Policing and Punishing Illegal Gun Behavior: An Examination of Jail Detainee Experiences with Gun Law Enforcement In Los Angeles

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ABSTRACT

Drawing upon 140 interviews with individuals detained on gun-related charges, this article examines how participants’ experiences with gun-related policing and punishment shaped their beliefs and behaviors surrounding guns and gun violence. Findings suggest that respondents characterized many of their gun-related experiences as unjust. They argue that their policing encounters reinforced discriminatory practices and stereotypes, undermining a key feature of procedural and distributive justice – impartiality. Respondents’ experiences with police harassment and neglect attenuated their willingness to seek out and cooperate with the police by communicating that the law was not designed to serve marginalized groups, who often are treated as suspects first and victims second. By contrast, gang enhancements were key in shaping respondents’ perceptions of unjust punishment, as these severe penalties also revealed inequities by race/ethnicity, class, and other social characteristics. The legitimacy erosion and sense of failed protection by the state produced by these encounters ultimately helped to create a context whereby illegal gun carry was positioned as a necessary strategy. Findings from this study extend existing scholarship on justice perceptions by demonstrating how specific policing, punishment, and criminalization processes can damage the law’s legitimacy and inadvertently encourage the violence that the law was designed to deter.

KEYWORDS: guns; procedural justice; distributive justice; policing; gang enhancements.

Since the peak of the gun violence epidemic in the 1990s, states, cities, and counties have developed a range of strategies and programs to help reduce gun death and injury. Many of these interventions have focused on law enforcement, whether creating new penalties for gun offenses or new policing and prosecution initiatives that target certain individuals and groups, such as gangs or people with criminal record histories (Makarios and Pratt 2012). Evidence on the effectiveness of gun-related policing and punishment strategies, however, is mixed. Focused deterrence and problem-oriented policing initiatives, for example, have shown the most consistent and significant impact at reducing gun crime and violence, whereas strategies that increase the severity of sentencing for gun offenses have demonstrated little to no effect at increasing public safety (Braga, Weisburd, and Turchan 2018; Makarios and Pratt 2012; Tonry 2009).
Nonetheless, many questions about the policing and punishment of guns remain, particularly in light of recent research on proactive policing and determinate sentencing. For example, several studies and recent court cases (e.g., Floyd v. City of New York) demonstrate that proactive policing tactics originally aimed at deterring gun violence, such as stop and frisk, have increased racial disparities in police contact (Fagan 2012; Tyler, Fagan, and Geller 2014) and damaged the mental health of young men of color (Geller et al. 2014). Weak empirical support for mandatory minimums has also generated concern about a potential repeat of the War on Drugs in the illegal gun context, given similarities across both law enforcement campaigns (Balko 2014; Denevir 2013; Levin 2016). Despite these critiques, debates around proactive policing and punitive sentencing schemes tend to hinge either on legality or the general effectiveness of said strategy for reducing crime (Tyler et al. 2014). Few studies explicitly explore how the implementation of gun-related policing programs or sentencing practices subsequently impact individual perceptions and behaviors (see Fontaine et al. 2017 for an exception). These lacunae are striking, given mounting research demonstrating that legal perceptions and encounters matter for the law’s (il)legitimacy, cooperation and compliance, and violence (e.g., Berg et al. 2016; Papachristos, Meares, and Fagan, 2012; Kirk and Papachristos 2011; Sierra-Arevalo 2016; Sunshine and Tyler 2003; Tankebe 2013; Tyler 1990).

The present study attends to these empirical gaps by centralizing the legal experiences of 140 individuals detained on gun offenses in Los Angeles. I situate my analysis within the literature on procedural and distributive justice, legitimacy, and legal cynicism – all of which examine the nature and impact of justice encounters for individuals and communities. By integrating these frameworks and leveraging the perspectives of those with intimate gun-related policing and punishment experiences, this study provides a much-needed assessment of how criminalized and incarcerated populations think about gun law enforcement in the United States, and, importantly, the ramifications of these experiences for legal perceptions and behaviors.

Findings suggest that respondents characterized many of their gun-related policing and punishment experiences as unjust. They specifically argue that their policing encounters relied upon and reinforced discriminatory practices and stereotypes, thereby undermining a key feature of procedural and distributive justice – impartiality. Consistent with prior research, experiences with harassment and neglect attenuated participants’ willingness to seek out and cooperate with the police by communicating that the law was not designed to serve marginalized groups, such as racial minorities and people with criminal records, who often are treated as suspects first and victims second (Brunson 2007; Carr, Napolitano, and Keating 2007; Gau and Brunson 2015; Rios 2011). By contrast, gang enhancements – a common sentencing scheme in gun prosecution – were key in shaping respondents’ perceptions of unjust punishment, as these severe penalties also revealed inequities by race/ethnicity, class, and other social characteristics, such as alleged gang affiliation. The legitimacy erosion and sense of failed protection by the state produced by these encounters ultimately helped to create a context whereby illegal gun carry was positioned as a more viable, even necessary, self-help strategy to ensure one’s safety (Anderson 1999; Gau and Brunson, 2015; Papachristos et al. 2012; Wilkinson, Beaty, and Lurry 2009). Taken together, findings from this study extend existing scholarship on justice perceptions by demonstrating how specific policing, punishment, and criminalization processes can damage the law’s legitimacy and inadvertently encourage the very behavior and violence that the law was designed to deter.

PERCEPTUAL JUSTICE FRAMES

Procedural Justice

The procedural justice model asserts that people make fairness evaluations according to four process-based criteria. The first component, quality of decision-making, reflects the use of neutral and consistent practices whereby legal authorities rely upon objective indicators, rather than personal opinions or biases, to make decisions (Tyler 1990). The second factor, quality of treatment, is characterized as
the provision of dignity and respect during the legal process. Trust in the motives of legal authorities is the third component of the model: if people believe that legal actors are honest and act out of concern for the public, they are more likely to view their decisions as fair (Tyler and Huo 2002). The final component emphasizes citizen participation, and, specifically, the ability to feel heard during an encounter (Tyler 1990).

