

## **Police Unions, Race, and Trust in the Police**

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### **Abstract**

It has long been recognized that trust critically influences the effective functioning of political institutions, yet the determinants of trust in the police – a classic order institution – are still not well understood. We examine the effect of police unionization on trust in the police and, in particular, in mediating the adverse impacts of police killings of civilians on trust within the U.S. multiracial context. We analyze trust responses and corresponding demographic data on approximately 5,000 respondents across 11 metropolitan statistical areas from the 2006 Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey, matched to relevant city- and state-level correlates from three additional datasets. Our results confirm prior studies' findings of a large gap between black and non-black trust. Whereas police killings of civilians normally reduce trust among non-blacks while leaving black levels of trust unaffected, we find that in jurisdictions where police bargain collectively the drop in non-black trust is effectively eliminated, suggesting that police unionization essentially abets the polarization of trust in the police between blacks and non-blacks.

In the summer of 2020, protests and riots consumed U.S. cities in the wake of George Floyd’s death at the hands of the Minneapolis police. Initial outrage metastasized into a historic nationwide crisis of public trust in law enforcement. Radical calls to “defund the police,” and a raft of significant legislative changes in many states in 2021-2022, indicate a burgeoning trust problem that – at least to some degree – has transcended ideological affiliation.

Trust has long been central to social science research (Fukuyama 1995, Scholz and Lubell 1998, Putnam 2000, Zak and Knack 2001, Glaeser et al. 2002, Knack 2001, 2003, Hetherington 2005, Rahn and Rudolph 2005, Rudolph and Evans 2005, Helliwell and Wang 2011, Fleming et al. 2014, Hetherington and Rudolph 2015, Helliwell et al. 2018, Uslaner 2018, Vallier 2020). In the study of trust in government institutions, scholars distinguish between order institutions—such as police and courts—and political institutions—such as legislatures, political parties, and bureaucracies (Theobald and Haider-Markel 2009, Rothstein and Stolle 2008, You 2018).

In this paper, we scrutinize the impact of collective bargaining by police unions on trust in the police, a central order institution, in the American local government context. Police unions’ potential impact on public trust in the police is ambiguous. On the one hand, collective bargaining could reduce trust in the police, as work rules in contracts protect bad officers and thereby poison community relations. On the other hand, collective bargaining – to the extent it gives rise to labor organizations that are effective advocates for officers and can tell “the cops’ side of the story” – might actually increase public trust in the police.

Since these arguments cut in opposite directions, we tested them with data. We found little empirical evidence that collective bargaining *directly* impacts trust in the police. Our

analysis finds no support for the reigning public narrative that police unions undercut trust in the police (Stockman 2021).

Yet, when we examined the role of collective bargaining by police in determining the public's reaction when police kill civilians, we found an important and powerful mediating effect of police unionization. Our analysis shows that police unionization buffers public trust against the adverse impacts of police killings on civilians. While trust in police – measured without regard to race – declines significantly when local fatal encounters occur, this effect is eliminated where police have collective bargaining rights. The results suggest that police unions prop up trust in the wake of fatal encounters with the police, which would otherwise fall. As powerful interest groups, police unions manage public perceptions of bad officer behavior, altering the politics of policing in local jurisdictions. Our results suggest interest group mediation helps explain the recent finding that the policy positions of political elites align with the preferences of urban residents (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014, Einstein and Kogan 2016, Warshaw 2019).

These findings have a racial subtext which must be viewed in the context of two observations about black Americans' trust in the police.<sup>1</sup> First, attitudes towards the police have long been polarized along racial lines. African-Americans consistently express greater skepticism of police than whites (Campbell and Schuman 1968, Decker 1981, Greenfield et al. 1997, U.S. Department of Justice 2000, Howell et al. 2004, Macdonald and Stokes 2006). Indeed, our own analysis finds a significant difference between the level of trust in the police of black Americans on the one hand and non-black, non-Hispanic (NBNH) Americans on the

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<sup>1</sup> We focus on black Americans because the United States' history of slavery, Jim Crow, and concentrated urban poverty remain to be reckoned with—and other racial minorities have not suffered equivalent subjugation. Hispanics are the most proximate group to blacks with respect to their adverse relationship to the police and historical and current position in U.S. society, so we also distinguish them in our analysis.

other.<sup>2</sup> The reasons for black distrust of the police are manifold. Black Americans are more likely to report unpleasant encounters with the police, including adversarial and violent interactions, as well as being stopped, questioned, and frisked without cause (Browning et al. 1994, Flanagan and Vaughn 1996, Epp et al. 2014, Lerman and Weaver 2014a, Baumgartner et al. 2018, Mullinix and Norris 2018, Fryer 2019, Edwards et al. 2019, Pierson et. al 2020).

Second, when the police kill a civilian, the trust of black Americans in the police is not adversely affected, all else equal, while NBNHs' trust declines significantly. This differential has the intuitively appealing interpretation of a “told you so” effect: while news coverage of police killings of suspects is attention-getting and salient for NBNH Americans who might have adhered to an idealized notion of police behavior, it merely confirms what blacks already believe: the police can't be trusted.

As reactions to police killings are exclusively a NBNH trust issue, we find that police unions essentially abet the polarization of trust in the police along racial lines. We hypothesize that police unions serve a public relations machines that defend officers and thereby staunch the drop-in trust among NBNH Americans that would otherwise occur. The result of this shielding effect is that NBNH trust in the police remains higher where police unions are present. In short – prior to George Floyd's killing, at least – police unions appear to have inoculated NBNH trust against the adverse effect of police killings of civilians and may have been responsible for staving off calls for reform. Our conjecture with regard to the mechanism at work here is supported by the available qualitative evidence. Numerous news articles document that police unions advertise in support of letting the police “do their job” in the face of challenges,

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<sup>2</sup> In our empirics, we specifically account for the response tendencies of blacks and Hispanics. The measured attitudes of these groups stand therefore in relief relative to a residual baseline represented by the collective clustering of other groups, which we characterize as “non-black non-Hispanic” Americans and represent via the acronym “NBNH”: whites, Asians, Pacific Islanders, native Alaskans, etc.

particularly salient local violence.<sup>3</sup> A small scholarly literature suggests that unions can be effective in shaping public attitudes towards their members (Pomper 1959, Crane 1986). The polarizing effects of such campaigns are intuitive when one considers the messenger: police departments are often whiter than the communities they serve (Leatherby and Oppel 2020, Hyland and Davis 2021) and police union leadership tends to be even more heavily white than the overall ranks of police officers (Feuer 2020, Hager and Li 2020).

