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# Command-level Police Officers' Perceptions of the "War on Cops" and De-policing

Justin Nix<sup>1</sup> , Scott E. Wolfe<sup>2</sup> and  
Bradley A. Campbell<sup>3</sup>

Policing has been the subject of intense public scrutiny for the better part of two years after several high-profile police killings of unarmed African Americans across the United States. The scrutiny has been so extreme that some contend there is currently a "war on cops"—whereby citizens are emboldened by protests and negative media coverage of the police, and are lashing out by assaulting police officers more frequently. In response, it is argued that officers are de-policing (i.e. avoiding proactive stops). We surveyed command-level police officers from a southeastern state about their attitudes concerning the war on cops and de-policing. The majority of our sample believed there has been a war on cops over the last two years. Moreover, officers who felt strongly about the existence of a war on cops were more likely to believe that de-policing is common among officers in today's world of law enforcement.

**Keywords** policing; legitimacy; war on cops; de-policing; dialogic model

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Policing in the United States has come under fire in recent years due to several controversial use-of-force incidents involving unarmed black males (Weitzer, 2015). Arguably, the most consequential was the fatal shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014, which sparked protests throughout the United States for weeks thereafter and renewed the historic debate concerning excessive police force against minority citizens. According to Heather Mac Donald (2016), Ferguson marked the beginning of a “war on cops,” whereby (a) citizens and the news media have become more scrutinous of police actions and (b) felonious assaults of police officers have increased. She furthermore argued that officers will respond to this war on cops by “de-policing” (i.e. making fewer proactive, officer-initiated stops) which ultimately will cause crime rates to increase as criminals take notice and feel more emboldened.<sup>1</sup> This process—otherwise known as the “Ferguson Effect”—has since been subjected to empirical scrutiny by criminologists (Morgan & Pally, 2016; Pyrooz, Decker, Wolfe, & Shjarback, 2016; Rosenfeld, 2016; Shjarback et al., 2017). While no definitive conclusions can be drawn regarding the objective truth of these claims (i.e. whether officers are actually being assaulted more frequently, whether they are de-policing in response, and whether crime has actually increased), the evidence compiled to date does suggest both police officers and citizens have been affected by Ferguson and related incidents.

A lingering question is whether the police believe the war on cops and de-policing are real. Anecdotally, several nationally recognized law enforcement executives appear to believe so. Former FBI Director James Comey (2015) recently suggested, “a chill wind [is] blowing through American law enforcement over the last year...And that wind is surely changing behavior.” Former NYPD Commissioner William Bratton echoed such sentiments with respect to what he termed the “YouTube effect” (Davis, 2015). Others have reasoned that officers’ fear of media and public scrutiny might lead them to hesitate during instances that require them to use coercive force (Reese, 2014). In October 2016, after a Chicago police officer was badly beaten by a suspect at the scene of a traffic accident, Superintendent Eddie Johnson told reporters that the officer did not draw her firearm—even though she feared for her life—because “she didn’t want her family or the department to go through the scrutiny the next day on the national news” (Gorner & Dardick, 2016).

Comments such as these suggest law enforcement executives at the highest level are concerned about public scrutiny and officer safety in the post-Ferguson era. What remains unclear is whether such sentiments are typical of most police executives. Importantly, and as will be discussed below, at least

1. While officers are obligated to respond to 911 calls, they have much greater discretion in *proactively* stopping citizens (see e.g. Goldstein, 1960, 1963; Kubrin, Messner, Deane, Mcgeever, & Stucky, 2010; Wilson & Kelling, 1982). As such, we would expect proactive work in particular to decline due to a war on cops.

two criminological theories would anticipate a connection between attitudes about the war on cops and de-policing—general strain theory (Agnew, 1992) and the dialogic model of legitimacy (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012). The purpose of the current study was to determine whether command-level police officers believe the war on cops exists and, in turn, if they believe that de-policing is a common coping mechanism among officers. Consistent with Bottoms and Tankebe’s (2012) dialogic model, we also considered whether respondent perceptions of audience legitimacy (i.e. whether they feel citizens in their community view the police as a legitimate authority) were associated with their perceptions of de-policing. We focused on command-level police officers because as leaders, they have the potential to shape the culture of their agency. Specifically, if they believe de-policing is an understandable coping mechanism in response to the perceived war on cops, they could be signaling to their subordinates that it is acceptable or even encouraged behavior. Using survey data from a sample of law enforcement executives across a state in the US southeast, the overarching goal of this study was to add empirical evidence to an important contemporary police debate that has been met with mostly anecdote and conjecture thus far.

### The Legitimacy Crisis and the “War on Cops”

On 9 August 2014, Officer Darren Wilson of the Ferguson Police Department fatally shot 18-year-old Michael Brown, an unarmed black male. Looking back, this incident marked a pivotal moment in US policing. Indeed, scholars have since referred to the incident as an “environmental jolt” to the police profession (Campbell, Nix, & Maguire, 2017)—that is, it was “sudden and unprecedented” and its impact was “disruptive and potentially inimical” (Meyer, 1982, p. 515). Though allegations of excessive force by police against minority citizens are certainly nothing new in the United States (e.g. the beating of Rodney King occurred over 25 years ago), the quickness with which news of Brown’s death spread via social and conventional media was unprecedented. Brown’s death received extraordinary media attention and triggered civil unrest locally and protests throughout other parts of the United States. Since then, similar incidents have occurred in other cities across the nation. Some, such as the shooting of Walter Scott in North Charleston, SC, were captured on video and spread virally on the Internet. These incidents added fuel to a growing legitimacy crisis with potentially numerous undesirable consequences. For example, some have proclaimed that the legitimacy crisis has triggered a “war on cops,” such that (a) the public and news media are increasingly scrutinous of law enforcement and (b) it is becoming more common for citizens to assault police officers (Mac Donald, 2016; Reese, 2014; Sessions, 2017).

