

# The Effect of Urban Neighborhood Disorder on Evaluations of the Police and Courts

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Are people dissatisfied with the courts as well as the police when they perceive high levels of disorder in their neighborhoods? Consistent with previous research, this study, using a representative sample of Canadian adults, demonstrates that people are significantly more negative about the police when they perceive high levels of disorder. They are not, however, more negative toward the courts when confronted with these social problems. It is possible that they have heard the police rhetoric—namely, that the police form the “thin blue line” between order and chaos. Although the public holds the police and the courts responsible for increasing rates of crime, victimization, and fear, they do not see the courts as being responsible for neighborhood disorder, which they see as being the sole responsibility of the police.

**Keywords:** *perceptions of police; perceptions of the courts; neighborhood disorder*

## Neighborhood Disorder

People draw many inferences when faced with visual cues of disorder in public spaces. Disorder, or what some may call *incivilities* (see Hunter, 1985), have long been noted as important symbolic cues that many use to

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understand and negotiate public spaces (Goffman, 1963). Many times, *disorder* encompasses a grey area of behaviors that are not necessarily criminal (Skogan, 1990). For example, noisy neighbors, garbage, poorly maintained buildings, and groups of people “hanging out” on street corners are not necessarily criminal acts, nor do they have any specific victims. However, most people react and/or draw inferences when in the presence of such behaviors or visual cues.

There is, of course, no widespread agreement on what exactly disorder entails. Unlike the garden-variety criminal offenses, such as assaults and thefts, which most people agree are wrong and deserving of some sort of response, disorder generates less agreement. For example, people vary on how problematic they view behaviors such as loitering and public drinking, and, of course, feelings about how wrong or dangerous these sorts of behaviors are vary across time and space (Skogan, 1990).

Some people, however, have identified two types of disorder: physical and social (Sampson & Raudenbush, 1990; Skogan, 1990). Skogan (1990) suggested that “physical disorder refers to ongoing conditions, while social disorder appears as a series of more-or-less episodic events” (p. 4). He investigated the effects of physical and social disorder using data from self-report surveys across 40 urban neighborhoods, which asked respondents how much of a problem various disorderly cues were, ranging from public drinking, drug use, and noisy neighbors to vandalism, littering, and building deterioration. Asking respondents how much of a problem those sorts of social and physical cues were combines the cues’ presence and the respondents’ judgments about them. This approach acknowledges that unlike regular crimes, such as assault and breaking and entering, disorder (whether physical or social) causes people to view it with a certain degree of variation—that is, to what extent its forms are problematic or not.

Skogan (1990) found that even when controlling for poverty, neighborhood stability, and racial composition, those who thought that physical disorder and social disorder were neighborhood problems were more likely to be fearful in their neighborhoods and report crime as being a problem. Perceived problems of disorder were also related to lower levels of neighborhood satisfaction, neighborhood solidarity, and higher levels of wanting to move out of the neighborhood. If people infer that there are crime problems in disorderly areas, then it is perhaps not surprising that they also may feel fearful of being victimized and, more generally, simply want to move out of the neighborhood. Skogan (1990) suggested that the presence of disorder can lead to further deterioration of a neighborhood:

Confidence is hardly bolstered by the spread of boarded-up buildings, burned out store-fronts, poorly maintained homes and lawns, garbage spilling out of waste cans, and junk and trash strewn about. Such areas will also not attract shoppers or potential employers, to the further detriment to the community. In short, were things to begin to look bad, the economic factors which underlie neighborhood stability can take a turn for the worse. (p. 50)

Clearly, then, people draw inferences and react to perceived disorder problems.

Others have found perceptions of neighborhood disorder to correlate with fear, perceptions of crime and risk of victimization, neighborhood decline, and informal social control (see, e.g., Kelling & Coles, 1996; Perkins & Taylor 1996; Roundtree & Land, 1996; Skogan, 1990; Taylor, 1997, 1999; Wilson & Kelling, 1982; Yili, Fiedler, & Flaming, 2005). Moreover, using different methods to assess neighborhood disorder tends to yield similar results. Perkins and Taylor (1996) assessed physical and social neighborhood disorder through perception surveys, independent and systematically coded evidence of disorder, and newspaper stories of disorder. Residents' perceptions of neighborhood disorder correlated with the independent observations of disorder and newspaper accounts, and all three measures of disorder predicted fear—the more indications of disorder, the more fearful people were.<sup>1</sup> This suggests that although there can be cultural relativism around whether various aspects of disorder are a problem, there is some level of consensus or objectivity such that independent observers coded more disorder in neighborhoods where residents were more likely to report disorder problems.

Sampson and Raudenbush (1999) used independent observers to code physical and social disorder. They were interested in investigating whether physical and social disorder was related to crime rates. Of course, such surveys of the public can explore only whether people perceive there to be a link between, in this case, crime rates and disorder. Thus, Sampson and Raudenbush observed and systematically coded physical and social disorder cues in a number of different neighborhoods and gathered data on self-reported victimization and arrest rates. They also surveyed the public to see whether their perceptions of disorder were related to the independently observed disorder.

As a result, Sampson and Raudenbush (1999), like those researchers cited above, found a significant correlation between independent systematic observation of physical and social disorder and respondents' ratings of how much of a problem these factors were. The researchers also found that after controlling for other neighborhood characteristics—specifically, collective

efficacy—such cues were not indicative of higher crime rates (except, perhaps, for robbery).

