

# Concern About Crime and Confidence in the Police

## Reassurance or Accountability?

Wesley G. Skogan

*Northwestern University, Evanston, IL*

This article 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 influenced by confidence in the police. This research stresses the *reassurance* effects of policing. Taken as a whole, these studies thus assume contradictory causal orderings of these two correlated factors. It is also possible that the relationship between the two is instead reciprocal, with confidence and concern affecting each other, but this possibility has never been tested. This article addresses this central theoretical ambiguity in research on public perceptions, using panel data and structural modeling to identify the most plausible 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 an accountability link from concern about crime to confidence in the police was much weaker and not statistically significant.

**Keywords:** *public opinion; fear; satisfaction; contact*

This article 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, there is theoretical ambiguity in the proper causal ordering of concern about crime and confidence in police. Three views of this relationship are examined here. One body of research on opinions about police treats confidence in the police as a dependent variable that is influenced in part 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 the dependent variable, one that is explained in part by the extent of confidence in the police. This research

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**Author's Note:** Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Wesley G. Skogan, Institute for Policy Research, 2040 Sheridan Road, Evanston IL 60208; e-mail: [skogan@northwestern.edu](mailto:skogan@northwestern.edu).

stresses the *reassurance* effects of policing. It is also possible that the relationship between the two is instead *reciprocal*, with confidence and concern affecting each other, but this possibility is rarely raised and has never been tested.

Taken as a whole, research on opinions of the police and crime thus accommodates at its core contradictory causal orderings between its key constructs. This article addresses this central theoretical ambiguity. First, it reviews research in the accountability and reassurance traditions, to establish the scope and significance of each. Then it proposes a structural equation model which tests both causal orderings jointly. We then use two-wave panel data to test the model and identify a best-fitting causal ordering of the two constructs. The results support the smaller body of work that has adopted the reassurance model of public opinion. The article concludes with a summary of the findings, a discussion of the limitations of the present study, and a review of its implications for research and practice.

### **The Reassurance Model: Confidence in Police Alleviates Concern About Crime**

A significant body of research treats confidence in the police as an independent variable and examines its impact on fear, worry, or concern about neighborhood crime and disorder. This causal ordering lay at the heart of Charles Bahn's early (1974) 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, pp. 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 of public opinion is so widely held that sustaining visible patrol drives the resource allocation decisions of 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 as a result. 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 visible foot patrols increased confidence in the police and reduced fear of crime (Pate, 1986). The famous Kansas City Preventive Patrol Experiment is often cited as a counterpoint, for the planned reduction in visible patrol there did not seem to increase levels of fear (Kelling, Pate, Dieckman, & Brown, 1974). However, there have been challenges to the fidelity of the treatment in this study, and its results are in question (Fienberg, Larntz, & Reiss, 1976; Larson, 1975).

Finally, the reassurance model of policing underlies a vast social experiment in Britain, where policing reform even adopted the label, the Home Office’s *National Reassurance Policing Programme*. The political impetus behind this was concern on the part of government that fear of crime, measured with some prominence on a regular basis by the British Crime Survey, had not fallen despite New Labour’s investments in safety and security (Millie & Herrington, 2005). 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). This led to a field trial of reassurance policing strategies in 16 experimental policing areas around England, beginning in 2003. The interventions aimed at increasing police presence, contact with the general public, and involvement in problem-solving activities. The evaluation included repeated surveys of community residents in the program and matched comparison sites. These revealed that the interventions increased police visibility, familiarity with police officers, and public confidence in the police, as intended. In turn, the program was associated with reductions in perceived crime and antisocial behavior, self-reported victimization, worry about various crimes, and perceived risk of being victimized—the “reassurance” effect (Quinton & Morris, 2008). Much of the ferment in British policing today revolves around identifying strategies for enhancing the reassurance qualities of the police (Innes, 2007).

