Nevaeh Hairston

University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Department: Criminal Justice and Criminology

Advisor: Kevin Petersen, Ph.D.

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College Students' Perceptions of Policing: Effects of Procedural Justice Following Victimization

INTRODUCTION

Police interact with citizens on a daily basis. Whether these interactions occur when police are on patrol, conducting traffic stops, investigating, or helping someone who has been victimized, the nature of interactions between police officers and citizens plays an important role in shaping beliefs and attitudes about the police. As of 2022, 49.2 million citizens aged 16 or older in the United States had contact with the police in some capacity. Of this amount, about 46% were citizens reporting a crime, with females being more likely than males to initiate contact (Tapp & Davis, 2024). One of the most frequent interactions that occurs between citizens and police officers is after incidents of victimization. In the United States, 48% of violent victimizations, 73% of robbery victimizations, and 30% of property victimizations were reported to the police in 2024 (Tapp & Coen, 2025). This puts the rate of violent victimization reported to 11.2 per 1,000 people 12 or older in 2024, with total victimizations in 2024 being as high as 23.3 per 1,000 persons 12 or older (Tapp & Coen, 2025).

Police-citizen interactions are not only frequent, but also critical in shaping how citizens view, not only their local law enforcement, but the justice system in general. Research suggests that interactions with police "interpreted as harassing, unfair, or discriminatory damage public trust in police, encourage avoidance of police and other record-keeping institutions (e.g., hospitals and schools), and negatively influence community members and individual mental health" (Wright et al., 2022, pp. 229-315). This is concerning because effective policing requires trust and respect from citizens. In addition, accurate crime reporting is necessary to achieve justice for victims and to make policies capable of addressing crime problems. On the contrary, if a citizen experiences a positive interaction with the police, it may build trust, respect, increase willingness to report future crimes, and lead to better communication about safety concerns (Hill & Dlugolenski, 2025). One determining factor in the quality of police-citizen interactions is whether police treat citizens with procedural justice. Procedural justice "...emphasizes the importance of fair and equitable treatment in interactions with legal and law enforcement authorities, which can lead to increased satisfaction and trust in the system" (Biscontini, 2024, para. 1; see also Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Tyler, 2004).

A prevalent form of police interaction that has received limited attention is police interaction with college students. College students are more likely to be in contact with police and even their campus police for either traffic tickets, theft, drinking tickets, or after experiences of victimization (Kicks, 2021). According to Lynch et al. (2024, pp. 13-14), surveys focusing on victimization in higher education found that 42% of students experience sexual harassment, 13% experience nonconsensual sexual contact, and 10% experience intimate partner abuse. These studies show how frequently college students are victimized by peers or other citizens on campus, and how the delicate process of interacting with police after these incidents could

negatively or positively impact college students' views of policing and the justice system as a whole. Studies have shown that procedural justice is an important predictor of satisfaction with policing among college students (Greenwood et al., 2022; Pryce & Wilson, 2020; Pryce et al., 2019), which is particularly important because college students are the next generation of the working world and will become the communities that police are sworn to serve.

There are two hypotheses that help to explain why college students may be particularly susceptible to police interactions at this age: the impressionable years hypothesis states that socializing influences people when they are young and impacts their thinking throughout life, and the increasing persistence hypothesis states that when people are young they are flexible and responsive to social circumstances, but this decreases as they get older (Krosnick & Alwin, 1989).“Early adulthood, spanning ages 18-40, is a time of significant growth and change. Individuals experience physical peak performance, continued brain development, and cognitive refinement” (Fiveble, 2025, para. 1). College students may be in a vulnerable period of development, where negative or positive interactions hold increased long-term weight. If students develop negative views of policing and spread these beliefs to friends, family, future kids, etc., this only cements distrust in police and potentially leads to future issues with police-community relationships and trust in the justice system.

There are a number of studies focusing on how procedural justice during police-citizen interactions affects views on policing (Mazerolle et al., 2013; Nivette et al., 2024). A study conducted by Brown (2023) showed that public trust and confidence in police are essential, and without it, citizens are less likely to report crimes or cooperate with investigations. Another study done by Mazerolle et al. (2013) found that fairness and neutrality in police actions enhanced police legitimacy in the eyes of citizens. However, there is not much research focused on the

effects of procedural justice among college students after incidents of victimization. Other studies that look at procedural justice mainly focus on general citizens, but it is important to look at college students' perceptions because they are the next voice of the generation and are frequently in contact with police after experiences of victimization. One study conducted by Flippin et al. (2019, pp. 651-660) was focused on the effects of procedural injustice between 911 operators and citizens, finding that negative interactions lead citizens to avoid calling 911 when facing similar incidents. Similarly, a study done by Nivette & Akoensi (2019, pp. 471-487) examined the effects of procedural justice affecting citizen perceptions, again finding that procedural justice increases satisfaction with police, but that these benefits may be undermined by unlawfulness and ineffectiveness of police behavior. However, neither of these studies (and very little existing research) has examined the element of procedural justice for college students after victimization. This study aims to bridge this gap by examining college students' perceptions of police trust, satisfaction, and willingness to report future crime after a hypothetical experience of victimization involving a theft from a motor vehicle.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Procedural Justice

Procedural justice in policing is an important factor that plays a role in not only the perceptions that citizens have of police, but also the justice system more broadly. A study done by Brown (2019) revealed that "...police behavior that is incongruous with the concept of procedural justice elevates the likelihood of negative outcomes" (pp. 696-710). Procedural justice first emerged in the 1970s and, "emphasizes the importance of fair and equitable treatment in interactions with legal and law enforcement authorities, which can lead to increased

satisfaction and trust in the system" (Biscontini, 2024, para. 1). In policing, influential work by Sunshine and Tyler (2003) and Tyler (2004) suggested that police legitimacy could be enhanced by focusing on the nature of police-citizen interactions, rather than simply their outcomes, and that increasing police legitimacy may lead to higher levels of satisfaction, trust, and willingness to cooperate with law enforcement (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Tyler, 2004).

