

Trust in the Police and Willingness to Report Crimes: Who Researched the Nexus, When and with What Result?

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For many years criminology has assumed that the more victims trust the police, the more they will be willing to report crimes. Yet, the relationship between trust in the police and victims' willingness to report has rarely been considered empirically. In the last few years, however, the topic has been attracting more and more attention worldwide. This study reviews the articles published on this topic in English so far and examines them from the perspective of scientific metrics, including the numerical distribution of the correlation. Using the search function of Web of Science, a total of 41 articles were found published between 1975 and 2020 that studied the relationship between the two concepts. Analysing these, it has emerged that research interest in the subject has increased over the past five years, primarily in criminology, but also in the fields of law and social sciences. The results also show that most research comes from economically more developed regions, mainly Anglo-Saxon areas. The main finding of this article is that the research results are inconsistent. Although most research confirms the relationship between trust in the police and willingness to report crimes, there are many studies that contradict this. Furthermore, the controversial results do not seem to correlate with the level of economic development, nor with when the research was published. Therefore, the relationship between trust in the police and the willingness to report crimes should also be researched using qualitative methods in order to gain a deeper understanding of this complex topic, and questionnaires should be designed specifically for this purpose.

Keywords: police, trust, willingness to report, research, science metrics

Introduction

Criminologists have long been concerned with the reasons why some victims report crimes and others choose not to report them to the police when a crime is committed against them.² This knowledge is important not only from a theoretical, but also from a practical point of view that determines the functioning of the police.

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² BLOCK 1974; SKOGAN 1976; SKOGAN 1984.

On a theoretical level, it is important, because we do not know the full reality of crime until we know about the cases that remain in latency, and on a practical level, it is important for the day-to-day operation of the police to know the reasons that play a role in the decision not to report, because the work of the police can be adapted accordingly. Some of these important reasons have been clearly identified from victimology, such as insurance as a strong incentive for property crime, but there is also a strong significant correlation with, for example, the seriousness of the crime as perceived by the victim; the more serious the crime against him or her, the more likely he or she is to report it.³ For a long time, the criminological literature also has taken for granted the link between trust in the police and the willingness to report crimes,⁴ but previously only sporadic empirical research has been conducted on the relationship.⁵

However, over the last five to ten years, a growing amount of research has been published examining this topic.⁶ The purpose of this paper is to systematically review the research on this topic in English; highlighting (1) who, when and where conducted research on the nexus between reporting crimes and trust in the police and examining (2) what are the results of this research, ergo is there a nexus between the two phenomena.

Methodology

In order to ensure that the research results were processed systematically, I followed a rigorous methodology in collecting the articles. For this purpose, I used the Web of Sciences (WoS) search engine. The WoS is a subscription-based website that provides access to several databases offering research articles in various scientific fields. The site is excellent for searching and measuring citations and publications. The site works in a similar way to Google Scholar, but allows for a more systematic search (e.g. more filtering options) and, importantly, its database contains only peer-reviewed works. For the literature review, I searched English-language studies published between 1975 and 2020, using the subject as the search scope. This means that the search engine searched not only the titles of the individual articles, but the entire content of the articles for the search words and phrases I specified.

³ SKOGAN 1984.

⁴ KÄÄRIÄINEN-SIRÉN 2011.

⁵ FISHMAN 1979; BENNETT-WIEGAND 1994; SUNSHINE-TYLER 2003; GOUDRIAAN et al. 2004; GOUDRIAAN et al. 2006; DAVIS-HENDRICKS 2007; TYLER-FAGAN 2008; TANKEBE 2009; SLOCUM et al. 2010; TYLER et al. 2010.

⁶ KÄÄRIÄINEN-SIRÉN 2011; MURPHY-CHERNEY 2011; KOHEL et al. 2011; SEMUKHINA 2014; MURPHY-BARKWORTH 2014; SARGEANT et al. 2014; TSUSHIMA-HAMAI 2015; KRUGER et al. 2016; TANKEBE et al. 2016; VAN DAMME - PAUWELS 2016; KARAKUS 2017; KHONDAKER et al. 2017; MURPHY et al. 2017; SLOCUM 2018; WIEDLITZKA et al. 2018; BOATENG 2018; MURPHY-MAZEROLLE 2018; GRIFFITHS 2018; ELNTIB et al. 2018; ÖZAŞÇILAR et al. 2019; SUN et al. 2018; KWAK et al. 2019; RENGIFO et al. 2019; TANKEBE 2019; MURPHY et al. 2019; MURPHY et al. 2020; PÖSCH et al. 2021; LI et al. 2020; LEE-CHO 2021; LEE AND CHO 2020; JACKSON et al. 2021.