### **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, & Namazzi, 1995). The same is true for those who believe that crime is a serious problem in their neighborhood (Weitzer & Tuch, 2004a, 2004b; Weitzer, Tuch, & Skogan, 2008) and who report that a violent crime occurred in their neighborhood in the past year (Weitzer & 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 Jéglum-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 Jéglum-Bartusch (1998, p. 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, fuels cynicism toward police. Consistent with their path model, Xu, Fiedler, and Flaming (2005) conclude that fear undermines satisfaction with police. In their view, fearful people (who disproportionately live in high crime, disorderly, low-quality-of-life neighborhoods) believe it is because police are unable or unwilling to help them deal with their problems. Ren, Cao, Lovrich, and Gaffney (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 & Parks, 2000; Velez, 2001). Focusing on social disorder, Cao, Frank, and Cullen (1996, p. 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.”

## Hypotheses

In line with these contradictory conclusions, this article tests the three contending assumptions about the relationship between views of the police and concern about crime. The *accountability* model posits that confidence in the police is best modeled as a dependent variable, one that is influenced by assessments of neighborhood conditions. The *reassurance* model treats concern about crime as a dependent variable that is influenced by confidence in the police. A *reciprocal causation* model can also be tested; this posits that confidence in the police and concern about crime influence one another in the course of time.

## Method

A structural equation model was developed to address the competing claims about the causal ordering of concern about crime and confidence in police. The model was tested with data from a two-wave panel survey, to estimate the magnitude and statistical significance of contending causal arrows running between concern and confidence. All of the studies cited above reported strong correlations between measures of confidence in the police and concern about crime, when both were measured at the same time. However, such correlations are symmetrical; although they demonstrate that two factors covary, they cannot speak to which causes which. It is tracking people's experiences and assessments of them over time that gives us a causal handle on how one influences the other. Controlling for Wave 1 measures essentially enables us to examine the relationship in each direction between *changes* in concern and confidence over time. The model could be robustly identified because of the additional influence of events that occurred between the waves of the survey: victimization and encounters with the police. Some respondents also experienced an exogenous 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 as well.

## The Data

The surveys were conducted in conjunction with the evaluation of a community policing project in Houston, Texas. The evaluation was conducted by the Police Foundation, a Washington, D.C.-based, nonprofit research organization. The four study areas were chosen because they were racially diverse and faced significant crime problems, and they were closely matched demographically. By and large, the residents of these neighborhoods (which were identifiable as such) were of modest means. In total, less than 10% had a college degree (range 7%-12%), whereas one third had not graduated from high school (range 21%-39%). About 40% reported

household incomes of below US\$15,000 per year (range 36%–46%). Most were either short-term residents (45% had lived there for less than 3 years) or old-timers (about 30% had lived there for more than 10 years). Fifty-seven percent of the residents were White, one quarter were African American (range 14%–24%), and 20% were Hispanic (range 13%–24%). In total, 51% of the respondents were female.

New policing projects were fielded in three of the neighborhoods; these included the formation of a community organizing team, opening a storefront office, and teams of neighborhood officers going door-to-door to gather information for a problem-solving campaign (for a description of the programs, see Skogan, 1990). A comparison area that matched the program areas demographically was also designated, and no new policing project was mounted there. The evaluation identified a mix of positive results. By one measure or another, disorder declined in all three areas and did concern about crime. Confidence in the police grew distinctively in two areas and was up almost significantly in the third. In the Wave 2 interview, 65% of the residents of the area being served by a new police office knew about the storefront (Pate, Wycoff, Skogan, & Sherman, 1986).

Although the study from which these data are drawn began in 1983, the interventions that were being evaluated thus would be familiar to innovating police administrators even today. They have all been emulated in many cities, and they helped establish the progressive reputation of Houston's chief of police at the time, Lee Brown. Furthermore, the evaluation design and the survey instruments developed for the Houston study by the Police Foundation greatly influenced ensuing evaluations. The research design and measures were used by the Police Foundation in later studies in Baltimore, Birmingham, Denver, Madison, Oakland, and Newark. Many of the survey questions examined here have been in use to this day.

