



# Why does organizational justice matter? Uncertainty management among law enforcement officers<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** Law enforcement officers who believe their supervisors are organizationally fair are more satisfied with their jobs, more confident in their authority, and more likely to use procedural justice. The problem, however, is that we have little understanding concerning why officers care about being treated fairly. We address this issue by drawing on fairness heuristic and uncertainty management theories.

**Methods:** We used survey data from a sample of Border Patrol agents ( $N = 868$ ) to help advance our understanding of the association between organizational justice and job satisfaction. Regression analyses and Stata's *margins* command were used to visualize the interaction effects.

**Results:** We found that agents facing uncertainty focused more attention on fair supervisor treatment than their counterparts when considering how satisfied they were with their jobs. Both general workplace uncertainty and uncertainty stemming from recent negative publicity moderated the relationship between organizational justice and job satisfaction.

**Conclusions:** Organizational justice appears to be more salient to agents facing uncertainty because supervisor fairness provides cues that the agency has their best interests in mind and will support them in the future.

## 1. Introduction

Policing is a profession characterized by uncertainty. Police managers, in particular, face the difficult task of trying to get their line-level officers to have favorable evaluations of their work environment in the face of issues such as frequent organizational change and increasing public criticism. Research reveals that organizational justice—how fairly supervisors treat subordinates—produces numerous beneficial work-related outcomes among officers including greater job satisfaction, trust in their agency, less misconduct, and support for the use of procedural fairness (Myhill & Bradford, 2013; Tankebe, 2014b; Wolfe & Nix, 2017; Wolfe & Piquero, 2011). Accordingly, understanding *why* organizational justice matters to officers has important implications for contemporary police agencies.

Fairness heuristic theory offers insight into the causal mechanisms underlying the organizational justice effect (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Van den Bos, 2001). Fair supervisor treatment is important because it signals to employees that their identity with an organization is not at risk of rejection or exploitation. Uncertainty management theory builds on

this idea by suggesting that uncertainty about the future (e.g., upcoming organizational changes) threatens employees' identification with their organization. To counterbalance uncertainty, employees focus more attention on evaluations of organizational fairness (Van den Bos, 2001; Van den Bos & Miedema, 2000).

Uncertainty management theory has yet to be tested in a law enforcement organizational context. This is an important gap because uncertainty characterizes many aspects of police subculture (Paoline, 2004; Terrill, Paoline, & Manning, 2003). For example, law enforcement chief executives have high turnover rates which causes frequent organizational changes within agencies, and larger paradigm shifts are common in the profession (see, e.g., Reisig, 2010). Such organizational issues create general workplace uncertainty for some officers regarding their role and job security in the future. Consistent with uncertainty management theory, officers that feel uncertainty of this type will likely place more emphasis on how fairly they are treated by supervisors than their counterparts.

Policing is also a unique organizational context because it receives high levels of public criticism. Negative publicity surrounding policing

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may introduce psychological uncertainty concerning whether public antagonism has made the job more dangerous or less enjoyable (Nix & Wolfe, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2017). Further, the viral video and social media era of policing has increased the probability of officer actions being captured on video. This may increase officers' uncertainty about whether their behavior—whether legal or not—will result in criticism and possibly result in them losing their job. Uncertainty revolving around their occupation threatens officers' identification with their profession and may help explain why organizational justice matters to law enforcement officers. Fair treatment likely provides comfort to officers that their superiors will support them in the face of potential public criticism or increased safety threats.

Based on these theoretical possibilities, the present study analyzed survey data from a sample of Border Patrol agents to determine whether organizational justice was associated with job satisfaction to a greater degree among agents with higher levels of uncertainty. We explored this question using two measures of uncertainty—general workplace uncertainty and negative publicity as a form of uncertainty specific to law enforcement. The purpose of this study was three-fold: (1) increase our understanding of why organizational justice impacts law enforcement officers' work orientations, (2) advance the broader organizational justice and uncertainty management literatures by bringing data to bear from a police organizational context, and (3) provide practical implications for police managers hoping to improve employee outcomes.

## 2. Organizational justice

Justice scholars have long observed that employees are more likely to engage in beneficial work-related behaviors when they believe they have been treated fairly by their supervisors (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001). The social psychology of justice can be traced to Adams' (1965) work on equity theory. He argued that distributive justice is based on individuals' assessments of the equity of outcome allocation. Seminal work by scholars such as Thibaut and Walker (1975) and Leventhal (1980) suggest that individuals' evaluations of fairness are grounded also in procedural concerns (see also, Reisig, Bratton, & Gertz, 2007; Tyler, 1990; Wolfe, Nix, Kaminski, & Rojek, 2016). Procedural fairness is attained when people are provided a voice during procedures, the ability to influence outcomes, and neutral decision making (Lind & Tyler, 1988). Bies and Moag (1986) introduced a third justice concept, interactional justice, which represents the extent to which authority figures treat people with dignity and respect and clearly explain the reasons for their decisions. Accordingly, the literature typically focuses on three key components to organizational justice—procedural, distributive, and interactional fairness (Colquitt, 2001; Greenberg, 1990, 1993; Lind, 2001; Lind & Tyler, 1988; Matta, Scott, Colquitt, Koopman, & Passantino, 2016).

Fair supervisor treatment is positively associated with a wide range of beneficial employee outcomes such as greater productivity, a stronger commitment to organizational goals, and lower turnover intentions (Ambrose & Schminke, 2009; Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt et al., 2001; McFarlin & Sweeney, 1992). Organizational justice also appears to protect against counterproductive work behaviors (e.g., cyber-loafing while one should be working; Bechtoldt, Welk, Zapf, & Hartig, 2007; Fox, Spector, & Miles, 2001; Lim, 2002). Importantly, organizational justice is a key predictor of overall employee job satisfaction (Ambrose & Schminke, 2009; Sweeney & McFarlin, 1993). This is a desirable situation for managers because satisfied employees are more likely to engage in organizational citizenship behaviors (e.g., going beyond the minimum requirements of one's job; Barnes, Ghumman, & Scott, 2013; Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002; Koys, 2001; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, & Fetter, 1990).