Thus, although many seem to link disorder and crime problems, neighborhood disorder may not be indicative of serious crime problems. Moreover, there may not be an increased risk of victimization; as such, the increased fear may be misplaced. Regardless, people's perceptions—however mistaken—are still important because they influence how people feel about their neighborhoods. In addition, the link between perceived disorder and perceived crime is important for another reason: The criminal justice system—as represented by the police and the courts—routinely takes responsibility for levels of crime in a neighborhood.

The police, by arguing that they need more resources, more power, and fewer restrictions on their methods of crime control, communicate the message that they are important in keeping crime under control in the community. The courts are more explicit: By invoking such sentencing purposes as deterrence and incapacitation, judges make it clear that they believe that they can control the level of crime in the community. The difference between the message coming from the police and that coming from sentencing judges is that the judges' message is explicit, whereas the message from the police is more subtle. It is reasonable to hypothesize, therefore, that high levels of neighborhood disorder, because of its link with perceived crime, will lead to more negative views of the criminal justice system, given that the disorder is a direct visual reminder of the failure of the criminal justice system to do its work. Judges, at least in Canada, routinely describe their jobs as "protecting the public." Indeed, the Criminal Code of Canada notes that one of the purposes of sentencing is to contribute to a safe and peaceful society. Disorder, then, indicates that the judges have failed to fulfill their statutory role.

## **Neighborhood Disorder and Evaluations of the Police and Courts**

People may look to the police and the courts to solve disorder problems and then subsequently evaluate them on their ability to reduce or control such problems. Skogan (1990), for example, noted that neighborhood disorder

often leads to complaints that the authorities "do something." . . . Because of the tenuous legal status of such complaints, and the fact that many disorders are not conventionally defined as serious problems, getting the attention of the police or other municipal agencies can be difficult. (p. 3)

If people have trouble getting responses from police, they may end up not having as much confidence in them and their ability to control crime and disorder.

Prior research on public attitudes toward the police has acknowledged that neighborhood culture and perceptions of one's neighborhood are likely to be important factors (see, e.g., Jacob, 1971; Schuman & Gruenberg, 1972; Walker, Richardson, Williams, Denyer, & McGaughey, 1972). One of the earlier investigations by Lewis and Salem (1986) found relationships between perceptions of neighborhood disorder and views of the police. In a sample of neighborhoods in Chicago and Philadelphia, interviews revealed that those participants who perceived high levels of neighborhood disorder were more likely to make negative comments about the police. Similar correlations were found by Davis (1990), using a sample of New York residents, and later by Maxson, Hennigan, and Sloan (2003), using a sample of Los Angeles residents. In both studies, those who perceived there to be relatively high levels of disorder in their neighborhoods rated the police more negatively on a variety of dimensions than did those who described their neighborhoods as having relatively low levels of disorder.

Other studies have found a relationship between perceptions of neighborhoods and ratings of the police, even when controlling for other factors. For example, Cao, Frank, and Cullen (1996) investigated factors that affected Cincinnati residents' confidence in the police to control crime in their neighborhoods. The researchers found that even when controlling for factors such as victimization and fear of crime, ratings of neighborhood disorder had a significant impact on people's confidence: The more perceived disorder in a neighborhood, the less confident respondents were that the police could respond to calls and control crime and safety in their neighborhood. Yili et al. (2005) also found that when controlling for demographic factors and fear of crime, perceptions of problematic neighborhood disorder predicted negative evaluations of the police.

These results are similar to those of Jesilow and Meyer (1995), who, using open-ended questions with a sample of Los Angeles residents, found that after controlling for factors such as contact with police, age, education, and ethnicity, perceptions of one's neighborhood were a strong predictor of evaluations of the police. Those who thought that there were problems of disorder in their neighborhood were significantly more likely to be negative toward the police.

Most recently, in investigating factors that affect public confidence in the police, Skogan (2006) found that perceived neighborhood disorder was a significant predictor of confidence in a sample of Chicago-area residents.

Controlling for age, ethnicity, and recent experiences, perceptions of one's neighborhood affected views of the police. Those who believed that they had high levels of disorder in their neighborhood were less likely to have confidence in the police.

However, others have not found significant relationships between perceptions of neighborhood disorder and ratings of the police. For example, using data from a small town in a Northeastern state, Reisig and Giacomazzi (1998) found no relationship between perceived neighborhood disorder and evaluations of the police. After controlling for factors such as age, race, gender, income, education, fear of crime, and perceptions of an increasing crime rate, perception of neighborhood disorder was not a significant predictor of perception of police performance or perception of the police's ability to control crime.

Interestingly, perceived neighborhood disorder has been investigated with respect to its impact on ratings of the police, but rarely have researchers investigated—or even speculated about—what impact these views might have on the courts. When social scientists have thought about views of the courts, they have tended to suggest that perceptions of insecurity and neighborhood disorder do in fact influence people's evaluations of the courts. Shearing and Brodeur (2005) argued that survey data from Canada and Britain have revealed that the public tends to endorse increasing sentences to reduce crime. They note, citing Skogan (1990), that “feelings of insecurity are generated by the perception of disorder and uncivil behavior rather than by the fear of crime itself. High feelings of insecurity can prevail in a situation of declining crime rates” (p. 388). Their earlier suggestion, in this context, that the “Canadian public views the courts as the main public agent for promoting security” (p. 383) implies that one might expect that the public would hold the courts responsible for disorder in their communities. Unfortunately, we could not find published evidence of this link.