Our analysis makes use of data on trust from Harvard University's 2006 Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey, the most recent extensive survey of individuals that captures trust levels in the police. The lack of appropriate data has prevented the study of police unions, collective bargaining and their effects on communities served by police (DiSalvo 2022). But as recent scholarship has urged the discipline to take more interest in local policing, especially its impact on minorities communities, the politics of policing is too important a topic not to study with the available data (Lerman and Weaver 2014a, Lerman and Weaver 2014b, Hinton 2015, Fortner 2015, Soss and Weaver 2017, Baumgartner et al. 2018). The period we analyze necessarily precedes the extensive national attention paid to controversial police killings of black Americans—beginning, one might argue, with the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014. As such, the study provides essential background for the different attitudes toward police observable today.

## **Background and Research**

Public employee unions took off in the 1960s and 1970s, only to see some of their

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<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., “‘Help Wanted’: Philadelphia Police Union Calling for New District Attorney in I-95 Billboards,” accessed at: <https://philadelphia.cbslocal.com/2019/06/27/help-wanted-philadelphia-police-union-calling-for-new-district-attorney-in-i-95-billboards/>; and “Organizations Show Support for BRPD Amid Controversy over Police Union Billboards,” accessed at: <https://www.wafb.com/2020/07/21/organizations-show-support-brpd-after-new-police-union-billboards/>.

legal rights curtailed in the 2010s (DiSalvo 2015; Anzia and Moe 2016; Walker 2014, 2020). As part of this larger movement, police unions became players in American urban politics. Police currently have collective-bargaining rights by statute in 30 states, and union locals are dispersed across the roughly 18,000 police departments nationwide. Only Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee, prohibit bargaining for public employees;<sup>4</sup> while Alabama, Colorado, Mississippi, and Wyoming lack statutes to either advance or oppose police unions (Rushin 2017). In 2019, Bureau of Labor Statistics' Current Population Survey reported that 57.5% of the nation's 712,336 police officers were covered by collective-bargaining contracts, and 55% of officers were union members. In addition, there were 80,802 police supervisors and detectives, 40.6% of whom were union members and 43.3% of whom were covered by union contracts. As a result, in percentage terms police are the most heavily unionized segment of the public sector workforce—outpacing K-12 teachers.

Policing is a core local government service and constitutes a substantial share of municipal budgets (Einstein and Kogan 2016). Therefore, governments that collectively bargain with police unions raise issues of great importance. From the bottom up, collective bargaining influences the costs of public safety, the organizational structure of police departments, and perhaps decisions made by police officers on the street. The latter in particular involve outcomes that matter a great deal to public stakeholders and, in some situations, are matters of life and death. From the top down, police unions can exercise influence on the “management” side of the bargaining table through campaign contributions to and candidate endorsements of elected officials with whom they will negotiate. Presumably, then, there are important connections

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<sup>4</sup> Until 2021 Virginia also prohibited collective bargaining for public employees. In May of that year, Virginia permitted local governing bodies to engage in collective bargaining with its employees—including public school teachers, firefighters, police officers, and most other local government employees—for the first time.

between police union collective bargaining, political activity, public safety provision and perceptions of the police.

However, amazingly little is known about the political impact of collective bargaining in law enforcement and police unions' political roles. There are almost no studies of police unions by political scientists (for an exception see, Zoorob 2018). They are an overlooked topic of study in the social sciences generally (Walker 2008). Only recently have collective bargaining for law enforcement and police unions attracted legal scholars' attention (Bies 2017, Rushin 2017, Rushin and DeProspo 2019, Dharmapala et al. 2020).

This neglect has occurred while the study of public employee unions in general has emerged as a major focus of research (Moe 2006, 2009, 2011; Hartney and Flavin 2011; Sieg and Wang 2013; Anzia and Moe 2015, 2016, 2019; Flavin and Hartney 2015; DiSalvo 2015; DiSalvo and Kucik 2018; Walker 2014, 2020; Zupan 2017; Hertel-Fernandez 2018; Finger and Hartney 2019; Paglayan 2019; Hartney 2022). In large measure, this work has centered on teachers' unions, while broadly passing over unions in the protective services.

Police unions, however, sit at the intersection of three streams of political science research. One is work answering recent calls to make interest groups more central to political science research (Bawn et al. 2012; Hacker and Pierson 2010, 2014; Moe 2015; Anzia 2019). Another is the study of U.S. local government, which after a long hiatus has returned to the mainstream (Oliver 2012; Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014; Einstein and Kogan 2016; Warshaw 2019; Anzia 2019, 2020; Schaffner et al. 2020; Dynes et al. 2021). Finally, scholars have taken an interest in policing, particularly its impact on minority communities and its influence on American racial politics (Lerman and Weaver 2014a, Lerman and Weaver 2014b, Hinton 2015, Isaac 2015, Soss and Weaver 2017).

Our work here seeks to connect and advance these research agendas. Research on public sector unions to date has focused on the costs of government (for an exception, see Feigenbaum et al. 2018). By contrast, we examine the impact of police unions on political trust. Our study provides a first foray into a largely unexplored territory of connections (or disconnections) between collective bargaining with law enforcement on the one hand and trust in American local political institutions and satisfaction with the provision of public goods on the other. Recent studies of local politics have focused on whether the policy positions of political elites align with the preferences of urban residents—with the finding being that they generally do (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014, Einstein and Kogan 2016, Warshaw 2019). Our findings suggest that public perceptions of a core local policy—policing—are significantly mediated by interest group activity. Ultimately, if the police are the face of the state for minority communities in urban centers, as Soss and Weaver (2017) contend, understanding how police unions shape public perceptions of the police could be critical to the assessment of public perceptions of the quality of American democracy more generally.

### **Theoretical Expectations**

We hypothesize that there are two related ways that collective bargaining rights impact trust in the police in the wake of police fatal encounters with civilians, mediating the effects of such encounters. Our theory builds on recent work that unpacks the processes whereby individuals in different racial groups adopt distinct accounts of controversial policing actions (Jefferson et al. 2021).