Over the past four decades, research has repeatedly confirmed the importance of these criteria, and procedural justice more generally, for shaping various justice-related experiences. Individuals who feel that they have been treated in a procedurally just manner during a police encounter are more likely to believe in the legitimacy of law enforcement (Tyler and Huo 2002) or in the idea that the law and its agents “ought to be obeyed” (Tyler 1990:375). Though the precise measurement of legitimacy varies by study, with some scholars also including trust as a key component of legal authority (See Tankebe 2013; White, Mulvey, and Dario 2016), procedural justice has consistently been identified as a strong predictor of legitimacy across different contexts and samples (e.g., Reisig, Bratton and Gertz 2007; Tankebe 2013; Tyler et al. 2014; White et al. 2016). Procedural justice and legitimacy have also been linked to heightened compliance with the law (Jackson et al. 2012; Sunshine and Tyler, 2003; Tyler and Huo, 2002), and an increased willingness to cooperate with the police, whether by reporting a crime or assisting with an investigation (Jackson et al. 2012; Reisig et al. 2007; Sunshine and Tyler 2003; Tyler 2011).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, evidence suggests that the above beliefs and behaviors are all negatively affected when individuals perceive the law and its agents to be unjust (Barragan et al. 2016; Berg et al. 2016; Carr et al. 2007; Gau and Brunson 2015; Papachristos et al. 2012). Skogan (2006), for example, found that negative encounters with police often outweighed positive encounters, underscoring the importance of adverse experiences for legal perceptions. Tyler and colleagues (2014) also found that feelings of humiliation, disrespect, and use of force negatively impacted legitimacy assessments, with more intrusive and frequent stops attenuating legitimacy over time. One-third of study participants reporting low legitimacy had also engaged in serious criminal behavior within the past year, including assault, thus highlighting the potential consequences of adverse police encounters for crime and violence.

**Distributive Justice**

Whereas procedural justice provides a useful lens for examining respondents’ perceptions of policing, the distributive justice framework can help illuminate whether and how respondents make sense of their gun-related punishments as just or unjust. Generally speaking, the distributive justice thesis posits that individuals are more likely to view both favorable and unfavorable outcomes as just, if they believe that the said outcomes are deserved and distributed fairly across individuals and groups—for example, by race, geography, or gender (Engel 2005; Tankebe 2013; Tyler 2004). Outcome judgments are, therefore, generally framed in terms of equity, where these outcomes are assessed relative to others or one’s own behavior and/or background.

Within the criminal justice context, distributive justice perceptions have been examined for both sentencing and policing. Casper, Tyler, and Fisher (1988), for instance, found that distributive justice assessments, as measured by perceived sentence severity, significantly predicted defendants’ satisfaction with their sentence and perceived fairness of the legal process. Sunshine and Tyler (2003), however, report more mixed findings with respect to policing. Respondents were asked whether individuals similarly and differentially situated by race, neighborhood, and income received the quality of service that they “deserved” from police. While perceptions of distributive fairness positively impacted police legitimacy, they had no direct effect on legal compliance or cooperation with the authorities (See also Reisig and Lloyd 2009). Given the importance of legitimacy in mediating legal behaviors, null effects for these latter two measures should not imply that outcome fairness does not matter. Indeed, other studies that have used different conceptualizations of distributive justice (e.g.,
Engel 2005; Tankebe 2013; Reisig, Bratton and Gertz 2007) have found that the equity-based construct does indeed predict people’s willingness to call or report crimes to the police. Null, limited, or inconsistent effects may ultimately reflect variable measurement rather than a conclusive finding that outcome perceptions are unimportant or irrelevant to legal perceptions and behaviors (McLean 2018).

Scholarly attention to distributive justice is also critical given the vast social inequities produced by both aggressive policing and punishment (Geller et al. 2014; Jones 2014; Legewie and Fagan 2019; Tonry 2009). Black, Brown and poor communities continue to face disproportionately higher uses of force, stops, and arrest rates than whites, which contributes not only to more severe sentencing (Kansal and Mauer 2005; Rehavi and Starr 2014) and incarceration (Western 2006), but also to systematic trauma among marginalized populations (Geller et al. 2014; Piper and Berle, 2019). Nonetheless, current scholarship on distributive justice has focused primarily on policing rather than punishment experiences. Though research on policing perceptions certainly matters, narrow attention to the police encounter may inadvertently encourage a blindness to, or even acceptance of, inequality in punishment (See Epp, Haider-Markel, and Maynard-Moody 2013; MacCoun 2005; Rios, Prieto and Ibarra 2020).

Given these concerns and gaps in the literature, this paper integrates procedural and distributive justice models in order examine how both legal treatment and outcome experiences influenced respondents’ perceptions of (in)justice, feelings of safety and vulnerability, and their willingness to cooperate and comply with the law. Similar to previous procedural justice research, this study examines legal treatment by focusing on respondents’ experiences with policing. Outcome experiences are primarily assessed in relation to sentencing, focusing particularly on the issue of gang enhancements, as this punishment scheme emerged as a salient theme within interviews and is commonly used to address gun violence in urban communities.

Legal Cynicism and Self-Help

Though related to the constructs mentioned above, legal cynicism operates as distinct model for examining justice perceptions because it centralizes the role of local context, not just individual experience, in shaping justice perceptions. Legal cynicism is formed by the structural conditions of a neighborhood or city, as well as by variation in policing practices and resident interactions with the justice system (Kirk and Matsuda 2011). This construct also explicitly connects mistrust of law enforcement with normative expectations or beliefs about rule-breaking, positioning both issues as two sides of the same coin (e.g., “Laws are made to be broken” and “Police are not doing a good job at preventing crime”; Kirk and Papachristos 2011). As such, legal cynicism provides a particularly useful construct for exploring why individuals, like those sampled for this study, might illegally possess or use a gun.