Roberts and Stalans (1997) have also suggested that the courts might be held responsible more so than the police for disorder and crime in one's neighborhood. They noted that in many surveys, people tend to rate the courts more negatively than they do the police on a variety of dimensions. The researchers hypothesized that this happens because people hold the courts responsible for failing to prevent and reduce crime. Conversely, the authors argued that “surveys suggest that fear of victimization or failure to prevent crime does not influence how much the public supports the police” (p. 30). However, perceptions of crime in particular or of security in general might be quite different from perceptions of disorder in one's neighborhood in terms of impact on evaluations of the police and courts. That is,

broadly defined “crime” may be seen as the responsibility of the criminal justice system as a whole. However, local neighborhood disorder may, in ordinary people’s minds, be seen as a local problem that the local police are expected to solve.

Thus, although many have found a relationship between perceptions of neighborhood disorder and evaluations of the police, others have argued that the courts compose the institution most strongly affected by perceptions of neighborhood crime and disorder. This article aims to extend the literature on perceived neighborhood social disorder by investigating how it affects evaluations of the police and the courts. In addition, unlike the majority of the studies on this topic, which use data from one city per study, this research uses a representative sample of Canadian residents. Specifically, using data from Statistics Canada’s 2004 General Social Survey we investigate, using logistic regression, the effect of perceived neighborhood disorder on ratings of the police and ratings of the courts.

## Method

### Data

Every five years or so, the General Social Survey program of Statistics Canada carries out a survey assessing personal risk and the prevalence of various criminal victimizations, using a representative sample of Canadian residents. The most recent survey was conducted in 2004, and like the previous General Social Surveys in Canada (and like similar surveys in the United Kingdom and the United States), it collected information on a variety of other topics, such as respondents’ attitudes toward various aspects of the criminal justice system, their fear of crime, and their perceptions of their neighborhoods.

As in the previous surveys, Canadian residents aged 15 and older in the 10 provinces (but not the 3 territories, in Northern Canada) who were not full-time residents of institutions were sampled randomly and interviewed on the telephone. For a variety of reasons, various groups were oversampled. For example, to get a reasonably sized sample of the smaller provinces and rural areas of Canada, respondents in those locations were oversampled. In total, 23,766 people were sampled, giving a response rate of 75% (Statistics Canada, 2005). Because we are interested in the effect of neighborhood disorder on ratings of the police and courts, we restricted our sample to those living in urban areas,<sup>2</sup> and they accounted for roughly 75.3% of the sample and a sample size of 17,898.<sup>3</sup>

## Measures

Our two dependent measures included ratings of both the police and the courts. Respondents were asked to rate, on 3-point scales, how good of a job their local police were doing (1 = *good job*, 2 = *average job*, 3 = *poor job*) on each of six aspects (enforcing laws, promptly responding to calls, being approachable, providing information to the public about how to reduce crime, ensuring citizen safety, and treating people fairly). Using only those who answered four or more of these questions, we calculated the average response for each person on those four to six questions answered by each respondent. This resulted in a loss of about 7% of the sample, leaving us with a sample of 16,535. The overall scale value per respondent ranged from 1 (for someone who responded with a 1, *good job*, to all of the questions) to 3 (for someone who responded with a 3, *poor job* to all of the questions). Because we were interested in understanding predictors of negative ratings, we recoded this scale and took approximately the most negative 10%.<sup>4</sup> Those 10% of the sample who gave the police the worst ratings were coded as 1 ( $n = 1,774$ ), and the rest of the sample was coded as a 0 ( $n = 14,761$ ).

We used the same procedure for ratings of the courts. Four items asked respondents how good of a job the courts were doing on providing justice quickly, helping the victim, determining guilt, and ensuring a fair trial. Using only those who answered three or more of these questions, we again calculated a scale value for each respondent, which was the average of the three or four questions answered by each person. This resulted in a loss of roughly 15%, leaving us with a sample size of 15,239. The scale ranged from 1 (*good job* on all three or four questions) to 3 (*poor job* on all three or four questions). We again recoded this scale into those who tended to give, on average, relatively poor ratings (the 11% who gave the worst ratings of the courts) versus the rest of the sample. Those giving the poorest ratings ( $n = 1,709$ ) were coded as 1, and the rest of the sample ( $n = 13,529$ ) was coded as a 0.

In the data set, there were four demographic variables (sex, age, household income, and visible minority status) and four variables related to victimizations and perceptions of crime and safety. The survey also asked about six types of police contacts that could be used to predict views of the police and one type of court contact that could be used to predict views of the courts. In total, there were 15 variables when predicting views of the police and 10 variables when predicting views of the courts.

Age was coded into 10-year groupings (15–24, 25–34, 35–44, 45–54, 55–64, 65 and older). Household income was recoded into three roughly equivalent groups (up to \$39,999; \$40,000–\$79,999; \$80,000 or more).<sup>5</sup> Visible minority status was available in the data set as those who self-identified as such. Thus, this flag captures a variety of ethnicities within the label of *visible minority*.

