

# **Police Ethics in Rural Contexts: A Left Realist Consequentialist View**

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### Abstract

This article presents crime survey data from the state of West Virginia in the United States showing that, controlling for structural conditions, community atmosphere is significantly related to crime, violence and many other social problems in rural places. These results help identify measurable and achievable progressive desired ends in rural policing, replacing law enforcement outputs (for example, arrests, gun and drug seizures) with safe, strong community outcomes as the *summum bonum* (i.e, ultimate outcome) of policing. Findings show that interdependent communities where police are partners with residents are the safest, while conflict communities where the police are viewed as adversaries are least safe. These results suggest a left realist consequentialist approach to police ethics to dismantle the hegemony of draconian policies and practices.

**Keywords:** community dynamics; left realism; police reform; rural policing; community atmosphere

Central to the conception of social order in contemporary societies are the different aspects of organized state practices, which are generally referred to as agencies of social control. The law enforcement branch of the state, and particularly the police, represent the single most important agency responsible for the reproduction of social order (Currie et al., 1990). Regardless of whether they are based in urban, suburban or rural places, the police are typically defined as strictly law enforcement officials. Viewing them as such seems so natural or ‘commonsensical’ that metrics like the number of arrests, indictments, and drug and gun seizures appear to many, if not most people, that the police are doing ‘good’ even though there is ample evidence to the contrary (see, for example, Vitale, 2017; 2019). Arguably, rather than measuring the contribution of police work to public safety, these measures are used for government accounting purposes and are better viewed as measures of police productivity (Brownstein, 2000; O’Brien 1996).

In fact, decades of militarized law enforcement in socially and economically disenfranchised urban communities, especially in the United States, as made things worse (Kraska, 2018). Thus, it is no wonder that punitive, orthodox means of social control like ‘broken windows policing’ (see Kelling & Coles, 1997) are, as left realists put it, not effective as a means to fight crime (Kinsey et al., 1986).

Within criminology, there is a rich history of police research, but the vast majority of it is not critical (DeKeseredy, 2022), that is, examining larger social forces, especially the empirical work done in non-metropolitan contexts. What explains this selective inattention? Critical policing scholar Peter Kraska (2018, p. 222) supplies some short answers to this question:

Several reasons might account for this neglect, including critical criminologists focusing primarily on the growth of softer state controls associated with “late modernity,” intense attention paid to mass incarceration (a “punishment studies” focus that generally excluded policing), and an assumption by many academics that community policing reforms meant that the police were attempting to democratize as opposed to militarize (despite the punitive war on drugs waged first and foremost by the police).

Left realists, however, are among a small group of critical criminologists who take policing seriously. Though Kraska (2018) and other critical criminologists have historically focused almost exclusively on inner-city crime,<sup>1</sup> some rural criminologists now offer a variant of what Matthews (2009) refers to as a ‘refashioned left realism’, one that examines the role state

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<sup>1</sup> Left realism is a critical criminological school of thought that was born in the mid-1980s in the United States and United Kingdom. Left realists point to the criminogenic consequences of broader social forces like capitalism and patriarchy and borrow from the writings of ‘strain’ theorists like Merton (1938) and Cohen (1955). For the purpose of this article, most importantly, left realists propose short-term anticrime strategies that both challenge the right-wing law-and-order campaign and take seriously socially and economically disenfranchised rural and urban communities fear of intimate violence and predatory street crime seriously (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2018).

agencies like the police play in responding to crime in rural and remote communities (see DeKeseredy, 2022; Donnermeyer & DeKeseredy, 2014). The arguments offered here are heavily informed by this school of thought. For example, the 2016 West Virginia Community Quality of Life Survey (WVCQLS) featured in this article is an integral part of a program of left realist local crime survey research that can be tremendously useful to inform the police, town and city councils, and other local agencies about both specific local problems and people's perceptions of what does and does not bother them.

The linguistic blurring of policing, with a single authoritarian approach, is hardly trivial. It conceals the insidious nature of current policing strategies in a U.S. context, and legitimates the institutional and cultural practices behind the racial disparities in law enforcement and the use of violent force. Further, conceiving of policing as only enforcing the law contributes to deontological ethics codes that center on conformity to rigid policies and standards rather than assessing the consequences of police behaviors and policies. Therefore, 'doing right' in policing generally means being 'in the right'. Put differently, it means ensuring that officers follow sanctioned or accredited policies and practices even when they create harm or fail to achieve desired ends. Shifting toward 'consequentialist ethics' in rural policing, then, requires considering the *summum bonum*, or highest good. Police behaviors that help achieve this goal are ethical, while those working against it are unethical. Consequentialist ethics shift the focus from simply following rules to the consequences of following the rules (Pajman, 1999).