Organizational justice research has recently appeared in criminal justice-related scholarship with most attention focusing on the police. Officers that feel they are treated fairly by supervisors are more likely to

identify with their agency, have less cynicism, and are more committed to organizational goals (Bradford & Quinton, 2014; Bradford, Quinton, Myhill, & Porter, 2014). Organizationally-fair treatment also appears to translate into better relationships with the public. Officers who believe their supervisors are fair have more favorable attitudes toward the public (Myhill & Bradford, 2013) and are more likely to support community-oriented policing and the use of procedurally-fair treatment of citizens (Myhill & Bradford, 2013; Tankebe, 2014b; Trinkner, Tyler, & Goff, 2016). Criminal justice research also shows that organizational fairness promotes officer rule compliance (Bradford et al., 2014; Tyler, Callahan, & Frost, 2007; Wolfe & Piquero, 2011) and overall job satisfaction (Donner, Maskaly, Fridell, & Jennings, 2015; Rosenbaum & McCarty, 2017). On the other hand, the experience of organizational injustice appears to cultivate anger and leads to production deviance and self-protective behaviors (Reynolds, Fitzgerald, & Hicks, 2017).

The organizational justice model has advanced our understanding of employee behaviors and attitudes in police organizations. Recent research has demonstrated that the experience of justice appears to cultivate greater organizational identification, internalization of organizational goals, supervisor trust, citizen trust, and self-legitimacy which, in turn, are associated with beneficial work-related outcomes among line-level officers (Bradford et al., 2014; Bradford & Quinton, 2014; Carr & Maxwell, 2017; Haas, Van Craen, Skogan, & Fleitas, 2015; Nix & Wolfe, 2016; Van Craen & Skogan, 2016; Wolfe & Nix, 2017). At the same time, however, the literature is less clear on exactly why organizational justice is important to police employees—*why do officers care about being treated fairly?* Fairness heuristic and uncertainty management theories offer insight concerning this question.

## 3. Fairness heuristic and uncertainty management

Fairness heuristic theory helps explain why justice matters in organizational contexts (Lind, 2001; Lind, Kulik, Ambrose, & de Vera Park, 1993; Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler & Lind, 1992). At the foundation of the theory lies the assumption that all social relationships, such as those in police organizations, involve repeated encounters with what Lind (2001, p. 61) terms the “fundamental social dilemma.” On one side of the dilemma, employees who contribute time, effort, and social capital to an organization stand to benefit from this investment in the form of goal attainment and work efficiency. Most importantly, working within a team in this manner allows an employee to secure a self-identity with the broader purpose of the organization—a sense of worth that is greater than what may be attained if working alone. Law enforcement officers willingly endure long hours, dangerous conditions, and low pay because many see it as contributing to a purpose greater than themselves—public safety and the pursuit of justice. Police subculture research shows that the camaraderie officers feel among each other creates a self- and group-identity as police that extends beyond the walls of their own agency (Bahn, 1984; Bradford, 2014; Muir, 1979; Reiner, 2010).

On the other side of the dilemma, however, rests the reality that sacrifice for the organization and identification with its purpose inherently places an employee at risk of rejection or loss of this self-identity. When we place our interests (e.g., job security or promotional potential) partially in the hands of others in an organization, we risk being exploited or rejected. In other words, “...if one links one's identity and sense of self to some larger social or organizational identity, there is always the risk that one will experience rejection by the group and an attendant loss of identity” (Lind, 2001, p. 61).

The fundamental social dilemma forces employees to choose between their own self-interests and the interest of the larger organization. According to the theory, people use a mental shortcut—a heuristic—to resolve the dilemma. Perceived fairness from superiors becomes a heuristic that allows employees to decide whether the authority figure can be trusted not to exploit or exclude them from their relationship with the organization (Van den Bos, Wilke, & Lind, 1998).

As Lind (2001, p. 67) argues, “The essence of the fairness heuristic process is that fair treatment leads to a shift from responding to social situations in terms of immediate self-interest, which might be termed the ‘individual mode,’ to responding to social situations as a member of the larger social entity, which might be termed the ‘group mode.’” In this way, fairness heuristic theory partially explains why organizational justice is related to organizational citizenship behaviors (Tyler & Blader, 2003). Fair treatment signals to employees that they are valued members of the organization, their self-identity with the organization is secure, and they can subordinate self-interest for the betterment of the group.

Van den Bos (2001) offered a theoretical advancement that clarifies further why organizational fairness matters to people. He argued that a key feature of the fairness heuristic is that it helps reduce people's uncertainties about future interactions with authority figures (Van den Bos, Vermunt, & Wilke, 1997). Uncertainty is defined as the importance employees place on the unpredictability of future events (Matta et al., 2016; Van den Bos & Lind, 2002). Experimental research has shown that when people are uncertain about whether they can trust an authority figure they tend to focus more attention on procedural fairness (Van den Bos et al., 1997; Van den Bos et al., 1998; Van den Bos, Wilke, Lind, & Vermunt, 1998). Within several experiments, Van den Bos and Miedema (2000) and Van den Bos (2001) showed that perceived fairness had larger effects on evaluations of authority figure treatment among participants who were forced to consider uncertain situations (e.g., think about their own death). This mechanism has also been observed in citizens' evaluations of local governance. Herian, Hamm, Tomkins, and Zillig (2012) revealed that the perceived fairness of a city budgeting process had a stronger impact on support for city government performance among participants who indicated more uncertainty about government budgets.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that uncertainty moderates the fairness effect. Fair treatment gives “people information as to the extent to which they can be certain about important issues” (Van den Bos, 2001, p. 932). Lind and Van den Bos (2002, p. 196) suggest that “...in the situation where uncertainty is coupled with clearly fair treatment, the person in question is able to maintain positive affect, feel favorable toward the organization, and engage in the sort of pro-organizational behavior...that have long been known to be linked to fair process and fair outcomes.” For example, organizational justice may have a stronger effect on job satisfaction among employees facing uncertainty. This is not to say that organizational justice does not increase job satisfaction among employees who are certain about their future in their organization—it surely does. Rather, organizational justice is more salient among uncertain employees because they are the ones searching for an indication that they are valued members of the organization.