Perception of crime in one's neighborhood, as compared to other areas in Canada, was coded on a 3-point scale (1 = *lower*, 2 = *about the same*, 3 = *higher*). Perception of crime changing in one's neighborhood in the last five years was also coded on a 3-point scale (1 = *decreased*, 2 = *about the same*, 3 = *increased*). Fear and personal safety were a combination of three questions that asked respondents about their levels of fear when home alone at night, when walking alone in their neighborhood at night, and their overall satisfaction with their personal safety from crime. These three items were added together to create a scale that ranged from 1 to 9 (alpha = .61). Because of the relatively skewed nature of this scale (90% of the sample was between 1 and 4), we recoded it so that it ranged from 1 to 4, with higher numbers indicating higher levels of fear and less satisfaction with personal safety. Previous victimization was simply an indicator that identified whether or not the person had reported a victimization in the past year (0 = *no victimization*, 1 = *victimization*).

Neighborhood disorder was a combination of nine questions that asked how much of a problem various social and physical issues were in respondents' neighborhoods (1 = *not a problem at all*, 2 = *not a very big problem*, 3 = *a fairly big problem*, 4 = *a very big problem*). Specifically, they were asked about noisy neighbors, people hanging out on the street, people sleeping on the street, garbage and litter lying around, vandalism and graffiti, people being harassed because of skin color or religion, people using and dealing drugs, people being drunk in public, and prostitution. Although some have made distinctions between physical and social disorder, our analyses supported one construct. Specially, all items correlated well together—those that could be thought of as physical disorder (e.g., vandalism) had relatively high correlations (above .5) with other aspects that could be considered social disorder (e.g., people dealing drugs). Moreover, a factor analysis supported a single-factor solution.<sup>6</sup> As such, we did not differentiate between physical and social disorder; thus, because our scale is predominately focused on social disorder, one might think of it as primarily assessing that aspect only.<sup>7</sup> These nine questions created a scale that ranged from 9 to 36, which we tried to recode into thirds as best we could given the distribution. Higher numbers indicate more perceived disorder.

**Table 1**  
**Distribution of Dependent and Independent Variables**

	%	<i>n</i>
Dependent Variables		
Ratings of the police		
Relatively positive	89.3	14,716
Relatively negative	10.7	1,774
Ratings of the courts		
Relatively positive	88.8	13,529
Relatively negative	11.2	1,709
Independent Variables		
Age of respondent		
15 to 24	17.1	3,052
25 to 34	17.7	3,161
35 to 44	20.2	3,608
45 to 54	18.2	3,250
55 to 64	12.6	2,252
65 and older	14.4	2,575
Sex of respondent		
Male	49.1	8,793
Female	50.9	9,105
Household income		
Up to 39,999	28.2	3,882
40,000 to 79,999	38.8	5,336
80,000+	33.0	4,546
Visible minority status		
Nonvisible minority	85.6	14,726
Visible minority	14.4	2,483
Perception of crime in neighborhood compared to other areas in Canada		
Lower	58.1	10,022
About the same	31.9	5,511
Higher	10.0	1,730
Perception of crime increasing or decreasing in last 5 years in neighborhood		
Decreased	6.5	1,069
About the same	60.5	9,973
Increased	33.0	5,450
Fear and personal safety		
No fear	22.6	3,636
Low fear	25.9	4,159
Medium fear	26.2	4,200
High fear	25.3	4,052

Previous victimization		
No	71.0	12,702
Yes	29.0	5,196
Perception of disorder in neighborhood		
No disorder	43.3	6,901
Some disorder	32.3	5,151
A lot of disorder	24.4	3,887
Contact with police in past year: Information session to reduce crime		
No	91.2	16,317
Yes	8.8	1,570
Contact with police in past year: Traffic violation		
No	86.4	15,460
Yes	13.6	2,431
Contact with police in past year: Victim of crime		
No	92.7	16,590
Yes	7.3	1,300
Contact with police in past year: Witness to a crime		
No	93.6	16,736
Yes	6.4	1,152
Contact with police in past year: Arrested		
No	99.0	17,718
Yes	1.0	171
Contact with police in past year: Other reasons		
No	89.6	16,022
Yes	10.4	1,865
Contact with criminal courts in lifetime		
No	78.3	14,004
Yes	21.7	3,877

The six types of police contacts recorded in this data set asked respondents whether or not they came into contact with the police (in the past year) for an information session about how to reduce crime, for a traffic violation, as a victim, as a witness to a crime, because of an arrest, and for any other type of contact. Because not all police contacts are the same, we kept these variables separate. Each variable was coded as 0 (*no contact*) or 1 (*contact*). There was only one question that asked about court contact: Respondents were simply asked if they have ever (in their lifetimes) had contact with the criminal courts (0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*). Table 1 shows the distribution of our dependent and independent variables, along with the sample sizes.