Again, the key arguments presented in this article are informed by quantitative data generated by the WVCQLS, which is one of the very few rural victimization surveys thus far conducted in the United States (DeKeseredy et al., 2022). Two things make this study unique. First, despite the important role that the police play in the reproduction of social order, there is, as noted above, a lacuna in the critical criminological literature on the policing of rural and remote places in democratic societies. Thus, this survey helps fill a major research gap. Indeed, what Mawby and Yarwood (2011, p. 1) said a decade ago still holds true today:

If studies of policing have been on the edge of geographical investigation (Fyfe, 1991; Herbert, 2009), then studies of *rural* policing have fallen off the edge of many research agendas (Dingwall & Moody, 1999). Despite renewed and sustained interest in rural studies (Cloke et al., 2006), rural policing has received little attention from social scientists (Dingwall & Moody, 1999; Yarwood, 2001). Rather like the boy in the old joke, academics with an interest in rural policing appear to be following in the tracks of other researchers than forging paths on their own.

What also makes this study novel is that it brings the concepts of 'community dynamics' and 'community atmosphere' to the study of rural policing. Community dynamics refer to psychodynamic processes that occur when people live near each other and share the desire to live

in a safe place. These dynamic processes, in turn, create a community atmosphere most associated with (and predictive of) personal victimization, crime in the community, fear of crime, and opioid-related and other drug-related problems in the community (Brownstein et al., 2014; Nolan & Hinkle, 2021).

Community atmosphere is viewed as a receptacle with varying levels of three main substantive categories: (i) interdependence; (ii) frustration/conflict; and (iii) dependence. Interdependence refers to the degree to which residents know and trust each other and are willing to work collectively to resolve community problems. Frustration/conflict is the degree to which residents avoid each other, do not work well together, and do not trust or like the police. Dependence is the extent to which residents trust the police, but do not know their neighbors very well. WVCQLS data show that the composition of the community atmosphere (for example, varying levels of interdependence, frustration/conflict and dependence) is related to the risk of victimization, crime in the community, fear of crime, and opioid problems.

Our findings help identify measurable and achievable desired ends in rural policing. Envisioning this type of formal social control as a vital means to create safe places – rather than as just a simplistic law enforcement mechanism – is an important first step toward implementing a consequentialist code of ethics. It also avoids the language trap that surreptitiously exacerbates racist and cultural superiority (for example, hegemony) in policing. This approach is consistent with the left realist notion of ‘preemptive deterrence’. This involves working in a community to try to prevent crime from happening, rather than coming in with a massive police-as-law enforcement presence after the fact (Lea & Young, 1984).

Our suggested means of reconstituting social order and social control in rural places is also in line with left realists’ compelling alternative to militaristic, zero tolerance and broken windows styles of policing – that is, ‘minimal policing’ (Fleetwood & Lea, 2022; Kinsey et al., 1986). This is designed to foster democratic accountability of police to local communities and local police authorities. Minimal policing involves strict limits on police powers and is heavily guided by the notion that police should cooperate and respond to the demands and concerns of the community, rather than vice versa. The principles of minimal policing are: maximum public initiation of police action; minimum necessary coercion by the police; minimal police intervention; and maximum public access to the police. Given the spread of police militarization are increasingly reaching into rural areas (Lawson, 2019), achieving these goals would denote a much-needed alternative to “paramilitary policing in Mayberry” (Kraska & Cubellis, 1997, p. 607).<sup>2</sup>

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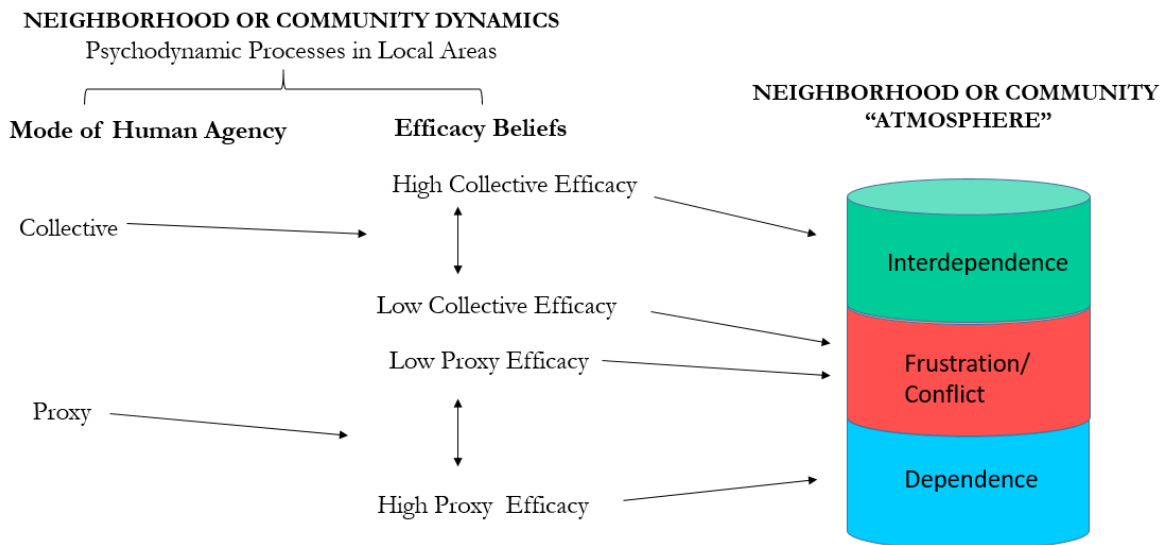
<sup>2</sup> Mayberry is a term that generally refers to a rural utopian town or village. It is also a fictional North Carolina community that was the setting for two popular United States television comedies: *The Andy Griffith Show* and *Mayberry R.F.D.*