Commentators have suggested that the police will pull back from proactively patrolling their communities in response to these occupational strains (Comey, 2015; Mac Donald, 2016).<sup>2</sup> By “de-policing” in this manner, officers will be less likely to find themselves in a scenario that might require them to use force—thereby avoiding any potential backlash or public criticism afterward. De-policing can furthermore prevent officers from being injured or killed by combative citizens. This is concerning because empirical research suggests proactive policing strategies can be effective in reducing crime (Braga & Weisburd, 2012). If the police have indeed become less willing to do so in the post-Ferguson era, crime rates might ultimately rise as criminals begin feeling more emboldened. Collectively, this argument—that the war on cops will lead to de-policing and de-policing will lead to increased crime—is now commonly known as the “Ferguson Effect.”

A key component of the Ferguson Effect argument is that increased scrutiny of the police has caused criminals to feel more emboldened (Mac Donald, 2016). According to Sunshine and Tyler (2003, p. 517), “when [the police] are not viewed as legitimate, their actions are subject to challenge, their decisions are not accepted, and their directives are ignored” (see also Sherman, 1993; Tyler, 2006; Tyler & Huo, 2002; Wolfe & McLean, *in press*). To the best of our knowledge, no studies have explored whether citizens have in fact become more defiant of the police in the post-Ferguson era. However, a recent study suggests that citizens are more apt to challenge police decision-making since Ferguson. Culhane, Boman, and Schweitzer (2016) demonstrated with a natural experiment that citizens who viewed a police shooting video were less likely to think the officer’s force was justified if they viewed it post-Ferguson. Interestingly, the authors replicated their experiment one year later and found that citizens’ judgments about the justifiability of the shooting had returned to their pre-Ferguson levels (Culhane & Schweitzer, 2017). The take-away from this literature is that extreme public scrutiny is an indication of a legitimacy crisis. As such, it is feasible that police could believe that they are facing increased danger in the post-Ferguson era. And, in turn, we would anticipate officers to change their behavior—potentially by de-policing.

The empirical evidence in support of these claims is decidedly mixed. With respect to the war on cops, it is unclear whether citizens are indeed assaulting police officers in the line of duty more frequently since Ferguson. Although the *Officer Down Memorial Page* (ODMP) and the FBI’s *Law Enforcement Officers*

2. The idea that officers might de-police in response to occupational strains is nothing new. Researchers have previously uncovered evidence of de-policing after the implementation of consent decrees by the Department of Justice (Rushin & Edwards, 2017). Stone, Foglesong, and Cole (2009) found that officers in the Los Angeles Police Department said they engaged in de-policing to avoid receiving citizen complaints and reprisal for making “honest mistakes” after the department entered a consent decree in 1999. Similarly, officers in the Pittsburgh Police Department indicated that they were using less force and their response times were slower after entering a consent decree (Davis, Ortiz, Henderson, Miller, & Massie, 2002).

*Killed and Assaulted* data series do suggest that line of duty deaths by gunfire increased from 2015 to 2016, a recent time-series analysis of officers fatally assaulted from January 2010 to March 2016 casts doubt on the existence of a war on cops (Maguire, Nix, & Campbell, 2017). In fact, the ODMP indicates that the average number of officers killed in the line of duty each year has steadily trended downward over the past few decades.<sup>3</sup> Of course, these numbers pertain only to fatal assaults of police officers, and therefore cannot speak to whether non-fatal assaults are on the rise.

On the other hand, recent studies suggest that de-policing may be occurring in some cities. For example, Morgan and Pally (2016) examined crime and arrest data in Baltimore from 2010 to 2015, and observed that arrests started to decline following Brown's death in Ferguson (the decline was even more drastic in the three months following Freddie Gray's death in Baltimore). In a separate study, Shjarback, Pyrooz, Wolfe, and Decker (in press) considered whether de-policing occurred in Missouri police departments post-Ferguson. They showed that vehicle stops declined slightly in 2015 compared to 2014. Furthermore, the results suggested that communities with a higher percentage of African-American residents experienced fewer vehicle stops and arrests during the same period. Thus, African-American communities seemed to experience de-policing more so than white communities. Slowdowns in police activity have been observed in other cities as well—including North Charleston and Chicago, following the police shootings of Walter Scott and Laquan McDonald, respectively.<sup>4</sup>

Regarding the claim that crime rates will increase because of the war on cops and de-policing, the evidence is inconclusive. To date, two studies have examined national crime trends since the shooting of Brown in Ferguson—and they arrived at very different conclusions. Pyrooz et al. (2016) examined monthly UCR Part I offenses in 81 large cities 12 months before and after August 2014, and found no evidence of a post-Ferguson change in overall,

3. The ODMP is a non-profit organization founded in 1996 by a police officer in Virginia. Comprised of a team of volunteers, its research staff receives information about fallen officers from user submissions, media accounts, and direct correspondence with fallen officers' agencies. The staff carefully reviews each case to ensure it is valid and fits the inclusion criteria (see <http://www.odmp.org/info/criteria-for-inclusion>).