General workplace uncertainty has been studied in a variety of contexts (Colquitt et al., 2001; Matta et al., 2016), but has yet to be examined among law enforcement officers. Police operate in a unique organizational environment where uncertainty is a central component of the police subculture (Herbert, 1998; Paoline, 2003). For starters, police are socialized to view all aspects of their world with suspicion because it is uncertain whether their physical safety will be put to test at any given moment (Crank, 2014; Manning, 1977). This is combined with frequent change (e.g., leadership turnover) that is an important source of uncertainty within police work (Loftus, 2009). Relatedly, organizational climate plays a significant role in officer uncertainty. Ambiguity concerning organizational tasks (Paoline, 2004) and competing cultural norms between street officers and their supervisors (Engel & Worden, 2003; Reuss-Ianni, 2011) often induces uncertainty. Therefore, officer uncertainty often revolves around whether management is leading the agency in a good direction, whether their agency will adequately prepare officers for the future (e.g., training opportunities), and whether they will fit within their agency as it changes overtime (Herbert, 1998; Manning, 1977; Paoline, 2003). Cultural

orientations characterized by such uncertainty have been shown to predict negative outcomes among officers (Ingram, Paoline, & Terrill, 2013; Paoline & Terrill, 2005; Terrill et al., 2003). Yet, like other organizational settings, officers facing uncertainty may still harbor positive affect toward their agency (e.g., job satisfaction) if they perceive fair treatment from their supervisors. Our first hypothesis deals with this issue.

**Hypothesis 1.** Organizational justice will have a stronger relationship with job satisfaction among officers with higher levels of general workplace uncertainty.

### 3.1. Negative publicity as a source of uncertainty

Negative publicity is another source of employee uncertainty that makes law enforcement agencies particularly unique. Recent research has focused attention on the so-called Ferguson Effect that suggests negative publicity directed at law enforcement has been so intense in recent years that some officers have begun withdrawing from their duties out of fear of becoming the next controversial viral video and getting fired (Mac Donald, 2016; Shjarback, Pyrooz, Wolfe, & Decker, 2017). Empirical research has revealed several important findings regarding this issue. Wolfe and Nix (2016b) demonstrated that law enforcement officers who indicated they have been adversely impacted by recent negative publicity surrounding their profession (e.g., reduced motivation) were less likely to support working with the community to solve problems. Importantly, however, they showed that this apparent de-policing behavior was completely confounded by officers' perceptions of organizational justice. Officers were more willing to engage in community partnerships if they felt fairly treated by supervisors regardless of their perceptions of negative publicity. Related work has shown that organizational justice was related to officers' sensitivity to the Ferguson Effect and confidence in their authority (Nix & Wolfe, 2016, 2017).

To date, however, limited attention has been devoted toward understanding the theoretical reasons why negative publicity impacts officers (see, Nix & Pickett, 2017). We argue that negative publicity aimed at policing can be conceptualized as a form of uncertainty for law enforcement officers. In a national police survey, the Pew Research Center (2017) found that 93% of officers have become more concerned about their safety because of negative publicity surrounding high-profile incidents between African Americans and the police. Seventy-six percent indicated that they have become more reluctant to use force and 72% have become less willing to stop and question suspicious people. Negative publicity, protests (sometimes violent), and constant cellphone surveillance directed at the police seems to have increased uncertainty among officers concerning not only their physical safety, but also their sense of job security. Namely, some officers appear uncertain about whether their next action on the street will cost them their life or job and whether their agency will have their back in the face of public criticism. Organizational justice may play an important role in this process, which brings us to our second hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2.** Organizational justice will have a stronger relationship with job satisfaction among officers that have experienced more uncertainty stemming from recent negative publicity.

## 4. The present study

We test these hypotheses using a sample of United States Border Patrol (USBP) agents. The traditional responsibility of the USBP was to patrol vast stretches of land between official ports of entry to apprehend individuals making illegal entry into the United States. However, agency priorities have greatly changed over the past 20 years. An important tenet to securing Congressional approval for the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 was the increased

securitization of the nation's borders (Andreas, 2009; Mabee, 2007), which resulted in the agency nearly doubling in size from 4287 agents to about 8000 agents from 1994 through 1998 (GAO, 1999). Subsequently, the creation of the Department of Homeland Security in 2003 became the impetus for growth of federal law enforcement agencies with counterterrorism responsibilities (Longmire, 2014). Once again, the agency doubled in size from 2007 through 2011 to over 21,000 Border Patrol Agents (Customs and Border Protection, 2016). This growth was a direct result of expanding the agency's mission beyond countering illegal immigration to include a heavier emphasis on preventing the movement of drugs and terrorist-related threats into the country. Accordingly, the USBP faces similar structural and priority changes as is commonly seen in local-level police agencies.

Within this context, the day-to-day functioning of the USBP is similar to a municipal police or county sheriff's department. The large majority of the 21,000 USBP agents are assigned to one of twenty field sectors along U.S. borders. Within each sector there are several stations that are the equivalent of patrol divisions within local law enforcement agencies. Most agents are assigned to work as the federal-level equivalent of a patrol officer out of these stations. A considerable portion of an agent's patrol shift is dedicated to responding to dispatched calls. These calls can be generated from citizen reports of illegal border entries, drug activity, violence, and other suspicious activity, or responding to the activation of ground and other sensors indicating a potential illegal border crossing. Additionally, agents frequently co-respond to calls for service with local law enforcement due to the low presence of personnel across large, often rural, geographic areas patrolled by nearby local agencies. The remaining portion of a patrol agent's time is generally dedicated to self-initiated activity regarding detecting illegal border crossings and associated activities, similar to local patrol officers' self-initiated behaviors (e.g., detection of criminal activity). Much like local police agencies, the USBP also has faced significant public criticism concerning its use of force on civilians (see, e.g., Hennessy-Fiske, 2016).

Furthermore, the agency currently has some unique circumstances that provide an ideal case for examining organizational justice and uncertainty. The USBP serves at the discretion of the President who sets funding and strategic priorities. The data for the current study were collected in the summer of 2016, which was a key point in the year's Presidential election campaign. The politicization of immigration law and border security was particularly prominent in this election cycle. Alternative stances between candidates on these issues likely introduced uncertainty among agents concerning the future direction of their agency. Accordingly, the USBP provides an appropriate research context for our questions; agents face similar sources of internal agency uncertainty (e.g., organizational and leadership change) and uncertainty from negative publicity, and they function in a similar operational context to local police. We aim to advance both the police and organizational behavior literatures by operationalizing uncertainty in two ways—one of which is consistent with prior organizational behavior research and another that is more specific to law enforcement. In doing so, our overarching goal is to provide a better understanding of why law enforcement officers value organizational justice.