During the research, I used quantitative methods to investigate the following variables: year of publication, location of research, most published authors, publishing journals, and field of study. With these data, we can get a general idea of the basic trends and the state of the art of science metrics in the relationship between the two concepts. Furthermore, the main research focus was to determine the nature of the correlation between willingness to report and trust in the police, i.e. to examine the content of the research articles and then to present the numerical distribution of the correlations.

The search words

One important step in defining the methodological framework was to identify relevant search terms and phrases. It was not sufficient to use the most frequent terms, for example, when searching for the terms trust in police and willingness to report together (using the AND command), the WoS search engine returned only two results.⁷ The most frequently used synonyms, terms and concepts in the English literature for trust in police are: trust in police; confidence in police; victims' perceptions of police performance; procedural justice; procedural fairness; instrumental justice; instrumental fairness; effectiveness; victim satisfaction; attitudes toward the police; attitude towards law enforcement. The most common terms used for the term willingness to report or related terms used instead are: unreported crimes; crime reporting; notification; willingness to report; cooperation with the police.

These terms represent a total of 55 search combinations using the AND command, so a search would look like this: “trust in police” AND “unreported crimes”. Some of the search terms (procedural justice, effectiveness, cooperation with the police) proved to be very successful, i.e. many hits were obtained using them, while some proved to be completely redundant (unreported crimes, instrumental justice; instrumental fairness, attitude towards law enforcement), not resulting any hits in any combination.

Categorisation

After systematically processing all the combinations, the WoS search engine returned more than a hundred research articles. The collection ended in December 2020, so articles published later on the topic were not included in the analysis. There were some articles that were immediately excluded on the basis of their topic, i.e. they were not relevant to the research, but there were also some that seemed to touch on the topics but did not investigate the relationship between the two concepts, and some articles

⁷ MURPHY–MAZEROLLE 2018; SULKOWSKI 2011.

that touched on the relationship between the two concepts but were not based on their own research, but referred to other research. Having selected articles relevant and not relevant to the research based on these criteria, 41 studies were included in the category of articles to be analysed.

Concepts

In the research articles examined, the authors use different concepts. The basic difference between *willingness to cooperate* and *willingness to report* is that the former is a broader concept; it includes reporting a crime by telephone, giving information to the police, or being asked by the police to cooperate, to help the police.⁸ The researchers use the concepts in a mixed way: the concept of willingness to cooperate was used more than willingness to report in the research studies.

Trusting someone means believing that they will act in good faith towards us and that they are competent to do what we entrust them with.⁹ Hardin's definition is important, because it shows that trust has two dimensions: good faith (*procedural* or *procedural trust*) and competence (*instrumental* or *outcome-based trust*). *Trust in the police* is therefore an indicator of the effectiveness of the police, and assumes, based on experience and information about the force, how fairly (procedural justice) they would act towards it. In addition to effectiveness and procedural fairness, *police legitimacy* also includes lawfulness and distributive fairness.¹⁰

Legitimacy was examined in nine cases, trust in nine cases, and one or both of its components (efficiency; procedural justice) in nine cases, while the remaining research articles examine the image of the police or attitudes towards the police, which are related concepts to trust and therefore included in the relevant articles for this research.

Results

The research provides useful information in three areas: firstly, it reveals patterns that can be used to infer the place of the research topic in academic life; secondly, it shows when and where the topic has received attention; and thirdly, it provides insights into the research findings on the nexus between trust in the police and the willingness to report. By comparing these with the temporal and regional distributions, we can also find out whether the individual variables influence the correlation results.

⁸ SARGEANT et al. 2014.

⁹ HARDIN 2006: 54.

¹⁰ BOTTOMS-TANKEBE 2012.

Lessons from science metrics

I will first discuss and illustrate the observations relevant to the scientific metrics of the research.