One is that the vigorous public defense of officers accused of misconduct by police union leaders may appeal to many Americans, especially NBNH Americans. Collective bargaining rights facilitate the formation of police unions that are politically savvy and well-resourced



(Keller and Barker 2021). Therefore, when an officer is accused of abuse or misconduct in a high-profile case, union leaders mount major public relations offensives in defense of the accused officer, which can include rallies, speeches, television appearances by union leaders, op-eds in newspapers, and more (Burpo et al. 1997, DeLord et al. 2008).<sup>5</sup> They seek to turn officers accused of misconduct into victims of false complaints who were only doing a tough job (Keller and Barker 2021). Given that there is a gulf between white and black assessments of the fairness of the criminal justice system, police unions can reinforce white (and perhaps other races’) sense that what police and courts do is generally fair (Peffley and Hurwitz 2007). On the other hand, police union rhetoric is less likely to influence black Americans’ attitudes toward the police, as this group’s distrust – based often on salient personal or family experiences in their neighborhoods – represents a relatively hardened and inelastic position.

Two, police unions often have close ties with elected officials—officials who sought and received their election endorsements and campaign contributions—who often contribute to the public debate on behalf of the police in the wake of controversial incidents.<sup>6</sup> Some mayors and city council members can be expected to give the police in general, if not always the officer accused of misconduct, the benefit of the doubt in their public statements in the wake of a police killing of a civilian. Defense of the police in general as doing a hard job and/or urging the public to await the details of an investigation can help mitigate the decline in trust in police that would otherwise occur in a post-killing situation. Even if some elected officials say little or nothing, this may help bolster the image of the police, particularly in the minds of NBNH Americans who

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<sup>5</sup> Not only are union leaders legally obligated to defend all members equally, but internal leadership elections encourage such behavior. Failure to vigorously defend every officer can expose union presidents to challenges in the next leadership election. In all misconduct cases, the union at a minimum undertakes a legal defense within the police department following the procedural mechanisms detailed in state statute or the collective bargaining agreement.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Stockman (2021).

may be predisposed to sympathize with the police. Rather than condemn the officer or the police generally, the message some elected officials can send is, in effect, that there little to concern the public.

In sum, we expect that the public relations operations of police unions abetted by allied elected officials along with greater public spending on policing will enhance trust in the police in the wake of controversial killings of civilians. We expect that the first two of these factors will mitigate the fall in trust in the police that would otherwise occur in the wake of police killings of civilians.

The role of police unions with respect to the police killings of civilians may be instructively viewed through the lens of customer relationship management in the provision of a public service. It has been shown in the service marketing literature that committed customers are more willing to overlook service defects and that their attitudes toward providers recover faster in the face of acknowledged defects (Bejou and Palmer 1998, Hess et al. 2003). To the extent that the efforts of police unions successfully shore up the public's commitment to the police, we would expect the public's trust in the face of events that indicate "defects," even huge ones such as fatal encounters with civilians, to be more resilient. Taking the marketing analogy further, anticipating that black Americans would likely be less receptive to messages seeking to build a relationship to the police might induce unions to target their public relations primarily to shore up the commitment of non-blacks. Incremental investment effort would be more "profitably" spent on those whose attitudes toward the police are more elastic. Thus, an optimal "marketing" strategy for police unions would, by this logic, involve a differential racial approach and impact, particularly as regards managing the public's reactions to fatal encounters involving civilians.

## Data and Methods

We stress that the subject matter of this paper is in an area in which the availability of data has been extraordinarily limited. We use the best or only data available for each variable. We sourced our data on individual-level trust in police and associated individual-level correlates from the 2006 Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey (“SOCCAP”), a survey dataset collected by Saguaro Seminar at the John F. Kennedy School of Government of Harvard University.<sup>7</sup> The survey was based on a telephone sample of communities in the United States, including 11 specifically identifiable with metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs), combined with a national sample conducted randomly across the Continental U.S.

To these, we matched data from three additional datasets. We obtained data on the number of fatalities occurring in encounters between civilians and the police from 2000 and 2006 from FatalEncounters.org, a dataset constructed based on news reports and other primary sources.<sup>8</sup> Measures of political ideology at the city level were captured from the City-level Public Preference Estimates of the American Ideology Project (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2013, 2014; henceforth, “AIP dataset”).<sup>9</sup> Data on the duty-to-bargain laws by state that govern police departments came from the Public Sector Collective Bargaining Law Data Set of the National Bureau of Economic Research collected by Valletta and Freeman (1988), as updated through 1996 by Kim Rueben of the Urban Institute (henceforth, “Valletta and Freeman dataset”).<sup>10</sup> There were few changes in collective bargaining laws between 1996 and 2006, so we

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<sup>7</sup> Accessed at: <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/featured-collections/2006-social-capital-community-benchmark-survey>

<sup>8</sup> Accessed at: <https://fatalencounters.org/>. FatalEncounters.org is a civilian run data source that records fatal incidents involving police since 2000. The owner of the website and a research term records the incident, the agencies of the officers involved, and the known names of any involved individuals. They collect these items from new stories and public records and therefore cannot not guarantee a complete collection of all shootings. It should be noted that the further back in time one goes using this dataset the likelihood of undercounting police killings of civilians increases. However, it is by all accounts the best available source that extends back twenty years.

<sup>9</sup> Accessed at: <https://americanideologyproject.com/>

<sup>10</sup> Accessed at: <https://www.nber.org/research/data/nber-public-sector-collective-bargaining-law-data-set>

made the appropriate adjustments to the Rueben data by hand to obtain the 2006 data used in the study.

We employ state-level bargaining laws as our proxy for local police unionization because they represent the largest factor influencing – hence, reflecting – the strength of public employee unions at the local-level (Anzia 2020). Once a state adopts a mandatory collective bargaining law nearly all covered employees form unions to negotiate mutually binding contracts with government employers. As a result, union membership and dues revenues increase, making such unions more potent political forces. While “unions” exist in states in “right-to-work” states without collective bargaining statutes, these groups are more proximate to associations of employees and tend to have much lower membership rates and disposable revenues (Moe 2011, Flavin and Hartney 2015, DiSalvo 2015, Hartney 2022).

We estimate the determinants of trust in police at the individual level. Our core estimation model is as follows:

	$Trust = \beta_1 \cdot Black + \beta_2 \cdot Hisp + \beta_3 \cdot Age + \beta_4 \cdot Income + \beta_5 \cdot Educ + \beta_6 \cdot Indiv\ Ideology$ $+ \beta_7 \cdot Killings + \beta_8 \cdot DutytoBargain + \beta_9 \cdot DutytoBargain \cdot Killings$	(1)
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The dependent variable *Trust* is a survey response variable derived from the SOCCAP data; it takes on ordered integer values between 1 and 4, where 1 indicates the individual respondent trusts police “not at all” and 4 trusts police “a lot.”