**Community Dynamics and Community Atmosphere**

Presented in Figure 1 is a psychodynamic process that involves rural residents: (i) believing that the police are primarily responsible for crime control; or (ii) residents supposing that they and the police are co-responsible for creating a safe community. Each form of human agency, collective or proxy, generates a range of efficacy beliefs from high to low. This process creates a community atmosphere that we depict as a receptacle containing three types of components: interdependence; frustration/conflict; and dependence. The quantity of each one depends on the dynamic process. For instance, where there is collective agency in the community relating to crime control with high

**Figure 1**

*Community Dynamics and Community Atmosphere*



Source: Figure created by authors

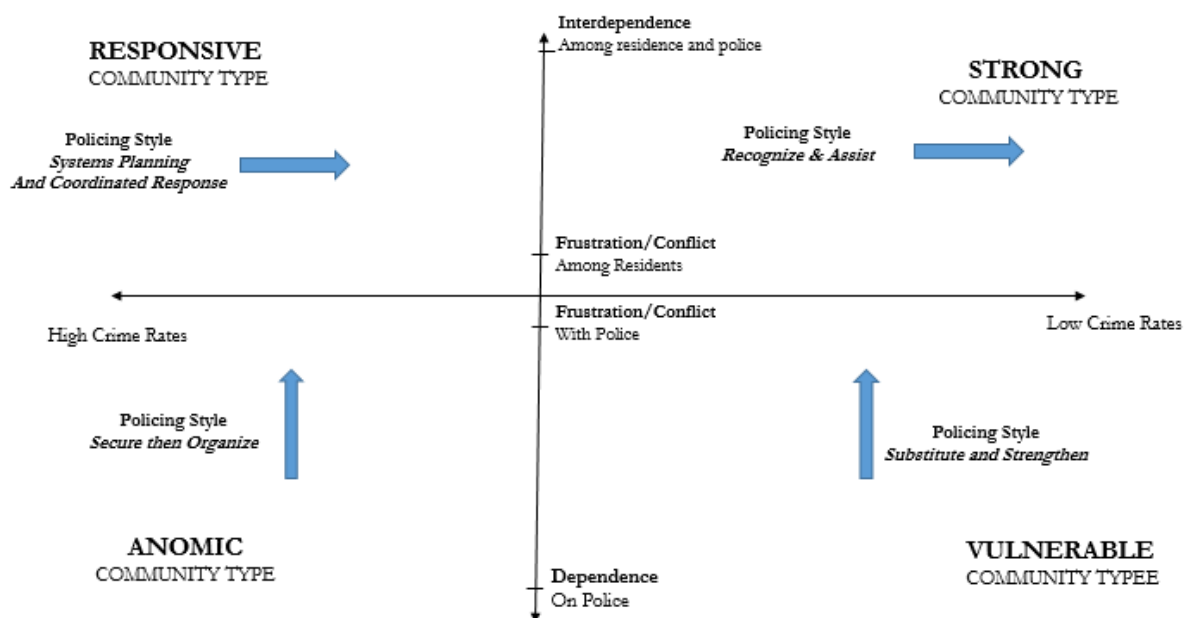
‘collective efficacy’ beliefs, this leads to increases in interdependence. When collective agency produces low collective efficacy beliefs, then the levels of frustration/conflict in the community atmosphere will increase. Where the community expects proxy agency, with the police primarily responsible for crime control on behalf of the community and where efficacy beliefs are high, levels of dependence in the community atmosphere will likely increase. Finally, where proxy agency is expected and efficacy beliefs are low, levels of frustration/conflict in the community atmosphere will increase. Following Sampson et al. (1998, p. 1), collective efficacy is defined here as “mutual trust among neighbors combined with a willingness to act on behalf of the common good, specifically to supervise children and maintain public order”.