Studies demonstrate that adverse and frequent police encounters, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic disadvantage are all positively associated with cynical views toward police (Berg et al. 2016; Drakulich and Crutchfield 2013; Solis, Portillos, and Brunson 2009). Studies have also identified the types of interactions with law enforcement that generate mistrust or cynicism in the law, particularly among Blacks and Latinos. These include abusive language and force during an encounter, unwarranted police stops, racial profiling, slow police response times, and a perceived lack of care for the victimization of minority and criminalized populations, such as gang members (Anderson 1999; Brunson 2007; Brunson and Weitzer 2009; Durán, 2009; Gau and Brunson 2015; Rios 2011; Wilkinson et al. 2009).

In addition to fomenting heightened cynicism, research suggests that these types of encounters can encourage a reliance on self-help strategies for protection (e.g., Anderson 1999; Barragan et al. 2016; Gau and Brunson 2015; Papachristos et al. 2012; Sierra-Arevalo 2016). Wilkinson and colleagues (2009), for example, found that the young minority men in their study actively evaded the
police because they perceived them as more of a threat than a source of protection. To avert victimization, young people would avoid certain times, places, and people; or affiliate with certain people/groups, such as gangs; yet, “none of these strategies ensured safety with certainty,” explaining why some youth still carried a gun (Wilkinson et al. 2009:31). In such a context, being mistreated by police may not cause a person to immediately pick up a gun, but it may influence whether they seek out police to resolve a dispute, grievance, or emergency (Anderson 1999; Black 1983; Carr et al. 2007; Fontaine et al. 2018; Jones 2009).

As I discuss later, legal cynicism and feelings of exclusion, discrimination, and helplessness are byproducts of both over- and under-policing in urban communities. The residual and cumulative outcomes of personal and vicarious injustice ultimately create a foundation for engaging in illegal gun behavior. However, unlike most perceptual justice studies that focus on police interactions, this study also examines sentencing to demonstrate how both procedural and distributive (in)justice experiences can generate cynicism, erode the law’s legitimacy, and embolden a reliance on and rationalization of illegal self-help behaviors for protection.

DATA AND METHODS

Data Collection

Data were collected as part of an illegal gun market study conducted at four Los Angeles County jail facilities in 2014. The Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department provided the research team, including two faculty and five trained graduate students, with bi-weekly lists of individuals held on at least one gun-related charge, including unlawful possession of a firearm, prohibited possession of ammunition, and assault with a firearm. Individuals were randomly selected from these lists, excluding only detainees that required special handling because of safety and/or mental health designations. In total, 215 detainees were asked to participate in open-ended, in-depth interviews regarding their illegal firearm experiences; 75 detainees refused, resulting in a final sample of 140 individuals. As noted in Table 1, most respondents were racial minorities (Black, 48 percent; Latino/a 35 percent), male (92 percent), and prohibited from lawfully owning a firearm (80 percent).

The National Institute of Justice’s Drug Use Forecasting (DUF) Gun Addendum (Swartz and Lurigio 1998) informed the initial development of the interview instrument, covering topics such as gun ownership attitudes and behaviors (e.g., where one acquired their gun), and experiences with gun victimization. The project team later revised the instrument to include additional areas of inquiry, including knowledge of gun laws; community safety; and perceptions of and experiences with policing and punishment. To ensure consistency in data collection, the research team met on a bi-weekly basis to review interview recordings, verify protocol fidelity, and reconcile questions or discrepancies. All interviews were randomly assigned to project team members, conducted in jail visiting rooms, recorded with the participant’s consent, and transcribed verbatim. Participants were also provided with a $10 commissary card.

It is important to note how the setting and legal vulnerabilities of our participants influenced data collection. For example, because some participants were still being adjudicated, we did not want them to disclose any information that could jeopardize their case or safety (see Schlosser 2008). For this reason, we obtained verbal rather than written consent and did not maintain records of any personal information (e.g., jail ID number) that could create a “paper trail.” With similar ethical considerations in mind, we also did not ask for details regarding a participant’s current or past charges. Any information obtained about prior history was provided voluntarily. Though these decisions limit the breath of data obtained and our ability to verify the charges discussed, researchers are ethically obligated to minimize harm, both during the interview and after. Based on the sampling scheme, however, we can say that the vast majority (96.5 percent) of eligible detainees were arrested for unlawful possession of a firearm, with a smaller proportion arrested for more violent offenses, such as assault with a firearm (14.5 percent).
Researcher positionality is also an important methodological issue to consider (Emerson 2001). Most interviewers for this study were white women (5/7), and about half had personal experiences with the justice system, either directly or indirectly through family. For purposes of this paper, however, I can only speak to my own positionality and how it influenced my research process. As the only researcher of color on the team, I drew upon my racial/ethnic background and familial experience with incarceration to build rapport with participants and to demonstrate familiarity with (and sympathy for) the experiences disclosed by participants (e.g., police harassment; guilt associated with incarceration). These shared sensibilities not only facilitated data collection, they influenced my writing. Within a field that often questions the narrative credibility of those with criminal backgrounds (Becker 1967; Patenaude 2004), I directly and generously quote respondents as way to ensure that the sociological claims made in this paper reflect the lived experiences of those most affected by the issues at hand. Prevalence of a theme or experience is provided when possible to further underscore the salience of a given finding, yet I encourage the reader to focus on the narrative accounts rather

Table 1. Demographics of Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age (years)</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n=128)</td>
<td>(n=12)</td>
<td>(n=140)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≤ 20</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8.60%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-30</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>54.69%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>25.00%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7.03%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥ 51</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.12%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.56%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median age</td>
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<td></td>
<td>27.5</td>
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</table>

Race/Ethnicity

<table>
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<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n=128)</td>
<td>(n=12)</td>
<td>(n=140)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>50.78%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino/a</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>34.38%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.13%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.69%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.91%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.13%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than HS</td>
<td>(n=128)</td>
<td>(n=12)</td>
<td>(n=140)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS diploma/ GED</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>38.28%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>27.34%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College degree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.78%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.78%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prohibited Possessor</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>79.68%</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gang Affiliated</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>49.22%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personally Shot at</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>43.75%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personally Shot</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>30.47%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend/relative shot/ at</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>57.81%</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author's calculations

1Smaller sample size relative to men reflects a smaller pool of eligible participants during data collection.
than the numbers presented, as they more accurately characterize the consequences of gun-related policing and punishment practices for illegal gun behavior and the persistence of violence in urban communities.