The first six independent variables are characteristics of the individual respondent taken from SOCCAP. The first two of these are binary indicators reflecting whether the respondent is black or is Hispanic, categories which are not mutually exclusive. The inclusion of these two indicators implies that the measured residual effects on trust will be for individuals who are neither black nor Hispanic. The respondent’s age is included as a continuous variable. The

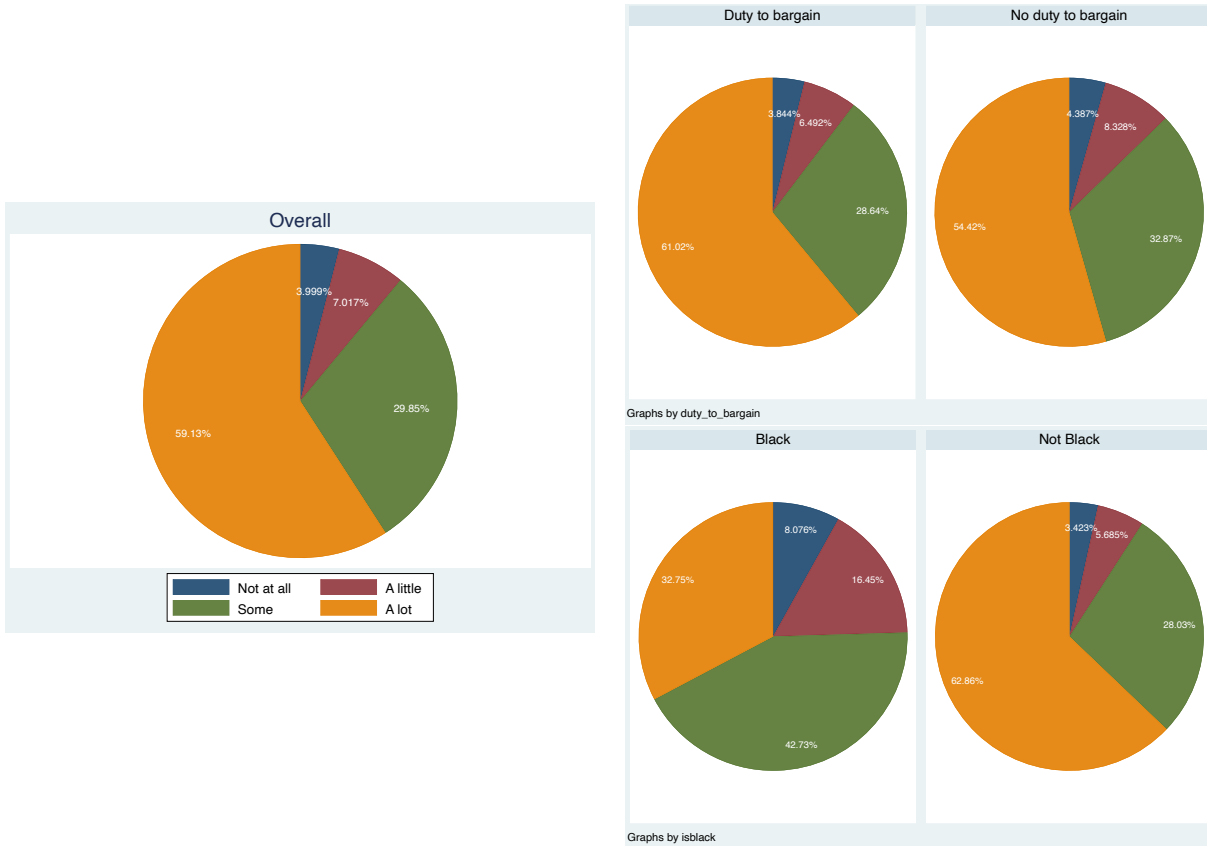
respondent's income is reported based upon one of a series of ordered, increasing income ranges. The respondent's education level takes on ordered integer values ranging from 1 (less than high school) through 7 (graduate or professional degree). *Indiv Ideology* represents self-reported political ideology of the respondent and takes on ordered integer values between 1 and 5, where 5 indicates the respondent self-identifies as "very liberal" and 1 "very conservative."

The two remaining explanatory variables are associated with characteristics of the respondent's geographic location. *Killings* comprises fatalities per million residents in the metropolitan statistical area (MSA) of the respondent, for the period from January 1, 2000 through December 31, 2006. *DutytoBargain* is a binary indicator for whether municipalities have an express or implied duty to bargain with police unions in the respondent's state, based on state law. These variables come from FatalEncounters.org and the Valletta and Freeman dataset, respectively. Both variables enter the model independently, and we also consider the effect of their interaction.

Figure 1 displays several pie charts that show the distribution of the ordered responses captured by the dependent variable *Trust*. The first pie, which shows the overall distribution of responses, indicates as a general matter the overwhelming favorability of respondents toward the police. The second and third pies indicate the distribution for respondents in duty-to-bargain states versus respondents in states without a duty to bargain law; these appear to suggest somewhat greater favorability toward police under a collective bargaining regime. The fourth and fifth pies, which display the distribution of responses for black versus NBNH respondents, show a truly dramatic difference. While nearly 63% of NBNH Americans trust the police "a lot," fewer than 33% of blacks do. There is some compensation for this in the large percentage of

blacks who are moderately trusting of police. Whereas only 3.4% of NBNHs trust police “not at all,” more than twice that share of blacks – slightly over 8% – possess that attitude.

Fig 1. HOW MUCH DO YOU TRUST THE POLICE IN YOUR LOCAL COMMUNITY?



We estimate variants of the core model in (1) that also include *Black* interacted with *Killings*, substitute for *Indiv Ideology* an indicator for whether the respondent identifies as a Republican (i.e., *GOP*), and add both independently and interacted with *Killings* the Tausanovitch and Warshaw (2013) estimate of city-level ideology using multilevel regression with poststratification from the AIP dataset (*City Ideology*).<sup>11</sup> *City Ideology* is included to pick up the effects on individual trust of merely living in an ideologically conservative MSA, all else equal – a hypothesized social influence effect. The interaction of the city-level ideology variable

<sup>11</sup> This variable is called *MRP\_est* in the Tausanovitch and Warshaw (2013) dataset.

with *Killings* is included, in turn, to pick up a potential attenuation of enthusiasm for the police of people in ideologically conservative MSAs in the wake of police killings of civilians. It should be borne in mind when reviewing our results that whereas individual ideology is coded with higher values representing a stronger liberal leaning, city-level ideology is coded with higher values representing greater conservatism. This discrepancy accrues to our having preserved the original coding of both variables, as derived from their respective source datasets.

