimensions of low police morale. Morale is not a unidimensional or psychological
construct per se, but the term is used colloquially by both police and commentators to describe
several related occupational attitudes. The dependent measures of morale used in this study
encompass *job satisfaction, burnout, and cynicism.*

*Job satisfaction* is measured via two items. The first item asks officers to indicate
whether they are satisfied or dissatisfied “with the department as a place to work.” The second
item asks officers to indicate whether they are satisfied or dissatisfied with their present job
assignment. For each item, responses are coded 1 to indicate satisfaction and 0 to indicate
dissatisfaction.
Burnout encompasses work-related symptoms of exhaustion and inefficacy (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Officers are asked four questions to capture how often they experienced the following:

- I feel burned out from my work.
- I feel emotionally drained from my work.
- I feel frustrated by my job.
- I feel used up at the end of the day.

Responses are captured with a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 indicates “never,” 4 indicates “2-3 times a month,” and 7 represents “daily.” Thus, higher scores on these items indicate higher levels of burnout. These scores are collapsed into a composite scale given high inter-item reliability (α = .9172).

Cynicism has been described as an officer’s “contemptuous distrust of human nature and motives” (Graves, 1996). Cynicism is measured via five items that assess the officers’ sense of mutual or reciprocated dislike or distrust of the public, which some said was high following Ferguson and other police controversies of 2014 (Deuchar, Crichlow, & Fallik, 2019; Deuchar, Fallik, & Crichlow, 2018; Nix & Pickett, 2017). Officers are asked to indicate their level of agreement with the following four statements:

- Officers have reason to be distrustful of most citizens.
- The public doesn’t understand what it means to be an officer.
- The media treat the police unfairly.
- Most people respect the police (reversed).
- The relationship between police and the people of this city is very good (reversed).
Each item was reduced to a dichotomous variable where 1 indicates agreement with the statement and 0 indicates disagreement.³

**Research question 2: Depolicing.**

Question 2 examines whether low police morale is associated with depolicing. Depolicing refers to police withdrawal from proactive and self-initiated police activities. This study measures three such forms of police activity as outcome variables: *foot patrol*, attendance at community *meetings*, and *citations* issued.

*Foot patrol* is measured by a survey item asking respondents “How often do you engage in Foot Patrol (for at least 30 minutes)?” Responses are captured via a 5-point ordinal scale where 1 = never, 2 = one to five times per year, 3 = one to two times per month, 4 = one to two times per week, and 5 = once per day. Officers who indicate that the question is not applicable are coded as missing, rather than “never.”

*Meetings* refers to the frequency with which an officer attends meetings with community members. Officers are asked “How often do you engage in/attend community meetings?” Responses are captured using the same 5-point ordinal scale as the preceding *foot patrol* measure.

³ Measures for cynicism and job satisfaction were originally captured using 4-point Likert scales (e.g., 1=Strongly Agree, 2=Agree, 3=Disagree, 4=Strongly Disagree). They were reduced to dichotomous agree/disagree statements for ease of interpretation: the percentage shift from agree to disagree between waves (or vice versa) is inherently more interpretable than the difference on a 4-point scale (e.g., from 2.54 to 2.60). Furthermore, evaluation of the magnitude of effect was more straightforward using a percentage change in officers who agree, rather than using the change in a 4-point scale, which necessitates the interpretation of another test statistic, such as Cohen’s *d*. Nonetheless, the pattern of results is the same, and these results are available from the first author upon request. Furthermore, *job satisfaction* and *cynicism* were not collapsed into composite scales because the composite score masked curious and unexpected details—for instance, a contradictory increase on some measures of cynicism, but a decrease on others.
The citations variable indicates the number of citations officers report issuing in the previous 40 hours/one week of work. Responses are measured with a 5-point ordinal scale, where the lowest value represents no citations written, and the highest value represents 4 or more citations issued in the past week.

Independent variables for Question 2 include the survey-wave variable and several morale variables. A temporal dummy variable indicates whether the officer is a pre-Ferguson (0) or post-Ferguson (1) survey respondent (although the surveys used in this study spanned several other legitimacy crises, as well), in order to examine whether pre-Ferguson officers and post-Ferguson officers significantly differed in reported police activity. Job satisfaction, burnout, and cynicism are measured with 8 variables as described in the measures for Research Question 1.