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% completion rate. The second wave survey recontacted 1,294 respondents, for a reinterview rate of 75%. They were divided about equally across the study areas. 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. This raised the possibility that the complete-data subset of respondents were in some way biased demographically or socially in ways that could affect the findings. To examine this, we compared the completed 933 Wave 2 interviews with the original set of 1,733 respondents across 10 key demographic items plus their Wave 1 attitudes toward the police, recent experiences with police, worry about crime, and self-reported victimization (for a total of 20 comparisons). The only item on which Wave 2 respondents differed from the original set by more than 5 percentage points was housing tenure. The original respondents were 50% renters, whereas the final analysis subset were 44% renters. Otherwise, the two

groups were closely matched. For example, the original sample was 19.6% African American and 19.8% Hispanic, whereas the complete-data subset were 20.5% African American and 20.8% Hispanic. In the original sample, 15% recalled being stopped by police prior to the Wave 1 survey; among complete-data respondents, the figure was 14.3%. Nine percent in both groups recalled a pre-Wave 1 personal crime victimization. The data analysis and all of the descriptive information cited below are based on the complete-data subset. The data were archived, and they are available for reanalysis from the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, Study 8496.

The analysis presented here makes use of the panel design of the study in several ways. First, a panel survey directly measures individual-level change; previous studies could only contrast respondents with high and low scores. Controlling for Wave 1 levels of confidence and concern in the statistical analysis isolates the reciprocal influence of changes in concern and confidence between the two waves. The panel design also simplifies the analysis greatly. The inclusion of the first-wave measures accounts 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 but do not change over time. The panel design also accounts for the direct effects of experiences respondents had with the police and with crime prior to the first interview. The Wave 2 survey then captures ensuing changes in neighborhood conditions and policing, changes that take place between the waves of interviews. For example, if neighborhood conditions grew worse, this would be reflected in their Wave 2 expressions of concern about crime.

Another design feature of the study is that it includes Wave 2 recall measures of events which occurred *between* the two interviews that could further influence respondents' confidence and concern. These include victimization, police visibility, and positive or negative encounters with the police. Measures of all three of these experiences are included in the analysis, as they independently influenced Wave 2 confidence in the police and concern about crime. 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.

## The Measures

In the surveys, *confidence in the police* is measured by responses to questions that formed 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 5-point scales ranging from *very good job* to *very poor job*, with *fair job* at the midpoint. Confidence in the professional *demeanor* of police was assessed by 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 alpha reliabilities of the two confidence measures at Wave 1 were .80 (performance) and .81 (behavior); at Wave 2, they were .82 and .84, respectively. The two scores are used in the structural equation model as indicators of the unobserved construct “confidence in the police.” There was some change over time in confidence. In the second interview, respondents averaged just below the mid-point with regard to police performance (their average score was 2.7, up from 2.4 in the first interviews). They scored higher on demeanor, averaging 3.3 on a 4-point scale, but this score remained virtually unchanged from the first interviews.

*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 surveys asked about a mix of personal and property crimes. 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 home 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 burglary (the most worrisome crime on the list) declined from 44% to 34%. Extreme concern about home invasion (the lowest-ranked crime on the list) declined from 18% to 12%. Means scores on all four measures declined, and all of the decline was concentrated in the program areas rather than the matched comparison area.

*Criminal victimization* is measured by responses to questions about individual and household experiences with crime. Respondents were presented with a series of yes/no questions that described a broad mix of property and personal crimes. 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 combining personal and property crime is used as an indicator of criminal victimization; more elaborate specifications were explored, but they did not add any information beyond these dichotomies. Between the waves, victimization declined from 40% to 32% of those interviewed.



All of this decline was in the program areas, whereas victimization went up slightly (by 2 percentage points) in the matched comparison area.