Our analysis of (1) is restricted to the sub-sample of SOCCAP respondents for which it was possible to identify the MSA of the respondent.<sup>12</sup> The MSAs covered are Baton Rouge, LA; Duluth, MN / Superior, WI; Greensboro, NC; Houston, TX; Kalamazoo, MI; Lewiston-Auburn, ME; Rochester, NY; San Diego, CA; Winston-Salem, NC; Yakima, WA; and Sarasota, FL. Of these 11 MSAs, 8 are covered by duty-to-bargain laws, while three – Baton Rouge, Greensboro, and Winston-Salem – are not.<sup>13</sup> This group is broadly representative in the sense both of its relative ideological diversity and its comprising a mix of large and small as well as geographically dispersed cities. Only in three cities do police lack collective bargaining rights because a majority of states (42) grant police these rights, and once granted local police unionize, such that any sample would have more cities with such rights than without. Recall that state duty-to-bargain laws for police lead to the near universal unionization of local police departments; while the absence of a state duty-to-bargain law means that police officers will not be able to form an association that can negotiate with management.

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<sup>12</sup> The MSAs are derived from the U.S. Census Bureau.: <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/metro-micro.html>.

<sup>13</sup> We do not possess data on the specific share of police officers in these MSAs who belong to unions because such granular level data can only be secured through a Freedom of Information Act or other public records request for local government payroll data. The dispersion of our MSAs across the country, and the fact that some of them contain multiple police departments within them, would render it an exceptionally time-consuming task to secure union membership data at the department level for our full sample. Even if we were to have attempted this effort, the variability in local government responsiveness to such requests suggests our efforts might well have been fruitless.

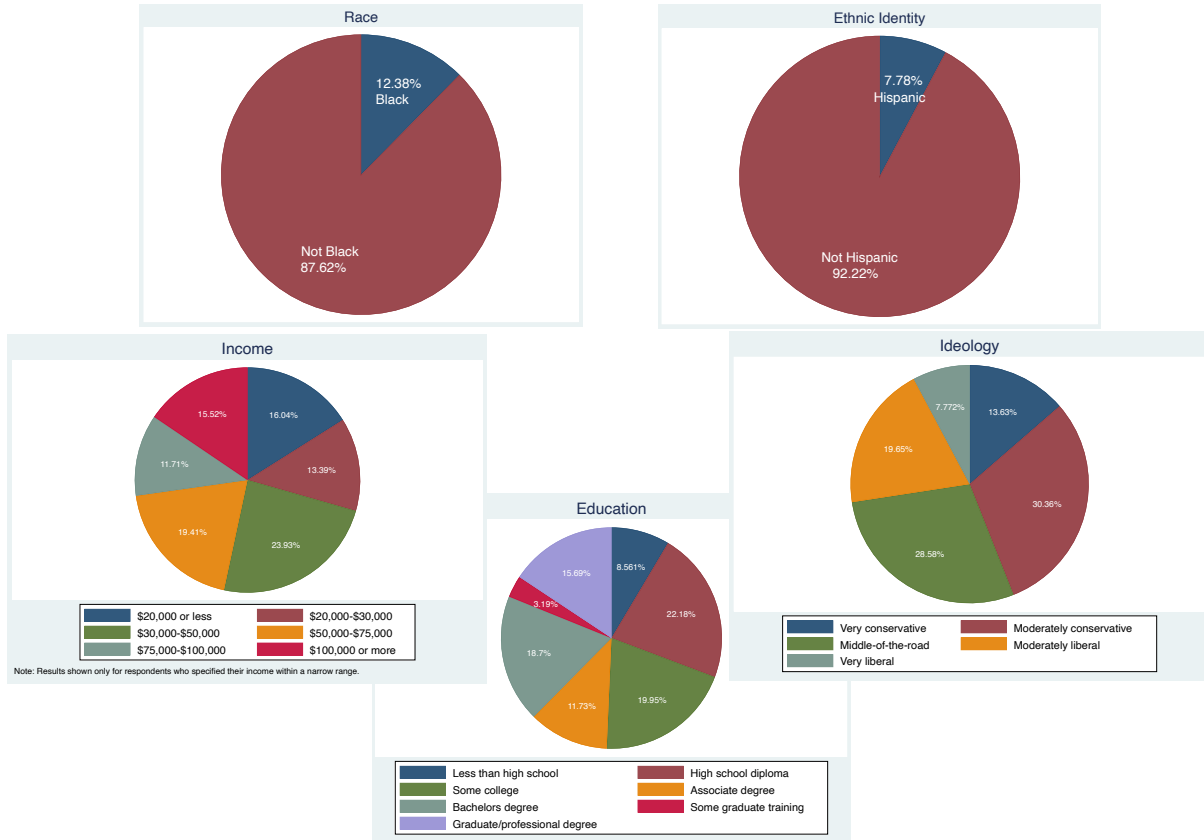
Analysis is further restricted, in the case of certain estimated variants, to the subset of observations for which data on none of the relevant variables is missing. Table 1 presents killings by police per million population and whether duty to bargain laws are in place for each MSA in the sub-sample. Figure 2 displays several pie charts that present summary characteristics of the MSA sub-sample.

**Table 1**  
MSA Characteristics

MSA	Killings by Police per 1,000,000 population, 2000-2006	Duty to Bargain?
Baton Rouge, LA	32.7	No
Duluth, MN/Superior, WI	14.6	Yes
Greensboro, NC	11.7	No
Houston, TX	21.9	Yes
Kalamazoo, MI	21.8	Yes
Lewiston-Auburn, ME	9.4	Yes
Rochester, NY	7.8	Yes
San Diego, CA	40.4	Yes
Winston-Salem, NC	0.0	No
Yakima, WA	13.0	Yes
Sarasota, FL	13.3	Yes



Fig 2. SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS



We estimate (1) using ordinary least squares (OLS).<sup>14</sup> As our explanatory variables include both individual-level data and data aggregated to the MSA and state level, we cluster our standard errors at the MSA-by-state level.<sup>15</sup> This avoids the risk of under-estimation of the standard errors associated with failing to account for correlation within groups (Moulton 1990).