## 5. Method

### 5.1. Sample and procedure

Survey data for this study come from larger project on workplace sentiment in the El Paso Sector of the USBP. The El Paso Sector contains 11 stations that provide border patrol-related law enforcement for El Paso and Hudspeth counties in Texas and the entire state of New Mexico. Given the geographic spread of agents across their duty stations and shift assignments, the project incorporated a two-prong survey delivery administration approach that included in-person and online survey efforts.

The in-person administration involved attending each muster (the equivalent of roll calls) for 10 of the stations in the El Paso Sector. One station that houses a handful of personnel that perform no patrol function was excluded. Dates were randomly selected over a nine-week period to attend each of the stations in the summer of 2016. On the selected date, we would arrive at a station and attend each of the musters that day to administer the survey. This included the early morning and late evening musters.<sup>1</sup> Across the 10 stations there were 29 potential musters, and we attended 28 to administer surveys.<sup>2</sup> This allowed us the opportunity to cover nearly all musters for all shifts across all stations in the sector. Each muster would begin with the watch commander providing necessary information to the agents as would normally be done prior to agents' shifts beginning. We were then given the opportunity to introduce ourselves and the purpose of the survey (i.e., provide an assessment of organizational satisfaction to members of the command staff). To help improve response rates, we described to the potential respondents how all raw data would only be accessible to the research team, all data would be reported in aggregate form, and no specific identifying information would be collected. No command staff members were present during the survey administration, agents completed the questionnaire with pen or pencil individually, and completion of the survey averaged 14 min. A total of 738 surveys were returned by the 783 agents present at the musters.<sup>3</sup>

Although we attended nearly every shift muster across the stations, some agents were not present due to scheduled days off, court time, injury, vacation, military leave, or some other form of administrative leave. To allow those not present at the musters an opportunity to complete the survey, we emailed an online version of the questionnaire to all line-level agents in El Paso Sector at the conclusion of the in-person data collection. We received 136 completed surveys using this strategy.<sup>4</sup> We used similar response pattern imputation to impute a small number of missing values, which left us with 868 respondents available for data analysis (six cases were missing nearly all responses and, therefore, were excluded). Our sample covers 48% of line-level agents in the sector.

### 5.2. Measures

#### 5.2.1. Employee satisfaction

Our dependent variable, *employee satisfaction*, was measured by asking agents their level of agreement (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) to the following questions: "Overall, I am satisfied with my job at USBP"; "I enjoy working with my colleagues at USBP"; "Overall, USBP is a good agency to work for." Principal-axis factor analysis (PAF) showed the items loaded on a single factor (eigenvalue = 2.05, factor loadings > 0.51). The items also had adequate internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.77$ ) and, therefore, were combined into a

<sup>1</sup> One aspect of patrol deployment in the USBP that differs from local law enforcement is the absence of routine heavy call days. Typically, in local agencies, Fridays and Saturdays are heavy call volume days and agencies will deploy more officers on those days. In the operational environment of the USBP, there are no routine heavy volume days, which results in relatively even deployment numbers across the week. Agents work on a bid system for days off, so attending one particular muster does not miss a whole squad or platoon. USBP deployment also requires a certain percentage of agent seniority variation on each shift. Thus, attending random days for survey administration provides a good cross section of agents, and avoids some of the biases that could occur in administering surveys only on heavy deployment days or avoiding those days in a local agency.

<sup>2</sup> Eight of the stations have three musters a day, one station has four musters a day, and one station held a single muster for the entire station. We could not attend one muster due to scheduling conflicts.

<sup>3</sup> This represents a 94% response rate for the in-person portion of data collection which is much higher than typical response rates found in survey research of law enforcement officers (Nix, Pickett, Baek, & Alpert, 2017)

<sup>4</sup> We conducted a sensitivity analysis to determine whether our findings differed for those that completed the survey in person or online. All substantive findings remained the same regardless of survey administration format. We thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this analysis.



**Table 1**  
Descriptive statistics for variables used in the multivariate analyses.

	Mean/%	S.D.	Min	Max
Dependent variable				
Satisfaction	10.95	2.48	3	15
Key independent variables				
Immediate supervisor organizational justice	31.44	7.58	9	45
Sector leadership organizational justice	15.24	4.82	6	30
General workplace uncertainty	14.55	3.24	8	20
Negative publicity uncertainty	17.97	4.22	5	25
Control variables				
Self-legitimacy	22.70	4.31	6	30
Age	2.39	0.70	1	4
Hispanic	70.91%	–	0	1
Male	95.09%	–	0	1
4-year degree or higher	31.98%	–	0	1
Agent	82.46%	–	0	1
Military	31.33%	–	0	1
Experience	1.63	0.65	1	3

Note: The descriptive statistics represent values derived from the original variables prior to mean centering.

summated index. Higher scores on the scale coincide with greater employee satisfaction. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for all variables.

### 5.2.2. Organizational justice

We measured organizational justice by asking agents to indicate their level of agreement to a series of questions pertaining to perceived fairness of immediate supervisors and sector-level leadership (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). It was important to capture perceptions of organizational justice regarding immediate supervisors separately from sector leadership evaluations for two reasons. First, we pilot tested our questionnaire and participating agents were confident their colleagues would have different fairness evaluations for immediate supervisors and sector command staff.<sup>5</sup> Second, and in support of this view, prior research has shown that police officers' evaluations of supervisor and command staff organizational justice are distinct constructs (Bradford & Quinton, 2014).

Table 2 presents the 15 items used to capture agents' perceptions of organizational justice and provides the factor loadings from a PAF with promax rotation. The PAF revealed that the items loaded onto two distinct factors, one pertaining to immediate supervisor organizational justice (eigenvalue = 6.79, factor loadings > 0.59, items 1–9) and the other relating to sector leadership organizational justice (eigenvalue = 2.12, factor loadings > 0.60, items 10–15). The respective items also demonstrated strong internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.91$  and  $\alpha = 0.86$ , respectively). Accordingly, we created two summated scales: *immediate supervisor organizational justice* and *sector leadership organizational justice*. Higher scores represent greater perceived organizational justice on both scales.