4. In North Charleston, officers made 26,000 traffic stops in the nine months following Scott's death, compared to 54,000 during the same period the prior year—a decline of 51 percent (Knapp, 2016). In Chicago, the arrest rates for homicides and nonfatal shootings fell 48 and 69 percent, respectively, in the four months following the release of the video that captured McDonald's death. Overall, arrest rates were down 31 percent compared to the same four-month period from the previous year (Arthur & Asher, 2016). Still, findings such as these do not definitively prove that de-policing is behind the observed lower arrest numbers. A recent paper by Desmond, Papachristos, and Kirk (2016) can provide insight here. The authors demonstrated that Milwaukee residents—particularly those from black neighborhoods—were less likely to report crime in the year following the highly publicized police beating of Frank Jude, an unarmed black man, in 2004. While this incident occurred a decade before Ferguson and the national police legitimacy crisis, the authors' findings highlight how citizens' behavior might change in the wake of a local controversial use-of-force incident.

violent, or property crime trends. The authors pointed out that certain cities did experience increases in violent crime starting around the same time as Ferguson—in particular, those with above average crime rates, larger African-American populations, and greater police per capita—but importantly, the magnitude of these changes was small. Accordingly, the authors concluded, “on the whole, there is no nationwide Ferguson Effect on crime rates” (p. 7). In a separate analysis, however, Rosenfeld (2016, p. 2) considered trends in homicide rates across 56 large cities and concluded that the Ferguson effect was in fact a feasible explanation for “real and nearly unprecedented” increases. Thus, whether crime rates have increased because of the Ferguson Effect remains up for debate. And, more importantly, no studies to date have directly tied the war on cops or de-policing to increases in the crime rate.

Yet regardless of whether the war on cops is objectively real, police officers might nevertheless *perceive* it to be real and de-police in response. The fact that crime rates may not have increased nationally post-Ferguson does not rule out the possibility of officers de-policing or at least perceiving it to be a common behavioral pattern among other officers (see Morgan & Pally, 2016; Shjarback et al., in press). The question that arises, then, is whether there are theoretical reasons to support a supposed connection between officers’ perceptions of the war on cops and attitudes toward de-policing.

### Theoretical Rationale for a Link between a Perceived War on Cops and De-policing

The war on cops debate has occurred largely outside of academic research to date (Mac Donald, 2015, 2016; Reese, 2014; Sessions, 2017). Yet, there is theoretical reason to believe that a perceived war on cops may be associated with attitudes about de-policing among police officers. Consistent with general strain theory (Agnew, 1992), for example, the war on cops can be viewed as a psychological strain experienced by officers who perceive it to be a reality. According to this framework, such officers likely search for ways to cope with the frustration or fear of a perceived war on cops. De-policing can be conceptualized as one such coping mechanism for several reasons. For one, de-policing may serve a self-preservation function by reducing officers’ chances of being assaulted or subjected to public scrutiny (see Muir, 1977; Oliver, 2017; Paoline, 2003, 2004; Smith & Alpert, 2002). Additionally, it may help officers feeling the strain of the war on cops to restore justice. Officers may choose to stop proactively policing in communities as a way to retaliate against citizens’ disrespectful, antagonistic, or violent stance toward the police (Brown, 1981; Goldstein, 1977; Van Maanen, 1978).

Bottoms and Tankebe’s (2012) dialogic model of legitimacy also can speak to this issue. They argued that police legitimacy is part of an ongoing dialog between police and citizens. The police claim to be a legitimate authority figure and citizens respond to this claim either favorably or unfavorably. In this



way, citizens continually signal to police the extent to which they view them as a legitimate institution. The police interpret citizens' response and may alter their behavior accordingly—perhaps withdrawing a particular claim to legitimacy. When viewed through the lens of the dialogic model, the perceived war on cops can be conceptualized as a legitimacy challenge. Officers who believe US citizens have become more hostile and antagonistic toward the police in recent years may believe it is a sign that citizens are challenging the police claim to legitimate authority. Consequently, they may believe officers are responding by de-policing—in other words, adjusting their legitimacy claim by making fewer proactive stops.

Along these lines, scholars have used survey research methods to illuminate attitudes and beliefs attributable to the war on cops. Indeed, a growing body of research on police perceptions suggests that recent controversial shootings and the subsequent negative media coverage of law enforcement has adversely affected officers. Wolfe and Nix (2016), for example, found that officers in their sample expressed less willingness to engage in community partnership (a form of de-policing) because of media scrutiny in the six months after Ferguson. In a separate study, Nix and Wolfe (2016) observed that a substantial portion of their sample believed unfavorable media coverage had negatively affected their colleagues, and that citizens' attitudes toward the police had deteriorated in the wake of Ferguson. Finally, Nix and Wolfe (2017) demonstrated that media scrutiny of law enforcement was inversely related to officers' self-legitimacy (i.e. the confidence they had in their authority as law enforcement officers; see also Tankebe, 2014). In a recent nationwide survey of almost 8,000 police officers, 93 percent of the sample felt "more concerned about their safety" and 72 percent indicated that officers in their department were "less willing to stop and question people who seem suspicious" because of high-profile incidents between police and black citizens (Morin, Parker, Stepler, & Mercer, 2017).