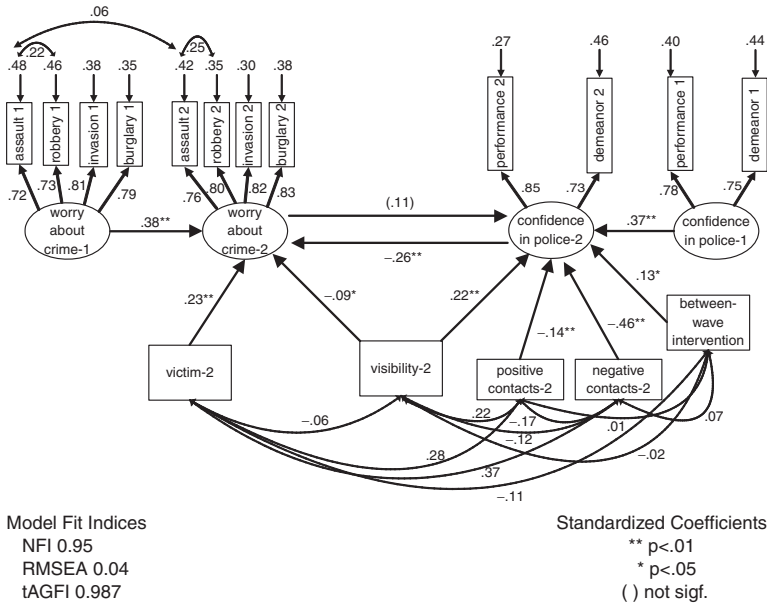
*Experience with the police* is measured by evaluative questions asked of respondents who recalled contacting or being stopped by the police in the preceding year. To establish who had experienced an encounter, all respondents were asked about six different contexts in which they might have initiated contacts with the police. These included 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 then asked whether, in their most recent contact, the police they talked to clearly explained the action they would take in response, if the police were 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 why they were stopped, and if police clearly explained what action they would take.

The most frequent circumstance was that respondents reported *no* personal contact with police at all during the previous year. At Wave 1, 37% recalled being stopped or calling the police, a figure dropped to 32% in the second interview. Most who were stopped evaluated the experience positively, a finding that is consistent with virtually every survey-based study of public encounters with the police (Skogan, 2006a). In the analysis, dichotomous measures identify respondents recalling a positive experience of any type with the police and those with a negative experience of any type. Dividing these by encounter type did not add any further information. Overall, 29% of respondents reported a good experience prior to Wave 1, and 10% a poorly rated experience. Both percentages dropped proportionally, because fewer respondents had any contact at all between the waves. This turned out to be significant, for—consistent with research in this area—contacts with the police of *any* kind reduced confidence in them (see Skogan, 2006).

*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 hr (44% at Wave 2) to not at all even in the past week (20% at Wave 2).

The *community policing intervention* that took place between the two waves of the survey is represented by a dichotomous indicator of whether each respondent lived in the evaluation’s comparison neighborhood or in any of the three program areas. In total, 80% of panel respondents lived areas that were selected for these programs, and 20% lived in the designated comparison area. As noted above, the original evaluation found a mix of positive results across the programs, including increased confidence in the police and decreased concern about crime. The statistical

**Figure 1**  
**SEM Model of Reassurance and Accountability**



findings presented below did not change when the single dichotomous program indicator was replaced by three site-specific indicators. However, their inclusion greatly complicates the presentation of the results of the analysis.

**Analytic Model**

A structural equation model is employed here because it is a statistical approach which can accommodate a hypothesis about reciprocal causation. As Figure 1 illustrates, it enables the analyst to describe relationships between a whole network of variables, not just one dependent variable and a list of explanatory variables. The statistical work then compares the relationships specified among the network of variables to those actually found in the data. The specified model, which is sketched in Figure 1, “fits” the data when the relationships it specifies (the arrows in Figure 1) turn out to be strong relationships in the data, and when links that the model specify should *not* be present turn out to be weak or nonexistent in the data.

Reciprocal causation can be accommodated because, as Figure 1 illustrates, there are factors that influence confidence in the police but not concern about crime, except *through* confidence in the police via reassurance. These are personal experiences with the police and the impact of living in the experimental policing areas.