<sup>14</sup> As an alternative approach, we also estimate identical regressions using ordered probit. This econometric procedure assumes an ordinal (i.e., ordered categorical) dependent variable and so is arguably appropriate to our estimation problem; indeed, different researchers have different preferences as regards the use of OLS and ordered probit for handling ordinal dependent variables. We find nearly identical results with this procedure. As a further robustness check, we estimate all our presented specifications with the education variable excluded and find similarly near-identical results. In the interest of space, we do not present our ordered probit results or results excluding education in the paper but rather incorporate them into a separate appendix, available upon request.

<sup>15</sup> All of our MSAs are entirely contained within single states except for one, Duluth, which spans Minnesota and Wisconsin. To deal with the Duluth MSA, we split the individual-level observations by state, treating Duluth for the purposes of standard-error clustering as two distinct single-state MSAs.

## **Results**

Table 2 presents estimation results for 6 variants of the model in (1). We begin by discussing the effects of demographics and ideology on trust, as these set the stage for understanding the influence of police killings of civilians and collective bargaining.

**Table 2**  
Determinants of Trust in Police: MSA Subsample, OLS Models

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Constant	2.982*** (0.060)	2.999*** (0.054)	3.006*** (0.059)	2.782*** (0.060)	2.803*** (0.056)	2.808*** (0.057)
<i>Black</i>	-0.392*** (0.045)	-0.499*** (0.055)	-0.383*** (0.045)	-0.348*** (0.044)	-0.458*** (0.044)	-0.338*** (0.045)
<i>Hispanic</i>	-0.115* (0.053)	-0.111* (0.053)	-0.107* (0.053)	-0.104* (0.053)	-0.101* (0.052)	-0.097* (0.051)
<i>Age</i>	0.008*** (0.001)	0.008*** (0.001)	0.008*** (0.001)	0.008*** (0.001)	0.008*** (0.001)	0.008*** (0.001)
<i>Income</i>	0.033*** (0.007)	0.033*** (0.007)	0.033*** (0.007)	0.029*** (0.008)	0.029*** (0.008)	0.029*** (0.008)
<i>Education</i>	0.038*** (0.007)	0.039*** (0.007)	0.039*** (0.007)	0.035*** (0.006)	0.035*** (0.006)	0.035*** (0.006)
<i>Indiv Ideology</i>	-0.053*** (0.007)	-0.053*** (0.007)	-0.053*** (0.007)			
<i>GOP</i>				0.159*** (0.020)	0.158*** (0.019)	0.161*** (0.020)
<i>Killings</i>	-0.006*** (0.001)	-0.007*** (0.002)	-0.007*** (0.002)	-0.006*** (0.001)	-0.008*** (0.002)	-0.008*** (0.002)
<i>Black x Killings</i>		0.007** (0.003)			0.007** (0.003)	
<i>Duty-to-Bargain</i>	-0.012 (0.047)	-0.025 (0.042)	0.067 (0.038)	-0.013 (0.047)	-0.026 (0.042)	0.066 (0.038)
<i>Duty-to-Bargain x Killings</i>	0.006*** (0.002)	0.007*** (0.002)		0.006*** (0.002)	0.007*** (0.002)	
<i>City Ideology</i>			0.283** (0.093)			0.289*** (0.087)
<i>City Ideology x Killings</i>			-0.021*** (0.005)			-0.022*** (0.005)
N	4,899	4,899	4,899	4,996	4,996	4,996
R <sup>2</sup>	0.1070	0.1082	0.1074	0.1099	0.1112	0.1104

\*\*\*Significant at 1% level

\*\*Significant at 5% level

\*Significant at 10% level

All runs cluster standard errors at the MSA-by-state level.

Hypothesis Test Results

	(1)	(2)	(4)	(5)
$H_0: Killings - Black \times Killings = 0$		FTR 10%		FTR 10%
$H_0: Killings - Duty-to-Bargain \times Killings = 0$	FTR 10%	FTR 10%	FTR 10%	FTR 10%

Several consistent findings emerge relating to the demographics of the respondent. Trust in the police is significantly lower for blacks and Hispanics than for those who identify in neither category, and higher for older people and people with greater income or more education. Of

these influences, the effect of being black is the most sizable: it has between 2 and 5 times the negative influence on trust that being Hispanic has, depending upon the run. Moreover, being black has a greater effect in most runs than the most extreme differences in income across individuals, and it can in essence erase the trust-increasing effect of more than 40 years of age.

The political ideology of the respondent matters. People who consider themselves more liberal have a significantly lower trust in police than conservatives – a finding that holds up over the three model variants that incorporate the *Indiv Ideology* variable. In the other three runs, we find along similar lines that Republicans trust police significantly more than non-Republicans.

*City Ideology* also has a significant influence on trust in police. The two runs that use this variable indicate that people who live in more conservative MSAs, all else equal, trust police significantly more. This seems to suggest that, independent of whether they self-identify as liberal or conservative, individuals' attitudes toward police are influenced by their neighbors and the underlying cultural norms of the place they live.

Killings by police in the individual's metropolitan area have a significant depressive influence on trust. Moreover, civilian fatalities at the hands of police seem to reduce the relative enthusiasm that people in more ideologically conservative MSAs tend to exhibit for the police. This latter result is revealed by the significant negative coefficients on the interactive variable *City Ideology x Killings*: since *City Ideology* is an ideological measure for which higher values indicate the city leans more conservative, a negative coefficient on this interaction suggests that killings by police reduce the positive impact on trust from a city's conservatism.

Particularly interesting is the differential response of blacks to killings, as indicated by our findings in runs #2 and #5 in Table 2. These runs yield a significant positive coefficient on a black indicator interacted with *Killings*; in fact, one may observe that these coefficients are very

close to being the same in absolute value to the negative coefficients appearing on *Killings* as a standalone variable in the same runs. Hypothesis test results, shown at the bottom of the table, indicate a failure to reject a hypothesis that the net effect of killings on black trust is zero. For blacks, one may reasonably conjecture that the distrust of police is such a stable part of their daily lived experience that the salient information provided by news of a fatal encounter with police does not affect it. The broader population, meanwhile, finds such news on average more surprising, such that their trust in the police tends to be influenced by it. Viewing the implied differential effect of killings on non-black trust through the lens of an apparent black lack-of-surprise, we characterize this differential as a “told you so” effect.