Analysis
Findings presented in this paper emerged from a multi-stage, deductive, and inductive coding process known as abduction, whereby new hypotheses and theories are generated in relation to extant theories and anomalous research findings (Timmermans and Tavory 2012). The first round of coding focused on general topics covered within the interview instrument, such as illegal gun market characteristics, perceptions of firearms and safety in their community, and perceptions of gun law and the police. Emergent themes, such as those presented in this paper, were also identified during this initial coding stage and analyzed in greater depth during subsequent rounds of more focused coding (Charmaz 2014).

This paper utilizes data from the policing, punishment, and safety codes given the prominent role that these issues played in shaping respondents’ legal perceptions and their willingness to obtain, carry, and/or use an illegal firearm. Gang enhancements surfaced in nearly 25 percent of interviews, typically in response to questions regarding participants’ general knowledge about gun laws and their associated punishments. About 75 percent of respondents also offered direct and/or indirect accounts of adverse policing experiences when describing police encounters, their community context, and/or their rationale for having a gun.

Given the open-ended nature of the interview instrument, findings associated with the above themes were emergent and, often, incomplete in terms of how an encounter unfolded (e.g., police stop or response to a shooting). However, as Gau and Brunson (2015) argue, it is important to take respondent claims at face value, even if there are gaps or deviations from what may have “actually happened,” as it is ultimately “civilians’ psychological and emotional reactions that are operative” within analyses of procedural or distributive justice (p.140). Additionally, though the study was not explicitly designed to prove or disprove hypotheses related to these specific psychosocial concepts, the frequency and consistency within which respondents described negative (as opposed to positive) encounters with law enforcement provides an important opportunity to examine how highly a criminalized and vulnerable population makes sense of their policing and punishment experiences as either just or unjust. Finally, it is important to note that while the study focused specifically on people charged with gun crimes, the vast majority of respondents (80 percent) were prohibited possessors, suggesting that findings may also reflect the experiences of incarcerated populations with repeat criminal histories more generally.

FINDINGS
While respondents did not unilaterally perceive the practices used to target and sanction their illegal gun behavior as unfair, their encounters with law enforcement were predominantly negative. The first sub-section describes how respondents’ simultaneous experiences with over- and under-policing produced feelings of harassment, neglect, and legal cynicism. The second sub-section describes the consequences of these encounters for respondents’ willingness to cooperate and comply with the law on gun-related matters. The third sub-section pivots to the issue of punishment to capture how gang enhancements also influenced respondents’ perceptions of legal parity, particularly because the penalties seemed to reinforce stereotypes about criminality by race, place, and association.

Moreover, while negative appraisals of police were higher for men than women (76 percent v. 58 percent), the majority of respondents from each group reported adverse experiences with law enforcement. Black and Latino/a participants were also two to three times more likely to report negative rather positive assessments of policing in their community than were white or multi-racial respondents. With respect to gang enhancement experiences, all respondents were non-white – with
the vast majority being either Black (31 percent) or Latino (53 percent). As such, this analysis is largely reflective of Black and Latino male respondent experiences with policing and punishment.

Over/Under-Policing, Harassment, and Neglect

Consistent with prior research (Brunson 2007; Jones 2014; Rios 2011; Rios, Prieto and Ibarra, 2020; Tyler et al. 2014), police harassment was identified as a key mechanism that shaped respondent perceptions of injustice. Descriptions of harassment experiences were provided in roughly sixty-percent of interviews,1 with the vast majority (97 percent) of participants describing law enforcement as a corrupt, untrustworthy, and brutalizing force in their community. For example, respondents recounted numerous occasions of being pulled over while walking to a store, eating in public, coming home from a basketball game, or even sitting in front of their home. Many of these stops were the result of their probation/parole status. While some understood that their status made them both increasingly and lawfully susceptible to such stops, what frustrated respondents most was not the legality or illegality of the stop, but rather how the stop seemed to be tinged with bias (e.g., by race/ethnicity and/or gang affiliation). This sentiment was particularly true for respondents who were stopped while engaging in what they perceived to be mundane behavior, as Rodrigo (Latino male) illustrates:

They just rolled up on me, two cars deep, and they just put me in handcuffs . . . saying, “Oh, you’re a gang member.” I was just like, “Hey man, I’m just here to buy a Swisher.” They searched me and then they were just like, “Oh, we could throw you [down].” Just little threats like, “We got the power to do this.” Little stuff, like power tripping, you know?

Although Rodrigo was not taken into custody after this incident, he still perceived the stop as unjust, because he did not think that his behavior warranted police attention. While an outside observer might easily dismiss “little threats” of symbolic force as non-menacing, other researchers (e.g., Brunson and Weitzer 2009; Gau and Brunson 2015; Jones 2014; Rios 2011) have found that it was exactly such intimidation, as in the officer’s posturing, that made Rodrigo classify this stop as harassment. Indeed, as Rodrigo explained later in our interview, such threats became reality on the day of his most recent arrest. What should have been a routine stop escalated into a “beating” where he was “thrown against the wall” and “stomped on with the officer’s boots.” Rodrigo did not have a gun or any other weapon on him during the arrest; had a gun been present, he argued, the police “would have really gone the extra mile to hurt me.”

Another underlying factor that contributed to Rodrigo’s indignation was what he understood as the real rationale for the stops he experienced: presumed criminal activity because of gang affiliation. Though he identified as an active gang member during the interview, he firmly argued that his status did not provide sufficient cause for criminalizing ordinary behavior. This is not to say that he believed gang-related activity should go unmonitored and unpunished. In fact, Rodrigo and many other respondents identified gang violence as a serious problem with their community and cited fear from rival gang members as a key motivating factor for illegally possessing a gun. Nonetheless, they still disagreed with how the police used presumed or known gang affiliation to justify perpetual surveillance. Alejandro (Latino male), who reported being wrongfully labeled as a gang member by police, agreed:

Just because I live there, they think I’m involved with them, or associated with them . . . [but] I grew up my whole life in that neighborhood . . . I know they’re gang men, but I just grew up

1 Though high, this figure is likely an undercount, given that respondents were not directly asked to cite experiences with direct or indirect harassment; instead, these responses emerged naturally as participants described policing in their community; feelings of safety (or lack thereof); and their rationale for possessing a firearm.
with them playing soccer and going to school. Sometimes I give them a ride to McDonald’s and by the time they stop me they think I’m involved with things because I got tattoos... [They’re] discriminating.