The WoS assigns each article to a discipline. This shows that the nexus between trust in police and the willingness to report a crime is mainly dealt within the field of criminology. Law, sociology and psychology are also prominent among the disciplines concerned (Figure 1).

Which field of science researches the nexus?

■ Criminology ■ Law □ Family Studies ■ Psychology ■ Sociology

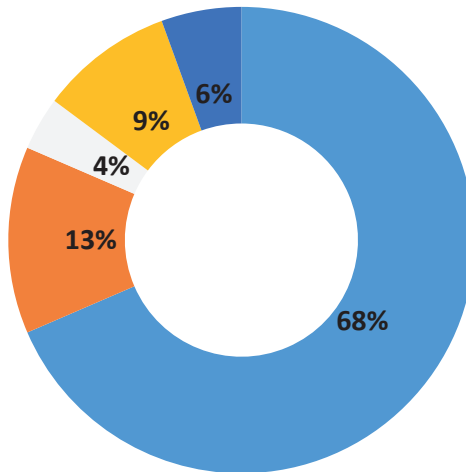


Figure 1: Visualisation of the disciplinary distribution

Source: compiled by the author

When examining the journals, it is also clear that the study on the nexus between trust in the police and the willingness to report is primarily of interest to criminology journals. In addition, journals with a legal and law enforcement interest publish several articles on this topic (Figure 2).

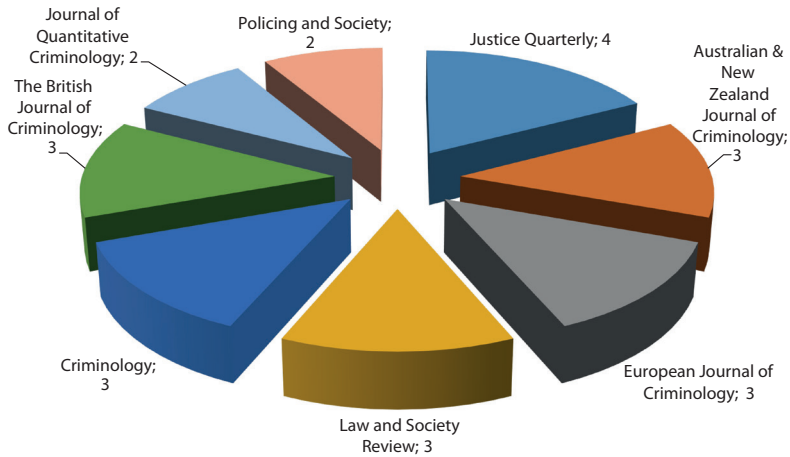


Figure 2: Journals with at least two articles on the topic

Source: compiled by the author

Of all the authors who have researched correlation, Murphy, who is based in Australia, has published the most studies, often co-authoring with Cherney, the second most published author. Tyler, a respected and highly cited author on the topic of trust in the police, has also devoted much attention to correlation research. With the exception of one study in Nigeria, Tankebe's work in Ghana is credited with bringing correlation research to Africa, and he has often compared data collected in Ghana with data from other countries. Slocum and Wu have also published three and three papers. Another ten authors (Goudriaan, Nieuwbeerta, Mazerolle, Sun, Lee, Jackson, Cho, Bradford, Madon, and Pósch) have published two papers (Figure 3).

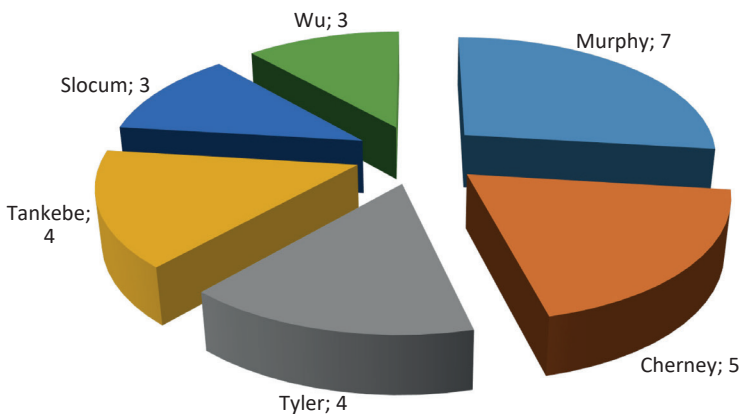


Figure 3: Authors who have published at least three articles

Source: compiled by the author

Citation

According to the Web of Science database, the 41 studies were cited by a total of 2,071 articles, with a total of 3,408 citations, and 2,037 articles without self-citations, with a total of 3,253 citations. This shows that despite the relative paucity of empirical research, there is considerable interest in the topic. The Hirsch index of the collection is 18, i.e. a total of 18 articles analysed with at least 18 citations.