### 5.2.3. General workplace uncertainty

Consistent with our earlier discussion, we measured agents' uncertainty in two ways. First, to capture agents' general feelings of workplace uncertainty respondents were asked how certain they were that “The culture of the USBP is going in a positive direction,” “You will fit in with the USBP culture as it changes in the upcoming years,” “You will have opportunities for promotion in the future,” and “The USBP will provide you with adequate opportunities for professional development in the future.” These items were tailored to USBP based on how

<sup>5</sup> With assistance from El Paso Sector command staff, we pilot tested the survey with seven agents and asked for their feedback on suggested revisions to the questionnaire. These agents were excluded from participating in the study's primary data collection efforts because they were assigned to administrative duties at the El Paso Sector headquarters. We thank the agents for their participation and feedback.

uncertainty is conceptualized in the social psychology literature. Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *very uncertain* to 5 = *very certain*). Each item was reversed coded so that higher scores indicated greater *general workplace uncertainty*. The items loaded on a single factor (eigenvalue = 2.55, factor loadings > 0.53), demonstrated strong internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ), and were combined into a summated scale.

### 5.2.4. Negative publicity uncertainty

Second, we captured agents' uncertainty concerning recent negative publicity by asking them to indicate their level of agreement (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) to the following questions derived from prior research (Nix & Wolfe, 2016, 2017; Wolfe & Nix, 2016b, 2017): “Negative publicity surrounding law enforcement over the past year has made it difficult for you to be motivated at work”; “Over the past year, negative publicity surrounding law enforcement has caused you to be less proactive on the job than you were in the past”; “Negative publicity surrounding law enforcement over the past year has caused you to be more apprehensive about using force, even though it may be necessary”; “Over the past year, negative publicity has forced law enforcement agencies to make policy changes that ultimately threaten officer safety”; “Negative publicity surrounding law enforcement over the past year has made it more difficult to do your job.” The items loaded on a single factor (eigenvalue = 2.75, factor loadings > 0.40), demonstrated adequate internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.79$ ), and were combined into an additive scale—*negative publicity uncertainty*. Higher scores reflected greater uncertainty stemming from recent negative publicity.

### 5.2.5. Control variables

To help provide unbiased estimates of the effects of the predictor variables on employee satisfaction, it was necessary to account for several individual characteristics that have been shown in previous research to impact law enforcement officers' perceptions. Emerging research suggests that law enforcement officers' sense of self-legitimacy—their “recognition of, or confidence in, their own individual entitlement to power” (Tankebe, 2014a, p. 3)—is related to a host of desirable officer outcomes (Bradford & Quinton, 2014; Tankebe, 2010; Tankebe & Meško, 2015; Wolfe & Nix, 2016b, 2017). It was necessary to control for self-legitimacy because agents who are more confident in their authority may be more satisfied with their jobs, perceive greater organizational justice from supervisors, and have less uncertainty. We captured agents' sense of self-legitimacy using the following six survey items adopted from prior research and tailored to USBP: “I have confidence in the authority vested in me as a USBP agent”; “I am confident that I have enough authority to do my job well”; “I believe the USBP is capable of providing a secure border in the El Paso Sector”; “I have a good understanding of the USBP missions”; “I understand how my work directly contributes to the success of the USBP”; “I feel my job positively impacts the communities along the border in the El Paso Sector.” The items coalesced onto a single factor (eigenvalue = 2.78, factor loadings > 0.53), had adequate internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.75$ ), and were combined into an additive scale with higher scores indicating greater *self-legitimacy*.

We also controlled for several individual characteristics to ensure that any observed relationships were not the result of demographic differences. Respondent age was measured categorically (1 = 21–30, 2 = 31–40, 3 = 41–50, and 4 = 51 and older) and agent race/ethnicity was measured dichotomously (1 = *Hispanic*, 0 = *white*). Non-Hispanic whites served as the omitted reference category.<sup>6</sup> Dummy

<sup>6</sup> About 70% of respondents indicated Hispanic as the race or ethnicity they most identify with. Twenty-six percent of agents indicated white. Only 24 respondents indicated “other” as their racial or ethnic category. Accordingly, we combined these respondents with those that indicated they were white. This allowed us to determine whether Hispanic agents' perceptions differed from agents in other racial and ethnic

**Table 2**  
Principal-axis factor analysis of organizational justice scale items.

Survey items	Factor loadings	
	1	2
1. My immediate supervisors treat me with respect.	<b>0.84</b>	– 0.12
2. My immediate supervisors treat employees the same regardless of their gender.	<b>0.66</b>	0.04
3. My immediate supervisors treat employees the same regardless of their race or ethnicity.	<b>0.77</b>	– 0.10
4. My immediate supervisors consider employee viewpoints.	<b>0.76</b>	0.08
5. My immediate supervisors conduct fair investigations of civilian complaints.	<b>0.65</b>	0.09
6. My immediate supervisors support any lawful action or decision I make in the field.	<b>0.69</b>	0.04
7. My immediate supervisors are able to make independent decisions regarding normal operations.	<b>0.59</b>	0.13
8. I am confident I can approach my immediate supervisors with a professional issue.	<b>0.86</b>	– 0.04
9. I am confident I can approach my immediate supervisors with a personal issue.	<b>0.68</b>	0.04
10. Sector leadership applies USBP policies in a way that promotes consistency in decisions that impact the workplace.	– 0.02	<b>0.77</b>
11. Policy decisions by sector leadership provide the opportunity for employees to have a voice in decisions (e.g., allocation of sector resources, establishment of sector priorities and strategies).	– 0.09	<b>0.80</b>
12. Sector command staff clearly explains the reasons for their decisions (i.e., policy changes).	– 0.09	<b>0.80</b>
13. Discipline is issued fairly to agents.	0.09	<b>0.60</b>
14. The expectation for job performance and experience to obtain promotion is reasonable in this sector.	0.09	<b>0.62</b>
15. Sector leadership treats employees with respect and consideration.	0.15	<b>0.63</b>
Eigenvalue	6.79	2.12

Note: Factor loadings greater than |0.40| are bolded.

variables were used to account for agent gender (1 = male, 0 = female), education (1 = 4-year degree or higher, 0 = less than a 4-year degree), rank (1 = agent, 0 = mid-level manager), and military background (1 = yes, 0 = no). We also accounted for the number of years agents had worked for Border Patrol with a categorical variable—experience (1 = 1–9 years, 2 = 10–19 years, and 3 = 20 or more years).<sup>7</sup>

### 5.3. Analytic strategy

Our analysis proceeded in a series of steps. We first examined whether the organizational justice and uncertainty measures were associated with respondents' job satisfaction, net of statistical controls, using an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression equation. Our concern here was with whether our sample replicates previous business and criminal justice research.