Like others, Alejandro took serious issue with being criminalized simply because of his location and associations. He argued that the only way he could avoid this type of stereotyping and discrimination would be to move; even then, he feared that the label would follow him.

Considering California’s gang laws and the state’s methods for tracking identified gang members, Alejandro’s concerns are not entirely unwarranted. If Alejandro had encounters with the police while he was with his known gang member friends, police are well within their rights to enter his name in the state’s interagency monitoring system for gang-involved individuals (Youth Justice Coalition 2012). To be removed from the database, an identified individual would need to be clear of criminal justice contact for five years, which is a challenge for any male of color living in a heavily surveilled community. As such, while some of the strategies used to police guns, gangs and probationers/parolees are legal, lawfulness did not necessarily equate to righteousness in the eyes of those subject to such procedures (See also Geller et al. 2014; Tyler et al. 2014). Importantly, rather than encourage trust, the constant surveillance and over-reach produced by gang and other law enforcement efforts heightened mistrust toward the law and its agents. For Alejandro, the situation felt hopeless — if you get a gun to protect yourself, the “cop ain’t going to believe you”; but if you don’t have a gun, you are left on your own, because the police cannot be trusted to treat you fairly, let alone protect you.

That said, experiences with police neglect also fostered legal cynicism (Anderson 1999; Carr et al. 2007; Rios 2011). Identified in nearly 25 percent of interviews, respondents characterized police neglect in terms of police unresponsiveness, an unwillingness to investigate crimes, and an inability to claim victim status because of supposed criminal involvement. In the following excerpt, Diego (Black male) discusses how both personal and vicarious experiences with police neglect not only tarnished his perceptions of police, they seemed to generate a sense of empathy for, and even solidarity with, gang members:

I’m not trying to blame anybody, but one time... somebody broke into my house. I called the police and said my computer was stolen... Police never came. And on top of that... if a fatality happened based on gang-related [activity]... they don’t even investigate. Gang members feel like “We got to take matters into our own hands... They ain’t going to do nothing to help gang-banging people.”

Diego acknowledged the gravity of gang violence throughout his interview, yet he also understood why people in his community felt unprotected by the state, himself included. Whether failing to respond to a burglary or a fatal shooting, these experiences communicated that the police were not only unresponsive, but also intentionally dismissive. Eric (Black male) expands upon this sentiment in the following quote:

If they know a gang [member] stays at [this address], they say “Okay, this dude... we know him, we have run-ins with him. We’ve arrested him for firearms. He’s an asshole... [he’s just another] statistic. Let him die. We’ll come back and clean the mess later on.” [And then if they do end up] arresting the person who did it... that’s two gang members off the street. Kill two birds with one stone.

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2 According to California’s Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention (STEP) Act (1988), an individual may be classified as a gang member if they meet at least two of the ten criteria outlined by the STEP Act, which range from being seen in a photo with known gang members to having tattoos associated with a known gang.
Interestingly, Diego was not a self-reported gang member and Eric was; yet both believed that gang members were equally as deserving of police protection as were non-gang members.

Unfortunately, direct and indirect experience with police neglect (among other stated abuses) solidified in many respondents’ minds that police viewed the lives of gang members or affiliates – including friends, brothers, fathers, and cousins – as expendable.

Over/Under-Policing, Cooperation, and Compliance

While respondents’ routine experiences with police harassment and neglect are important findings in and of themselves, what is most significant about these encounters is that they also appeared to influence respondents’ willingness to cooperate with the police on gun-related incidents. For purposes of this paper, I define cooperation as respondents voluntarily reporting shootings and/or gun injuries to the police and assisting with investigations (e.g., providing a suspect’s description). Some respondents shared that they would willingly call the police in the event of either a shooting or injury, but more often than not, they said “no” or “it depends” (see also Bell 2016). Denis (Black male) was part of this latter group, where he was willing to set aside general doubts about the police out of a sense of obligation to his neighbor, not law enforcement. For Denis, a gun injury was an emergency where “you have to call the police”; yet, calling the police to report a shooting was pointless “because they [the police] don’t care” about the community or “get[ting] guns off the street.” Instead, he explains:

They want to come around and harass people when nothing’s going on, but when something’s going on, it takes ten years to come... But when nothing’s going on and they just want to take somebody to jail, they’re quick.

Michael (Latino male) reported similar sentiments about refusing to call the police to report gunfire. Yet, unlike Denis, he was unwilling to work with the authorities in the event of a gun injury—even his own. In describing a recent encounter with the police after being shot, Michael said: “I wasn’t telling them anything. I told them he [the perpetrator] was like 10 feet tall.” He later explained that keeping quiet was “just something that I’ve learned” given prior experiences and inter-generational norms shared by both family and his community to “not tell on anybody.” Although I cannot say which aspect of his legal socialization mattered more for his refusal to cooperate, these findings are largely consistent with past research demonstrating how adverse police encounters and the cultural, place-based frames generated by such encounters dis-incentivize cooperation with the authorities (Berg et al. 2016; Kirk and Papachristos 2011).