## Results

Before exploring the relationships between our independent and dependent variables, we thought it useful to first describe a little about who reports relatively high levels of disorder in their neighborhoods. Using all of our independent variables described above, we ran an ordinary least squares stepwise regression to identify the strongest predictors of neighborhood disorder. In total, 12 of our 16 predictors were significant. The strongest predictor, perhaps not surprisingly, was perceptions of crime in one's neighborhood as compared to other areas in Canada. Those who reported relatively high levels of disorder were more likely to report that crime was higher in their neighborhoods than in other areas of Canada. Additionally, respondents who perceived relatively high levels of disorder were (in order of effect size) more likely to be younger, report relatively high levels of fear, experience a victimization in the past year, report lower income, report having a contact with the criminal courts, be a nonvisible minority, report a contact with police for an *other* reason, report a contact with police as a witness to a crime, be male, report coming into contact with police for an information session on how to reduce crime.

### Bivariate Analyses

Turning our attention now to the relationships between our independent variables and evaluations of the police and courts, we first explore evaluations of the police. Table 2 shows the proportion within the various categories of our independent variables who rated the police most negatively (the top 10%). For example, as age increases, the proportion of people who are most negative in their evaluations of the police increases slightly and then decreases. Within the 15–24 age group, 21.4% believe that the police do a poor job. However, in the 25–34 age category, up to 24% believe the police do a poor job. Then, in the older-age categories, people are less likely to feel that the police are doing a poor job such that only 5.4% of those 65 and older feel that the police are doing a poor job.

Males were more likely than females to give the police poor ratings—roughly 12.1% of males versus 9.3% of females rated the police, on average, relatively poorly. Visible minorities were also slightly more likely to give the police negative evaluations. Household income was not significantly related to evaluations of the police when recoded into a 3-point scale. A further investigation actually revealed a curvilinear relationship—those at the highest and lowest income groups tended to rate the police more

**Table 2**  
**Proportion Who Rated the Police Most Negatively as a**  
**Function of Demographic Variables**

Independent Variables	%
Age of respondent <sup>a</sup>	
15 to 24	21.4
24 to 34	24.1
35 to 44	20.4
45 to 54	17.4
55 to 64	11.3
65+	5.4
Sex of respondent <sup>b</sup>	
Male	12.1
Female	9.3
Household income <sup>c</sup>	
Up to 39,999	10.6
40,000 to 79,999	9.9
80,000+	11.2
Visible minority status <sup>d</sup>	
Nonvisible minority	10.1
Visible minority	12.4

a.  $\chi^2 = 170.40, df = 5, p < .001$ .

b.  $\chi^2 = 33.34, df = 1, p < .001$ .

c.  $\chi^2 = 4.74, df = 2, ns$ .

d.  $\chi^2 = 9.80, df = 1, p < .05$ .

negatively than those in the middle-income groups. For example, 13.2% of those with an income of less than \$20,000 rated the police negatively. In the middle-income groups (\$20,000 to \$79,999), that proportion dropped to 9.7% but then increased again to 11.2% among the income groupings of \$80,000 or more. Because of the nature of this relationship (nonlinear), we did not enter it into our regression equation.

Table 3 shows the relationship between our crime-related variables and ratings of the police. Those who believed that crime was higher in their neighborhoods as compared to other areas in Canada, those who believed that crime was increasing in their neighborhoods, those who were more fearful, and those who experienced a victimization in the last year were more likely give negative evaluations of the police. Neighborhood disorder was also significantly related to evaluations of the police. Only 6.4% of those who perceived no disorder in their neighborhood rated the police poorly. However, 10% of those who said that there was some disorder and

**Table 3**  
**Proportion Who Rated the Police Most Negatively as a**  
**Function of Crime-Related Variables**

Independent Variables	%
Perception of crime in neighborhood compared to other areas in Canada <sup>a</sup>	
Lower	8.3
About the same	11.7
Higher	20.8
Perception of crime increasing or decreasing in last 5 years in neighborhood <sup>b</sup>	
Decreased	9.5
About the same	8.3
Increased	15.6
Fear and personal safety <sup>c</sup>	
No fear	6.6
Low fear	8.3
Medium fear	11.6
High fear	17.5
Previous victimization <sup>d</sup>	
No	7.9
Yes	17.4
Perception of disorder in neighborhood <sup>e</sup>	
No disorder	6.4
Some disorder	10.0
A lot of disorder	17.1

a.  $\chi^2 = 233.23$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .001$ .

b.  $\chi^2 = 186.07$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .001$ .

c.  $\chi^2 = 260.50$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < .001$ .

d.  $\chi^2 = 327.71$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .001$ .

e.  $\chi^2 = 293.49$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .001$ .

17.1% of those who said that there was a lot of disorder rated the police poorly on average.

Table 4 shows the relationship between the six types of police contacts and the evaluations of the police. Only having contact for an information session was nonsignificant. Respondents who reported having any of the other five types of contacts were significantly more likely to hold negative evaluations of the police.