There are four core principles in procedural justice: respect, neutrality, voice, and trustworthiness (Mazerolle et al., 2013; Tyler, 2004). The element of respect focuses on treating citizens with respect and showing regard for their feelings, wishes, and rights. The element of neutrality focuses on an officer's unbiased decision-making, meaning that an officer should take into account every aspect of evidence and not let their personal opinion persuade them. The element of voice refers to giving citizens the opportunity to speak and have their views heard without being interrupted or dismissed. The final element, trustworthiness, refers to displaying acts that are trustworthy, such as looking at all of the evidence before making a decision, explaining to citizens why they are under arrest or being detained, and ensuring that citizens understand their rights. All of these elements may combine to shape individuals' perceptions of police officers during interactions (Dailly, 2024).

There have been numerous studies that have looked at the effect of procedural justice on citizen perceptions of police. Often, these studies focus on outcomes such as trust in police, satisfaction with police, and willingness to report future crimes. Trust in police can be defined as the belief that police "...have the right intentions towards us…" and that they are "competent to do what we trust…" them to do (Murphy et al, 2013, pp.405-424). In this regard, the concept of trust can also include both instrumental and interpersonal elements. Instrumental trust is about an individual's belief in receiving positive outcomes from police interaction. For example,

complying with the law to receive a future collective benefit, such as a reduction in crime rates and increased public safety (Murphy et al, 2013). In contrast, interpersonal trust is based on social relationships and fair treatment of others, which will lead citizens to trust the motives of police and develop a long-term commitment to their decisions (Murphy et al, 2013). Using a randomized controlled trial with survey vignettes, Murphy et al. (2013) found that trust and confidence in the police were higher for participants assigned to the procedural justice condition, compared to the standard procedure condition, and it remained so even after factoring in demographics and general perceptions of the police. The study also found that trust in the police increased participants' willingness to cooperate with police and perceived obligation to obey police orders.

Satisfaction with police, in the context of procedural justice, focuses on how pleased citizens are with how the police treat them during their interactions. Studies have found that "...an authority's legitimacy is linked to people's satisfaction with the procedural justice aspects of their encounter with that authority" (Hinds & Murphy, 2007, pp. 28; see also Sunshine & Tyler, 2003, pp. 514). In contrast, Hinds & Murphy (2007) analyzed a survey of 2,611 Australians and found that when police used unfair procedures, it led to alienation, dissatisfaction, defiance, and non-cooperation with the public. Mazerolle et al. (2013) found that, across 29 studies, procedural justice leads to significant increases in satisfaction with police. Supporting this, a study conducted by Resig et al. (2018) found that procedural injustice leads to decreased satisfaction in the police.

Given that procedural justice is intended to increase police legitimacy, leading to increased compliance with police (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Tyler, 2004), another important aspect is whether the interaction affects a citizen's willingness to report future crimes. Procedural

justice may impact a citizen's willingness to report crimes by communicating to citizens that their reports are being taken seriously and treated fairly. If a citizen feels they are being treated rudely or unfairly by a police officer, then it gives the impression that the officer does not care about the victim, which in turn deters them from reporting in the future for fear that they will be treated the same way. A study conducted by Murphy & Barkworth (2014) found that a citizen's willingness to report a crime was context-specific, meaning that depending on the type of victimization and previous victimization experienced, procedural justice was the determining factor, and in others it relied mainly on instrumental factors. In contrast, Murphy & Barkworth (2014) found that "negative experiences can result in an unwillingness to report future victimizations or to assist police in more general collaborative crime control efforts" (pp.178-204). They found that this is largely because crime victims reported that they felt blamed and doubted by criminal justice officials, believing that legal authorities are more worried about public approval and not losing the case than they are with victim needs (Murphy & Backworth, 2014). Other studies have found that negative interactions with police after experiences of victimization (e.g., sexual assault) lead to decreased willingness to report similar crimes in the future, possibly because the interactions signal to victims that their complaints are not a priority or worthy of attention (Hohl et al., 2025; Lorenz & Jacobsen, 2021).

Procedural Justice and Victimization

Interactions with police officers after victimization experiences may have particularly important effects on trust, satisfaction, and willingness to report future crimes. As noted, unjust interactions with police after experiences of victimization may communicate a lack of care and priority to crime victims (Hohl et al., 2015). This may determine how satisfied a victim is with their encounter and how likely they are to report future crimes. A study conducted by Stanek et

al. (2022) examined the effect of procedural justice on willingness to report future crimes after sexual victimization. The authors found that procedurally unjust treatment significantly reduced the likelihood of future victimization reporting, suggesting that "... what matters for influencing victims' reporting behavior is global police perceptions and experiences of just treatment" (Stanek et al, 2022, pp. 860-881). In fact, Stanek et al. (2022) found that procedural justice had a larger influence on reporting behavior than the sex of the responding officer or prior perceptions of the police.