### A Situational Policing Framework for Rural Police

Unlike situational crime prevention which is informed by rational choice theory (Felson & Clarke, 1998), reconstituting rural policing to build strong, safe communities instead of simply enforcing the law results in a new progressive conceptual framework that identifies community types and preferred strategies for moving toward desired ends (Nolan et al., 2004; Markovic, 2009). Viewing the level of community crime or disorder on a scale from low to high on a horizontal plane and with community atmosphere depicted on a vertical scale with dependence at the bottom, interdependence at the top, and frustration/conflict in between creates four different neighborhood types, as depicted in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**

*Situational Policing Framework for Determining Ethical Action*



Source: Figure created by authors

The logic and ethics of police behaviors relate to the starting place (community type) and the desired end (strong community). The strategy ‘secure then organize’ is appropriate in an anomic community, in a Durkheimian sense (Durkheim, 1951[1897]). It is logical because it provides police protection in high crime locations so that organizing can happen. It is ethical because law enforcement is not an end in itself. Rather, it is a tool to move a neighborhood toward stronger relations (responsive quadrant) where more resources can be coordinated, presumably with greater effectiveness. Doing the right thing in responsive communities, on the

other hand, involves a broader range of activities than is typical of policing today. It involves system-level planning and the coordination of resources for the purpose of the strong, safe ideal.

In strong neighborhoods, supporting community leadership and action is ethical because it supports the strong community goal. Law enforcement efforts disconnected from community work are unethical in such a community if they foster hostilities and harms, creating the conditions for crime and violence to thrive. Finally, in vulnerable communities where crime is low but the residents are still dependent on the police for safety, strategies to organize and assist in relationship building and problem solving outside of criminal activity might be deemed ethical where simply maintaining dependence on the police as a standard practice would be considered unethical.

## Methods

The WVCQLS was commissioned by the West Virginia Division of Justice and Community Services and the United States Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. Developed and conducted by the Research Center on Violence (RCV) at West Virginia University (WVU) in the United States, this telephone survey was launched in the northern hemisphere summer of 2016. It was this State's first attempt to assess rates of crime victimization outside of official police statistics. In the tradition of left realist scientific inquiry (MacLean, 1992), the WVCQLS was crafted in collaboration with community stakeholders (for example, West Virginia Foundation for Rape Information and Services), and includes a broad array of measures related to crime, fear of crime, and the overall quality of life in West Virginia communities. It was twice distributed to a random sample of West Virginians aged 18 and older via cellular and land line telephones, but only data generated by the first administration are reported here.

## Sample and Data Collection

The sampling frame includes individual residents of West Virginia aged 18 and older who have access to a telephone ( $n = 1,398,953$ ).<sup>3</sup> The random sample includes 6,310 cellular phone numbers and 3,554 landline numbers.<sup>4</sup> From June 2016 to May 2017, RCV researchers called all 9,864 phone numbers. Only about 13 percent of the calls resulted in someone answering the phone ( $n = 1,281$ ). Of those who answered, nearly 30 percent responded to the survey ( $n = 358$ ).

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<sup>3</sup> The National Center for Health Statistics (2014) estimates that 3.9 percent of West Virginians 18 and older have no phone, neither landline nor cellular. ([https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhis/earlyrelease/wireless\\_state\\_201602.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhis/earlyrelease/wireless_state_201602.pdf)).

<sup>4</sup> The Marketing Systems group provided the research team with the random sample of landline and cellular phone numbers (<http://www.m-s-g.com/Web/Index.aspx>)



Table 1 compares the demographic characteristics of WVQLS respondents to the 2016 Bureau of Census demographic estimates of West Virginia residents. The low response rate is, in this current era, common and is consistent with those of other large-scale surveys (Pickett et al., 2018). Actually, according to a 2017 President of the American Association of Public Opinion Research, “the survey and polling business is in crisis... response rates have been falling for 30 years... Even high-quality face-to-face surveys rarely reach a 70 percent response rate these days” (Tourangeau, 2017, p. 803). If truth be told, response rates for all types of surveys, including the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), have declined (Pickett et al., 2018), and response rates in typical telephone surveys have dropped below 10 percent (Keeter et al., 2017). It should also be noted that left realists have long recognized that telephone survey technology cannot capture the experiences of the homeless, incarcerated and other vulnerable groups (for example, those in psychiatric institutions) that do not own telephones (DeKeseredy, 1992).

Tables presented in this article sometimes include population estimates that are calculated by multiplying the sample percentage by the estimated population of West Virginia residents with phones. Intervals for these estimates were calculated according to the following equation:

$$1.96 \sqrt{\frac{N - n}{N} \frac{P * (1 - P)}{n - 1}}$$

In this equation, N is the population of residents in West Virginia aged 18 or older who have access to a phone ( $n = 1,398,953$ ), n is the sample size (the number of completed responses in each category), P is the percentage of affirmative responses.