Table 5 shows the proportion within the various categories of our independent variables that rated the courts most negatively (the top 11%). Unlike evaluations of the police, where older respondents tended to be more positive, with respect to the courts, older respondents were more

**Table 4**  
**Proportion Who Rated the Police Most Negatively as a**  
**Function of Police Contact Variables**

Independent Variables	%
Contact with police in past year:	
Information session to reduce crime <sup>a</sup>	
No	10.7
Yes	11.1
Contact with police in past year: Traffic violation <sup>b</sup>	
No	9.7
Yes	17.0
Contact with police in past year: Victim of crime <sup>c</sup>	
No	10.0
Yes	19.1
Contact with police in past year: Witness to a crime <sup>d</sup>	
No	10.1
Yes	19.9
Contact with police in past year: Arrested <sup>e</sup>	
No	10.4
Yes	38.5
Contact with police in past year: Other reasons <sup>f</sup>	
No	10.5
Yes	12.9

a.  $\chi^2 = 0.27$ ,  $df = 1$ , *ns*.

b.  $\chi^2 = 107.76$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .001$ .

c.  $\chi^2 = 100.06$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .001$ .

d.  $\chi^2 = 105.66$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .001$ .

e.  $\chi^2 = 134.26$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .001$ .

f.  $\chi^2 = 10.05$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .001$ .

likely to be negative. Although only 6.9% of the 15- to 24-year-olds rated the courts negatively, 21% of those 45 to 54 years old rated the courts negatively. However, negative evaluations decreased slightly in the last two age categories such that 17.9% of those 65 and older rated the court negatively. Sex was not significantly related to evaluations of the courts, but income and visible minority status were. Those with lower incomes were more likely to be negative toward the courts as were nonvisible minorities. What is notable about these findings in comparison to the relationships involving the police is that none of the demographic relationships are the same. For example, members of visible minority groups in Canada were more likely to give poor ratings to the police than were nonvisible minority Canadians. In contrast, visible minorities were less likely to give poor ratings to the courts than were nonvisible minority Canadians.

**Table 5**  
**Proportion Who Rated the Courts Most Negatively as a**  
**Function of Demographic Variables**

Independent Variables	%
Age of respondent <sup>a</sup>	
15 to 24	6.9
24 to 34	16.5
35 to 44	20.8
45 to 54	21.0
55 to 64	16.9
65+	17.9
Sex of respondent <sup>b</sup>	
Male	11.4
Female	11.1
Household income <sup>c</sup>	
Up to 39,999	12.7
40,000 to 79,999	10.9
80,000+	9.3
Visible minority status <sup>d</sup>	
Nonvisible minority	11.5
Visible minority	8.2

a.  $\chi^2 = 203.75$ ,  $df = 5$ ,  $p < .001$ .

b.  $\chi^2 = .405$ ,  $df = 1$ , *ns*.

c.  $\chi^2 = 21.874$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .001$ .

d.  $\chi^2 = 17.03$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Table 6 shows the relationship between crime-related and court-contact variables and evaluations of the court. Those most likely to rate the courts negatively were those who believed that crime was higher in their neighborhoods as compared to other areas in Canada, those who believed crime was increasing in their neighborhoods, those who were more fearful, those who experienced a victimization, and those who had contact with the criminal courts. The perception of disorder in one's neighborhood, however, was not significantly related to evaluations of the courts at this bivariate level.

## Logistic Regression

Looking first at predicting negative evaluations of the police, we entered all of our independent variables except for neighborhood disorder.<sup>8</sup> Table 7 shows the results from this first step. Only visible minority status and contact with police for other reasons were not significant. Younger respondents

**Table 6**  
**Proportion Who Rated the Courts Most Negatively as a**  
**Function of Various Crime-Related and Court-Contact Variables**

Independent Variables	%
Perception of crime in neighborhood compared to other areas in Canada <sup>a</sup>	
Lower	9.9
About the same	11.3
Higher	17.0
Perception of crime increasing or decreasing in last 5 years in neighborhood <sup>b</sup>	
Decreased	8.4
About the same	9.5
Increased	14.9
Fear and personal safety <sup>c</sup>	
No fear	7.9
Low fear	8.9
Medium fear	10.8
High fear	15.5
Previous victimization <sup>d</sup>	
No	10.7
Yes	12.5
Perception of disorder in neighborhood <sup>e</sup>	
No disorder	10.3
Some disorder	10.8
A lot of disorder	11.4
Contact with criminal courts (in lifetime) <sup>f</sup>	
No	10.0
Yes	15.1

a.  $c^2 = 63.93, df = 2, p < .001$ .

b.  $\chi^2 = 96.61, df = 2, p < .001$ .

c.  $\chi^2 = 121.60, df = 3, p < .001$ .

d.  $\chi^2 = 10.72, df = 1, p < .01$ .

e.  $\chi^2 = 2.43, df = 2, ns$ .

f.  $\chi^2 = 71.05, df = 1, p < .001$ .

and males tended to have more negative evaluations of the police, as did those who believed that crime was higher in their neighborhoods as compared to other areas in Canada and those who believed that crime was increasing in their neighborhoods. Those who were more fearful also rated the police more negatively, as did those who experienced a victimization in the last year. It also appears that respondents rated the police more negatively if they came into contact with them as a victim or witness, because