Procedurally just interactions are just as important to look at as procedurally unjust interactions. A study done by Elliot et al. (2013) conducted in-depth interviews of 110 people after experiences of victimization and found that validation of victim experiences by the police gave the victims a sense of closure, empowerment, and made them feel safer, as well as giving an indication of their value in the community. Another study done by Elliot et al. (2011) conducted interviews on 110 victimized citizens within the last 12 months of the study and found that fair treatment by the police sends a message to the victim that the police are doing their best to solve the case and that the victim is important to the police independent of the case outcome. They also found that when the police practiced procedural justice by using non-blaming attitudes and taking action, as well as following up and staying in touch about the progress of their case, victims perceived the police as doing their best to solve the crime (Elliot et al., 2011).

A study conducted by Wolfe & McLean (2016) examined how procedural injustice results in engaging in risky lifestyles that lead to victimization. They used data from Gang Resistance Education and Training programs and determined that the perception of procedural injustice weakens adolescents' ties to the police, resulting in loosening social control and paving the way for risky lifestyles conducive to victimization (Wolf & McLean, 2016). The importance

of this is that it shows potential causal factors for victimization. Another study looking at the correlation between procedural justice and victimization was conducted by Barkworth & Murphy (2014). The authors examined data from 171 crime victim surveys to determine if procedural justice policing can reduce the negative impacts of system contact for crime victims. Ultimately, they found that "... a victim's fear of crime and their feelings of social exclusion can be significantly reduced if police use a procedurally just approach when they first come into contact with a crime victim" (Barkworth & Murphy, 2014, pp.105-122).

Procedural Justice and Victimization Among College Students

It is important to examine the effects of procedural justice among victimized college students because college students are the next generation of citizens and communities that police will be sworn to serve. If college students develop negative views toward policing, characterized by a lack of trust or feeling that police will not take their matters seriously, this may lead to future problems in terms of crime prevention, crime reporting, and police-community relations. The impressionable years hypothesis (socializing influences people when they are young and impacts their thinking throughout life), and the increasing persistence hypothesis (when people are young, they are flexible and responsive to social circumstances) provide theoretical reasons to explain why interactions with police officers are so important among college students (Krosnick & Alwin, 1989). In combination, these perspectives suggest that college students may be highly impressionable and that negative experiences with police during this time may be particularly influential in structuring beliefs about police officers moving forward.

Interactions between college students and police after experiences of victimization are also frequent. The rate at which college students experience violent victimization is 68 per 1,000

students (Smith 2003). A study conducted by Stanek et al. (2022) found that "...generally, college women will be more likely to report sexual victimization if they perceive police behavior to be fair or just" (pp. 860-881). Research has also found that there is a larger percentage of males and minority students who have had interactions with campus police (Finkeldey et al., 2025), and studies have shown that procedural justice is an important predictor of satisfaction with policing among college students (Greenwood et al., 2022; Pryce & Wilson, 2020; Pryce et al., 2019). Using cross-sectional data collected from 523 students 18 years and older, Pryce et al. (2019) found that procedural justice predicted satisfaction with police and the criminal justice system, but that there was disparity in these perceptions across majors. "Those majoring in law enforcement, including those double majoring in law enforcement and criminal justice, perceived that there was significantly less police misconduct in general than students majoring outside of law enforcement and criminal justice do" (Sethuraju et al., 2019, pp.115). A study done by Henry et al (2020) was conducted to examine 571 undergraduate students to determine the effect of procedural justice on police referral after reading a sexual assault disclosure. They then found that "...multivariate binary logistic regression models demonstrated that positive perceptions of procedural justice increased police referral following sexual assault disclosure" (Henry et al, 2020, pp. 2066-2091). Another study done by Greenwood et al (2022) examined data from 1,400 students at a university to determine student satisfaction with police based on procedural justice and perceptions of safety; the study found that procedural justice reduced fear of victimization by 20%.

Limitations of Prior Research

While many studies have examined the effect of procedural justice on citizen perceptions, few studies have focused specifically on procedural justice among college students after

experiences of victimization. In addition, many studies on procedural justice include only positive and negative police interactions, rather than including neutral (or control) conditions as well. Nivette et al. (2022) note that survey experiments on procedural justice usually involve two treatments (procedurally just or unjust interactions), and lack a neutral control group. This makes it difficult to determine just how much negative or positive interactions influence the outcome, compared to more realistic neutral behavior (see also Gaines et al., 2007). For example, many survey vignette studies compare positive and respectful interactions with police officers to interactions in which officers use highly disrespectful or foul language, with no neutral condition for comparison (Nivette et al., 2022), and using only these two extremes may not accurately represent the effects of procedural justice. The current study aims to bridge these gaps by including a neutral control group, examining all elements of procedural justice, and observing these effects among college students after experiences of victimization.