Extending this line of research, the next two examples reveal how inability to claim victim status because of presumed criminality—an element of police neglect—also dissuaded respondents from disclosing personal gun victimization to the authorities. When asked if he called to report his most recent gun injury to the police, Travis (Latino male) said: “No. They ask too many questions. They think it had to do with you, probably you owe somebody money. They think other things [too] so I’d just rather not call.” Fred (Latino Male) also refused to call the police after his car was shot at, stating that the police “are not going to believe shit I say” and that such actions could make him “come under the microscope again.” Brandon (Latino male), who in his youth had had frequent encounters with police, explained that concerns of racialized discrimination and punishment discouraged him from reporting his last gun injury:

I never made a report because... they tend to automatically see a person of my nationality... I’m an American but of Mexican descent... Any Hispanic with a gunshot, automatically, you are guilty of something criminal and on top of that they automatically want to put gang enhancement and all this stuff, and it’s like you’re thinking, “Well I’m the one that got shot!” If it would have happened to you [a white female] or [another] individual, you know it’d be
different because well, you know, once again, the stereotype ... your treatment they’ll do right. But as far as for me, not right away. It’s all bad from the beginning.

As Brandon, Fred, and Travis’ experiences demonstrate, cooperating with the authorities was seen by some respondents as pointless because of the way it could literally add insult to injury: rather than be treated as the victim, the police either blame them for their own victimization or target them as suspects (See Carlson 2019 for police perspectives on this issue).

These last few excerpts highlight how experiences with police harassment and neglect can ultimately come full circle to shape an individual’s decision to illegally acquire a gun, regardless of the consequences. As Andre (Latino male) suggests:

They [the police] don’t care, so why should I? I was doing good and stuff like that, [but] it’s like they want a reason for me to fall. So, they keep going and messing with me, even if I’m with whoever - my mom, my girlfriend. [My family’s] like, “Man, why do they keep messing with you? You’re doing good. You get home, you’re not doing nothing, [you] got work, and you’re with your family.”

By most standards, Andre was indeed “doing good”: he had a construction job and had reportedly been inactive from his gang for many years. Nonetheless, he still illegally owned gun. “Whether we like it or not,” he argued, “we’re targeted; both by other rival gang members and by police officers ... it’s like any sudden move can get us killed ... and who doesn’t want protect their own lives and their family’s lives?” Rogelio provided a similar explanation for his unlawful possession. Despite lack of involvement with and victimization by local gangs, he was repeatedly treated as a suspect by police because he was an “ex-felon.” Excessive probation searches, coupled with police negligence, he argued, can make a "good person [turn] bad."

It’s like their game you know? Because say you’re changing, you’re not at the corners or nothing, you’re not bothering nobody, like you shouldn’t get bothered neither, you know? It’s like practically they’re looking for you. ... And like if you’re not strong enough, they’ll make you weak again. Like, “Okay, you want to fuck with me? I’m going to fuck with you, too, then. I’m going to go and do what you’re blaming me for.” ... That’s how it really starts a lot of things.

Patricia (Black female) also explained that repeated harassment by police because of presumed gang affiliation motivated her most recent decision to obtain a gun, even after leaving her gang:

It’s just like a whole lot of politics, you know. And that’s what I get tired of. I’m tired of being the one blamed when I’m not doing nothing. So that’s what drive me to say, “Okay, let me go get this [gun] and let me see.”

Whether adverse encounters with police via harassment and neglect directly motivated respondents’ decisions to immediately acquire an illegal firearm is unclear, as this study was not designed to assess linear causality. Yet even in the event of reverse causality or “third common causes” (e.g., historical tensions with police in a community; see Nagin and Telep 2020), what the above examples demonstrate is that experiences with under- and over-policing created a situational context in which self-help strategies were seen as a more viable alternative than seeking out the police for protection. Experiences with gang enhancements functioned much in the same way by eroding legitimacy-based principles surrounding equity in punishment.
Though increased penalties for gang affiliation are not limited to gun charges or crimes, gang enhancements figured prominently in how respondents explained their experiences with gun law and how they understood gun-related punishment schemes to be (il)legitimate overall. Instituted in 1988 under California’s Street Terrorism Enforcement & Protection Act, legal penalties can be added to a person’s sentence if the crime in question was committed in association with, at the direction of, or for the benefit of a criminal street gang (California Penal Code 186.22(b)). Prosecutors can add a gang enhancement to a gun crime if sufficient evidence suggests that the offense was committed to “promote, further or assist” a criminal gang, regardless of actual gang member status. Moreover, because gang enhancements can be applied to a broader range of offenses than general gun enhancements (particularly for gun possession), these penalties can be particularly consequential for a person’s final sentence and, as the following two examples demonstrate, for perceptions of injustice.

James (Black male) was a self-identified gang member serving time on a second gun case. His first charge, he argued, was a wrongful conviction, but his second gun case was valid. While James accepted the need to serve time for his recent offense, he ultimately disputed the logic that drove the severity of his sentence:

Just because a person is a gang member, that don’t mean nothing... What about the kid in Connecticut that killed all them babies in the elementary school? He wasn’t in no gang. Now if he would have got caught with the gun before it happened, it would have been slap on the wrist, probation, you know, pay a fine... I got it on me for protection [not to go shoot up a school], and if I get caught with it, I’m going to prison. [They just think] “Oh, he’s a gang member with a gun.” That’s five years.

James is not asking for leniency per se; rather, he is asking for parity – let his sentence reflect the nature of his crime (unlawful possession) rather than the nature of his associations. He is also asking for contextualization, or an understanding that his rationale for having a gun, regardless of its legality, is less menacing than prosecutors or police would argue. His best friend, for example, was killed at the age of 15 while walking home from a corner store. Twenty years later, he explained that his community was still marred by the same type of violence that took his friend’s life, where “[people just] walk up and just shoot you for no reason.” Like most respondents, James firmly argued that he carried a gun to avert victimization, or for self-defense. He was not Adam Lanza – a young white male who premeditated the murder of innocent children – or even a hyper-aggressive gang member who carries a gun to intimidate or retaliate against other gang members. Yet within a court of law, prior experiences with traumatic events seemed to be extraneous when assessing culpability for gun-related offenses (Carlson 2019). What appeared to matter most, according to James, were his “felon” and gang member statuses, which regardless of legality, violated principles of impartiality and, thus, distributive fairness.