**Table 7**  
**Logistic Regression Predicting Evaluations of the Police**

Variables	First Step			Second Step		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>OR</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>OR</i>
Coding						
Constant	-4.00	.158	.018	-4.34	.169	.013
Age of respondent Higher = older	-.111	.020***	.895	-.082	.021***	.921
Sex of respondent 0 = male / 1 = female	-.433	.066***	.648	-.424	.066***	.654
Visible minority 0 = no / 1 = yes	.120	.086	1.13	.145	.086	1.16
Perception of crime in neighborhood compared to other areas in Canada Higher = more crime	.221	.044***	1.25	.169	.045***	1.18
Perception of crime increasing or decreasing in last 5 years in neighborhood Higher = crime increasing	.316	.055***	1.37	.290	.055***	1.34
Fear and personal safety Higher = greater fear/less safety	.346	.032***	1.41	.314	.033***	1.37
Previous victimization 0 = no victimization / 1 = victimization	.525	.066***	1.69	.478	.067***	1.61
Contact with police in past year: Information session to reduce crime 0 = no / 1 = yes	-.205	.104*	.815	-.219	.105*	.803
Contact with police in past year: Traffic violation 0 = no / 1 = yes	.428	.076***	1.53	.429	.076***	1.54
Contact with police in past year: Victim of crime 0 = no / 1 = yes	.202	.098*	1.22	.209	.098*	1.23
Contact with police in past year: Witness to a crime 0 = no / 1 = yes	.329	.098**	1.39	.303	.098**	1.36
Contact with police in past year: Arrested 0 = no / 1 = yes	1.29	.197***	3.61	1.31	.198***	3.72
Contact with police in past year: Other reasons 0 = no / 1 = yes	.108	.093	1.11	.084	.093	1.00
Perception of disorder in neighborhood Higher = more disorder	—	—	—	.252	.041***	1.29
Nagelkerke <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>		.106			.111	

Note: 0 = relatively positive average ratings; 1 = relatively negative average ratings; OR = odds ratio. Dashes indicate that perception of disorder in neighborhood was not entered into the analysis in the first step.

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

**Table 8**  
**Logistic Regression: Predicting Evaluations of the Courts**

Variables	First Step			Second Step		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>OR</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>OR</i>
Coding						
Constant	-4.13	.211	.016	-4.14	.223	.016
Age of respondent						
Higher = older	.194	.022***	1.21	.195	.023***	1.22
Sex of respondent						
0 = male / 1 = female	-.144	.073*	.866	-.144	.073*	.866
Household income						
Higher = higher income	-.099	.045*	.906	-.098	.045*	.907
Visible minority						
0 = no / 1 = yes	-.221	.121	.802	-.220	.121	.802
Perception of crime in neighborhood compared to other areas in Canada						
Higher = more crime	.021	.053	1.02	.019	.053	1.02
Perception of crime increasing or decreasing in last 5 years in neighborhood						
Higher = crime increasing	.267	.062***	1.31	.266	.062***	1.31
Fear and personal safety						
Higher = greater fear / less safety	.266	.036***	1.31	.265	.036***	1.30
Previous victimization						
0 = no victimization / 1 = victimization	.260	.074***	1.30	.258	.075**	1.30
Contact with criminal courts (in lifetime)						
0 = no / 1 = yes	.498	.073***	1.65	.487	.074***	1.64
Perception of disorder in neighborhood						
Higher = more disorder	—	—	—	.009	.046	1.01
Nagelkerke <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>		.058			.058	

Note: 0 = relatively positive average ratings; 1 = relatively negative average ratings; OR = odds ratio. Dashes indicate that perception of disorder in neighborhood was not entered into the analysis in the first step.

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

of a traffic violation, or because they were arrested. However, if respondents came into contact with police for an information session, then they were more likely to have positive evaluations of the police.

In the second step, we entered neighborhood disorder to see if, above and beyond the other predictors, it had any effect on evaluations of the police. The results are shown in the Second Step column of Table 7. All of the significant predictors from the first step were still significant in the second step. More important, however, neighborhood disorder is a significant

predictor above and beyond the others. Those who believed that there was more disorder in their neighborhoods were significantly more likely to rate the police negatively than those who perceived less disorder in their neighborhoods.

Table 8 presents the results for views of the courts. In the first step, all of the independent variables except for neighborhood disorder were entered. Only visible minority status and perceptions of crime in one's neighborhood as compared to other areas in Canada were nonsignificant. Older respondents and males were more negative about the courts. This finding stands in contrast to evaluations of the police where younger respondents were more negative. Those with lower household incomes also tended to be more negative about the courts, as did those who believed that crime was increasing in their neighborhood. Those who reported higher levels of fear, those who experienced a victimization in the last year, and (similar to the results from the police logistic regression) those who had an experience with the courts were significantly more likely to be negative.

In the second step, we entered neighborhood disorder to see if, over and above the other predictors, it had any effect. Perhaps not terribly surprising, given the lack of a relationship at the bivariate level (see Table 6), it was nonsignificant in the regression. Thus, perceptions of neighborhood disorder appear to affect ratings of the police but not the courts.

## Discussion

It is clear, at least for a representative sample of Canadians, that ratings of the courts and ratings of the police are best considered as separate constructs. The results in Tables 2 and 5 demonstrate that different demographic groups tend to hold negative views for these two criminal justice institutions. It is not surprising, therefore, that the police and courts would not equally be affected by perceptions of neighborhood disorder.

Our findings that perceptions of neighborhood disorder affect ratings of the police but not the courts may make sense when one considers that it is police who patrol and engage with communities more than those who work within the court system. For example, if a community member was concerned about drug dealing in the neighborhood and wanted "something done" to reduce the incidence of this activity, it would be more likely (and sensible) that the person contact the police as opposed to relying on a judge to solve the problem. Moreover, in many communities, the police try to engage people through various programs to help reduce crime (e.g., Crime

Stoppers, neighborhood watch, information blitzes on reducing victimization). In the minds of community members, then, this type of involvement—rightly or wrongly—places the responsibility for neighborhood problems squarely on the police.