METHODS

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of college students' perception of policing, specifically focusing on the effects of procedural justice and the importance it plays when dealing with victimization. The research question asks whether conditions of procedural justice affect a college student's willingness to report future crimes, their trust in police, and their satisfaction with police interactions after experiencing victimization. It is hypothesized that the presence of procedural justice will increase student willingness to report future crimes, build trust between police and the student community, and leave the student feeling satisfied with the interaction regardless of the outcome of the case. This study utilizes an experimental vignette research design, placing participants in the shoes of a hypothetical crime victim and randomly assigning them to procedurally just, neutral, or unjust police interactions. The survey vignette

was administered online to college students 18 years or older who are currently attending the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

Participants and Procedures

Surveys were administered to a convenience sample of students in various courses in the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice. To administer the survey, an initial email request was sent in January 2026 to all faculty members teaching criminal justice courses during the Spring 2026 semester. A follow-up email was sent to select professors (e.g., those teaching large sections of introductory classes) several weeks later, before survey collection closed at the end of February 2026. The initial email asked professors to share the survey link with their classes. All participation from the students was voluntary, therefore, it is difficult to determine which classes survey respondents came from or to calculate an overall survey response rate. The population represented by this study therefore includes all students enrolled in criminal justice courses during the Spring 2026 semester, which can include both criminal justice majors and students in other majors taking criminal justice courses as electives. The survey instrument and administration procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board at UNC Charlotte prior to data collection.

Three vignettes designed by the researcher were assigned randomly to the participants using Qualtrics. All participants in the study read the same hypothetical scenario between a police officer and a victimized college student reporting that their car was broken into on campus with objects stolen from the vehicle. The three conditions administered differ only with respect to the way the officer treats the crime victim. The first vignette contained a procedurally just scenario in which the participant was asked to read a hypothetical scenario that involved an

interaction between a college student experiencing victimization and a police officer attending to the case, where the police officer showed genuine concern and had a positive attitude. In this scenario, the voice element of procedural justice presented itself when the officer said “can you tell me what happened?”, this shows the officer is actually listening to the victim and giving them a voice. The element of neutrality presented itself when the officer said “I understand your frustration”, letting the victim know that their feelings are validated. The element of trust and respect presented itself when the officer said "I'm so sorry this happened to you, but I promise I will do everything in my power to make sure we get you answers”, letting the victim know that the officer sees where they are coming from and how important it is to the officer to get the situation resolved. These elements are conceptually similar to those of prior survey research on procedural justice (see Nivette & Akoensi, 2019; Resig et al., 2018).

The second vignette contained a hypothetical scenario with a neutral interaction between a victimized college student and the officer on the case, in which the officer was neither being positive or negative during the interaction. The third vignette was a hypothetical scenario containing procedural injustice, in which a victimized college student is interacting with the officer on the case, and the officer is using negative language and shows no concern for the victim (see Appendix for all three vignettes).

Independent and Dependent Variables

The current study contains a single categorical independent variable, where the three categories are procedural justice, neutral, and procedural injustice. The dependent variables for the study include willingness to report future crimes, trust in police, and satisfaction with police. To measure willingness to report future crimes, a continuous numeric measurement was used in

which the participants were asked after reading the scenario, “how likely are you to report a future crime to campus police?”, with responses ranging from 0% to 100%. For trust in police, an average of three items derived from prior research (Gau, 2013; Merenda et al., 2021) were asked to participants: “based on the interaction, the police officer acted in a trustworthy manner”, “based on the interaction, the police officer can be trusted to do what is right”, and “based on the interaction, the police officer protected my rights”. The responses for all three items were on the same scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). To measure satisfaction with police, an average of three items derived from prior research (Gau, 2013; Merenda et al., 2021) were asked to participants: “how satisfied are you with the police during this interaction?”, “based on the interaction, do you believe the officer showed genuine concern for your problem?”, and “based on the interaction, do you believe the officer prioritized your problem?”. The responses for all three items were on the same scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The survey instrument in this study also collects information on various respondent characteristics. Even though this is a randomized experiment it is important to make sure that it is the independent variable causing the outcome and not preexisting conditions, such as demographics. To account for this possibility, questions regarding demographics (i.e., sex, age, income, etc.) were given in the survey and used to test for experimental balance. Finally, it is common for survey vignette studies to include one or more manipulation check questions that disqualify respondents if answered incorrectly (Petersen et al., 2022). In this study, participants were asked to correctly identify why they contacted the police in order to continue with the survey. Any incorrect responses to the manipulation check were omitted from the analysis.

Analytic Strategy

The analysis for this study followed three stages. First, descriptive statistics for all survey respondents were examined. For numeric variables, the mean and standard deviation were examined, and for categorical variables the percentage of responses in each category were examined. To test for balance across the three different experimental conditions, sociodemographic characteristics were then compared across the procedural justice, neutral, and injustice conditions.

Second, analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test for significant differences between the mean of the responses for each dependent variable. This involved estimating separate ANOVAs for trust in police, satisfaction with police, and willingness to report future crimes. Once the averages were found for each dependent variable, a pairwise comparison was then conducted between the procedural justice condition, neutral condition, and procedural injustice condition to determine what (if any) conditions significantly differed.

RESULTS

In total, 91 students initiated the survey; however, 18 students failed to correctly answer the manipulation question. Thus, a final sample of 73 students, varying in age, sex, race, major, and year in school, was used to measure levels of trust in police, satisfaction with police, and willingness to contact the police. As seen in Table 1, the average respondent was 22 years old, approximately 22% were Freshmen, 20% Sophomores, 22% Juniors, and 36% Seniors, with 60% reporting as Criminal Justice majors and 40% reporting a different major. Approximately 24% of respondents were male, 73% were female, and 3% preferred not to say. In terms of race/ethnicity, 52% were white, 21% were Black or African American, 15% were Hispanic or

Latino, 7% identified as other, 3% were American Indian or Alaskan Native, 2% were Asian or Pacific Islander, and 2% preferred not to say.