Turning to collective bargaining, we observe the complete absence of a significant direct effect of duty-to-bargain laws on trust. *DutytoBargain* – the indicator variable for these laws – is included in all 6 runs, and in all 6 the coefficients are insignificant. But remarkable – particularly when viewed in the context of the black response to killings by police – is the effect of collective bargaining rights on individuals’ reactions to killings by police, displayed in the table. In runs #1, #2, #4, and #5, the duty-to-bargain indicator interacted with *Killings* yields a significant positive coefficient. Just like the coefficients on the interaction of the black indicator with *Killings* in runs #2 and #5, these coefficients are quite close to being the same in absolute value to the negative coefficients appearing on *Killings* as a standalone variable in the same runs. Also similar to the effect with respect to the black indicator, hypothesis test results shown at the bottom of the table indicate a failure to reject a hypothesis that the net effect of killings on trust is zero in states that have duty-to-bargain laws. Though their direct effects on trust in the police seem negligible, police unions appear to inoculate the general public when it comes to the effect of police killings

on trust, rendering it impervious in much the same way that blacks already are – though of course for different reasons.

Figures 3 and 4 are illustrative of these relationships. The two panels in Fig. 3 show, separated by race, scatterplots of average trust in police versus police killings per million population by state for the full sample of respondents – that is, including those respondents for whom it was possible to identify their state of residence, but not their MSA. Duty-to-bargain and non-duty-to-bargain states are color-coded accordingly. Two observations emerge from this figure. First, the average level of trust for non-blacks (which includes Hispanics who do not identify as black) is clearly substantially higher than for blacks, as illustrated by the clustering of dots near the top of the upper panel as opposed to the more vertically-centered clustering seen in the lower panel of Fig. 3. Second, whereas the relationship of trust in police to fatalities per million shows no obvious trend for blacks (lower panel), for non-blacks there is an easily discernable downward trend to the plot. Fig. 3 demonstrates visually that blacks distrust police more than non-blacks (which, again, includes Hispanics who do not identify as black), and that their level of trust is impervious to killings by police whereas that of non-blacks responds negatively to such killings.

Fig. 3. TRUST VS. FATALITIES BY RACE



Fig 4. AVERAGE TRUST BY STATE: COMBINED

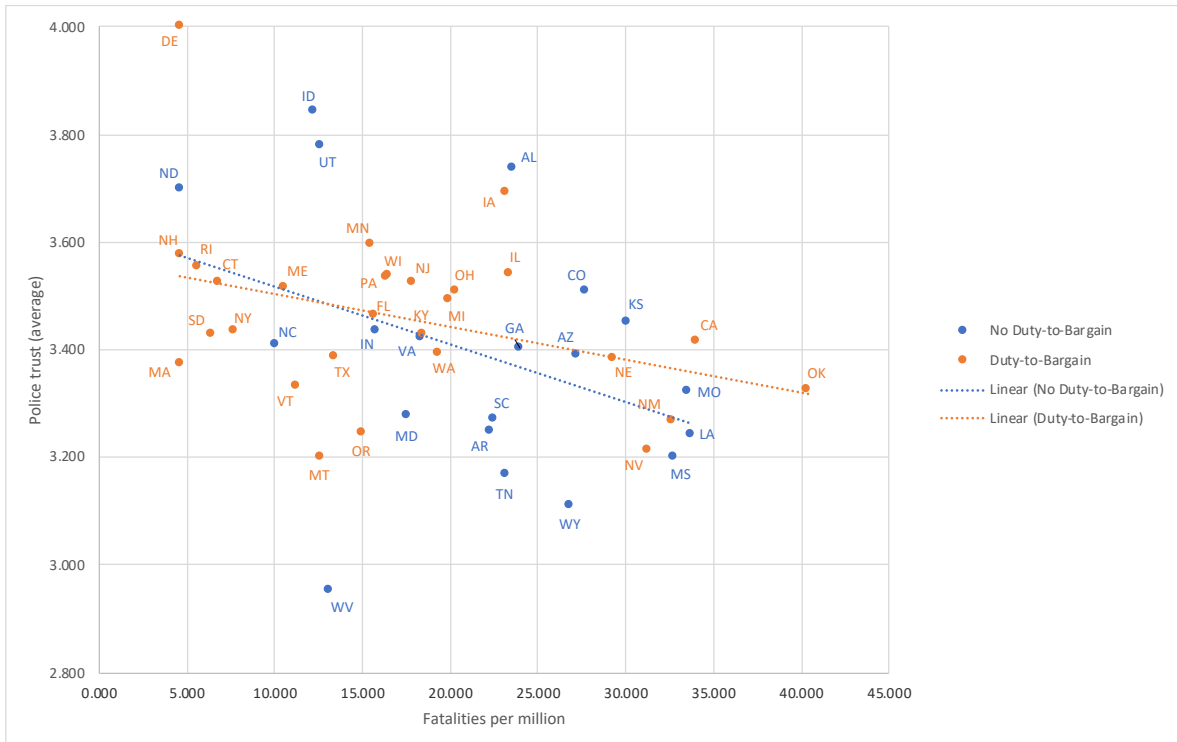


Fig. 4 offers a scatterplot of average trust in police versus police killings per million population by state combined by race for the full sample. As in Fig. 3, duty-to-bargain states and non-duty-to-bargain states are shown as distinct series; the figure also plots linear trend lines for each. As the figure illustrates, the trend of trust with fatalities per million population is flatter in duty-to-bargain states. This visual is, of course, consistent with the thesis that police unions inoculate the public trust against the adverse effect of police killings of civilians.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> The existence of an extant downward trend in Fig. 4 even in states with collective bargaining rights appears at odds with the hypothesis test results in Table 2 which indicate that the trust response to killings disappears for respondents in duty-to-bargain states. Because our econometric results, represented in the table, control for numerous explanatory factors including relevant individual respondent characteristics, they should be accepted in preference to what is shown in the figure, which does not control for such factors and is merely illustrative.



As a robustness check of the results obtained on the MSA subsample, we estimated variants of the model in (1) on the full sample of over 10,000 respondents. We used fatalities per million population estimated at the state level as our measure of *Killings*, based on the state of residence of each respondent, as a measure that could be calculated consistently for every respondent in this larger sample. This admittedly does not provide as accurate a proxy for police behavior local to the respondent as does the analogous MSA-measured variable. Other variables were identical to what was used for estimation on the MSA subsample.

Table 3 presents the results. All the demographic variables proposed in (1), as well as the individual-level ideology variables, come in as significant in the full-sample estimation and with the same signs as in our MSA estimation. Collective bargaining rights have an insignificant effect on trust, also in line with the results from our MSA estimation. Fatal encounters with police consistently have a significant negative effect on trust, as in the MSA regressions. However, the size of the coefficients on the fatal encounters variable is substantially smaller on average than in the MSA regressions; this almost certainly accrues to the measure of fatal encounters being at the state level rather than a level local to the respondent. Similarly, the moderating influence of unions on the adverse effect of fatal encounters on trust is insignificant, again mostly likely as an artifact of state-level-only identification of the individuals in these regressions.