Several demographic variables are also included as control variables, including a continuous age measure, a dichotomous race indicator (where white=1 and non-white=0), gender (where male=1), and an ordinal educational level, which ranges from 0 to 5 (where 0 indicates no college and 5 indicates a graduate or professional degree). Age is grand mean centered for the multilevel models.

**Analytic Techniques**

Analysis proceeds in two stages. Stage 1 evaluates whether officers’ job satisfaction, burnout, and cynicism significantly changed after Ferguson. Descriptive statistics are presented, and two-sample t-tests are performed in order to evaluate whether significant differences are observed between pre-Ferguson and post-Ferguson respondents.4

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4 In order to ensure high response rates, as well as encourage honest survey responses, individual officers are not identified in the surveys, precluding repeated-samples t-tests.
Stage 2 examines whether morale predicts depolicing—more specifically, whether job satisfaction, burnout, and cynicism predict foot patrol, attendance at community meetings, and citations written. A series of multilevel pooled time-series cross-section analyses are presented (Raffalovich & Chung, 2015). First, baseline regression models, containing a temporal dummy variable predictor but no morale-related measures, are presented to explore whether post-Ferguson officers were significantly more likely to report less frequent foot patrol, community meetings, or citations. The dummy-variable technique is equivalent to random-intercepts hierarchical regression using wave as a grouping variable, and is used here for simplicity since there are only two time points (Raffalovich and Chung 2015). Next, police activity is regressed on eight measures of morale in order to determine whether these factors account for any differences in police activity between pre-Ferguson and post-Ferguson officers. Because the outcomes (foot patrol, meetings, and citations) are measured using 5-point scales, ordinal logistic regression models are estimated (Pampel, 2000). Because officers are clustered within agencies, and within those agencies are clustered into work assignments (e.g., traffic, gangs, patrol, etc.), two-level models with random intercepts are presented in order to account for nonindependence of observations. This technique accounts for any time-invariant

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5 See previous footnote. These data are gathered from pooled time-series cross-sections, rather than a traditional time-series panel, due to anonymization of officer surveys. Therefore, within-officer changes over time cannot be measured; instead, between-officer differences are compared between two time points.

6 Binary logistic regression models, not shown, were also examined. These models used dichotomous some/none measures for foot patrol, meetings, and citations. These may be considered measures of absolute depolicing. Binary logistic regression also does not rely upon the parallel odds assumption of ordinal regression. The pattern of results was the same as the ordinal models presented here.

7 Three-level models were investigated, wherein officers were clustered into assignments, which were clustered within agencies. However, agency-level variation for most models fell to less than .001 when accounting for within-agency assignment. Therefore, the hierarchical models presented here use (agency unique) assignment indicators that account for nearly all group-level heterogeneity. Put differently, instead of up to 10 possible assignments within each of 100 agencies (a three-level model), the models presented here consist of 627 distinct assignment groups across all agencies (a two-level model consisting of officers and assignment groups). Odds ratios and standard errors between the two-level and three-level models are nearly identical, and there were no significant
unobserved/unmeasured agency-specific assignment-related factors that account for frequency of 
*foot patrol, community meetings, and citations written* (Luke, 2004). For instance, officers in 
traffic assignments will be much more likely to issue citations than officers in other assignments, 
and traffic units in one agency may have significantly different enforcement patterns than traffic 
units in other agencies. There is also evidence that workplace culture varies substantially within 
the police workgroup, enough to influence officer behavior (Ingram, Terrill, & Paoline, 2018). 
The multilevel models used here account for such grouping.

**Results**

Table 1 reports descriptive statistics for study variables. Table 1 indicates that the average 
respondent was white, male, about 40 years of age, and held an associate’s degree or equivalent. 
About half of all respondents were surveyed post-Ferguson (51.8%). The following sections 
report the results of t-tests and multilevel logistic regression in more detail.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

**Research Question 1: Demoralization**

Table 2 presents a comparison of morale-related attitudes between the pre-Ferguson and 
post-Ferguson samples. All morale-related items—reflecting job satisfaction, burnout and 
cynicism—demonstrated statistically significant differences before and after Ferguson, and all 
but one of these was significant at the $p < .001$ level. However, the magnitude of change was 
very small in each case, drawing attention to the distinction between *statistically significant* 

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differences in overall model fit. While the statistical inferences remain the same, the two-level models are reported 
due to their parsimony.
differences and *substantively* significant differences. Furthermore, and importantly, two of these relationships were significant in a direction *opposite* expectations.

[INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

The two job satisfaction items showed a slight decline post-Ferguson. Post-Ferguson officers were significantly, but only slightly less likely to express satisfaction with their agency as a place to work (67.1% vs 64.2%, p < .001). They were also significantly, but only slightly less likely to express satisfaction with their present job assignment (87.7% vs. 86.3%, p < .05). A clear majority of officers are satisfied with the work they do, and this is true both before and after Ferguson. That there is only approximately a 3% reduction in the proportion of officers who are satisfied with their jobs post-Ferguson presents rather underwhelming evidence that the dissent and protests following several police controversies had any appreciable effect on officers’ *job satisfaction*.

Post-Ferguson officers demonstrate significantly more *burnout* than pre-Ferguson officers (t = 3.750, p < .001). While statistically significant, Cohen’s *d* is just .066—an effect size that is generally considered negligible (Durlak, 2009). That officers report very small increases in the frequency of *burnout* symptoms challenges the claim that nationwide protests are associated with substantial or widespread *burnout*.

Five survey items comparing *cynicism* in pre-Ferguson and post-Ferguson samples also suggest modest effects, or contradict Ferguson Effect proponents entirely. For instance, post-Ferguson officers are significantly *less likely* to feel that officers have reason to be distrustful of most citizens (34.5% vs. 31.9%, p < .001). And while it is true that nearly 2% more post-Ferguson officers agreed that “the public doesn’t understand what it means to be an officer”
(91.7% vs. 93.3%, p < .001), what is most noteworthy is that more than nine in ten officers agreed with this statement before Ferguson and other controversial use of force incidents. Three quarters of pre-Ferguson respondents and four fifths of post-Ferguson respondents felt that the police are treated unfairly by the media (75.2% vs. 79.7%, p < .001). It is worth emphasizing once again that a vast majority of officers felt victimized by the media well before the nationally televised news of Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and other police-related deaths.

The final two cynicism items present curious findings. A slightly larger proportion of post-Ferguson officers felt that the public does not generally respect police (43% vs. 47.2%, p < .001). However, slightly more post-Ferguson respondents felt that the relationship with their local community was good; just 41.5% of post-Ferguson respondents (vs. 46.9% pre-Ferguson, p < .001) think that the relationship between their own agency and their own community is not very good. Thus, there is some indication that officers’ evaluation of police-community relations diverge post-Ferguson when it comes to evaluations of their own agency versus the policing institution more generally.

Research Question 2: Depolicing

Table 3 presents six multilevel fixed-effects ordinal logistic regression models utilizing a pooled time-series data. Models 1 through 3 evaluate whether post-Ferguson respondents report lower self-reported activity, after accounting for several control variables and the clustering of officers within agencies and work assignments. Model 1 suggests that post-Ferguson officers do not report doing significantly less frequent foot patrol (OR = .929, SE = .041 p = .096). Model 2 likewise suggests that post-Ferguson respondents do not report attending community meetings less frequently (OR = 1.069, SE = .050 p = .154). However, Model 3 indicates that
post-Ferguson officers are about 28% less likely to write more citations (OR = .717, SE = .032, p < .001). Therefore, there is evidence the citations fell following Ferguson, but that reductions in other forms of police activity did not materialize.

Notwithstanding evidence that some forms of police activity (foot patrol and attendance at community meetings) remained stable during the post-Ferguson period, it is still possible that, at the officer level, demoralization is associated with depolicing. While the findings in the previous section established that attitudes did not substantively change before and after Ferguson, it also revealed that officers expressed a good deal of cynicism before widespread criticism. Such cynicism may be associated with a withdrawal from duties irrespective of protests. Models 4 through 6 examine whether job satisfaction, burnout, and cynicism are associated with police activity—the depolicing hypothesis. To support the claim that low morale was related to depolicing, statistically significant relationships between the three measures of activity and the three measures of morale are expected.