At the same time, however, the war on cops as a perceived legitimacy challenge may not be the only factor that affects attitudes toward de-policing according to the dialogic model. Perceived audience legitimacy—the extent to which police believe they are legitimate in the eyes of the public—has been shown to increase officers' confidence in their own authority, support for procedurally-fair policing, and other beneficial outcomes (Bradford & Quinton, 2014; Tankebe, 2014; Tankebe & Meško, 2015). Importantly, Bottoms and Tankebe (2012, pp. 133–134) emphasized that "in the quest for legitimacy" police might be forced to "simultaneously address two or more audiences." Consistent with this view, audience legitimacy at the local level may be a more salient factor in explaining officers' views about de-policing than a perceived legitimacy challenge (i.e. war on cops) at the national level. In other words, if officers believe citizens *in their jurisdiction* view the police as fair, lawful, and sharing the same moral views about right and wrong, they may not believe it necessary to de-police in response to a perceived nationwide war on cops.



In this vein, Oliver's (2017) qualitative study suggests some officers may de-police in order to appease the public and/or local politicians. Yet only one quantitative study to date has been able to parse out the potential influence of officers' perceptions of local audience legitimacy, which might override the effects of officers' sentiments about national-level scrutiny of the police. Nix and Wolfe (in press) surveyed alumni of an advanced police education and training institute in the southeastern United States in the fall of 2016. Forty-six percent of their sample agreed or strongly agreed that deadly force incidents such as Ferguson "will ultimately result in higher crime rates due to de-policing" (p. 12). Similarly, about one-third of the sample reported feeling less motivated and being less proactive because of the deadly force incidents, while almost two-thirds indicated that policing has become less enjoyable. Multivariate models indicated that officers' perceptions of audience legitimacy were negatively associated with their "sensitivity to the Ferguson Effect" - an index that included one survey item about de-policing.

In sum, regardless of whether crime rates have changed or de-policing is actually occurring on a broad scale, it is apparent that recent criticism of their profession has adversely affected police officers' perceptions. Officers appear to be feeling strain related to national-level challenges to their legitimacy and may believe de-policing is a common response. On the other hand, perceived audience legitimacy at the local level may be a more important factor in shaping officers' beliefs about de-policing.

### The Current Study

It remains unclear whether sentiments like those expressed by former FBI Director Comey and Superintendent Johnson are typical of law enforcement executives. Do police officers holding command-level positions in their agencies think that de-policing has resulted, or will result, from the supposed war on cops? Or, do perceptions of audience legitimacy within their own jurisdiction override perceptions of a national-level war on cops? The orientations of command-level officers may trickle down to line-level officers. As Tyler (2011, p. 261) notes, "the organizational culture of police departments is shaped by the values articulated by their leaders." Command-level officers who believe that police are currently in the midst of a war on cops, and in turn, that the war on cops is likely to result in de-policing, may be sending a signal to their officers that they are under attack and that de-policing is acceptable (or at least understandable). By extension, such signaling could create an environment that is not conducive to current efforts to reform policing and improve community relations (Ramsey & Robinson, 2015). A command-level officer who believes the public has become more defiant and empathizes with de-policing is not likely in a position to restrict such behavior among his/her patrol officers. This has important implications for long-term police-community relations and public safety. The current study aimed to fill these gaps in the policing literature.

## Methods

### Data

Data for the current study were collected from a sample of command-level police officers who attended a training session offered annually by a criminal justice training academy in a southeastern state. This continuing education course is offered to police chiefs, sheriffs, directors, and their immediate lower ranking command staff (e.g. assistant chiefs, deputy chiefs, chief deputies, assistant directors), and focuses on statutory updates, as well as contemporary management issues. In October 2016, we administered an in-person survey to all 258 participants over a period of three days.<sup>5</sup> Importantly, this was only three months after the fatal ambushes of police officers in Dallas, TX and Baton Rouge, LA—a period contextualized by widespread media coverage of the alleged "war on cops." Two hundred and twenty-seven participants completed the survey resulting in an 88% response rate. We removed ten respondents who were the sole sworn officer at their agency and another seven due to missing data. As a result, the analyses below are based on the responses of 210 officers.

### Dependent Variable

Our dependent variable captured respondents' attitudes and beliefs about officers withdrawing from proactive policing activities. We asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) with the following three statements: (1) In today's world, it is in police officers' best interest to avoid making proactive stops, (2) My officers avoid proactive stops because it might lead to a use-of-force situation, and (3) My officers avoid proactive stops because a citizen might capture the stop on video and upload it to the Internet. Principal factor analysis (PFA) demonstrated that the items loaded onto a single factor. Therefore, responses to the items were averaged to generate a mean index with higher scores reflecting a greater belief that *de-policing* by officers is commonplace nowadays ( $\alpha = .82$ ). Descriptive statistics for this variable and all others used in the analyses are presented in Table 1.

### Independent Variables

Our first independent variable captured responding officers' perceptions of citizen behavior and the likelihood of officers being feloniously assaulted during the last two years. Specifically, we asked respondents the extent to which they

5. We developed the survey specifically for the purposes of this study, using questions derived from the relevant literature.