Next, our attention turned to the following question: do agents that face more uncertainty focus more attention on how fairly they are treated by their supervisors? We tackled this question by creating four mean-centered interaction terms (i.e., each organizational justice measure multiplied by each uncertainty measure) to determine if the effect of organizational justice on job satisfaction was moderated by uncertainty (Aiken, West, & Reno, 1991; Long & Freese, 2006). Robust standard errors that adjusted for clustering at the Border Patrol station level were used in all OLS equations.<sup>8</sup> Stata's margins command was used to explore the interactions and provide a graphical depiction of the relationships.

## 6. Results

Table 3 presents the results from an OLS equation that regressed employee job satisfaction on the organizational justice scales, uncertainty measures, and statistical controls. The predictor variables

(footnote continued)

groups. There were zero black respondents.

<sup>7</sup> We also captured the number of years a respondent had worked in law enforcement, generally, on the survey. Supplemental analysis revealed that all findings reported below remained unchanged substantively when this variable was used in place of the experience variable.

<sup>8</sup> Several diagnostic tests revealed that collinearity levels were not a concern in these analyses. Bivariate correlations between the independent variables all fell below |0.70|, which is commonly used as a threshold to diagnose problematic collinearity. Two other thresholds for collinearity were not exceeded—all variance inflation factors were below 2.0 and all condition indices were below 30 (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).

**Table 3**

The role of organizational justice and uncertainty in predicting USBP employee satisfaction (N = 868).

Variables	Employee satisfaction				
	b	(SE)	95% CI	t	p
Immediate supervisor organizational justice	0.07	(0.01)	(0.04, 0.10)	5.05	< 0.01
Sector leadership organizational justice	0.09	(0.02)	(0.05, 0.12)	4.93	< 0.01
General workplace uncertainty	– 0.12	(0.02)	(– 0.17, – 0.07)	– 5.58	< 0.01
Negative publicity uncertainty	– 0.05	(0.02)	(– 0.10, – 0.01)	– 2.94	0.02
Self-legitimacy	0.16	(0.02)	(0.12, 0.20)	9.32	< 0.01
Age	0.28	(0.12)	(0.01, 0.54)	2.38	0.04
Hispanic	0.34	(0.14)	(0.03, 0.66)	2.49	0.04
Male	0.57	(0.50)	(– 0.55, 1.69)	1.14	0.28
4-year degree or higher	– 0.13	(0.16)	(– 0.49, 0.23)	– 0.80	0.45
Agent	0.03	(0.16)	(– 0.32, 0.38)	0.22	0.83
Military	– 0.01	(0.16)	(– 0.37, 0.36)	– 0.03	0.98
Experience	– 0.08	(0.13)	(– 0.37, 0.22)	– 0.59	0.57
Constant	5.89	(0.48)	(4.81, 6.98)	12.26	< 0.01
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.45				

Note: Ordinary least-squares regression model. Entries are unstandardized partial regression coefficients (b), robust SEs, 95% confidence intervals, t-statistics, and p-values.

accounted for 45% of the variation in agents' job satisfaction (Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = 0.45). We found that both perceptions of immediate supervisor organizational justice (b = 0.07, p < 0.01) and sector leadership organizational justice (b = 0.09, p < 0.01) were positively associated with employee satisfaction. Put differently, agents who believed their immediate supervisors or sector leadership were fair in their management practices tended to be more satisfied with their jobs at USBP. It is also important to point out that the self-legitimacy scale was significantly and positively associated with job satisfaction (b = 0.17, p < 0.01). This is an interesting finding in itself, and underscores the importance of controlling for law enforcement officers' levels of self-legitimacy when examining work-related outcomes like job satisfaction.

General workplace uncertainty was significantly and negatively related to agent job satisfaction (b = – 0.12, p < 0.01). Agents who reported being more uncertain about the direction USBP is heading or

**Table 4**  
Does uncertainty moderate the organizational justice effect? (N = 868).

General workplace uncertainty	Employee satisfaction				
	<i>b</i>	(SE)	95% CI	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Model 1: Immediate supervisor organizational justice X General workplace uncertainty Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.01	(0.004)	(− 0.001, 0.02)	1.92	0.09
Model 2: Sector leadership organizational justice X General workplace uncertainty Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.02	(0.003)	(0.01, 0.02)	5.58	< 0.01
Negative publicity uncertainty					
Model 3: Immediate supervisor organizational justice X Negative publicity uncertainty Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	< 0.001	(0.002)	(− 0.004, 0.005)	0.17	0.17
Model 4: Sector leadership organizational justice X Negative publicity uncertainty Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.01	(0.001)	(0.004, 0.01)	5.03	< 0.01
	0.46				

Note: Both models were estimated using ordinary least-squares regression. Entries are unstandardized partial regression coefficients (*b*), robust SEs, 95% confidence intervals, *t*-statistics, and *p*-values. All models are estimated with statistical controls, but the results are not presented in this table for clarity.

where they will fit within the agency in the future were significantly less satisfied with their jobs. This suggests that uncertainty surrounding one's future in the USBP has a deleterious relationship with agent satisfaction, which is a finding consistent with business management research (Desai, Sondak, & Diekmann, 2011; Diekmann, Barsness, & Sondak, 2004). Adding to the policing and management literatures, we also showed that negative publicity uncertainty was significantly associated with employee satisfaction ( $b = -0.05, p < 0.01$ ). This suggests that negative publicity may produce uncertainty surrounding agents' working environments and, ultimately, harm their overall job satisfaction.