At the same time, personal experience with crime victimization should directly influence concern about crime but affect confidence in the police only indirectly via an accountability effect. Because there are so many of these independent factors (and their independence is not assumed, but tested by the data), the model can tease out the directionality of the relationship between its two core concepts. In fact, the analytic model presented in Figure 1 closely resembles the classic "peer influences on ambition" example that is used by Joreskog and Sorbom, leading structural modelers, to illustrate the application of reciprocal-causation structural equation models (see Joreskog & Sorbom, 2001).

Because the survey data were categorical (including both dichotomies and ordered categories, in the case of police visibility) PRELIS was used to calculate a polychoric correlation matrix. This was analyzed using LISREL 8.8 and an asymptotic covariance matrix, via a weighted least squares procedure. 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.

As indicated above, a key point is if, in the end, the data actually fit the hypothesized network of relationship specified in the model. There are many indices that can be used to assess model fit; here, we focus on the standard ones, Bentler and Bonett's (1980) Normed Fit Index (NFI), and Browne and Cudeck's (1993) Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). To evaluate errors in the initial theoretical 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 other theoretically appropriate, statistically significant modifications remained for the final model that is presented here. The arrows in Figure 1 fit the data appropriately.

## Results

Figure 1 presents the empirical structural coefficients for the model. 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 a value falling below .90 signals 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 high (.98), but the AGFI is uninformative with large sample sizes.

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. Each causal arrow is associated with a coefficient indicating its relative strength and statistical significance. These data support the reassurance model: reductions in concern about crime flow from increasing confidence in the police. At the same time, the accountability link from concern about crime to confidence in the police was not statistically significant. Furthermore, there was no evidence of reciprocal causation; both arrows *could* have been strong and statistically significant, but they were not. The causal link leading from confidence in the police to concern about crime is net of the controls for how worried and confident respondents were when they were interviewed the year before, and the many fixed characteristics of respondents that were reflected in the Wave 1 measures. The key findings illustrated in Figure 1 also take into account the increase in worry about crime that was linked to recent victimization, which was also significant. Based on the magnitude of the standardized coefficients presented here, the impact of confidence in the police on concern about crime ( $-.26$ ) was of about the same magnitude (although in the opposite direction) as recent victimization ( $+.23$ )

The visibility of police played a large role in this analysis. As was noted earlier, both models of the concern–confidence relationship feature hypotheses about the positive effects of police visibility, which is commonly found to be linked to lower levels of fear and higher levels of confidence in the police (see Skogan & Hartnett, 1997). The importance of police visibility is highlighted again here. In the panel data, the extent of visible local policing between the waves of interviews significantly affected concern about crime *and* confidence in police at Wave 2. Respondents who recalled spotting police on patrol in their neighborhood recently grew less worried about crime, as Bahn and others suggested. At the same time—and more strongly as the coefficient is much larger—recent police visibility led to increased confidence in the police. The belief among police administrators that the public “wants” visible policing is not tested here, but it certainly has an independent effect on both their fear and confidence in the police.

The quality of police encounters with the public was also influential; in fact, one of those linkages marked the single strongest relationship in the data. The surveys probed for descriptions of recent encounters with the police. In these Houston neighborhoods, recent contacts with the police of *any* kind—both positive and negative—reduced confidence in them. This finding is consistent with the conclusions of a number of studies in the United States and the United Kingdom that have documented that it is respondents with *no* recent experiences to report who are most positive about the police (Bradford, Jackson, & Stanko, 2009; FitzGerald, Hough, Joseph, & Qureshi, 2002; Skogan, 2006). That said, having a negatively rated experience with police had three times the impact of a positively rated experience. The central importance of the quality of actual experiences with the police in shaping public opinion is

documented in Figure 1, for 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. The interventions included the efforts of a community organizing team, opening a storefront office, and going door-to-door to gather information for a problem solving campaign. A report detailing the impacts of these projects on a site-by-site basis indicates that in various combinations they improved evaluations of the police, reduced perceived crime and disorder, and increased neighborhood satisfaction (Pate, Wycoff, Skogan, & Sherman, 1986). The analysis summarized in Figure 1 suggests that, in the aggregate, the positive benefits of this early experiment in community policing flowed through increasing confidence in the police, for there was no direct link between the intervention and reduced worry about crime.