**Table 1** Descriptive statistics

Variable	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
<i>Dependent variable</i>				
De-policing	2.024	.789	1.000	4.667
<i>Independent variables</i>				
War on cops	3.647	.850	1.000	5.000
Audience legitimacy	3.924	.414	2.900	5.000
<i>Controls</i>				
Effectiveness	3.950	.466	2.400	5.000
Mutually trust subordinates	4.234	.469	1.167	25.000
Years in law enforcement	24.498	8.011	5.000	56.000
Bachelor's degree	.465	—	.000	1.000
Sworn	2.493	1.277	1.000	5.000

Note. "SD" = standard deviation.

agreed or disagreed (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) that over the last two years: (1) citizens have become less compliant, (2) citizens have become more willing to resist police officers, (3) citizens have become more likely to assault police officers, and (4) it has become more common for officers to be feloniously assaulted in the line of duty. PFA showed that the items loaded onto a single factor. As such, we averaged responses to the four items to create a mean index ( $\alpha = .90$ ). Higher scores on this index indicate a stronger belief that there has been a *war on cops* over the course of the last two years.

The second independent variable was concerned with the extent to which responding officers felt members of their local community view the police as a legitimate authority. Consistent with Tankebe's (2013) conceptualization of police legitimacy, we asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) that most people in their community believe the police exhibit procedural fairness ("Treat them with respect"), distributive fairness ("Use rules and procedures that are fair to everyone"), lawfulness ("Are corrupt" [reverse coded]), and effectiveness ("Do a good job in tackling violent crime"). A complete list of the items is available in Appendix 1. PFA revealed that the items loaded onto a single factor. Accordingly, we averaged responses to the 10 items to generate a mean index, *audience legitimacy* ( $\alpha = .75$ ), with higher scores reflecting greater agreement that the local community views the police as a legitimate authority.

## Controls

We controlled for five additional variables in the analyses presented below. First, we considered respondents' perceived *effectiveness* of their departments. Command-level officers who feel their agencies are effective in various

aspects of police work might be less inclined to believe their officers should or actually do engage in de-policing. Specifically, respondents were asked how well (1 = not well at all to 5 = very well) their agency does with: (1) tackling gun crime, (2) tackling drug dealing, (3) providing support for victims, (4) responding to emergencies promptly, and (5) managing major events. Although the alpha ( $\alpha = .60$ ) for these items demonstrated moderate internal consistency, PFA revealed that the items loaded onto a single factor.<sup>6</sup> As such, we averaged responses to the items to create a mean index with higher scores reflecting greater perceived effectiveness.

We also measured responding officers' perceived quality of relationships with officers in their department. Here again, we expect command-level officers who trust the officers in their agency and feel supported by them to be less inclined to buy into de-policing as a way of coping with a perceived war on cops. Respondents were asked to report their level of agreement (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) with six statements: "I have a good working relationship with my officers in my police station," "I feel that my officers trust me," "I feel supported by my officers," "My officers treat me with respect," "I find it hard to trust my officers" (reverse coded), and "My views about what is right and wrong in police work are similar to the views of my officers." PFA showed that the items loaded onto a single factor. We averaged responses to the items to generate a mean index: *mutually trust subordinates* ( $\alpha = .80$ ). Higher scores on the index reflect perceptions of greater mutual trust between the respondent and his/her subordinates.

Finally, we controlled for three demographic characteristics of the responding officers. Their years in law enforcement were measured continuously, while their level of education was measured dichotomously (1 = Bachelor's degree or higher; 0 = less than a Bachelor's degree). The number of sworn officers employed by their agency was measured categorically (1 = fewer than 10, 2 = 10 to 24, 3 = 25 to 49, 4 = 50 to 99, 5 = 100 or more).<sup>7</sup>

## Analytic Strategy

Our analysis proceeded in three steps. We first examined simple descriptive statistics of our independent and dependent variables. Then, we examined the bivariate correlation between the indexes in order to ensure significant baseline relationships. Finally, in order to consider whether command-level officers' perceptions of a war on cops or audience legitimacy were associated with their beliefs about de-policing independent of our control variables, we

6. An anonymous reviewer pointed out that Cronbach's alpha for this index was somewhat low. Although .70 is typically considered the minimally acceptable level of reliability (see, e.g. Nunnally, 1967), Lyberg et al. (1997) suggest a threshold of .60.

7. Note that there was very little variation in the sample in terms of race (96% white) and gender (98% male).

estimated an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model. We used robust standard errors to account for the heteroskedastic error terms (Hayes & Cai, 2007).<sup>8</sup> Collinearity did not appear to be a problem in this model: all bivariate correlations fell below  $|.50|$  and all variance inflation factors (VIFs) fell well below 3.0 (mean VIF = 1.15; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).

## Results

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for our independent and dependent variables, along with each of the controls. The mean score of the first independent variable, *war on cops*, was 3.647—indicating that, on average, respondents tended to agree that citizens have become less compliant, more resistant, and more likely to assault police officers over the last two years. The mean of the second independent variable, *audience legitimacy*, was 3.924—signifying that the average respondent felt his/her community views the police as a legitimate authority. The mean of the dependent variable, *de-policing*, was 2.024—which suggests the sample disagreed that de-policing is common among today's officers.<sup>9</sup> In fact, only about 14 percent of the sample scored 3 or higher on this scale. This was an encouraging finding in its own right, but it did not provide any insight as to whether respondent perceptions of the war on cops or audience legitimacy were correlated with their beliefs regarding de-policing.