Table 1. Respondent characteristics

Variable	*N*	% or Mean	*SD*
Year (*N* = 64)			
Freshman	14	21.9	–
Sophomore	13	20.3	–
Junior	14	21.9	–
Senior	23	35.9	–
Major (*N* = 60)			
Criminal Justice	36	60	–
Other	24	40	–
Sex (*N* = 63)			
Male	15	23.8	–
Female	46	73	–
Prefer not to say	2	3.2	–
Ethnicity/Race (*N* = 62)			
American Indian or Alaskan Native	2	3.2	–
Asian or Pacific Islander	1	1.6	–
Black or African American	13	21	–
Hispanic or Latino	9	14.5	–
White/Caucasian	32	51.6	–
Prefer not to say	1	1.6	–
Other	4	6.5	–
Annual household income (*N* = 59)			
Less than $30,000	5	8.5	–
$30,000-$69,999	15	25.4	–
$70,000-$99,999	15	25.4	–
$100,000-$200,000	16	27.1	–
Greater than $200,000	8	13.6	–
Victim of a crime (*N* = 60)			
Yes	32	53.3	–
No	28	46.7	–
Had car broken into (*N* = 60)			
Yes	7	11.7	–
No	53	88.3	–
Encountered Law Enforcement (*N* = 60)			
Yes	45	75	–
No	15	25	–
Age (*N* = 60)		22.43	7.988

Annual household income was recorded and, on average, 27% reported $100,000 - $200,000, 25% reported $70,000 - $99,999, 25% reported $30,000 - $69,999, 14% reported greater than $200,000, and 9% reported less than $30,000. When asked if they had ever been a victim of a crime, 53% reported yes and 47% reported no. When asked if they had ever had their car broken into, 12% reported yes and 88% reported no, and when asked if they had ever had an encounter with law enforcement, 75% reported yes and 25% reported no.

Table 2. Experimental conditions

Variable	***N***	**%**
Procedural Justice	23	31.5%
Procedural Injustice	25	34.2%
Neutral	25	34.2%
Total	73	100%

As shown in Table 2, the respondents were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. Of the 73 respondents, 23 were assigned to the procedural justice condition, 25 were assigned to the procedural injustice condition, and 25 were assigned to the neutral condition. Of note, the survey instrument did not force responses for demographic questions, but did force responses for questions pertaining to the independent and dependent variables. For that reason, the sample size for demographic questions seen in Table 1 varies from the full sample size shown in Table 2.

In the survey given to respondents, the elements of trust and satisfaction were measured using sub-items derived from prior research (Gau, 2013 & Merenda et al., 2021). To ensure that the sub-items of each scale were consistent, Cronbach's Alpha statistics were conducted. The alpha score for trust was 0.853, and the alpha score for satisfaction was 0.919, indicating that the sub-items for each measure were internally consistent. Sub-items for trust (Q3, Q4, Q5) and

satisfaction (Q6, Q7, Q8) were then combined using simple averages of sub-item scores, creating single composite measures of each dependent variable (see Table 3).

Table 3. Dependent variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Willingness to contact police	82.32	24.72	5	100
Trust	3.89	1.097	1.33	5
Satisfaction	3.58	1.33	1	5

To examine whether randomization produced comparable groups, chi-square tests (for categorical variables) and ANOVA models (for numeric variables) were used to test for significant differences in respondent characteristics across experimental conditions. Results suggested no significant differences between conditions on any characteristic listed in Table 1. Accordingly, one-way ANOVA models were used to test the relationship between procedural justice conditions, trust, satisfaction, and willingness to call the police.

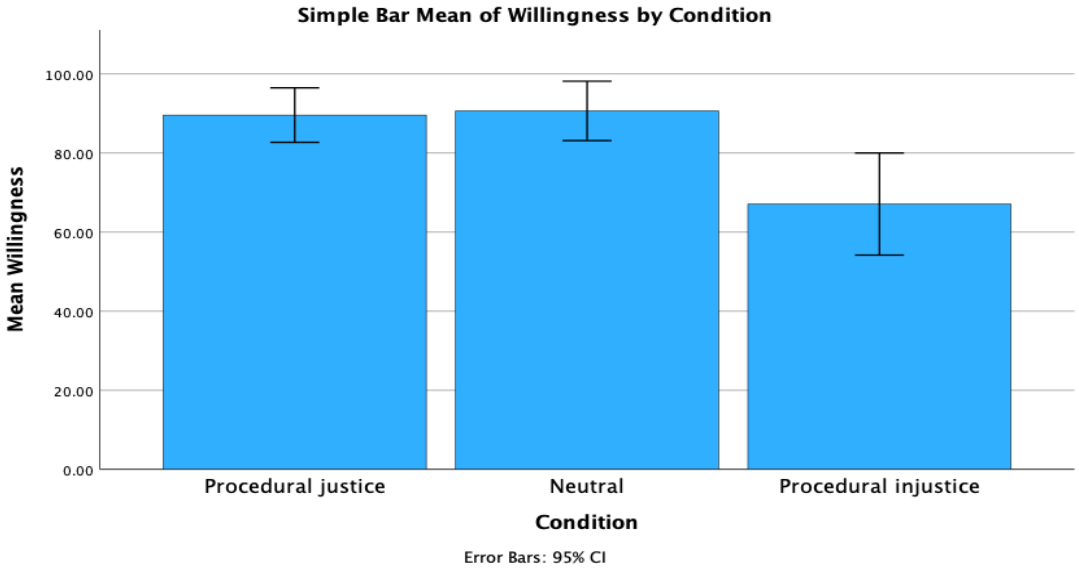

Figure 1. Willingness to call the police by experimental condition

As shown in Figure 1, there was a statistically significant difference in willingness to contact police between the three experimental conditions ($F(2,68) = 8.347$, $p < 0.001$). A Tukey's post hoc test revealed that the average willingness to contact police was significantly higher in the procedural justice ($M = 89.5\%$) and neutral ($M = 90.6\%$) conditions, compared to the procedural injustice condition ($M = 67\%$, $p < 0.01$). However, there was no statistically significant difference between the procedural justice condition and the neutral condition ($p = 0.99$).