**Table 1**

*Demographics of 2016 WVCQLS Compared to 2016 Census Demographics for West Virginia*

	<b>WVCQL (%)</b> <b>(n=358)</b>	<b>2016 Census (%)</b>
<b>Sex *</b>		
Male	42.29	49.50
Female	56.57	50.50
<b>Education</b>		
No High School Degree	6.59	14.70
HS Degree/Some College	65.90	65.70
Bachelor’s Degree or higher	27.51	19.60
<b>Race</b>		
White	93.86	96.60
Non-White	6.14	3.40
<b>Age</b>		
Average	50.70	48.50

## Independent Variables

### *Community Atmosphere*

For the purpose of this study, ‘home areas’ within communities are defined as a “5 to 10 minute walk from one’s home” (Kearns & Parkinson, 2001, p. 2103). These places involve face-to-face interaction and the potential for cooperation, both necessary components for neighborhoods as primary groups as pointed out by some early sociologists (Cooley, 1909). Other early social theorists classified groups according to degrees of interdependence (Cartwright & Zander, 1968; Lewin, 1948), core sentiments of their members (Homans, 1950), frequent patterns of interaction and the recognition of who belongs and who does not (Merton, 1957), shared social institutions (Breton, 1964), and common goals (Deutsch, 1949). Our conceptualization of the community group is informed by these early theorists.

The home areas within communities have collective properties like efficacy beliefs and undergo psychodynamic processes because of the interdependence of members (for example, what happens to one member is likely to affect other members). Residents generally know who belongs and who does not, and they participate in regular patterns of interaction, such as a wave or a nod, or where residents intentionally try to avoid each other. Most importantly, residents’ common goal is to live in a safe environment (Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999).

**Table 2**

### *Operationalizing Community Atmosphere with Factor Analysis*

survey items: Generally speaking, the people in my community...	Factor 1 <i>Interdependence</i>	Factor 2 <i>Frustration/ Conflict</i>	Factor 3 <i>Dependence</i>
...don’t get along with one another	-.543	<b>.199</b>	.021
...know how to work together to prevent crime	<b>.683</b>	-.122	.169
...are willing to help one another	<b>.807</b>	-.197	.003
...watch out for each other’s property	<b>.834</b>	-.030	.033
...know how to deal with minor community problems	<b>.647</b>	-.208	.039
...tell each other what is going on	<b>.743</b>	.026	.090
...do not work well together on community problems	-.672	.164	-.011
...trust each other	<b>.804</b>	-.134	.038
...rely heavily on each other	<b>.758</b>	.057	.295
...are frustrated with the police	-.156	<b>.757</b>	-.757
...call the police for most community problems	-.017	-.043	<b>.687</b>
...think the police don’t seem to care	-.157	<b>.812</b>	-.215

...think the police do very little to prevent crime	-.116	<b>.793</b>	-.191
...trust the police to be highly effective crime fighters	.152	-.558	<b>.551</b>
...assume the police know what is going on	.233	-.254	<b>.494</b>
...rely heavily on the police to deal with all kinds of community problems	-.072	-.170	<b>.821</b>
...think the local police are ineffective	-.100	<b>.790</b>	-.212
...have confidence that the police alone are capable of preventing crime	.200	-.258	<b>.665</b>

Note: KMO measure of sampling adequacy = .878; Cumulative variance explained with three factors – 58.3 percent

Milgram (1977) identified these smaller areas as having psychological boundaries associated with a comfortable familiarity rather than well-defined geographic lines. Similar psychological definitions of neighborhoods are found in Hipp and Boessen's (2013) work on 'egohoods'. Following these ideas and given our focus on the dynamic properties of the community, we define these community 'home areas' as the area closest to one's home where residents are likely to meet face-to-face and share mutual public safety problems and concerns. These community group dynamics produce the three components of community atmosphere, which are operationalized by way of an 18-item scale. Presented in Table 2, the items are reduced to three factors with eigenvalues over 1. Factor 1 represents the component of community atmosphere we are calling interdependence, Factor 2 represents frustration/ conflict, and Factor 3 represents dependence.

## Dependent Variables

### *Personal Crime Victimization in Past 12 Months*

Presented in Table 3 are the four items used to measure this variable and they were introduced with this preamble: "We realize that it may be difficult to discuss your experiences with crime. If we may, we would like to ask you a few questions about crimes that have happened to you." To prevent 'telescoping' (that is, bringing events that happened more than 12 months ago into the present 12-month time frame), we asked about each type of victimization in two ways. First, we asked if the particular type of victimization ever happened to the respondent. Then we asked if it occurred within the past 12 months.