Table 2 presents the bivariate correlation between all of the variables used in our multivariate analysis. The correlation between de-policing and war on cops was statistically significant and in the expected direction ( $r = .245, p < .01$ ). That is, respondents' perceptions of the war on cops were positively correlated with their perceptions of de-policing. The correlation between de-policing and audience legitimacy was also statistically significant and in the expected direction ( $r = -.203, p < .01$ ). Thus, respondents who felt their local community viewed the police as legitimate were less likely to believe that de-policing is common. Figure 1 visually confirms that de-policing appeared to have a linear relationship, in the expected direction, with each of the independent variables. The next step of the analysis, then, was to use multivariate regression to determine if one of the independent variables was more closely associated with the dependent variable while also controlling for other factors.

Table 3 presents the results of an OLS model that regressed de-policing onto our independent variables and each of the five control variables. The model as a whole was statistically significant ( $F = 5.790, p < .01$ ) and explained roughly 16% of the variation in the outcome. As expected, the coefficient for war on

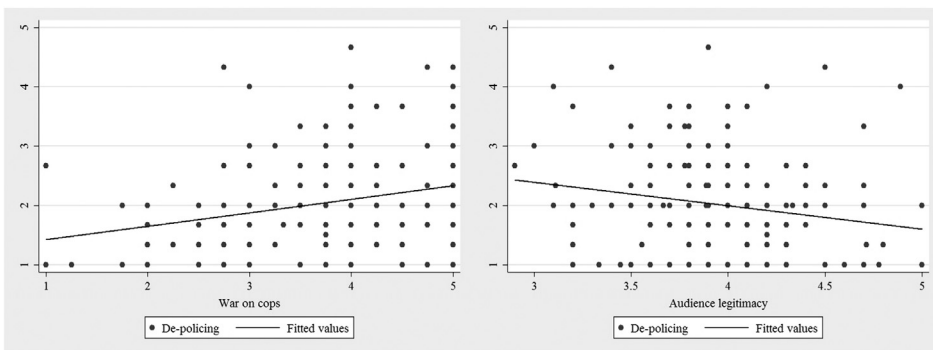
8. We also ran a supplementary analysis whereby we dropped two potential outliers. The results remained substantively unchanged.

9. Because simply comparing the means of each scale can be deceptive, we include in Appendix 1 a table that provides a response breakdown for the individual survey items that comprised each scale. We thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

**Table 2** Bivariate correlations

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 De-policing	1.000							
2 War on cops	.245**	1.000						
3 Audience legitimacy	-.203**	-.090	1.000					
4 Effectiveness	-.243**	.020	.366**	1.000				
5 Mutually trust subordinates	-.219**	.026	.240**	.288**	1.000			
6 Years in law enforcement	-.078	-.002	.077	-.061	.106	1.000		
7 Bachelor's degree	.027	-.130	-.066	-.035	.097	.139*	1.000	
8 Sworn	.023	-.091	-.101	-.067	-.008	.195**	.357**	1.000

\*\* $p < .01$ .; \* $p < .05$ .



**Figure 1** Relationship between the dependent and independent variables.

cops was positive and statistically significant ( $b = .244, p < .01$ ). Command-level officers who felt that citizens have become more noncompliant and more likely to feloniously assault police officers over the last two years were more likely to believe that de-policing is common. In other words, management officers in our sample who believe that American law enforcement is facing a war on cops were more likely to believe that officers are withdrawing from proactive policing. This relationship was observed net of other potentially important factors including perceived effectiveness of the agency and feelings of mutual trust with other officers in their department. On the other hand, audience legitimacy was not significantly associated with respondents' views of de-policing ( $b = -.153, p = .37$ ). We now turn to a discussion of the implications of these findings.

**Table 3** OLS regression predicting command-level officers' perceptions of de-policing (N = 210)

Variable	De-policing				
	<i>b</i>	Robust SE	95% CI		$\beta$
War on cops	.244**	.059	.127, .360		.270
Audience legitimacy	-.153	.170	-.488, .182		-.081
Effectiveness	-.265	.143	-.547, .016		-.156
Mutually trust subordinates	-.247	.174	-.590, .097		-.147
Years in law enforcement	-.008	.006	-.020, .004		-.080
Bachelor's degree	.075	.109	-.139, .289		.048
Sworn	.015	.043	-.071, .101		.025
Intercept	3.941**	.781	2.402, 5.481		—
<i>F</i> (8, 201)			5.790**		
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>			.159		

*Note.* Entries are unstandardized coefficients (*b*), robust standard errors (SE), 95% confidence intervals (CI), and standardized coefficients ( $\beta$ ).

\*\**p* < .01.

## Discussion

During his path to the White House, President Donald Trump's campaign focused on many controversial topics, including the need to return to a law and order mentality to more effectively combat street crime. The President's words sometimes echoed concerns about the supposed war on cops. For example, in August 2016 he opined, "The war on our police must end and it must end now...The war on police is a war against all peaceful citizens" (Gibson, 2016). Such a stance drew the public's notice, ultimately helping Trump win the endorsement of the Fraternal Order of Police. Recently, "Blue Lives Matter" bills have been introduced in various states (e.g. Louisiana, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Wisconsin to name a few), which seek to classify assaults against peace officers as hate crimes. And shortly after the fatal ambushes of police officers in Dallas and Baton Rouge in July 2016, some police executives ordered their patrol officers to work temporarily in pairs of two as a way to increase officer safety.

