

## Enhancing police legitimacy: Results from the Queensland community engagement trial (QCET)

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### Editor's Introduction

*Evidence based policing is based on grounding public safety work in sound scientific evidence, not just tradition. Evidence comes in many shapes and sizes. Some questions call for robust methodologies such as randomized control trials. Other questions call for more exploratory methods to help us understand the problem at hand before trialling a solution. Whatever the method, there is little doubt that the importance of evidence in policing and public safety will only get stronger. In this Research Focus we provide an insight into how evidence can help us make decisions about what we do and how we do it.*

*Drawing on an innovative experiment in Queensland, Professor Lorraine Mazerolle and her team discuss how tailoring the way police speak to people during routine encounters (in this case an RBT) can have significant implications for police-community relations. As well as providing useful data for us in understanding how to use procedural justice theory to advance road safety and community engagement. This research also showcases the value that strong academic-practitioner relations can have toward achieving organisational goals. As leaders wondering how to leverage such partnerships to help answer burning questions we can take heart from the success of QCET as a research process as much as from the valuable theoretical outcomes that it produced.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The legitimacy of social institutions, such as the police, is paramount for maintaining social order in communities. To be effective, police need the ongoing support and voluntary cooperation of the public. Past research clearly demonstrates that a person's belief in the legitimacy of the authority or institution issuing a command "leads people to feel that the authority or institution is entitled to be deferred to and obeyed"<sup>1</sup>.

Procedural justice is widely recognised as one of the most important antecedents for police legitimacy<sup>2</sup>. Research shows that when police treat citizens fairly and respectfully, people are more likely to view the police as legitimate, comply with police instructions, cooperate with requests, and are satisfied with police conduct<sup>3</sup>.

The quality of treatment and decision making during procedurally just encounters between police and citizens drives perceptions of police

legitimacy (i.e., a feeling of obligation to obey and trust in police), which ultimately leads to greater levels of compliance and cooperation<sup>4</sup>.

Conveying trustworthy motives, treating people with dignity and respect, being neutral and even-handed during an encounter and giving citizens' voice during decision-making processes comprise the 'quality' ingredients of procedurally just encounters<sup>5</sup>.

***"Procedural justice is widely recognised as one of the most important antecedents for police legitimacy"***

The Queensland Community Engagement Trial (QCET) is the world's first randomised field trial, conducted to investigate the impact of procedural justice policing on citizen perceptions of police legitimacy. The international research community already knows a lot about how the dynamics of police-citizen encounters explain variations in public perceptions of satisfaction, cooperation, compliance, trust in police and the capacity

1 Sunshine and Tyler 2003: 514

2 Hinds and Murphy 2007; Mazerolle et al. 2014; Murphy, Hinds and Fleming 2008; Reisig, Bratton and Gertz 2007; Thibaut and Walker 1975; Tyler 2004

3 Mastrofski, Snipes and Supina 1996

4 see Reisig et al. 2007; Tyler 2003

5 see Goodman-Delahunty 2010; Tyler 2008; Tyler and Huo 2002

of police to maintain order, regulate and solve community problems. Never before, however, had researchers used randomised field trial methods to directly test whether or not police can effectively and efficiently promote perceptions of police legitimacy through procedurally just dialogue.

Using the controlled environment of high-volume Random Breath Test (RBT) encounters, we test the impact of procedurally just dialogue under field experimental conditions. We begin the paper with a description of QCET, present the key research findings and conclude with some observations for embedding procedural justice policing into every day encounters that police have with the public.

## THE QUEENSLAND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TRIAL (QCET)

The QCET used field experimental methods to directly test whether or not police can promote police legitimacy through procedurally just dialogue.

Working with the Queensland Police Service (QPS) we sought to identify a high-volume, routine and controllable police–citizen encounter that we could adapt under experimental conditions. The QPS conducts over 4 million Random Breath Tests (RBTs) per year (1:1 ratio of RBTs to licensed drivers)<sup>6</sup>.

We therefore chose RBT stationary operations as the point of the police–citizen encounter for the field trial. RBT stationary operations involve police setting up roadblocks and then randomly pulling cars over into the roadblock zone to test drivers' alcohol levels.

The primary goal of our field experiment was to enhance the existing RBT procedure by introducing the four key procedural justice components into the police dialogue with drivers, with a view to promoting perceptions of legitimacy.