What is unclear is whether the negative evaluations are due to people's actively trying to contact the police to "do something" and finding them unresponsive, because, as Skogan (1990) notes, it is difficult for the police to know how to respond given that the problems are generally not serious and, in some cases, completely legal. Alternately, the negative evaluations could be due more to people's seeing signs of disorder and then inferring that the police are not doing anything or have abandoned the neighborhood. Our study suggests only that there is a relationship between perceiving disorder (largely, social disorder) in one's neighborhood and holding negative views of the police. Longitudinal data—and data tapped into physical disorder—would shed further light on the relationship found here.

With respect to evaluations of the courts, there was a relationship between views of crime increasing and negative evaluations of the courts. Thus, it could be that people do broadly hold the courts responsible. This would hardly be surprising given that political leaders in Canada from all three national parties tend to do so in their public statements about sentencing policies. However, on a more specific level, when people are thinking about problems within their neighborhoods, they no longer see the courts as the responsible agency. Other negative evaluations of the courts—leniency in sentencing, for example—also appear to break down when focusing on specific issues. That is, people tend to generally report that they feel that sentences are too lenient. However, when faced with a specific case or court decision, people tend not to endorse the most punitive responses (Doob & Roberts, 1988; Sprott, 1996, 1998). Indeed, in many cases, people tend to sentence similarly as judges do (Tufts & Roberts, 2002). Thus, it may be that although people may broadly relate increasing crime with negative evaluations of the courts, when focused on specific neighborhood problems, they no longer focus on the courts.

In conclusion, then, what we may be seeing here is that the perceptions of disorder in one's neighborhood affect ratings of the police for a simple reason—police, in their discussion about crime and disorder, take responsibility for it. The imagery of the "thin blue line" between order and disorder is designed by the police to garner support. However, the other side of the coin is evident when disorder wins out over order. In those circumstances, the police are seen as being responsible for not succeeding in doing what they promise to do—provide an effective blue barrier to disorder.

## Notes

1. Some have found significant relationships between respondents' reported levels of fear and independent systematic observation of disorder in neighborhoods—such that higher levels of fear were related to more disorder, as coded by independent observers (see, e.g., Covington & Taylor, 1991; Perkins, Meeks, & Taylor 1993; Perkins & Taylor, 1996; Taylor, Gottfredson, & Brower, 1984; Taylor, Shumaker, & Gottfredson, 1985). However, Perkins, Wandersman, and Taylor (1993) failed to find such a relationship.

2. We chose to restrict our sample because we had difficulty conceptually understanding what our neighborhood disorder questions would mean in a rural sample, with people who might not have others living nearby. We did, however, run our regressions using the entire sample and only the rural sample, and the results were always consistent with those presented here.

3. Because particular groups were sampled at different rates and because others (e.g., those with two telephone numbers) had different probabilities of being sampled, a weight for each respondent was provided by Statistics Canada, giving, in effect, the number of adult Canadians (15 years or older) who each sampled person represents in the country as a whole. Using these weights then gives a sensible relative weight but also, for inferential statistical purposes, a dramatically inflated sample size. For purposes of inferential statistics, these weights were divided by the average weight to bring the total sample size down to the actual sample size. We first selected only those who lived in urban areas; then we weighted the data and divided by the average weight to bring the estimated sample size back to the original sample size.

4. Additionally, the sample for any given descriptive statistic will necessarily vary somewhat from the actual number of people who answered each question. This means that the probability levels associated with inferential statistics reported in this article should be considered as rough estimates. Because none of our main findings with respect to the impact of perceived neighborhood disorder are marginal, this is not likely to be a problem. The alternative—not using weights—is strongly discouraged by Statistics Canada. Noninteger weights have another peculiar impact: They create noninteger frequencies. For simplicity's sake, we rounded frequencies to the nearest integer.

5. We also used the unrecoded scales and ran ordinary least squares regressions. Furthermore, we tried to simply add up all of the questions (for those respondents who answered all of the questions) to create a scale for the police and courts (as opposed to calculating the mean response from each respondent). The results were always consistent with those presented here.

6. For ease of presentation and to correct for the somewhat skewed nature of some of the scales, we tended to recode, where possible, roughly into thirds. This was, however, sometimes difficult given the distributions in some of the scales. We ran our regressions both ways—with full scales and with those recoded into thirds—and the results were always the same as presented here. Additionally, the overall scale alpha in a reliability analysis was .85 with each item contributing to the overall alpha.

7. We did, however, run our regressions looking at the independent effect of physical disorder (the two questions on garbage and vandalism) and social disorder (the remaining seven questions). Both were significant predictors (using the full scales or those recoded into thirds and using the binary dependent variables or the full scales). However, because the physical and social disorder scales correlated at .7, there are likely multicollinearity problems with this approach. This was why, in the end, we kept all measures of disorder together.

8. Given that all of the variables were entered into the logistic regressions, we lost roughly 30% of the sample owing to missing data across the questions. We therefore reran our analyses

after having recoded a number of the variables to retain more of the data—for example, keeping people who answered at least three of the police questions (as opposed to at least four), two or more of the court questions (as opposed to three or more), and seven or more of the disorder questions (as opposed to all) and removing income from the courts regression. The results were always consistent with those presented here.

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