Patterns of significance are similar across Models 4 through 6. Satisfaction with the agency as a place to work predicts more frequent attendance at community meetings (OR = 1.293, SE = .077, p < .001), but not on other forms of police activity; satisfaction with one’s job assignment has no effect on activity. Burnout is significantly associated with a less foot patrol (OR = .953, SE = .015, p < .001) and citations issued (OR = .953, SE = .015, p < .001), although it is not associated with less frequent attendance at community meetings.

Various measures of cynicism demonstrate significant effects. Officers who believe that “The public doesn’t understand what it means to be an officer” (cynicism 2) report significantly
less foot patrol (OR = .678, SE = .057, p < .001), significantly fewer meetings (OR = .764, SE = .068, p = .002), and significantly fewer citations (OR = .817, SE = .072, p = .022). Furthermore, officers who believe that the relationship between their agency and their own community is not very good (cynicism 5) are about 15% less likely to conduct more foot patrol (OR = .850, SE = .046, p = .003), about 20% less likely to attend more frequent community meetings (OR = .794, SE = .046, p < .001), and nearly 9% less likely to write more tickets, although this latter finding is not statistically significant (OR = .918, SE = .050, p = .121). Officers who agree that officers have reason to be distrustful of most citizens attend fewer meetings (OR = .836, SE = .044, p < .001). Opposite expectations, officers who felt that the media was unfair to police were about 16% more likely to write more citations (OR = 1.164, SE = .064, p = .006), contradicting Comey’s claims that a “chill wind” is connected to officers’ fears of being tried in the media. Finally, the post-Ferguson time variable maintains significant and substantive effects on citation-writing even when controlling for various measures of morale, suggesting that other factors mediate the relationship between post-Ferguson dissent and a decrease in citation issuance. In sum, there is some evidence that elements of low officer morale—particularly burnout and cynicism toward the public—is associated with depolicing.

**Discussion**

In 2014 and 2015, the deaths of several black men at the hands of police led to national news and widespread criticism of police. These events contributed to the rise of an international Black Lives Matter movement, drawing attention to racial disparities in police-related violence. Thousands of protestors marched in St. Louis, Missouri following the death of Michael Brown.
Protests were not limited to St. Louis and Ferguson, but also spread nationwide (Holpuch, 2014). Editorialists across the nation also turned a critical lens toward the police (Gertner, 2014; Hawkins, 2014).

Several law enforcement defenders argued that public antipathy toward police had consequences for police and society. St. Louis Police Chief Sam Dotson first coined the term “Ferguson Effect” to describe the effect of protests on both officers and citizens (Byers, 2014). In an infamous op-ed and, later, a book entitled The War on Cops, Heather MacDonald argued that “agitation” against the police led to low morale and depolicing, and therefore threatened increases in crime.

A limited body of empirical research has supported the demoralization hypothesis; some studies have suggested that officers’ morale worsened after Ferguson (Deuchar et al., 2019, 2018; Torres, Reling, & Hawdon, 2018). Another small body of research suggests that post-Ferguson antipathy may have been associated with depolicing. But most research examining the demoralization and depolicing propositions of the Ferguson Effect has been limited by a lack of systematic before-and-after comparisons with large, representative samples.

Using 13,257 officer surveys from a nationally representative sample of 100 law enforcement agencies, this study compared measures of morale and police activity among officers surveyed pre-Ferguson and officers surveyed post-Ferguson using before-and-after t-tests, as well as hierarchical pooled time-series cross-section regression analyses. The study tested the core Ferguson Effect claims that a “war on cops” led to low morale, and that low morale contributed to depolicing.
The key findings present mixed support for these predictions. The results of two-sample t-tests (presented in Table 2) indicate that post-Ferguson officers are significantly less satisfied and significantly more burned out than pre-Ferguson officers—but these statistically significant differences are negligible in size. Furthermore, statistically significant differences appear between pre- and post-Ferguson officers on several measures of cynicism—but two of five measures demonstrate *improved* rather than worsened attitudes, and the magnitude of change is insubstantial. The combination of small effect sizes and opposing directions suggests that statistical significance may have more to do with sample size than “Ferguson Effects.” Even the most generous assessment—looking at the largest before-and-after difference within 95% confidence intervals—suggests, *at most*, a 5.9% increase in the proportion of officers who believe that “the media treat the police unfairly.” The lack of evidence found in these data for the demoralization hypothesis contradicts several retrospective studies that asked officers to report how their attitudes changed after protests (Deuchar et al., 2019, 2018; Torres et al., 2018). The inconsistency between the present study and prior studies suggests that findings may be related to study methods, an issue addressed in more detail in the following section.