With these results in hand, we now turn our attention to Table 4 which presents models that explored whether uncertainty impacts the degree to which organizational justice is related to employee satisfaction. Several important results emerged from these equations. For starters, the interaction term between immediate supervisor organizational justice and general workplace uncertainty was not statistically significant at the  $p = 0.05$  level (see Model 1;  $b = 0.01, p = 0.09$ ). Although the interaction effect appears to operate in the hypothesized direction, this finding provides only qualified support for Hypotheses 1 with respect to immediate supervisor treatment. Importantly, however, the interaction effect between sector leadership organizational justice and general workplace uncertainty was significantly associated with employee satisfaction (see Model 2;  $b = 0.02, p < 0.01$ ).

Fig. 1 presents this relationship graphically. Sector leadership organizational fairness had the strongest effect on employee satisfaction among those agents who were more uncertain about their future in the agency. In other words, USBP agents with more uncertainty focused

more attention on organizational fairness than their counterparts. This result supported Hypothesis 1.

Next, we examined whether negative publicity uncertainty interacted with organizational justice. Model 3 in Table 4 reveals that immediate supervisor organizational justice does not interact with uncertainty. Combined with the results from Model 1, we have evidence that agents with more uncertainty (regardless of our measure) did not focus more attention on how fairly they are treated by their immediate supervisors. Yet, Model 4 demonstrated that the interaction effect between sector leadership organizational justice and negative publicity uncertainty was statistically significant ( $b = 0.01, p < 0.01$ ). Fig. 2 demonstrates that sector leadership organizational justice had a stronger relationship with job satisfaction among agents with more uncertainty stemming from recent negative publicity. This provided support for Hypothesis 2 with respect to sector leadership.<sup>9</sup>

### 7. Discussion

The benefits of organizational justice have been demonstrated in several academic disciplines including criminal justice. Police officers are more likely to treat the public in a fair manner, commit themselves to agency goals, and engage in less counterproductive work behavior when they believe they have been treated fairly by their supervisors (Bradford & Quinton, 2014; Tankebe, 2014b; Wolfe & Piquero, 2011). However, less clarity exists concerning exactly why organizational justice matters to police employees. The overarching goal of this study was to advance our understanding of the mechanisms that tie organizational fairness to beneficial work-related outcomes. Our study



Fig. 1. Sector leadership organizational justice has a stronger relationship with employee satisfaction among agents with more general workplace uncertainty.

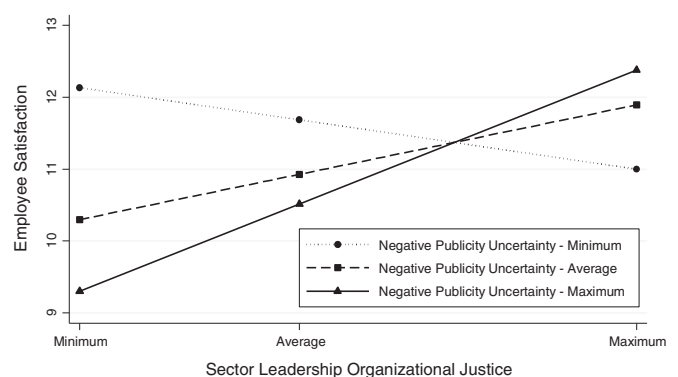


Fig. 2. Sector leadership organizational justice has a stronger relationship with employee satisfaction among agents with more uncertainty stemming from negative publicity.

extended the organizational justice model in criminal justice by leveraging insight from fairness heuristic and uncertainty management theories (Lind & Van den Bos, 2002; Matta et al., 2016; Van den Bos, 2001; Van den Bos & Lind, 2002). We now turn to a more detailed discussion of the results and their implications.

Our key finding was that the effect of organizational justice on job satisfaction was more pronounced among Border Patrol agents with higher levels of uncertainty. Employees facing uncertainty are especially attentive to supervisor fairness because they are searching for a way to reduce their anxiety (Lind & Van den Bos, 2002; Van den Bos, 2001). Being treated fairly gives employees confidence that they are not at risk of losing their identity within their organization. Law enforcement officers make many sacrifices, including risking physical injury, tolerating unpleasant people, and accepting only average pay, to name a few. Officers are willing to do these things because they see the pursuit of justice and protection of people as noble causes (Crank, 2014). Therefore, law enforcement officers' identity with their agency and the profession are central to their working personalities (Skolnick, 2011). At the same time, it is common for officers to face uncertainty about where they will fit in their agency as policing evolves or whether they will have adequate opportunities for career advancement (Crank, 2014; Muir, 1979). Such general workplace uncertainty appears to lead officers to consider how fairly they are treated by superiors, which highlights one of the primary reasons organizational justice is important. Fair treatment reaffirms to officers that their identity as police is secure and their personal sacrifices are worth the policing mission.

It is important to note, however, that this finding only applied to the effect of sector leadership organizational justice. Organizational fairness from immediate supervisors appears to impact work-related outcomes like job satisfaction to a similar degree regardless of how much uncertainty agents experience. This may occur because sector leadership (which is similar to command-level leadership in local police departments) is responsible for guiding high-level decisions like performance evaluation, promotion, discipline, and operational priorities, whereas immediate supervisors handle mostly day-to-day patrol issues. To be clear, organizational justice from immediate supervisors clearly matters to agents (see Table 3). The lack of an interaction effect simply suggests that fair treatment from immediate supervisors has limited ability to reduce feelings of uncertainty that are associated with issues largely beyond the control of such line-level managers (e.g., opportunities for advancement in the USBP or minimizing the harmful effects of public scrutiny and resultant internal investigations). Another possible explanation for the lack of an interaction effect is that agents in our sample had relatively favorable views of their immediate supervisors in terms of organizational justice (see, e.g., Table 1). Thus, there may simply not be enough variation in perceptions of immediate supervisors to observe strong interaction effects with the uncertainty measures.