## Discussion and Conclusions

This research addressed a theoretical ambiguity in the proper causal ordering of concern about crime and confidence in police. While this may seem to be an abstract issue, assumptions about this relationship have driven police policy and resource allocation for many decades. Three views of this relationship were reviewed. Many who study opinions about the police adopt the accountability view, and point to neighborhood crime and disorder to explain low levels of confidence in policing in troubled communities. Their reports feature confidence of the police as a dependent variable, affected in part by perceived or officially measured levels of crime. A very prominent subset of this literature features multilevel models embedding individuals in neighborhood context. These studies find confidence in the police is lower in crime-ridden communities. Many other studies report the individual-level correlates of confidence in the police. These typically conclude that, where residents perceive crime and disorder as high, or report high levels of fear, confidence in the police is lower as a result. They find that residents of high crime areas more often believe that officers perform poorly in maintaining order and fighting crime, treat crime victims unsatisfactorily, and are not responsive to local issues. Because of this view that confidence in them hinges on levels of crime and disorder, we dubbed this the "accountability" model of opinion about the police.

On the other hand, many who study concern about crime and disorder adopt the reassurance view, and point to public dissatisfaction with how well they are being served by the police as one explanation for high levels of fear and worry about crime in troubled communities. These studies conceptualize confidence in the police as an independent variable that explains, in part, concern about crime. Importantly, this view provides a theoretical underpinning for community policing. Field quasi experiments that change police tactics—by adding foot patrols, increasing patrol

visibility, opening storefront offices, and the like—and evaluate them by measuring ensuing levels of fear and perceived crime also reflect this view of the confidence–worry nexus. Following Bahn’s (1974) elaboration of this view, we dubbed it the *reassurance* model of the police–crime nexus.

Finally, a logical third view is that confidence in the police and concern about crime “affect each other” in reciprocal fashion. This view is rarely expressed in research reports, for typically they have chosen either confidence or concern as their dependent variable. Untangling reciprocal causation statistically also imposes heavier data and analytic demands. As a result, the issue has not before been addressed in the literature on public opinion and the police. The data and analytic model developed here could have also affirmed the reciprocal proposition but instead documented that a reassurance process is taking place.

These two-wave panel data from Houston strongly support the reassurance hypothesis. In the empirical 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 (here over 1 year), the more their concern about crime declined. This was net of the influence of recent victimization, which led to increased concern about crime. It also controlled for the extent of visible neighborhood patrolling, which was associated with lower levels of concern about crime *and* increased confidence in the police. This is an important finding, for visibility had the largest positive influence in building confidence of any of the factors examined here. The model also accounted for the effects of encounters with police that occurred during the interim. Most Houstonians had no recent experience with the police, but if they did its effects were on the whole negative. Respondents we classed as having bad experiences were not told why they were stopped or not given much help when they called, and believed they were treated unfairly, unhelpfully and impolitely. Only 7% of all respondents, but 20% of those who were stopped, were in this category. However, there was no support for the contention that respondents were holding police accountable for neighborhood conditions, or that the relationship was reciprocal. The effect of changing levels of concern about crime on changing confidence in the police was statistically insignificant. All of this was also net of the impact of the quasi-experimental reorganization of the police in three of the four areas studied, an exogenous intervention between the two waves of interviews that increased confidence.