An evaluation of the depolicing hypothesis (Table 3) presents mixed findings as well. The results of multilevel random-intercept models of depolicing indicate that post-Ferguson officers do not report significantly less *foot patrol* or *community meetings* than pre-Ferguson officers, contradicting prior research suggesting that some officers may be disinclined to engage with community members in the context of public antipathy (Deuchar et al., 2018; Wolfe & Nix, 2016). However, post-Ferguson officers do report writing fewer *citations*. The finding of fewer
citations is consistent with other research identifying multifaceted reductions in traffic enforcement (stops, searches, and arrests) during this time period (Shjarback et al., 2017).

Although there was not overwhelming evidence of depolicing following Ferguson, the results nonetheless indicate that poor morale is frequently associated with reduced police activity at the officer level. For instance, officers who felt misunderstood by the public reported significantly less foot patrol, community meetings, and citations. Officers who felt that the relationship between their department and community was not very good demonstrated significantly less foot patrol and community meetings. Thus, there is some evidence for the depolicing hypothesis, such that officer cynicism may contribute to a withdrawal from several forms of discretionary policing. Although the Ferguson-era events did not lead to substantially poorer morale, low morale is nonetheless salient to officer withdrawal from proactive policing.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

The findings in this study present several theoretical and research implications. Theoretically, the Ferguson Effect makes several claims that are consistent with the classic police culture literature. The demoralization hypothesis, for instance, suggests that negative officer attitudes are substantially determined by a deteriorated police-public relationship. The seminal works on police culture make similar claims. Whitaker’s 1964 ethnography, for instance, describes a reciprocated hostility that officers developed after periods of public antagonism toward the police. Skolnick (2011) similarly describes an emotional withdrawal and despondence that emerged as a result of alienation and acute cleavages between officers and citizens. Niederhoffer (1967) describes cynicism and distrust that result from officers’ anomic
experiences with the public. Reiner describes officers’ cynicism as a self-perceived martyrdom emerging in response to an ungrateful, antagonistic, and hedonistic public (2010: 120-121).

Similar parallels exist between the classic literature and the Ferguson Effect claims with regard to the depolicing hypothesis, which suggests that officers withdraw from work in the face of scrutiny and an atmosphere of reciprocated distrust. In a classic study by John Van Maanen, officers described the need to avoid further attention with a “lay-low” approach. One veteran counseled a rookie:

You gotta learn to take it easy. The department don’t care about you and the public sure as hell ain’t gonna cry over the fact that the patrolman always gets the shit end of the stick. The only people who care about you are your brother officers. So just lay back and take it easy here. Makes things a lot smoother for us as well as yourself (Van Maanen, 1974, p. 54).

Similarly, in a classic ethnography, Reuss-Ianni described cynical and highly dissatisfied street cops’ tendency to avoid critical attention by eschewing unnecessarily proactive police work (Reuss-Ianni, 2011).

Given these parallels, the present study’s implications extend beyond a mere test of the Ferguson Effect, applying also to a more general understanding of police culture during periods of substantial strain. The lack of support for the demoralization hypothesis challenges classic police ethnographers’ claims that officers’ cynicism is primarily a reciprocated distrust with the public or the product of periodic tensions. It is possible that these classic theories of police culture are anachronistic.

Alternatively, these results may illustrate that perceptions of public antipathy are a time-invariant constant of policing, developed early in the socialization process and relatively inure to temporal fluctuations in public sentiment. According to our findings, officers’ perceptions of public attitudes did not appreciably change after demonstrations—officers already
perceived a high degree of antagonism which the protests may have only reified. In one survey, 92% of officers reported the belief that recent protests were driven by longstanding anti-police bias, rather than an earnest movement for police accountability and reform (Morin, Parker, Stepler, & Mercer, 2017).