**Table 3***Personal Victimization: 2016 West Virginians' Experience with Property Crime Past 12 Months*

	# Sample	% Sample	Estimate d Number	Estimated Rate per 1000*
<b>Property Crime</b>				
Break-in <sup>a</sup>	25	7.67	107,300	76.7
Objects Stolen Inside Home <sup>b</sup>	18	5.50	76,942	55.0
Objects Stolen Outside Home <sup>c</sup>	19	5.85	81,838	58.5
Car, Bicycle, Motorcycle Stolen <sup>d</sup>	6	1.84	25,740	18.4
<b>Theft or Burglary in past 12 months</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>13.6</b>	<b>190,258</b>	<b>136.0</b>

*Note.* See footnote 1 for method for estimating the population of West Virginians 18 or older who have a telephone as 1,398,953.

<sup>a</sup> Break-in is defined as an incident where someone illegally breaks in to your home, car, or garage whether something is stolen or not.

<sup>b</sup> Objects stolen inside the home includes thefts that occur during a break in or by someone with legal access to the home.

<sup>c</sup> Objects stolen outside the home include anything stolen on your property but outside the home.

<sup>d</sup> Car, bicycle or motor vehicle stolen includes the thefts of all forms of these conveyances.

***Crime in the Community in Past 12 Months***

The items used to operationalize this variable are included in Table 4. They were introduced as follows:

Now I am going to ask you about certain incidents that may have occurred in your community during the past 12 months. I will read you a list of events and you can tell me whether it occurred and whether anyone intervened. The responses will be the following: 1) The event did not occur or I am not aware that it occurred, 2) The event occurred but no one did anything about it, 3) The event occurred and someone called the police, and 4) The event occurred and someone from the community responded directly to it to help.

**Table 4***Community Crime and Incivilities in Past 12 Months*

survey Items	# in sample	% in sample
Someone tried to break into a house	85	28.8
Suspicious people were hanging around the neighborhood	118	40.0
People were having a loud argument in public	93	32.0
A group of underage kids were drinking alcohol	60	20.4
Someone was threatened by a spouse/lover/date in a public place	38	12.9
Someone was assaulted by a spouse/lover/date in a public place	30	10.2
<b>Experience Community Crime and Incivilities in Last 12 Months</b>	<b>177</b>	<b>60.0</b>

*Fear of Crime*

The items used to measure this variable (see Table 5) are modified versions of those used by Beatty et al (2005) and were introduced with this preamble: “First, I would like to ask you how safe you generally feel in your community. Could you tell us how worried you are about the following happening to you?”.

The responses categories are: (1) not worried at all; (2) not very worried; (3) fairly worried; (4) very worried; and (5) don’t know or not applicable. It is important to note that we recoded the variables so that 1 & 2 = 0 (or not worried) and 3 & 4 = 1 (worried). We then constructed a composite ‘fear’ variable which indicated 1 if the respondent was excessively worried about one or more of these categories. It should be noted in passing that the word ‘worried’ is commonly used in the extant literature as an indicator of fear (Williams et al., 2000).

**Table 5***Fear of Crime in West Virginia Communities*

Survey items	# fearful in sample	% fearful in sample
- Having your home broken into and something stolen	103	29.3
- Being mugged or robbed	43	12.3
- Being sexually assaulted by strangers	27	7.7
- Being physically attacked by strangers	42	12.0
- Being physically attacked because of you skin color, race/ethnic origin or religion	13	3.7

- Vandalism to your home or car	92	26.3
- Being physically attacked by someone you know	15	4.3
- Being sexually assaulted by someone you know	11	3.2
<b>Worried about Crime in the Community</b>	<b>142</b>	<b>40.8</b>

***Physical and Social Disorder and Drug Problems in Community***

The items featured in Table 6 were introduced with this statement: “As I read through the list of potential problems, please indicate either 1 = not a problem, 2= a small problem, 3= a big problem, and 4 = not sure”. The category “physical disorder” includes litter and vacant or abandoned properties. “Social Disorder” includes neighbors who make too much noise, homelessness, truancy, and disorderly groups loitering. The category “drug problems” includes

**Table 6**

*Physical, Social, and Drug Disorder in the Community in the Previous 12 Months*

descriptions of types of disorder	not a problem		a community problem	
	n	%	n	%
<b><i>Physical Disorder</i></b> (litter, vacant and abandoned property)	101	34.5	192	65.5
<b><i>Social Disorder</i></b> (homelessness, noisy neighbors, truancy, disorderly groups loitering)	90	32.7	185	67.3
<b><i>Drug Use/Abuse</i></b> (public use of alcohol or drugs; drug dealing; use/abuse of pills; methamphetamine, marijuana, cocaine, and heroin use/abuse.	67	25.2	199	74.8

the public use of alcohol or drugs, illegal drug dealing, methamphetamine use/abuse, the use/abuse of pills such as Oxy and Vicodin, cocaine use/abuse, and heroin use/abuse. For analysis purposes, we constructed composite variables for physical disorder (Cronbach’s alpha = .573), social disorder (Cronbach’s alpha = .657), and drug problems (Cronbach’s alpha = .918). These variables were recorded as 0 = not a problem, and 1 = small or big problem.