Disagreement with gang enhancements, however, did not mean that respondents believed gun abusers and gang crimes should go unpunished; instead, they disagreed with the weight that the gang label had at sentencing, and how this label simultaneously reinforced a sense of racial discrimination. Consider Brandon’s (Latino male) case: a former gang member who lived nearly five years as a law-abiding citizen, yet wound up back in jail for unlawful possession of ammunition after failing to appear in court:

My PO did not inform me that I was supposed to go to court... They came and picked me up at my job of two years... Embarrassed me... arrested me... Then they searched my townhouse... [and] find a bullet. I have no weapons charges on my record... They want to give me six years, eight months for a bullet. [Yet] there’s a guy that –here in the yard, in the rec
area—he got two years and a half for a possession of a gun . . . and they’re trying to give me six years and eight months for a bullet? Where’s the justice on that? But it’s just, once again, it just all falls on the fact that I’m an ex-felon. I have a history . . . but no gun charges. I’m Mexican. Automatically they have stereotyped, you know, gang-related.

Though Brandon was confident that he had a “beatable case,” he was disillusioned. Brandon held a very firm stance against gang and gun violence because he had lived through the consequences of both—prison time, death of friends, drug abuse, and police harassment. In fact, he repeatedly argued throughout the interview that he was no longer “that person,” meaning the type of dangerous offender who warranted a six-plus years sentence to keep the streets safe. Yet despite efforts to overcome his past (e.g., junior college, a steady job, a home), Brandon’s progress seemed to mean little in a court of law. His words also demonstrate a perceived sense of injustice due to racial discrimination, where Brandon’s status as a racial/ethnic minority shaped, at least in part, how he was read by law enforcement as dangerous, despite his many efforts stay straight.

While limitations in the study’s design preclude a more complete assessment of respondent perceptions of gang enhancements, Brandon and James’ perceptions of excessive and misplaced punishment were not unique. Nearly one quarter of respondents discussed gang enhancement laws either in reference to their own case or to others that they had learned of through friends and family. Regardless of the experience that informed their opinions, more than two-thirds agreed that the punishment scheme was unjust because it was too loosely applied and/or because it assigned presumptions of dangerousness and guilt based more on a person’s past or their affiliations than on the actual crime under consideration. The above findings suggest that the perceived disconnect between respondents’ punishment and their personal beliefs and experiences with illegal gun ownership is, at its core, a disconnect between the law and their identity. As some scholars suggest, procedurally fair treatment before the law communicates a sense of societal belonging to the person being stopped and/or arrested (Bradford, Murphy, and Jackson 2014; Bradford et al. 2015; Gau and Brunson 2015). When such treatment is tainted by bias, attachments to the dominant group (i.e., mainstream society) are weakened, with the legitimacy of the dominant authority (e.g., police) weakened as well. The same logic can be applied to individual punishment experiences. If someone perceives their sentencing outcome as discriminatory, the identity conflicts and legitimacy erosion that emerge from such an encounter can encourage – albeit indirectly – a person’s willingness to disobey the law in response to an exclusionary and unjust state.

In this context, some respondents rationalized their illegal gun behavior as righteous because they did not view their possession of a gun as dangerous, and because they did not view themselves as dangerous, even if the justice system argued otherwise. Most respondents stated that their possession was purely self-protective: they did not have a gun to “go look for trouble”; rather they had it “just in case” someone attempted to perpetrate harm against them or their families. As Gabe (Latino male) and others argued, the stigma of believed or known, past or present gang affiliation effectively foreclosed the potential for empathy or self-defense arguments at sentencing:

If they could only be in our shoes and realize what the fuck really goes on . . . it’s hard to explain when you’re dressed in these blues trying to get a person who has no record, like the jury, [to believe you]. They’re the last person that’s going to take your fucking word.

Understanding his limited status before the law, Enrique (Latino male) explained that the prospect of punishment was ultimately less consequential than the prospect of death: “I [can] survive the time, but I’m not going to survive if I don’t have [a gun].” Again, respondents did not dispute the idea that gun-related offenses warranted punishment; rather, they disagreed with the way certain punishment schemes—such as gang enhancements—relied upon stereotypical and racially-biased notions about
dangerousness that disregarded their own personal histories, environments, and desire for equity and protection.

**DISCUSSION**

By leveraging multiple justice perception frameworks, this paper offers one of the first studies that simultaneously examines how individuals make sense of and respond to both gun-related policing and punishment in their everyday lives. Findings specifically suggest that police harassment and neglect shaped respondents’ perceptions of injustice. Echoing prior work on policing, respondents characterize their encounters with police as unjust in response to perceived discrimination—e.g., toward gang members, people of color, and those with criminal histories—and a perceived lack of care by the police for both the respondent and their local communities (Brunson 2007; Brunson and Weitzer 2009; Carr et al. 2007; Gau and Brunson 2015; Jones 2014; Rios 2011). Impartiality and inclusion are foundational to maintaining the law’s legitimacy, yet adverse encounters with law enforcement seemed to heighten perceptions that “the law” was not designed to serve those who live in disadvantaged communities, nor those who fit a certain stereotype of criminality. Even when respondents tried to “stay straight,” the labels that they were assigned by law enforcement carried with them an assumption of suspiciousness and guilt that provided only limited protection before the law.

Importantly, respondent experiences with police harassment and neglect translated into an overarching cynicism toward law enforcement that shaped the context in which cooperation and compliance decisions were made. Unlike previous studies that have found a similar relationship between legal cynicism and people’s decisions to both legally (Carlson 2012, 2015) and illegally acquire a gun (e.g., Papachristos et al. 2012; Sierra-Arevalo 2016), this study highlights how cynicism produced by harassment and neglect can mediate a person’s willingness to cooperate with the police on gun-related issues – from neighborhood shootings to fatal and non-fatal injuries. Identifying the specific actions that influence the operative mental framework that residents turn to when deciding to call or trust the police – such as engaging in excessive probation searches or assigning guilt to a gun victim – are critical for academics and law enforcement interested in understanding legal cynicism (see also Bell 2016). Taken together, these findings underscore a need to re-evaluate the implications of over-/under-policing for the maintenance and reproduction of gun violence in urban communities, as the situations that might lead a person to pick up a gun are shaped by both individual and community histories that reflect fear of and conflict with the law (Rios 2011; Rios et al. 2020).