The debate concerning an apparent war on cops has played a central role in political, legal, and civil discourse for the better part of two years. However, this discussion has been largely anecdotal and guided by emotion more so than science. Our study provides empirical evidence concerning the extent to which police officers *feel* there is a war on cops and de-policing by officers. Although most of our sample believed that there has been a war on cops in recent years, most *did not* agree that de-policing is commonplace. Still, the two sentiments were significantly correlated, such that those who were more likely to believe there is a war on cops tended to be more likely to indicate that police



engage in de-policing. Of course, these findings are constrained to our sample, but they do provide preliminary support for the argument that a war on cops may lead to de-policing behavior.

From a theoretical standpoint, it was surprising that the perceived war on cops was more closely associated with command-level officers' perceptions of de-policing than local audience legitimacy. Bottoms and Tankebe (2012) acknowledged that police engage in legitimacy dialogs with multiple audiences. They suggest that police must sometimes tailor their services and behavior to specific neighborhood contexts (e.g. residents of neighborhoods with higher levels of crime may have different expectations of the police than residents of neighborhoods with little crime; see Nix, *inpress*, 2017). Such local-level dialogs are key to formulating particular attitudes and legitimacy claims among the police according to the dialogic model. In our sample, however, the extent to which officers believed their local community affords them legitimacy (i.e. audience legitimacy) was *unrelated* to their de-policing attitudes. Rather, the more distal legitimacy crisis that is the war on cops was significantly related to respondents' views about de-policing. This seems to suggest that a portion of our sample views the war on cops as a threat to all officers and that it is being waged by *potentially any citizen*. And, in turn, some officers believed that some of their own subordinate officers are altering their legitimacy claim by de-policing. This implies that, at least in a US-based sample of command-level officers, national occurrences or legitimacy crises should not be underestimated in the dialogic model of legitimacy.

At the same time, de-policing may not necessarily be a bad thing in some communities. A lengthy body of research reveals that some aggressive, proactive policing strategies tend to harm police-community relations (Gau & Brunson, 2010; Tyler, Fagan, & Geller, 2014). The police may be responding to public scrutiny by de-policing in good faith as a way to adjust their legitimacy claim to the public. In other words, de-policing may be a necessary response to provide the public the type of service it seeks. Future research would do well to attempt to uncover the underlying reasons for de-policing (for a related inquiry, see Oliver, 2017).

On the other hand, Agnew's (1992) general strain theory may also speak to this issue. Officers in our sample appear to be experiencing stress from public criticism and increased threats to their safety. According to the theory, people cope with stress in prosocial or antisocial ways (in the policing context, see Brown, 1981; Paoline, 2003; Skolnick, 2011). A portion of respondents in our sample believed that some officers cope in a more antisocial way—by withdrawing from their duties (see also Broderick's [1977] discussion of "the realist" and Muir's [1977] discussion of "the avoider"). While our data cannot speak to this issue, it is possible that the war on cops' connection with such perceived withdrawal is not the result of a breakdown in a legitimacy dialog. Rather, it may simply be that the war on cops is a perceived threat to officer well-being. The frustration that likely stems from such perceived lawlessness may lead some officers to attempt to regain control or, at the very least,

achieve symbolic justice. De-policing—refusing to offer proactive policing and related services to the community—may be a coping mechanism that accomplishes this goal. In this way, it is possible that de-policing is not a recast legitimacy claim in a dialogic sense, but rather a coping mechanism to reduce strain. Future studies should consider the role of strain—and officers' emotional responses—in explaining their attitudes toward de-policing.

What do our empirical observations mean for policing and community relations? The extent to which the perceptions among officers in our sample are representative of other officers across the country has important implications for both police and the communities they serve. Officer perceptions of this sort may ultimately lead to problems such as increases in crime and assaults on officers. Although recent analyses suggest that widespread increases in violent crime or assaults on police officers have not occurred to date (Maguire et al., 2017; Pyrooz et al., 2016; Rosenfeld, 2016), such outcomes may eventually come to fruition if they result partially from officers' perceptions about the apparent war on cops and attitudes toward de-policing. Of course, this assumes that de-policing does in fact contribute to crime increases, or that increased hesitation by officers contributes to a growing number of injured/killed cops. It is worth noting that much of the official data used to explore issues of de-policing and the war on cops to date are rather limited. For example, it is unclear how many officers are feloniously assaulted or shot at *but not killed* each year. Thus, we cannot say with any certainty whether the number of felonious assaults have increased, decreased, or remained stable over the past few years. These issues make holistic examinations of the supposed war on cops difficult to accomplish.

Additionally, problems with official crime data sources such as the UCR are well documented and do not need to be reiterated here. However, such data present a unique problem when used to examine issues such as the Ferguson Effect. If the public is challenging the legitimacy of the police (via protesting, criticizing, or assaulting officers), this would likely result in less crime reporting (see Desmond et al., 2016). This would naturally pull the known number of crimes *down*. Yet, we would also expect people who view the police as less legitimate to be less likely to comply with the law, which would inherently lead to more crime (Tyler, 2006). Such possibilities may be happening simultaneously with some police officers withdrawing from their duties. De-policing would likely result in fewer officer-initiated arrests and give the appearance of less crime. However, reduced proactive policing may also signal to would-be offenders that there is less chance of being caught and punished for wrongdoing, which would presumably increase crime. All of this is to say that any supposed Ferguson (or war on cops-related) Effect on crime will be difficult to observe by examining official data. It could be that increased crime and de-policing may be masked by the inherent problems in the official data sources capable of speaking to such issues. On the other hand, the consequences of the perceptions observed in this study may not have manifested yet in actual increases in crime or de-policing. Our results simply suggest that some

command-level officers believe the war on cops and de-policing are real. Whether we will be able to detect if such issues are objectively real may or may not be possible with further research.