Two findings regarding the depolicing hypothesis raise theoretical questions about the supposed culture of work-avoidance in the face of heightened scrutiny and demoralization. First, only one of three types of police activity fell after Ferguson, suggesting that officers are not especially likely to “lay low” during periods of heightened tension. Nonetheless, two types of cynicism—feelings of being misunderstood, and a sense that the local police-community relationship was not very good—are associated with the “lay low” approach. This seems to support theoretical depictions of work avoidance as a product of reciprocated distrust with the community, even though such distrust did not appreciably change after Ferguson, and may in fact be an enduring cultural element. In light of these findings, police culture research ought to theoretically elaborate and empirically explore temporal constancy—in addition to change—of police attitudes and activity in the midst of substantial external pressures.

There are research implications of these findings. This study appears to contradict several previous studies of the Ferguson Effect, which suggested substantial worsening of attitudes among post-Ferguson officers (Deuchar et al., 2019, 2018; Nix & Pickett, 2017; Nix, Wolfe, & Campbell, 2018; Torres et al., 2018; Wolfe & Nix, 2016). This raises the possibility that the contradictory findings are due to differences in research designs. At least two differences may be relevant: temporal order and sampling. Previous studies used retrospective designs—for instance, by asking officers how their attitudes have changed since Ferguson, rather than
comparing pre-Ferguson attitudes to post-Ferguson attitudes. It is plausible that police attitudes have always been quite negative, or that officers’ evaluations of their past attitudes are tainted by their current sentiments. This study suggests that the use of identical survey items across time demonstrates much less variation than officers’ recollection of their sentiments at some time in the past. Second, this study utilizes a much larger and more representative sample of U.S. law enforcement officers than prior Ferguson Effect studies, which are limited to just one or a few agencies. Several studies (and the editorials that launched alarm about a potential “Ferguson Effect”) also rely upon convenience samples, opening up the possibility of substantial selection bias. If editorialists and scholars find that officers are depolicing and suffering low morale, that finding may be because they unintentionally solicit views from the most demoralized officers. Therefore, this study illustrates that very different conclusions may be drawn depending upon research design.

That said, time-series designs in policing research are uncommon, and this study illustrates their potential. Although the multi-wave survey data collected in this study were never designed to measure a phenomenon that did not exist at its inception—that is, the Ferguson Effect—they nonetheless yield a fruitful examination of changes within police officers during exogenous shocks to the police institution.

Unfortunately, officers’ trust in the public has been given scant attention by researchers (Mourtgos et al., 2019). Many seminal works on police culture treat cynicism toward the public

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8 The problem of retrospective recall regarding workplace morale is humorously and hyperbolically summed up by the character Peter Gibbons in the film Office Space, who recalls, “I realized, ever since I started working, every single day of my life has been worse than the day before it. So that means that every single day that you see me, that's on the worst day of my life.” These sentiments echo the sense of fatalism that officers have reported to ethnographic researchers since at least the 1960’s (Banton, 1964; Skolnick, 2011; Whitaker, 1964). For decades, officers have claimed things are “worse than ever.”
as a foregone conclusion—a natural and inevitable consequence of police work (e.g., Niederhoffer, 1967; Skolnick, 2011). Future studies ought to address how reduction of police cynicism and distrust may be accomplished—especially given that it appears widespread and independent of exogenous shocks such as Ferguson. The report of the President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing (2015) acknowledged the need to address mutual trust, but unfortunately failed to include actionable recommendations for improving police trust in the public (recommending only ways to enhance community trust in the police). As this study indicates, addressing officers’ cynicism—reducing officers’ contemptuous distrust of human motive and behavior—could reduce withdrawal from proactive policing, making the management of officer cynicism a much-needed area of future research with immediate practical significance.

**Implications for Social Policy**

One of the primary conclusions drawn from this study is that Ferguson did not appreciably worsen police morale or lead to withdrawal from police work. Thus, perhaps the most practically significant implication of this study is that criticism of the police is not detrimental to policing or public safety, despite the dire warnings issued in Ferguson Effect op-eds (e.g., MacDonald, 2015a). Indeed, the implicit message that MacDonald and others communicated was one of obedient acquiescence: police policy and practice is not to be challenged or questioned, else officer wellbeing and public safety is at risk. This message was ever more problematic given its tinge of racial subordination: it was specifically the redress of black grievance against the government that drew rebuke. Compare to the Bundy standoff, occurring just months before, in which armed protestors and private militia members, mostly white, occupied federal land and buildings and threatened federal law enforcement officers.
Rather than being accused of “agitation” and “lawlessness,” as Ferguson protestors were (MacDonald, 2015a), the Bundy militia were portrayed as patriots defending civil liberties (Fox News, 2015). In any event, the results of this study reaffirm the fundamental stability of American democracy under the pressure of discord, dissent, and demonstration: even intense hostility aimed directly at the agents of social control—in a few cases violent—was not enough to substantially alter officer attitudes or behaviors.