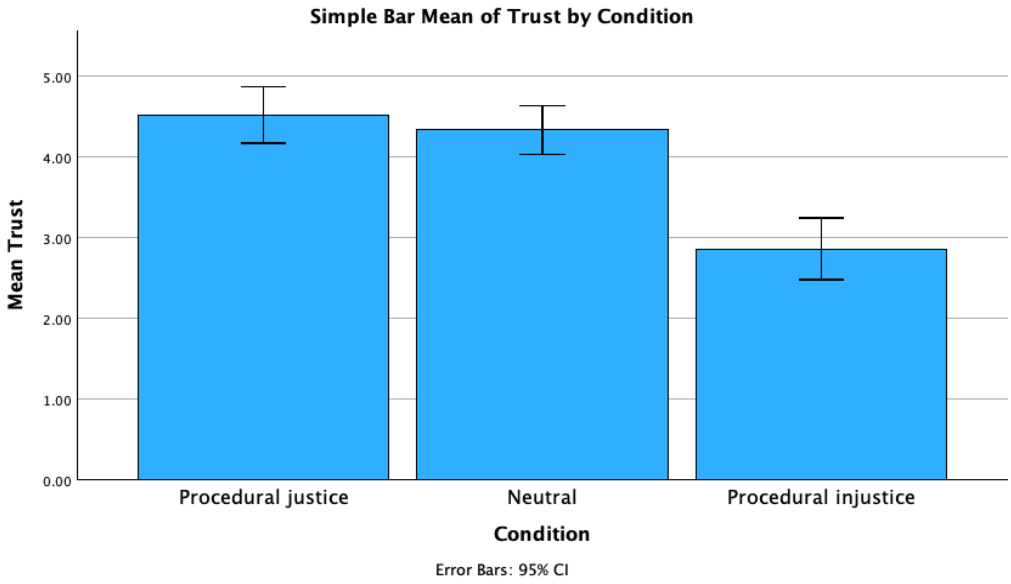

Figure 2. Trust in police by experimental condition

Figure 2 displays the results for trust in police, where there was also a statistically significant difference between the three experimental conditions ($F(2,67) = 29.813$, $p < 0.001$). Here, a Tukey's post hoc test revealed that the average level of trust was significantly higher in both the procedural justice ($M = 4.52$) and neutral ($M = 4.33$) conditions than in the procedural injustice condition ($M = 2.86$, $p < 0.001$), but no statistically significant difference between the procedural justice and neutral conditions ($p = .711$).

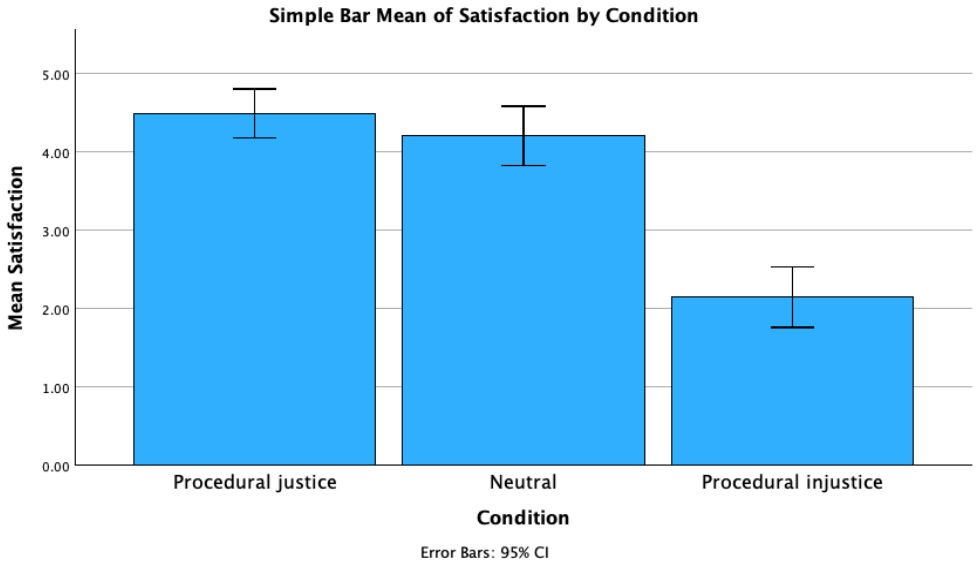

Figure 3. Satisfaction with police by experimental condition

Finally, Figure 3 displays the results for satisfaction. Once again, there was a statistically significant difference between the three experimental conditions ($F(2,63) = 56.057$, $p < 0.001$), with a Tukey's post hoc test indicating that satisfaction with police was significantly higher in the procedural justice ($M = 4.49$) and neutral conditions ($M = 4.206$), compared to the procedural injustice condition ($M = 2.14$, $p < 0.001$). There was no statistically significant difference between the procedural justice condition and the neutral condition, however ($p = .484$).