Along with its strengths, there are a number of limitations of this study. It was conducted in just one city, albeit the fourth largest city in the nation. The findings might not be generalizable to other peoples and places, although it involved significant numbers of African American and Hispanic neighborhood residents. What is not clear is if the findings can be generalized to an unpretested population. Every respondent was interviewed before the programs began, and they may have been more attentive to policing issues as a result. Only very large and expensive research designs can encompass the separate study of persons who are only interviewed at the

conclusion of the experiment, in both program and comparison areas. The panel survey design used here inevitably involves attrition, for people move to other neighborhoods or decline to be reinterviewed. This may bias the results in unanticipated ways, although in this case there was a good match between the original set of respondents and the analytic subset on a range of demographic, attitudinal, and experiential measures.

The data also did not encompass everything that is known to be correlated with confidence in the police or worry about crime. Other studies have examined the impact of knowing police officers socially, attending public meetings at which they are present, seeing them specifically on foot patrol (a favorite of the public), and feeling well-informed about police policies. None of those factors were measured here, and their omission must be considered. There are also contextual effects on attitudes toward the police. People living in higher crime and racially heterogeneous areas are more negative about the police and more fearful of crime than their counterparts, but this study involved just four matched, modest, heterogeneous communities. It has been argued that some crimes count more than others when it comes to sending "signals" to the public about what their fears and concerns should focus on (Innes, 2004). However, in these data, the worry measures were confined to familiar classes of household and personal offenses. There were measures of many specific kinds of victimization, but each was individually infrequent, and we found no evidence that more complicated schemes for classifying them added anything to the analysis.

These findings have implications for research and practice. For research, they suggest that a significant number of studies of opinions about the police have been based on miss-specified models positing that concern about crime is the independent variable. The findings here support the view that confidence in the police is the independent variable. The findings recommend against the accountability assumption underlying many studies of fear and concern about crime. Furthermore, the reassurance model ordering is consistent with the theoretical assumptions of many field quasi experiments in policing. It recommends the use of measures of concern about crime to evaluate the effectiveness of changing policing strategies.

For practice, the findings are a reminder that "it's not just the crime that counts." Quality matters, and even the small fraction of encounters between police and the public that went bad in Houston had magnified consequences. The quality of service rendered when police and the public come in contact, is one of the things that administrators can hope to actually control. Through their training and supervision practices, departments have some capacity to shape the relationship between residents and officers working the street. Whether police are polite or abrasive, concerned or aloof, and helpful or unresponsive to the obvious needs of the people they encounter, depends importantly on actions taken by department leaders. This led a National Research Council review panel to recommend more attention to what was dubbed *process oriented policing* (Skogan & Frydl, 2004), in addition to community- and problem-oriented policing.

Keeping the accomplishments of the police in the public eye is also important, and here it was quite literally the visibility of policing in the neighborhoods that counted. Visible patrol builds confidence in the police and reduced concern about crime, at the same time. More generally, police should consider strategies that will shed light on their many “back-room” activities that the public does not know about: their investigative efforts, the adoption of new technologies, modernizing management practices, the increasing sophistication and training of police leaders, data-driven crime strategizing, and rational resource allocation. I suspect that one reason for the popularity of community policing is that it is *visible*. Officers attend public meetings, get involved in collaborative projects with the public and other city agencies, and get a lot of good press. But a lot of back-office activity that is aimed at increasing their *effectiveness* never sees the light of day.

The findings suggest that the fear-reduction goal of projects like Britain’s Reassurance Policing Programme could 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, these findings add the empirical benefit of greater perceived safety and security, if the police are doing a good job and treating people professionally. 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.

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**Wesley G. Skogan** is professor of Political Science and the Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern University. Much of his research focuses on the interface between the public and the legal system, particularly community-oriented policing. His most recent book is *Police and Community in Chicago* (2006). He is the author of two lengthy reports in the Home Office Research Series examining citizen contact and satisfaction with policing in Britain, and the co-editor of a policy-oriented report from the National Research Council in Washington, DC, *Fairness and Effectiveness in Policing: The Evidence*. Another line of his research concerns neighborhood and community responses to crime. This includes work on fear of crime, the impact of crime on neighborhood life, and crime prevention efforts by community organizations. He has also been involved in research on criminal victimization and the evaluation of service programs for victims.