Nonetheless, cynicism was already quite high before Ferguson. This suggests that police administrators must address officer distrust regardless of current public sentiment. Unfortunately, as mentioned in the previous section, research is silent about how to reduce officers’ cynicism and improve officers’ trust in the public. It is possible, however, that efforts to promote citizen trust in the police may lead to police trust in the public. Trust involves a reciprocal, dialectical exchange, and research on organizations and groups indicates that perceptions of distrust on one side predicts reciprocated distrust from the other (Ferrin, Bligh, & Kohles, 2008; Korsgaard, Audrey Korsgaard, Brower, & Lester, 2015; Serva, Fuller, & Mayer, 2005). It therefore appears necessary to address both parties’ trust in the other. The phenomenon of reciprocated trust and upward/downward spirals implies that improvements in citizens’ trust of the police may, in turn, contribute to an improvement in officers’ trust in the public. Trust in the police is very much a function of the perception that police treat citizens fairly—that is, in a respectful and procedurally just manner (Tyler, 2005). Citizen trust in the police is a function of both direct and vicarious experiences of procedural justice (Flexon, Lurigio, & Greenleaf, 2009). If research regarding trust reciprocity is applicable to policing, then improving police legitimacy and citizens’ trust in the police may lead to higher levels of officers’ trust in the public, ultimately
leading to more proactive policing and community engagement. Therefore, although there is admittedly a lack of research indicating how officer distrust can be reduced, it is possible that transparency, accountability, and procedurally just policing may contribute to citizen trust, which will in turn contribute to reciprocated trust from officers.

Because burnout was a significant predictor of police activity, it is also incumbent upon police leaders to identify and manage burnout in law enforcement officers. Effective burnout interventions in other service professions include individual-level cognitive-behavioral therapy (e.g., coping skills training), as well as organizational-level changes that promote self-efficacy, communication, and employee input (Marine, Ruotsalainen, Serra, & Verbeek, 2006). A recent pilot study found that Mindfulness-Based Resilience Training demonstrated significant effects on burnout symptoms in a sample of police officers (Christopher, Goerling, Rogers, Hunsinger, Baron, Bergman & Zava, 2015). The prevention and treatment of burnout may require a combination of officer-level and agency-level interventions (Maslach and Leiter 2008), but this is likely to be a persistent problem, given the unique emotional demands and stressors related to policing (Bakker & Hueven, 2006).

This study may also have implications for crime control and community engagement, which are outcomes of proactive policing. The activity outcomes measured in this study—citations, foot patrol, and community meetings—reflect varieties of proactive policing. Proactive policing is a pillar of modern policing and involves the use of strategic, purposeful, and anticipatory approaches to crime, disorder, and other social problems. It differs from traditional policing, which primarily involves responding to and investigating crimes reported by citizens (Bordua & Reiss, 1966, 1967). Proactive policing achieves these outcomes by reducing
criminal opportunities, deterring offenders, and increasing perceptions of legitimacy among community members (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). It may involve a variety of different approaches (place-based, person-based, community-based, etc.), but strategies often involve frequent stops and contacts as well as community interaction, including the activities measured in this study. Importantly, proactive policing has the potential to reduce crime and improve community attitudes toward police (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). This was, in fact, a central “Ferguson Effect” claim: crime rates were supposedly rising nationwide because officers were withdrawing from proactive police work after widespread criticism (MacDonald, 2015a). While this study finds limited evidence that depolicing occurred because of such criticism, the claim that depolicing could contribute to increases in crime remains plausible, given the links between proactive policing and crime control. Thus, the officer-level factors identified in this study that contribute to reduced police activity—including burnout, cynicism, and job satisfaction—could affect crime via their influence on police activity.