One of the most prominent and widely cited authors in the literature on trust in the police is Tyler. Table 3 shows that his studies are highly cited. In addition to Tyler, several of the authors mentioned above who have published several times on the subject (Tankebe, Murphy, Cherney) have also achieved significant citations.

Table 1: Authors of articles with more than 100 citations

| Authors | Number of citations received for the most cited article |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Sunshine and Tyler | 1228 |
| Tyler | 305 |
| Tankebe | 229 |
| Tyler, Schulhofer and Huq | 173 |
| Goudriaan, Wittebrood and Nieuwbeerta | 132 |
| Murphy and Cherney | 119 |
| Kochel, Parks, Mastrofski | 108 |

Source: compiled by the author

The following graph (Figure 4) shows the annual distribution of citations. The graph shows that the interest in the topic is increasing year by year (the 2021 citations only show the results of the first quarter of the year for the time being).

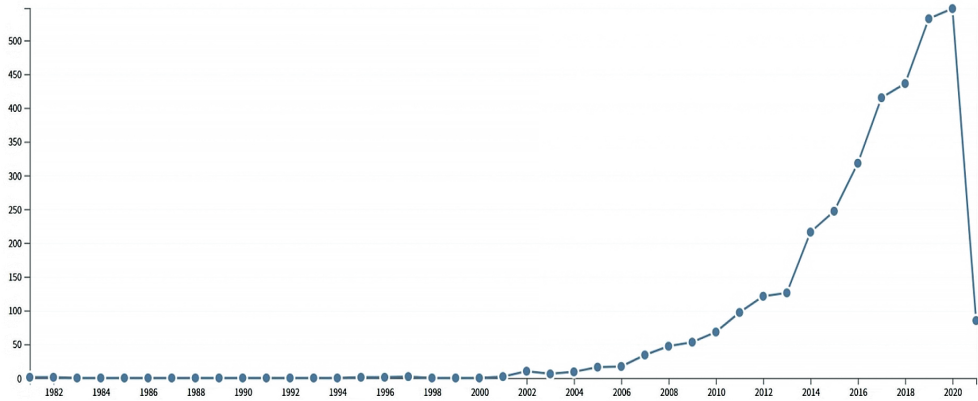


Figure 4: Citation by year

Source: compiled by the author

The next chapter will show that the number of publications themselves is increasing year on year. This, of course, has an impact on the increase in citations, but it is also a good example of the increase in interest in the subject.

General trends in the research area

Little empirical research on the relationship between trust in the police and the willingness to report was conducted until the 2000s. Figure 5 shows that after 2003, there was a publication on the topic almost every year, but interest in the topic has jumped significantly in the last five years. The trend line in the figure clearly shows that the scientific interest in the subject is intensifying.