DISCUSSION

This study examined college students' perceptions of policing based on the presence or absence of procedural justice. This was done by distributing an experimental survey vignette to college students to determine if the presence of procedural justice was a key part of citizens' trust in police officers, satisfaction with police officers, and future willingness to contact police. This study is important because limited research examines the effect of procedural justice on college

students' perceptions of policing, despite the fact that college students may be particularly susceptible to these interactions and will become the next generation of community members police are sworn to serve. My findings provide insight into ways that campus police may be able to build trust and satisfaction with college students, and the consequences for not doing so.

Prior research on procedural justice in police-citizen interactions suggests that interactions interpreted as "harassing, unfair, or discriminatory damage public trust" (Wright et al., 2022, pp. 229-315). More specifically, studies have found that unjust interactions reduce the likelihood of future victimization reporting, communicate a lack of care and priority to crime victims, and reduce trust and satisfaction (Hinds & Murphy, 2007; Hohl et al., 2015; Murphy et al., 2013; Stanek et al., 2022). The results of this study support prior findings, but extend them to interactions between college students and campus police. As hypothesized, my findings indicate that the lack of procedural justice in interactions between college students and campus police significantly reduces willingness to contact police in the future, trust in police officers, and overall satisfaction with police. Prior research (Smith, 2003) determined that the rate at which college students interact with police is 68 per 1,000 students, which is fairly frequent. The frequent interactions between college students and campus police suggest the important large-scale implications of these findings.

One unique element of the current study was the inclusion of a neutral condition, where police were neither overly respectful or disrespectful. As Nivette et al. (2024) explain, most prior experimental studies include only procedural justice and injustice conditions, though common police behavior may be in between these two extremes. For example, Gaines et al. (2007) argue the need for a business-as-usual control group in survey experiments, because otherwise it is difficult to determine how much negative or positive interactions influence the outcome. My

findings indicate that willingness to contact police, trust, and satisfaction were all significantly higher in the procedural justice and neutral conditions than in the procedural injustice condition. Since the findings showed that there were no significant differences between the procedural justice and neutral conditions, the implication is that police officers do not necessarily have to be overly respectful when interacting with citizens to build trust and satisfaction, but instead must avoid overly disrespectful behavior.

The study showed no significant difference between the procedural justice and neutral conditions, likely because being overtly nice to citizens and having a neutral tone when conversing with citizens are both perceived as police officers doing their jobs. According to prior research (Mazerolle et al., 2013; Tyler, 2004) an element that is key during an interaction with citizens that leads to satisfaction is an officer who maintains neutrality. So, both interactions with an officer would lead a citizen to trust the officer and increase their likelihood of contacting police in the future. However, these results could also be unique to populations of college students. According to prior research (Krosnick & Alwin, 1989; Fiveble, 2025, para. 1) college students are at their most impressionable stages of life, where they are experiencing cognitive changes that leads them to perceive their interactions differently than a citizen in late-adulthood. Therefore, an interaction that is not negative (procedural injustice) is conveyed as a successful interaction.

From a police policy and training standpoint, it may be easier to teach police officers to remain neutral to avoid negative outcomes than to meet all of the elements of procedural justice. This is a much lower bar to set, and my results suggest that neutral interactions can be as effective as procedurally just interactions. However, teaching officers to incorporate procedural justice may be more effective in the long run, and may also have other benefits not analyzed in

this study. If an officer strives for procedural justice but is having an off day, then they may come across as neutral. However, if they are taught to be neutral and have an off day then the interaction could present itself as procedural injustice. Ultimately, police agencies should strive to incorporate procedural justice into their training and policy, but my results suggest that simply avoiding unjust interactions can be an effective way to prevent distrust, lack of satisfaction, and unwillingness to contact police.

On the other hand, my results suggest that being overtly disrespectful has important consequences for people's perceptions of policing. When police officers do not treat people with respect, give them voice, or appear neutral, it has a significant effect on the way citizens view policing and the justice system. This is important because the relationship built between officers and citizens helps to improve police-community relations, which leads to the creation of policies that help the community and cooperative relationships between police and community members that help to promote public safety. Based on my results, these implications can extend to college campuses and thus campus police should pay particular attention to the way they treat students after incidents of victimization.

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study has several limitations worth noting. First, the study contains a small nonrandom sample, and it is not clear whether this sample is representative of the full population of students in criminal justice classes. Second, the use of a hypothetical vignette might not accurately capture people's perceptions after a real interaction with a police officer. The language used in the procedural justice condition and the neutral condition could be considered a small difference which might account for the nonsignificant differences between the two conditions.

Additionally, since the vignettes are written it is difficult to account for the tone of the officer, which could independently impact interpretation.

The survey vignette is a necessarily oversimplified version of a police interaction, and survey respondents may have a difficult time placing themselves in the shoes of the hypothetical crime victim. In addition, my survey asks about only a limited number of outcomes, and it is possible that significant differences between procedural justice and neutral conditions would exist for other types of perceptions. Finally, this study was conducted at only one university, so it is not clear how generalizable the results would be to other students or schools.