We also advanced the idea that negative publicity can be viewed as a form of uncertainty among law enforcement officers. Recent media attention focused on critiquing police use of force places officers under a constant public microscope. While perhaps good in some respects for police reform (Shjarback et al., 2017), this undoubtedly presents uncertainty to officers. Negative publicity appears to be producing uncertainty regarding officer safety, job security, job autonomy, and the future of policing in general (Nix & Wolfe, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2017; Wolfe & Nix, 2016b). These are important types of uncertainty because they deal directly with officers' identity with their agency and the profession. Officers may wonder whether their agency will support them if they are involved in a use of force incident. Our results suggest that fair treatment from supervisors, particularly command staff, is a

cue that USBP agents will look for when they are uncertain about the current climate of law enforcement and community relations. This finding squares well with related work done with municipal police officers (Nix & Wolfe, 2016). Organizational fairness may send an important message to agents; despite public criticism and antagonism, their agency will likely be fair, treat them with respect, and distribute fair outcomes based on facts rather than political pressure. At the same time, however, our measure of negative publicity uncertainty captured agents' views concerning public scrutiny of law enforcement in general. It would be useful for future research to examine whether federal officers experience different types of public criticism and subsequent uncertainty compared to their local police counterparts.

This was the first study to examine these issues in a law enforcement agency context, but our findings also contribute to the broader organizational justice and uncertainty management literatures. Despite differences in organizational characteristics, employees within a law enforcement agency value fairness for the same reasons as employees in other settings. Whatever the source or profession, uncertain employees pay more attention to organizational justice issues than their counterparts as they attempt to minimize the anxiety (Van den Bos, 2001). Additionally, negative publicity surrounding their profession appears to be an important form of uncertainty for law enforcement officers. This suggests that research in other organizational contexts may benefit from exploring the types of uncertainty that are germane to specific occupations or organizations.

The practical implication of these findings is that organizational justice is vitally important for all agents, but particularly for those that are cynical (about their job, citizens, etc.), burnt out, or uncertain what the future will bring. Law enforcement managers that ensure fair procedures, respectful interactions, and equity in the distribution of outcomes (e.g., promotions, assignment changes) may help such officers deal with undesirable emotions stemming from general workplace and negative publicity uncertainty. Organizational fairness is one mechanism that may give police employees reason to stay productive, motivated, and satisfied in the face of internal or external uncertainty. Of course, it is necessary to remember that "Managing for fairness is a very powerful tool for some particularly important organizational issues, but it is no panacea for all the problems that might arise in organizational life" (Lind, 2001, p. 77).

Unfortunately, our results also suggest that the harmful effects of experiencing organizational *injustice* will be exacerbated among officers facing uncertainty. As Lind and Van den Bos (2002, p. 196) note, "... unfair treatment under conditions of uncertainty gives the uncertainty a particularly sinister complexion, and makes people even more uneasy." Officers facing uncertainty *and* unfair supervisor treatment are unlikely to continue group mode behaviors (Lind, 2001; Lind & Tyler, 1988) because they will have little faith that their working identity is secure or that their sacrifices for the organization are appreciated. Counterproductive work behaviors such as reduced effort and deviance are likely to ensue (Judge, Scott, & Ilies, 2006; Mayer, Thau, Workman, Van Dijke, & De Cremer, 2012; Thau, Bennett, Mitchell, & Marrs, 2009).

We believe this study advances the organizational justice, uncertainty management, and police organizational behavior literatures in several ways. At the same time, it had limitations that provide opportunities for future research. Our study is one of the few in criminal justice research to employ survey data from a federal police agency (see Tyler et al., 2007). Thus, we offer insight on organizational issues from a rare sample of officers. The downside to our sample is that it comes from one federal agency within one sector of the USBP. Additionally, the sample is comprised of mostly men. We hope that future researchers attempt to determine whether our results generalize to other law enforcement agencies and with more diverse samples. We reiterate that the USBP is a federal police force that is closely related to the structure, mission, and operations of local police agencies, including their reliance on patrol and frequent interactions with civilians. At the same time, however, USBP agents' face differences in operational environments,

<sup>9</sup> An anonymous reviewer suggested that we examine whether our interaction effects remained statistically significant after using a Bonferroni-corrected alpha level. We did so (with four comparisons;  $p = 0.0125$ ), and the interaction effects between sector leadership organizational justice and each of the uncertainty scales remained statistically significant.



organizational structure, and civilian interactions. This underscores the importance of examining the relationship between organizational justice and uncertainty with municipal police samples.

Another drawback to the current study is that it is cross-sectional. Future work could build upon our findings by conducting longitudinal studies of officers. Collecting repeated survey measures could provide a clearer picture regarding the causal processes that underlie the relationship between organizational justice, uncertainty, and work-related outcomes (Matta et al., 2016).

Relatedly, workplace uncertainty is problematic from a managerial standpoint. Employees who are uncertain have more job dissatisfaction (Desai et al., 2011; Diekmann et al., 2004), higher levels of stress (Bordia, Hobman, Jones, Gallois, & Callan, 2004; Mantler, Matejcek, Matheson, & Anisman, 2005; Nixon, Mazzola, Bauer, Krueger, & Spector, 2011; O'Driscoll & Beehr, 1994), and tend to engage in counterproductive work behaviors (Thau et al., 2009; Thau, Aquino, & Wittek, 2007). Organizational justice likely helps reduce employee uncertainty. Conversely, organizational injustice may be associated with job dissatisfaction because it creates more uncertainty among employees. We encourage future researchers to explore such indirect relationships with longitudinal data.

In the end, organizational justice matters because employees in precarious work settings, such as law enforcement, may be anxious about their future employment prospects and focus on issues of fairness to help mitigate such psychological uncertainty. Officers around the country have been exposed to procedural justice training over the past few years to help improve citizen interactions (Skogan, Van Craen, & Hennessy, 2015). We argue that it is also time to invest in organizational justice training for police managers (Wolfe & Nix, 2016a). Front-line supervisors and command staff may benefit from sharpening their fair management skills because the experience of justice can protect officers from the harmful effects of uncertainty surrounding the profession. This will help improve job satisfaction and lead to a host of organizational citizenship behaviors. In particular, fairness from inside an agency will increase the chances of officers using procedural justice when interacting with the public (Haas et al., 2015; Van Craen & Skogan, 2016). This likely will help repair lost police legitimacy and improve officer and citizen safety along the way.

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