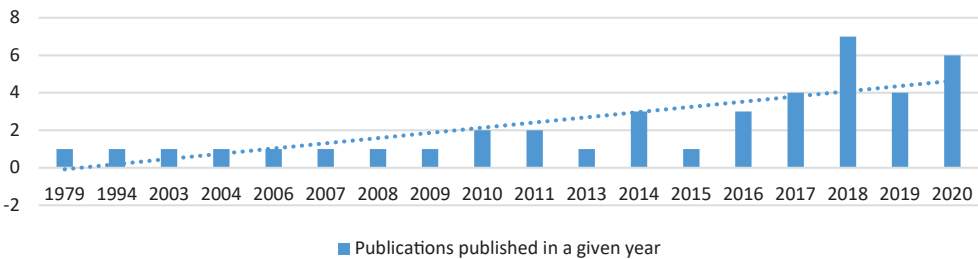


Figure 5: Number of publications by year of publication

Source: compiled by the author

The research also revealed the continents and regions (developed/developing),¹¹ where research on the relationship between the two phenomena is taking place. North America has the most intense interest in the subject. In Asia, research on the correlation is concentrated in the Far East (Japan, China, and South Korea). In Europe, half of the research has been carried out in Anglo-Saxon countries (England, Scotland) and the rest in the Benelux countries. In Australia, there is also considerable interest in the subject, but most of the research is published by the same authors (Murphy, Cherney). The situation is similar in Africa, where four of the five studies were published by Tankebe, so that data are in fact mainly available for Ghana. Research in Central and South America has been sporadic. In international research, researchers have looked at data from the UN's International Crime Victim Survey.

Numerical distribution of correlation

Summarising the research, there seems to be a strong predominance of results that demonstrate a positive relationship between the concepts. In total, 24 studies reached this conclusion, and there were a further six studies that partially confirmed the relationship (either efficiency and procedural justice caused a difference, or there was a difference between groups (majority, minority) in comparative analyses, and there was also research that compared several types of offences and there was a difference between them). In contrast, 11 studies were included in the sample that demonstrated that there was no relationship between the two concepts or that the relationship was not significant. A further four studies were also found in which the non-significant relationship was only a partial result. In addition, there are two studies in the sample, which, although partial results, conclude that there is a negative relationship between the two concepts, i.e. the more an individual trusts the police, the less likely he or she is to report the crime. These two sub-results, although surprising, are not relevant in the light of the other results and common sense, so we can conclude that there is unlikely to be a negative relationship between the two concepts, but that there is probably some methodological reason for the discrepancy.

¹¹ I have categorised research in each country into developed and developing. The developing countries include Ghana, Nigeria, Trinidad and Tobago and Belize; the developed countries include the USA, Australia, Scotland, England, Belgium, the Netherlands, Finland, Russia, Turkey, Israel, China, Japan, South Korea, and Israel.

■ Correlation exists (positive) ■ Correlation exists (negative) □ Mixed results ■ No significant correlation

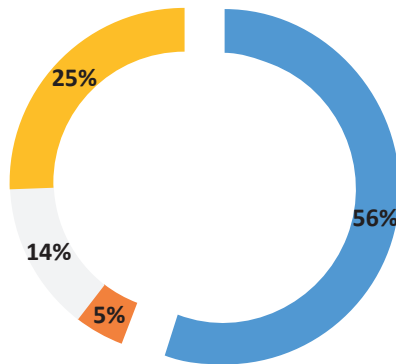


Figure 6: Percentage distribution of research results

Source: compiled by the author

However, the question of whether there is any link between trust in the police and the willingness to report seems relevant in the light of the results. More than double (24) the number of studies in the sample demonstrates a link, which is a considerable strength of conviction, but the 11 studies that refute the existence of a link cannot be ignored.

On the one hand, the discrepancy in results points to the need for further research and, on the other hand, it would be worthwhile to look at existing research to find the reasons for the discrepancies. However, a detailed methodological review of the 41 articles analysed is beyond the scope of this research.

Connection in time and space

In the early years of research on trust in the police and the willingness to report, there are no clear trends: there are results that show correlation between the concepts, some does not, and also there are mixed results in the early years. By the mixed results, I mean that some research looks at, for example, procedural and instrumental trust separately, or compares majority and minority societies, or looks at and compares crime types. Those studies in which one dimension shows a correlation and the other does not are classified as mixed results.

The last five years have, therefore, seen the emergence of a real interest in the subject, and as Figure 7 shows, a growing number of studies showing a purely positive correlation have appeared. Since it can be assumed that the authors of the later published articles are familiar with the earlier literature, it can be assumed that the research methodology has also evolved over the years, and thus we can presumably gain a more precise understanding of the relationship between the two concepts.