In particular, my results may not apply to other college students or universities because this study utilized participants that predominately had prior experiences with police officers (75%). The results could vary if a majority of the participants did not have previous encounters with police. Students who have already had a prior run in with law enforcement could potentially be answering with a preconceived bias or understanding of these interactions. Similarly, the study included respondents that were mainly criminal justice students who are actively learning how an officer should behave and what goes into an interaction with citizens experiencing victimization. Results could vary if the students were of different majors, who had little to no insight into law enforcement and would be responding based on how at ease their interaction with the officer left them. Respondents in the current study were also predominately white (52%) and female (73%), which is important given prior research indicating that perceptions of police are shaped by factors such as race and sex (Mbuba, 2010). Of note, the UNC Charlotte student body is roughly 50% white and 50% female, so the sample for this study is an overrepresentation of females at the university. However, among criminal justice majors, 40% of students are white

and over 70% are female. Therefore, the sample used in this study appears more representative of criminal justice majors than the university population overall.[1]

Even with these limitations, this study is important because it highlights an under-researched component of procedural justice. College students may be particularly susceptible to police interactions due to their impressionable nature and responsiveness to social circumstances (Krosnick & Alwin, 1989), but are rarely the focus of procedural justice research. The results of the study suggest that college students' perceptions are sensitive to police behavior, but police being overly disrespectful during an interaction matters more than being overly respectful. Given the frequency of interactions with college students and their potential susceptibility to these interactions, my findings indicate that police should prioritize respectful behavior in these interactions.

[1] https://ir-analytics.charlotte.edu/tableau/overview-enrollment-demographics-and-degrees-awarded/

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APPENDIX

Instructions: Please read the following description carefully and answer the questions. You are being asked to imagine that you are the victim of a crime occurring on the UNC Charlotte campus. The following scenario summarizes the details of the crime.

> On a weekday afternoon, you park your car on campus to attend class. When you return you find your car has broken windows and you are missing your school laptop, wallet/purse, and articles of clothing. You pick up the phone to contact campus police and report the crime. When the officer arrives, he approaches you and says: ["*Hello, my name is Officer Cullen. Can you tell me what happened?*" (Procedural Justice Condition)] [*"My name is Officer Cullen. Can you tell me what happened?*" (Neutral Condition)] [*"What happened?"* (Procedural Injustice Condition)]. You then tell the officer what you are experiencing and he replies: [*"I understand your frustration. I'm so sorry this happened to you, but I promise I will do everything in my power to make sure we get you answers. May I have your name and contact information to keep you updated as I progress through the investigation?* (Procedural Justice Condition)] ["*I'm going to take a look into this and try and get some answers. We will let you know any new information we get and see if we can find your stuff"* (Neutral Condition)] [*"this is why you need to remove anything important from your car. College students never take any responsibility for themselves. Someone will let you know if we find your stuff*" (Procedural Injustice Condition)]. You give him your information and: [*he makes sure to keep you updated on the situation and asks for your input throughout the investigation* (Procedural Justice Condition)] [*you receive a couple of calls with updates over the course of the*

investigation (Neutral Condition)] [*you get a call eventually with an update on the investigation* (Procedural Injustice Condition)]. After two weeks, your belongings are located and returned to you.

Please respond to the following questions

Manipulation check

1. In the given scenario, what was your reason for contacting campus police?
    a. Suspicious person on campus
    b. Car was broken into
    c. Car accident
    d. None of the above

Willingness to report future crime

2. Based on the interaction, how likely are you to report future crime to campus police? _____ (0-100% sliding scale)

Trust in police

3. Based on the interaction, the police officer acted in a trustworthy manner:
    a. Strongly disagree
    b. Disagree
    c. Neither agree or disagree
    d. Agree
    e. Strongly agree

4. Based on the interaction, the police officer can be trusted to do what is right:
    a. Strongly disagree
    b. Disagree
    c. Neither agree or disagree
    d. Agree
    e. Strongly agree

5. Based on the interaction, the police officer protected my rights:
    a. Strongly disagree
    b. Disagree
    c. Neither agree or disagree
    d. Agree
    e. Strongly agree

Satisfaction with police

6. How satisfied are you with the police during this interaction?
    a. Not satisfied at all
    b. Not satisfied
    c. Neither satisfied or unsatisfied
    d. Satisfied
    e. Very satisfied

7. Based on the interaction, do you believe the officer showed genuine concern for your problem?
    a. Strongly disagree
    b. Disagree
    c. Neither agree or disagree
    d. Agree
    e. Strongly agree

8. Based on the interaction, do you believe the officer prioritized your problem?
    a. Strongly disagree
    b. Disagree
    c. Neither agree or disagree
    d. Agree
    e. Strongly agree

Sociodemographic Questions

9. What is your year in school?
    a. Freshman
    b. Sophomore
    c. Junior
    d. Senior

10. What is your major? _____

11. What is your sex?
    a. Male
    b. Female
    c. Prefer not to answer

12. What is your age? _____

13. What best describes your race/ethnicity?
    a. American Indian or Alaskan Native
    b. Asian or Pacific Islander

c. Black or African American
d. Hispanic or Latino
e. White / Caucasian
f. Prefer not to answer
g. Other: _____

14. What is the estimate of your family's annual household income?
    a. Less than $30,000
    b. $30,000 - $69,999
    c. $70,000 - $99,999
    d. $100,000 - $200,000
    e. Greater than $200,000

15. Have you ever been the victim of a crime?
    a. Yes
    b. No

16. Have you ever had your car broken into?
    a. Yes
    b. No

17. Have you ever had an encounter with law enforcement?
    a. Yes
    b. No