Because officer activity is a critical element of crime control and community engagement, agencies may also need to address officer activity more directly (in addition to previous suggestions to address officer cynicism and burnout), and this may be accomplished through organizational justice. Organizational justice refers to fair, consistent, respectful, and morally just administration of employees (Greenberg 1990). Although limited, some research indicates that officers are more likely to proactively engage with community members to solve community problems when they perceive their agencies as fair (Wolfe and Nix 2016). These perceptions of fairness also contribute to officers’ overall commitment to agency goals, which
frequently include modern democratic approaches such as problem-oriented policing, community policing, and procedurally just policing (Rosenbaum and McCarty 2017). Organizational justice may thus offset some of the depolicing effects of cynicism and burnout.

**Study Limitations and Future Research**

Notwithstanding several important insights drawn regarding demoralization and depolicing, this study suffers from several limitations that may be remedied in future research. Officers who were most affected by post-Ferguson protests—those who experienced the most burnout, the biggest drop in job satisfaction, the greatest rise in cynicism, and the largest withdrawal from work—may have been those least likely to respond in the second survey wave, whether due to attrition from the study or attrition from the job. If this were the case, this study is likely to substantially underestimate temporal changes in morale and police activity. Because this was not a panel study, the current study is not able to identify patterns of attrition and other within-officer changes over time. If researchers can continue to earn officers’ trust, studies should capitalize on panel designs modeled in other disciplines in order to track participants over time. Along those lines, it is also possible that responding officers provided the socially desirable responses to questions, perhaps avoiding responses that appear unprofessional or unappealing.

Future research might improve the measures of police activity. Officers may have relatively little control over the time spent on foot patrol or in community meetings, and measures of actual police activity would ideally be measured via objective indicators (such as time spent in meetings or on foot patrol) rather than categorical self-report measures. It is also important to note that this study exclusively examined individual-level measures, and future
research ought to examine the contexts of workgroups, agencies, and neighborhoods that may contribute to both police morale and police activity. Finally, future studies of demoralization and depolicing in the context of legitimacy crises ought to explore targeted versus diffuse effects—whether the effect of protest against an officer’s own agency differs from broad criticism of the policing institution.

Conclusion

This study presents compelling evidence that public demonstrations against the police are not as consequential for police attitudes and behaviors as some have threatened. Even during a time of intense public antipathy for the police—a period in which public attitudes toward the police were the lowest in decades—officers experienced only minor, and sometimes counterintuitive, changes in job satisfaction, burnout, and cynicism. Although officers wrote fewer tickets after nationwide demonstrations, they did not significantly withdraw from foot patrol or community meetings, suggesting that the commitment to proactive, community policing remained high. High officer cynicism is significantly associated with withdrawal from police work, but cynicism on the part of police is high irrespective of periods of increased public antipathy. Thus, while public demonstrations against the police do not present threats to the police institution, some entrenched elements of police culture and morale may continue to challenge public administrators.
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Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

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Table 2: Comparison of Morale, Pre-Ferguson and Post-Ferguson

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<th>Agree: Satisfied with agency as place to work.</th>
<th>M (S.D.)</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>M (S.D.)</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>95% CI for Mean Difference</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
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<td>Pre-Ferguson</td>
<td>.671</td>
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<td>.642</td>
<td>6,832</td>
<td>-.046, -.013</td>
<td>3.538***</td>
<td>13,164</td>
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<td>Post Ferguson</td>
<td>.877</td>
<td>6,333</td>
<td>.863</td>
<td>6,840</td>
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<td>6,385</td>
<td>3.462 (1.676)</td>
<td>6,410</td>
<td>.052, .167</td>
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<td>12,793</td>
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<td>Agree: Satisfied with present job assignment.</td>
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<td>.319</td>
<td>6,808</td>
<td>-.042, -.009</td>
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<td>13,165</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agree: Officers have reason to distrust most citizens.</td>
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<td>6,372</td>
<td>.933</td>
<td>6,428</td>
<td>.008, .026</td>
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<td>Agree: Media treat police unfairly.</td>
<td>.752</td>
<td>6,343</td>
<td>.797</td>
<td>6,419</td>
<td>.031, .059</td>
<td>6.088***</td>
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<td>Disagree: Most people respect police.</td>
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<td>6,401</td>
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* p < .05, ***p < .001
Table 3: Prediction of Foot Patrol, Community Meetings, and Citations Written

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