**Table 3**  
Determinants of Trust in Police: Full Sample, OLS Models

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Constant	2.943*** (0.043)	2.970*** (0.031)	2.764*** (0.040)	2.791*** (0.033)
<i>Black</i>	-0.447*** (0.027)	-0.451*** (0.027)	-0.408*** (0.029)	-0.412*** (0.029)
<i>Hispanic</i>	-0.100** (0.039)	-0.101*** (0.038)	-0.085** (0.039)	-0.085** (0.038)
<i>Age</i>	0.008*** (0.0004)	0.008*** (0.0004)	0.008*** (0.0004)	0.008*** (0.0004)
<i>Income</i>	0.034*** (0.004)	0.034*** (0.004)	0.032*** (0.004)	0.032*** (0.004)
<i>Education</i>	0.038*** (0.005)	0.038*** (0.005)	0.034*** (0.004)	0.034*** (0.004)
<i>Indiv Ideology</i>	-0.048*** (0.006)	-0.048*** (0.007)		
<i>GOP</i>			0.149*** (0.015)	0.148*** (0.016)
<i>Killings</i>	-0.002*** (0.001)	-0.003*** (0.001)	-0.002*** (0.001)	-0.003** (0.001)
<i>Duty-to-Bargain</i>	0.036 (0.022)		0.035 (0.022)	
<i>Duty-to-Bargain x Killings</i>		0.001 (0.001)		0.001 (0.001)
N	10,537	10,537	10,734	10,734
R <sup>2</sup>	0.0983	0.0982	0.1015	0.1014

\*\*\*Significant at 1% level

\*\*Significant at 5% level

\*Significant at 10% level

All runs cluster standard errors at the state level.

### Conclusion

In this paper, we studied the impact of collective bargaining laws as well as related factors on trust in the police in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We found, during the relevant period, that granting police collective bargaining rights serves in large measure to manage police-community relations. It appears largely to do so by preventing a steep fall in trust when

fatal encounters occur between police and the population they serve. In short, collective bargaining and police unions appear to help hold trust in the police at higher levels than would occur otherwise after the police kill a civilian. Our hypothesis testing demonstrates that this effect of police unions is tantamount to rendering the response of the broader public to fatal encounters equivalent to the null response that African-Americans already demonstrate to such events. Estimation on a larger sample for which MSA of the respondent was not necessarily identifiable doubled our number of observations, while the results chimed with our analysis at the MSA level. All our models were robust to a variety of specifications.

Our study represents an early attempt to cast a wider net in the exploration of the impact of public sector collective bargaining and union activity. Moving beyond issues of government cost, we examine whether collective bargaining rights impact perceptions of policing in the most difficult circumstances: when police kill civilians. We do so because police unions and public sector unions more generally are among the most active interest groups in local politics across a broad swath of American cities. As the conduct of the police has come under increased scrutiny in recent years, the role police unions in influencing local politics has become an issue of increased relevance.

Our key finding that collective bargaining cushions the decrease in trust that occurs in the wake of a police killing has important potential implications local racial politics. Consider that if non-black trust were to fall substantially, the politics of policing in many American cities would be changed substantially. The overall picture of collective bargaining as maintaining the public's level of trust in the police, particularly in the wake of fatal encounters between police and those they are charged to protect and serve, is counter to the current view of police unions as inimical to public trust in the police. Indeed, it appears to have taken viral

videos of police brutality, national media coverage, and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement to shine a spotlight on an institution that functioned for decades as an unseen force buffering the public's perceptions. We hope our study will spur scholars to collect new data on the post-George Floyd period. We speculate that if our study were replicated today, it would need to take into account the reality of viral videos, which likely reduce the ability of police unions to shape the public narrative in the wake of a controversial fatal encounter. If that is the case, their ability to shore up trust among NBNHs would be reduced.

The dearth of data – specifically, with respect to the recent measurement of trust in the police – prevent our bringing the analysis up to the present. More broadly, the lack of appropriate data is one of the main reasons that police unions have been a neglected topic of study in the social sciences (Walker 2008). While more research is clearly needed, we believe that our study provides useful context to the Black Lives Matter movement, the importance of bystander video footage of recent police abuses, and ultimately the protests and riots that ensued in major U.S. cities during 2020. Prior to the widespread availability of video on social media, police unions could keep a lid on controversial encounters with citizens through their public relations operations and political leverage. Black Americans might have been appalled, but NBNH's trust in the police didn't fall very much and often recovered swiftly. One possibility is that only when a well-organized social movement emerged, and police unions could no longer control the local narrative because viral videos had undercut their claims, did a crisis of police legitimacy emerge (Devi and Fryer 2020).

Certain technical aspects of the relationship of collective bargaining to trust in the racial context deserve special scrutiny. In our analysis we have maintained the assumption that police violence against civilians occurs independently of the existence of collective bargaining.

Consider, however, that collective bargaining by police has been found to increase local government spending on law enforcement (Doerner and Doerner 2010, Anzia and Moe 2015, Frandsen 2016). It might be that more policing opens the possibility of more *bad* policing. Thus it is conceivable that jurisdictions with collective bargaining would exhibit increased violence against civilians. The story in such a case is clearly not one of unions mediating an externally-caused risk factor for trust in the police. Rather, it is one of unions *causing* a trust problem that their other activities work to ameliorate.

Recent work has inquired into whether unionization increases police violence against civilians (e.g., Rad 2018, Dharmapala et al. 2020, Goncalves 2021, Cunningham et al. 2021), but the relationship remains unresolved. The connection of this relationship to the effect of collective bargaining on trust in the police was beyond the scope of the present analysis, but future work might fruitfully consider it. Such work would clearly have significance for our understanding of the full implications of police unionization for U.S. race relations and local politics.

This study offers a modest contribution to building a more comprehensive perspective on America's interest group ecology and its implications for citizens' attitudes toward government institutions. Police unions provided us with a useful case study for understanding the dynamics of public sector unions and public trust in local government institutions. We believe that collective bargaining laws and how they shape the organization and operation of police departments should be considered in further research on the impact of policing on minority communities and America's racial politics. If collective bargaining agreements shape policing as well as public perceptions of the police, there remains important work for political scientists and allied researchers to do.



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