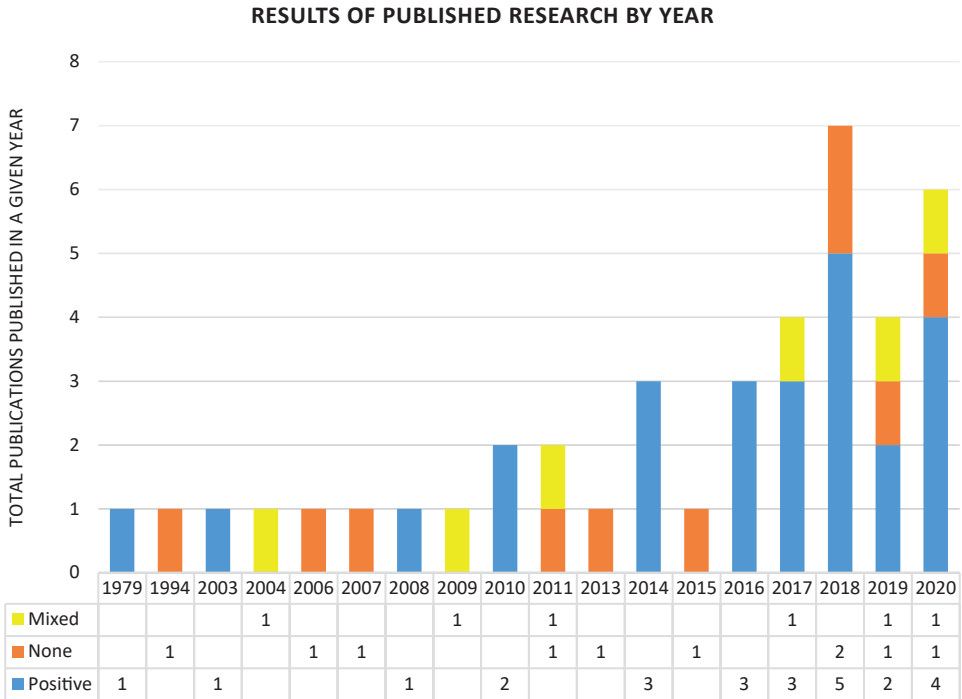


Figure 7: Research results by year

Source: compiled by the author

In the course of the research I also carried out a regional study. This revealed the continents where the research topic receives significant attention. The strongest interest in the topic is to be found in the Anglo-Saxon regions. It also showed that developed countries are more intensively involved than developing countries. The question was raised whether this (developed/developing) has any relevance for the results.

Results from research in developed and developing countries

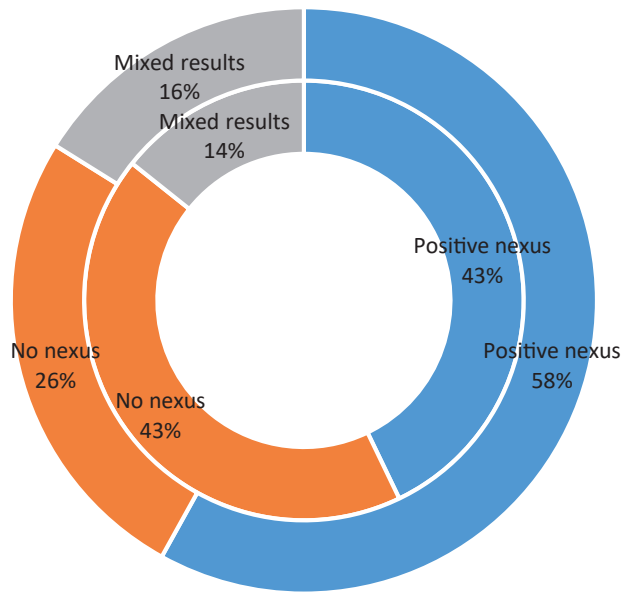


Figure 8: Percentage of research results published in developing countries shown in the inner circle and in developed countries shown in the outer circle

Source: compiled by the author

When comparing research results from developed and developing countries, we find that a more significant difference can be found in those studies where researchers did not find a link between the two concepts. However, it is neither worth, nor possible to draw any far-reaching conclusions from this due to the low number of items. The sample includes a total of seven studies from developing countries, which is not sufficient to identify clear trends.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is essential to highlight the importance of methodological supervision, further research and data collection in this area. However, in addition to these, a few other aspects are worth examining: firstly, when looking at differences in research findings, it can be of great importance, which research uses which concept, whether they examine phenomena in a narrower or broader sense, whether they separate, for example, procedural justice from efficiency. Some research has conceptualised and operationalised the concepts in detail, but there have been others where this is less clear from the methodology. It may also be questionable how respondents interpreted the questions. Given the complexity of both concepts, this may be of