## Results

We examined the relationship between the community atmosphere and the above six dependent variables. These dependent variables were constructed from the tables discussed earlier and recoded as 0 = no or not present or 1 = yes or present. Community atmosphere, again, is the independent variable and operationalized as the pasted factor scores for interdependence, frustration/conflict, and dependence. These are continuous variables from -3 to +3 representing z scores where 0 is the mean of all scores, and +/- scores above and below 0 are a measure of the distribution from the mean. We used four control variables in the analysis. Race was scored as 0 = nonwhite and 1 = white. Gender was scored 0 = not male and 1 = male. Age is a continuous variable from 18 to 89. And, household income was recoded as 0 = less than \$USD40,000 per year and 1 = \$USD40,000 a year or greater.

Table 7 shows that levels of interdependence have a significant negative relationship with the odds of personal victimization in the past 12 months, crime and incivilities in the community in the past 12 months, and excessive fear of crime in the community. As interdependence increases by one standard deviation, say from 0 to 1, the risk of personal victimization decreases by -33%, the odds of community crime and incivilities decreases by nearly 40%, and the odds of being excessively fearful of crime in the community goes down by 43%. The opposite is true as frustration/conflict increases by a standard deviation. This change in the composition of the community atmosphere increases the odds that a personal victimization (+64%) and crime and incivilities in the community in the past 12 months (+111%), and the odds that excessive fear is reported (+78%).

In Table 8 we found the same pattern for the reporting of drug problems and physical and social disorder in the community. Increases in interdependence reduce the odds that drug problems (-39%), physical disorder (-31%), and social disorder (-52%) will be reported as community problems. As frustration/conflict rises by a standard deviation, the odds of identifying drug abuse as a community problem increases by +225%. It is also related to an increase in odds for physical disorder (+48%) and social disorder (171%). In all six analyses, we found that dependence on the police was not significant.

**Table 7**

*Bivariate Logistic Regression of Community Atmosphere and Personal Victimization, Community Crime and Incivilities, and Excessive Fear of Crime in the Community*

<i>Community Atmosphere</i>	personal victimization in past 12 months				community crime & incivilities in past 12 months				excessive fear of crime in the community			
	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>Wald</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>Wald</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>Wald</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>
<b>Interdependence</b>	-.394	.207	3.64	.674 *	-.523	.188	7.75	.593 **	-.551	.175	9.93	.577 **
<b>Frustration/Conflict</b>	.493	.203	5.91	1.64 *	.746	.192	15.15	2.11 **	.576	.166	12.07	1.78 **
<b>Dependence</b>	-.098	.214	.209	.91	.074	.177	.172	1.08	-.071	.168	.176	.932
<i>Control Variables</i>												
Race, 1= white, 0= not white	.290	.895	.105	1.34	1.10	.694	2.52	3.01	.557	.712	.612	1.75
Gender, 1= male, 0 = not male	-.420	.429	.220	.657	.114	.338	.114	1.12	.336	.320	1.10	1.40
Age (18-89)	-.027	.013	4.24	.973 *	-.009	.010	.853	.991	.009	.010	.816	1.01
Household Income, 1= 40,000 or more per year, 0 = less than 40,000 per year	.211	.449	.220	1.24	.644	.362	3.17	1.91	-.205	.337	.368	.815
CONSTANT	-.702	1.05	.449	.496	-.350	.839	.174	.705	-1.15	.850	1.841	.316

\*significant at p<.05; \*\* significant at p<.01

**Discussion**

Police reformers typically ask the question “What works in policing?”. Based on a newly emerging rural left realist discourse (see DeKeseredy, 2021; Donnermeyer & DeKeseredy, 2008, 2014), the results of this study provide an example of what is necessary for meaningful progressive police reform based on information gleaned from a large-scale local crime survey. What also makes this study distinctive is that, to the best of our knowledge, it is the first United States crime victimization survey to measure community psychodynamic processes from a left realist perspective. Such data are necessary because they provide important information on the contexts in which crimes occur.



**Table 8**

*Bivariate Logistic Regression of Community Atmosphere and Problems in the Community (Drug Use/Abuse, Physical and Social Disorder)*

