Building Public Trust in the Police

July 11, 2016

Policing in the United States is under renewed scrutiny after the deaths of Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, and five Dallas police officers last week. While some cities, like Dallas, have seen improvements in police-community relations in recent years, public trust and confidence in the police continue to lag, especially following recent police shootings.

A **report** published in *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* provides a comprehensive look at psychological research on the factors that drive public trust and law-related behavior.

In the report, researchers Tom Tyler, Phillip Goff, and Robert MacCoun focus on the concept of police legitimacy, which is shaped by the perception that police treat people with respect and fairness. They argue that many widely used policing practices, which are often seen as unfair, have compromised people's view of the police as a legitimate legal authority, particularly following the deaths of unarmed Black men at the hands of police officers.

"In the wake of such deaths, the public has been increasingly unwilling to accept police accounts of such events, to believe that the police will investigate them in good faith, and to wait until such investigations

are completed to react individually or collectively," says Tyler.

Examining analyses of data from the United States and Europe, Tyler and co-authors find that when people view the police as a legitimate and appropriate legal authority, they are more likely to to cooperate with the police in personal encounters and comply with the law in their everyday lives. They're also more apt to help co-police their communities, report crime, identify criminals, and act as witnesses and jurors.

"Trust is not simply a byproduct of providing high quality service delivery or lowering the crime rate," explains Tyler. "Research shows that the subjective experience of being policed matters."

In particular, studies show that people react to whether or not they believe the procedures used by the police are just, an idea referred to as "procedural justice."

Drawing on evidence from behavioral science, Tyler and colleagues contend that efforts to foster perceptions of procedural justice must focus on:

- **Public Participation:** Involving the broader community in the development of strategies for managing social order encourages public acceptance and buy-in.
- **Neutrality:** Engaging in transparent, rule-based decision making demonstrates that policing policy and practices are fair and unbiased.
- **Respect:** Treating citizens with dignity communicates to them that their rights are being respected.
- **Trustworthiness:** Showing sensitivity to people's needs and concerns indicates that the police are sincerely trying to do what is best for those involved.

According to Phillip Cook, author of a commentary accompanying the report, the stakes are high, but "[r]esearch offers a way forward; it cannot determine society's goals, but it can provide the means to achieve the goals of a just society, and to do so more efficiently and effectively."

The report and accompanying commentary are available to the public online:
http://www.psychologicalscience.org/index.php/publications/policing.html