particular relevance. For example, it is not sufficient to examine trust in the police with just one or two questions, as is done, for example, by one of the largest data collections, the International Crime Victim Survey. Of course, the main aim of this survey is not to investigate the relationship, which is why only few questions focus on trust in the police. There is, however, a questionnaire that goes into depth on the issue of trust (European Social Survey), but that database does not include data on victimisation and reporting. Again, this is not the purpose of the questionnaire. However, using the two types of questionnaires, an excellent questionnaire could be constructed in order to investigate the relationship between two complex concepts. Ideally, once such a questionnaire has been constructed and standardised, data could be collected in several countries, even on a regular basis, in order to allow longitudinal studies.

During this research, it also revealed that, in addition to improving the databases, other research methods may also be worth involving. Currently only quantitative methods are applied to examine the nexus, however, qualitative methods would might be worth to apply.

Beyond the strict methodological issues, there are several other factors that influence the results. For example, when types of crimes are examined separately, it also causes significant differences in the results. It also showed that attitudes and decision-making mechanisms can differ between majority and minority societies, for example, in the case of immigrants, fear of deportation can be an important factor.¹² In addition, it should be taken into account that each case is an individual decision, which may be influenced by many other aspects and factors, such as the seriousness of the crime, the identity of the perpetrator, his/her relationship with the victim, the existence of insurance, the victim's intention, etc. In order to gain a clearer understanding of these aspects, qualitative research on the subject would also be needed, which could lead to more precise questionnaires.

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¹² MESSING et al. 2015.

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Annex

Table summarising the results

| Who? | What concept? | When? | Where? | How? | Result |
|-------------------|---|-------|---------------------------|--|---|
| FISHMAN | willingness to report; attitudes toward the police | 1979 | Israel | 477 questionnaires | no significant correlation |
| BENNETT–WIEGAND | willingness to report; attitudes toward the police | 1994 | Belize City | 532 questionnaires | no significant correlation |
| KÄÄRIÄINEN–SIRÉN | willingness to cooperate; trust in police | 2011 | international and Finland | ESS, ICVS, Finnish Crime Victims Survey: 10907 questionnaires | no significant correlation |
| GOUDRIAAN et al. | willingness to report; trust in the effectiveness of police | 2006 | Netherlands | Police Population Monitor, Residential Environment Data Base, Residential Needs Survey | no significant correlation |
| GOUDRIAAN et al. | willingness to report; effectiveness of the police | 2004 | international | ICVS | crimes against persons: not significant; against wealth: significant relationship |
| TYLER–FAGAN | willingness to cooperate; legitimacy of the police | 2008 | New York | First wave: 1653 questionnaires; second wave: 830 questionnaires | significant correlation |
| WIEDLITZKA et al. | willingness to cooperate; legitimacy of the police | 2018 | Australia | 4258 questionnaires | significant correlation |
| SEMUKHINA | willingness to report; satisfaction with the police | 2014 | Volgograd | 1332 questionnaires | significant correlation |
| MURPHY–BARKWORTH | willingness to report; trust in police | 2014 | Australia | 1204 questionnaires | significant correlation |
| BOATENG | willingness to report; trust in police | 2018 | Ghana | 493 questionnaires | significant correlation |
| KRUGER et al. | willingness to report; trust in police | 2016 | Flint, Genesee County, MI | The 2011 wave of national, representative, demographic data collection | significant correlation |
| MURPHY–MAZEROLLE | willingness to report; trust in police | 2018 | Brisbane, Australia | 60 trial | no significant correlation |