<i>Community Atmosphere</i>	drug problems in the community				physical disorder in the community				social disorder in the community			
	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>Wald</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>Wald</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>Wald</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>
<b>Interdependence</b>	-.499	.238	4.40	.607 *	-.378	.183	4.29	.685 *	-.731	.227	10.41	.481**
<b>Frustration/ Conflict</b>	1.180	.277	18.07	3.25 **	.393	.173	5.176	1.48 *	.995	.226	19.31	2.71 **
<b>Dependence</b>	.272	.230	1.41	1.31	-.123	.173	.508	.884	.060	.198	.091	1.061
<i>Control Variables</i>												
Race, 1= white, 0= not white	1.78	.799	4.98	5.94 *	.866	.658	1.736	2.37	.373	.851	.193	1.453
Gender, 1=male, 0 = not male	-.171	.423	.164	.843	.044	.332	.018	1.05	-.037	.370	.010	.963
Age (18-89)	-.050	.014	5.49	.952 **	-.027	0.10	6.89	.973 **	-.024	.011	4.54	.976 *
Household Income, 1= 40,000 or more per year, 0 = less than 40,000 per year	-.176	.470	.140	.839	-.084	.360	.054	.919	-.713	.411	3.01	.490
CONSTANT	2.41	1.03	5.49	11.07	1.283	.827	2.408	3.61	2.077	1.04	4.01	7.982 *

Following in the footsteps of previous left realist local crimes surveys, all of which were urban (for example, Jones et al., 1986), the rural-centered WVCQLS paid considerable attention to measuring all moments in the crime process and eliminated the sexist and conservative biases of national government administered surveys like the NCVS. In so doing, the WVCQLS is a valuable source of information for rural West Virginia communities in their struggle for police accountability (Currie et al., 1990). Again, we found that interdependent communities reported the highest levels of safety, while conflict communities are the least safe.

In this turbulent era in the United States characterized by an international resurgence of right-wing populism (DeKeseredy & Currie, 2019), the police profession is confused with the law enforcement approach, making it difficult to reimagine the police in ways better suited to deal with a myriad of rural social problems (for example, methamphetamine use and distribution), many related by a common root such as poverty. Using the terms policing and law enforcement interchangeably inhibits us from imagining what is possible in terms of making rural communities safer and stronger. The notion of the police as law enforcement comes from a

variety of sources including state and local legislation, professional codes of ethics and accreditation, and governmental and quasi-governmental agencies, such as the Department of Justice (DOJ) and the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF).

Socially constructing the police as law enforcement gives rise to a deontological code of ethics where the rightness or wrongness of behavior is associated with strictly following the law, policy, or principle regardless of the situation or consequences of behavior (Pajman, 1999). This is why the morality of violence by the police rarely focusses on the extent of harms to individuals, families and communities, but instead determining if officers were ‘in the right’. To be ‘in the right’ means officers followed the law and policy regardless of the circumstances or community outcomes. This is important because the ‘police as law enforcement’ is a sacred notion (Dilulio, 1995; Wilson, 2009; Kennedy, 2012), off limits for scrutiny because it appears natural and beyond question. However, in this study we asked a different question, that is, “What are the conditions that make rural communities safe?”. We argue that creating these conditions are the *summum bonum*, or the greatest good of the police profession. Police behaviors that deter these conditions and make communities unsafe is unethical, even if officers are following policy. Behaviors that make communities safer and stronger while following the law and policy is ethical behavior (e.g., doing right).

Our study empirically shows that simply viewing rural policing as law enforcement prevents us from seeing a full range of activities that make communities safe. To untangle the police from the law enforcement mandate necessitates major legislative changes in many places. For example, in a large county in the eastern United States, the state code creating the rural/suburban county police declares that:

The County police shall have all of the police powers conferred by law upon law-enforcement officers in the State... All police appointed under this section... shall arrest all persons who... (list of crimes); and shall execute all other duties in accordance with the law.

A reconstitution of state code that shifts the police mandate from crime control and law enforcement to community building and problem solving should resemble something like this:

The mission of the police is to work in a true partnership with residents, businesses, and visitors to create safe, strong, and vibrant communities. Within local communities, the police will provide the tools and resources to strengthen bonds while reducing crime, violence, and related social problems preferably through nonviolent means.

Along with responding to calls for broader cultural and institutional changes (for example, Sweeney, 2021) and the creation of new legislative mandates and organizational missions, the situational policing framework seems applicable not only in rural places, but also in more densely populated urban and suburban contexts. It enables the police to engage in a sincere dialogue with community residents with the ultimate goal of sustaining strong, safe communities. This change in the purpose of policing gives relevance to a consequentialist ethics where doing right means making places safe by building bonds, healing harms, restoring relationships, and solving community problems together.

However, the question remains on whether rural local governments will use data like those generated by the WVQLS to implement the left realist variant of minimal policing advanced here. Perhaps, then, it is best to conclude this article with a short section of a piece Currie et al. (1990) wrote about using left realist local crime surveys to assist local governments and local police in Canada in resolving their crime and policing problems:

Political or academic, such questions are practical and can only be answered practically, Critical criminology must be distinguished from other criminological discourses by its practice. Critical discourse divorced from critical practice degenerates into mere literary criticism, the value of which is a *purely scholastic question*. If the advance represented by left realist discourse and practice is to take root in the [rural] context and assist in the formation of structures for democratic accountability, then it rests with critical criminologists to advance such a model within practical political fora at the local level (p. 50, emphasis in original).

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