In the meantime, what can be done about such police officer perceptions? Rather than waiting until such perceptions manifest in actual de-policing, increases in crime, and/or assaults against officers, we argue that they should be addressed now. For starters, improving police–community relations is a two-way street (Pickett & Ryon, 2017). The public needs to believe they can trust the police, but officers must also trust the community. Wilson (1967, p. 162) argued half a century ago that “new ways...must be found to bring police officers and neighborhood groups together for nonbureaucratic and meaningful communication” and this sentiment is perhaps truer now than ever before. Open dialog may help build mutual trust and deconstruct perceptions that the public is waging war on cops. Dialog of this sort is consistent with intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954) and a recent meta-analysis suggests that such exposure can increase positive attitudes among police and citizens and reduce negative stereotypes (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Finding ways to break down barriers between the police and communities may help reduce the stereotype that citizens are “out to get” police or to make them look bad. Ultimately, such efforts may help improve audience legitimacy and thereby improve the legitimacy dialog between the police and public.

While our study was one of the first to provide empirical support for the war on cops and de-policing argument, several limitations provide justification for continued research. First, our sample was not random and our findings reflected only the views of command-level officers in a single southeastern state who agreed to participate in the study. The extent to which other officers in different regions of the country hold similar views awaits further inquiry. Second, our survey was cross-sectional. Longitudinal data, although expensive and time intensive, would be ideal for assessing whether officers’ views of the public have actually gotten worse over time (e.g. are officers more prone to believe that citizens are more likely to assault them than they were two years ago?). Third, it is possible that there was a degree of social desirability when answering the questions on our survey. Despite the promise of anonymity, it may have been difficult for some respondents to be truthful in reporting issues concerning the de-policing behaviors of fellow police officers. If this was the case, our results simply offer a conservative estimate of the relationship between the perceived war on cops and de-policing. Lastly, our multivariate model explained a relatively small amount of variation in respondents’ perceptions of de-policing (see Weisburd, Cave, & Piquero, 2015). This suggests that other factors beyond those included in our study likely influence such attitudes (e.g. political pressure).

US policing is at a fork in the road. We have clear evidence that a sizable portion of the public questions the legitimacy of police use of force. We are also beginning to accumulate an understanding of how such a legitimacy crisis impacts officers’ work orientations, attitudes, and behaviors (Nix & Wolfe,

2017; Shjarback et al., in press; Wolfe & Nix, 2016). This crisis affects both police and citizens and should be addressed by both groups working together. Placing all the responsibility for reforming police–community relations only on the police or only on “bad guys” will likely further diminish public trust in law enforcement and police trust in citizens. It is our hope that research such as ours helps point to reasonable solutions to address the current police legitimacy crisis. The police and community working together to build mutual trust will likely result in better, more effective police agencies and safer communities.

### Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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### Appendix 1. Breakdown of Responses for the Dependent and Independent Variables

Variable	%SD	%D	%N	%A	%SA
<i>De-policing</i>					
In today's world, it is in police officers' best interest to avoid making proactive stops	26.51	48.37	16.74	6.98	1.40
My officers avoid proactive stops because it might lead to a use-of-force situation	28.30	50.47	13.21	6.60	1.42
My officers avoid proactive stops because a citizen might capture the stop and upload it to the Internet	28.37	52.56	13.49	5.12	.47
<i>War on cops</i>					
Citizens have become less compliant over the last 2 years	2.33	15.81	14.42	54.42	13.02
Over the last 2 years, citizens have become more willing to resist police officers	1.86	13.02	13.49	55.35	16.28
Citizens have become more likely to assault police officers over the last 2 years	1.87	14.02	14.95	52.80	16.36
Over the last 2 years, it has become more common for officers to be feloniously assaulted in the line of duty	1.89	14.15	21.70	47.64	14.62
<i>Audience legitimacy</i>					
<i>[Most people in my community believe the police...]</i>					
Do a good job tackling violent crime	.47	.93	11.21	72.90	14.49
Do a good job providing support for victims	.47	3.74	27.10	56.54	12.15
Treat them with respect	.00	.00	4.15	72.35	23.50
Are biased against them <sup>1</sup>	29.11	47.89	13.62	7.98	1.41
Always obey the law	.46	11.57	25.46	52.31	10.19
Do not listen to them <sup>1</sup>	14.81	57.41	18.06	9.72	.00
Clearly explain reasons for their actions	.00	9.00	30.33	55.92	4.74
Use rules and procedures that are fair to everyone	.00	4.19	16.74	66.98	12.09
Are corrupt <sup>1</sup>	53.46	36.87	7.83	1.38	.46
Do not represent their values <sup>1</sup>	30.41	51.61	15.21	2.30	.46

Abbreviations: SD = strongly disagree, D = disagree, N = neutral, A = agree, SA = strongly agree.

<sup>1</sup>Item reverse coded prior to analysis.