While such recommendations are not entirely new, the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbury in 2020 have forced a national reckoning around police violence and racial injustice that also have implications for gun violence generally. Demands to defund the police, for instance, have pushed city leaders to consider not just how municipal funding is allocated, but how policing and violence prevention can be re-imagined to minimize harm. Public health approaches to gun violence prevention have set the stage for such reforms. For example, Cure Violence in Chicago and the Peacemaker Fellowship in Richmond, California, (to name only a few programs) place resident and community capacity-building at the center of prevention efforts (Cure Violence 2018; Giffords Law Center 2016). Gun-involved residents are offered intensive mentorship and support to desist from gun carry and crime, while residents and non-profit organizations (rather than police) are charged with coordinating these services. Though such programs vary in scope and effectiveness (e.g., Advance Peace 2020; Jensen et al. 2016), they provide a promising model to invest in – particularly as cities across the country continue to struggle with police abuses, budgetary constraints, and resident feelings of harassment, neglect, and cynicism like those communicated by study respondents (Smith and Davis 2020).

Policing aside, findings from this also study highlight the importance of distributive justice assessments, and particularly how gun-related punishments—like gang enhancements—can influence the law’s legitimacy and compliance. According to respondents, having a gun for the benefit of a gang
was automatically assumed if they fit a particular profile, such as having current or past gang associations, tattoos, and/or residence in a police-designated gang area. Though prosecutors are certainly expected to weigh these factors when bringing a gang charge, respondents still perceived this form of punishment as unjust because of how the gang label, once imposed, worked to overshadow claims of crime mischaracterization (i.e., possession not for the gang), desistance, and/or innocence. Thus, rather than encourage caution, gang enhancements seemed to reinforce respondents’ cynicism and justifications for illegally possessing a firearm.

Given the mutually reinforcing role of policing and punishment experiences for respondents’ perceptions of injustice and legitimacy, it is important that future perceptual justice studies—particularly those that include justice-involved populations—consider both individual treatment and outcomes before the law. Too often perceptual justice studies focus on police treatment without also taking stock of how perceptions of legal outcomes, such as sentence length, severity, and the deservedness of said outcome also influences one’s legal beliefs and behaviors. Without such integrated inquiry, it will be difficult to capture how different law enforcement efforts and encounters affect individual behaviors and the persistence of violence.

Moreover, findings from this study also underscore the intersectional nature of justice perceptions, and the importance of criminalization processes and outcomes in shaping legal perceptions. Both self-assigned and externally-assigned identities (race/ethnicity, “felon” status, residence in a poor community, gang affiliation) influenced participants’ interactions with policing and punishment, affecting both how they were read by the law and its agents, and how they perceived these interactions as either just or unjust. Some scholars have started to explore the relationship between social identity, legitimacy, and legal behavior, finding that unfair policing can jeopardize legitimacy and affect compliance by way of challenging a person’s sense of self and identification within mainstream society (Bradford et al. 2014; Bradford et al. 2015). The anger, resentment, and helplessness that respondents communicated – and the perceived inability to call upon and be protected by the state – reflects this tension. Assessing whether and to what extent legal encounters shape social identities (and vice versa), can help researchers better understand why certain individuals and groups might engage in self-help behaviors, such as illegal gun carry, despite the potential for harm and (excessive) punishment.

At a policy level, findings from this study raise questions about the use of gang enhancements as well. To start, there is little evidence to support the efficacy of gun-related enhancement schemes for reducing gun violence or gun crime (Raphael and Ludwig 2003; Tonry 2009). Findings from this study also suggest that enhancement policies can inadvertently encourage illegal behavior by communicating and/or reinforcing feelings of discrimination and, thus, eroding the hallmarks of fairness and impartiality that make the law righteous. To fully grasp the potential and limits of targeted punishment policies like gang enhancements, it is important that scholars assess not just their efficacy for reducing crime, but also whether and how they might produce inequalities in punishment and/or influence legal beliefs and behaviors, as these perceptions have very real consequences for gun carry and violence. Los Angeles county may begin to see changes to both gang and gun enhancement policies, as the newly elected District Attorney, George Gascón, has boldly directed his office to no longer impose these penalties, arguing that they are “outdated, incoherent, and applied unfairly” (Gascón 2020). While the future of enhancement reform policies in Los Angeles is uncertain due to pending lawsuits and resistance from legal actors (Ormseth 2020), Gascón’s directive has prompted a policy conversation and course of action that is unprecedented and, as many respondents for this study would argue, is necessary to ensure justice and equality before the law.

Research and policy on policing has arguably been more receptive to the role of justice perceptions in shaping legal behavior, as we have seen with the rise in focused deterrence and other legitimacy-based anti-gun violence initiatives, such as Operation Ceasefire. Nonetheless, researchers rarely assess if or how police treatment and legal perceptions change with such reformist programs. This oversight is notable, given that a key selling point for legitimacy-based strategies is the potential
improvement of police-community relations (Wallace et al. 2015). Yet if program participants are not afforded procedurally just treatment in their everyday interactions with officers, it is unlikely that their perceptions of police will tip in favor of justice by virtue of a discrete program (Fontaine et al. 2017). It is also unlikely that that their willingness to possess, carry, or use an illegal gun will change if they continue to feel unprotected by the state.

In light of such findings, both policing and sentencing interventions must attend to the psychosocial consequences of reform efforts. If there is still a dominant perception of police abuse/mistreatment within communities known to have histories with tense police community-relations even after reforms have been implemented, further research is needed to explore why this disconnect exists. The same goes for sentencing schemes such as enhancements. Failure to engage these issues with rigorous, multi-method research risks perpetuating the idea that gun-related policing and punishment campaigns (e.g., focused deterrence, gang enhancements) are inherently just and distinct from other law enforcement campaigns (e.g., the War on Drugs, stop-and-frisk) that we know have both produced and amplified disparities in sentencing, police contact, and systems-related trauma, especially among poor, Black, and other communities of color.

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