| Who? | What concept? | When? | Where? | How? | Result |
|------------------|--|--------------|-----------------------------------|---|---|
| SARGEANT et al. | willingness to cooperate; trust in police | 2014 | Brisbane and Melbourne, Australia | Australian Community Capacity Study 3. wave | significant correlation |
| TSUSHIMA-HAMAI | willingness to cooperate; trust in police | 2015 | Japan | Japanese victim survey (2011), 1251 questionnaires | no significant correlation |
| GRIFFITHS | willingness to cooperate; trust in police | 2018 | Crewe, England | 172 + 78 questionnaires | no significant correlation |
| JACKSON et al. | willingness to cooperate; trust in police | 2021 | England | Opinion Research Services (2018) | significant correlation |
| SLOCUM et al. | willingness to report; attitudes toward the police | 2010 | USA | 1354 student (National Evaluation of the Teens, Crime, and the Community/Community Works) | significant correlation |
| DAVIS-HENDRICKS | willingness to cooperate; attitudes toward the police | 2007 | Seattle, Washington | 400 questionnaires | no significant correlation |
| ELNTIB et al. | willingness to cooperate; effectiveness | 2018 | Nigeria | 200 questionnaires | significant correlation |
| KARAKUS | willingness to cooperate; effectiveness and procedural | 2017 | Istanbul | 1800 questionnaires | effectiveness: no significant correlation; procedural trust: significant correlation |
| KHONDAKER et al. | willingness to report; satisfaction with the police | 2017 | New York | 202 questionnaires | significant correlation |
| KWAK et al. | willingness to report; effectiveness and procedural | 2019 | Seattle | Seattle Neighborhoods and Crime Survey; 687 questionnaires (victims) | effectiveness significant correlation only with one minority; procedural: significant correlation |
| KOCHEL | willingness to report; effectiveness and procedural | 2011 | Trinidad and Tobago | 280 questionnaires (victims) | no significant correlation |
| LEE-CHO | willingness to cooperate; effectiveness and procedural | 2019 | South-Korea | South-Korean Adults (2007) 1018 questionnaires | no significant correlation |
| LEE-CHO | willingness to report; legitimacy of the police | 2021 | South-Korea | South-Korean Adults (2007) 1018 questionnaires | significant correlation |

| Who? | What concept? | When? | Where? | How? | Result |
|------------------|---|--------------|---------------|---|--|
| LI et al. | willingness to cooperate; effectiveness and procedural | 2020 | Shanghai | A Survey of Shanghai Residents' Legal Perceptions and Behavior": 1125 questionnaires | procedural no significant correlation, effectiveness significant correlation |
| MURPHY-CHERNEY | willingness to cooperate; procedural | 2011 | Australia | 1204 questionnaires | significant correlation in majority; no significant correlation in minority |
| MURPHY et al. | willingness to cooperate; legitimacy of the police and procedural | 2017 | Australia | "Being Muslim in Australia Survey": 800 questionnaires | significant correlation |
| ÖZAŞÇILAR et al. | willingness to report, satisfaction with the police | 2019 | Istanbul | 380 questionnaires | significant correlation |
| PÖSCH et al. | willingness to cooperate; procedural | 2021 | Scotland | Scottish Community Engagement Trial, 510 questionnaires | significant correlation |
| RENGIFO et al. | willingness to report; legitimacy of the police and effectiveness | 2019 | New York | 508 questionnaires | significant correlation |
| SLOCUM | willingness to report; procedural | 2018 | USA | longitudinal analysis Police Public Contact Surveys (2002, 2008, 2011) combined with the National Crime Victimization Survey (2002–2014) 43 thousand households and 80 thousand individuals | significant correlation |
| SUN et al. | willingness to cooperate; legitimacy of the police | 2018 | China | 1000 questionnaires | significant correlation |
| SUNSHINE-TYLER | willingness to cooperate; legitimacy of the police | 2003 | New York | 586 + 1653 questionnaires | significant correlation |

| Who? | What concept? | When? | Where? | How? | Result |
|---------------------|--|--------------|---------------|--------------------------|--|
| TANKEBE | willingness to cooperate; effectiveness and procedural | 2009 | Ghana | 374 questionnaires | effectiveness significant correlation; procedural negative correlation |
| TANKEBE et al. | willingness to cooperate; legitimacy of the police | 2016 | Ghana, USA | 516 + 444 questionnaires | significant correlation |
| TANKEBE | report corruption, legitimacy of the police | 2019 | Ghana | 530 questionnaires | no significant correlation |
| TYLER et al. | willingness to cooperate, procedural | 2010 | New York | | significant correlation |
| VAN DAMME – PAUWELS | willingness to cooperate; effectiveness and procedural | 2016 | Gent, Belgium | 1659 questionnaires | significant correlation |