Typically, a routine RBT stop lasts less than 20 seconds. The results of the breath test are indicative and provided within seconds of the driver blowing into the handheld device. If the results are negative (less than .05 blood alcohol concentration in grams of alcohol per 100 millilitres of blood for Open Licence holders and .00 for Learner and Provisional drivers), drivers are free to proceed and leave the roadblock. However, if the results are

<sup>6</sup> Queensland Travelsafe Committee 1997, Watson and Freeman 2007

positive, drivers are escorted under police supervision to a Breath Analysis Station (usually set up at the RBT site) where they are required to undergo further evidential analysis using a more sophisticated Breathalyser device and may be charged (if positive) with the offence of drink-driving.

We operationalised the four key components of procedural justice – citizen participation, dignity and respect, neutrality, and trustworthy motives – into a script which was delivered as the experimental encounter by police to drivers during police-initiated RBT traffic roadblocks. The experimental RBT encounter was compared to the business-as-usual mode of RBT traffic operations. The QCET experimental encounter sought to increase perceptions of police legitimacy in a police-citizen encounter that could be conducted consistently (integrity), reliably without intensive staff supervision (cost), and without the need for extensive training (time).

*“...our key components of procedural justice – citizen participation, dignity and respect, neutrality, and trustworthy motives ”*

In addition the high-volume nature of RBTs presented an opportunity for police to convey, on a large scale, specific crime prevention messages (e.g., 'lock it or lose it') as well as community information (e.g., the numbers for local police stations and local activities) in an effort to make motorists more aware of local community resources.

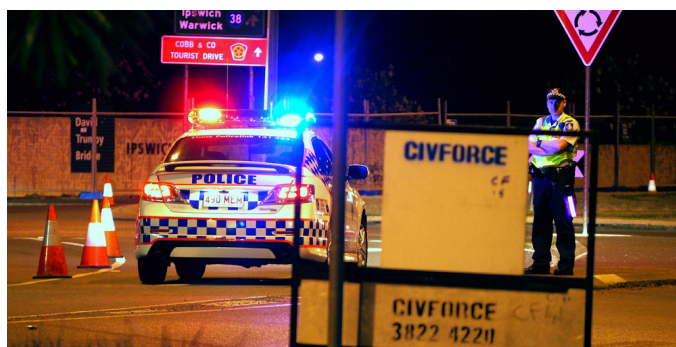
## METHODS

Using a randomised experimental trial design, the goal was to examine whether the existing RBT procedure in Queensland could be enhanced by introducing procedural justice components to promote legitimacy and community engagement as drivers participated in routine RBTs. The following sections describe where the trial occurred, how procedurally just policing was delivered using a scripted dialogue and how driver attitudes towards police were surveyed during the trial.

The trial was conducted between December, 2009 and July, 2010 in what at the time constituted the Metropolitan (Metro) South Region of Brisbane. The Metro South region consisted of three policing districts: Oxley, South Brisbane and Wynnum.

The diverse cultural make up of Metro South made the region ideal for conducting a trial of legitimacy in policing. Particularly so when one considers international and Australian research which suggests police find it difficult to gain cooperation from ethnic groups who display low levels of confidence and trust in the police<sup>7</sup>.

Mid-sized district level RBT operations were chosen as they were supervised by a senior officer on site, had a minimum number of five officers undertaking the roadside breath testing, and drivers were more likely to live in the region as opposed to the large scale operations aimed at drivers commuting through the region.



In addition, the mid-sized RBT district operations had the following research advantages: an easily accessible sample (e.g., plenty of motorists), randomly assigned operations were able to be distinct to prevent contamination (e.g., the entire RBT operation can be randomly assigned to either the control or experimental condition), and research staff could easily observe operations and work to ensure police were delivering the condition as assigned (treatment integrity). Nine mid-sized RBT operations were scheduled on average per district per month, mostly targeting weekends during evening and afternoon periods when traffic was heaviest and was most likely to sample local traffic.

Power analysis conducted by researchers concluded that a total of 60 RBT operations delivering a minimum of 300 surveys to drivers at each operation were required to observe meaningful differences between experimental and control encounters. The QCET RBT operations were numbered from 1 to 60 and randomly assigned to either the control (N = 30) or experimental RBT encounter (N = 30).

## CONTROL ENCOUNTER

The 'normal' RBT procedure requires that the officer deliver a mandated message prior to conducting the breath test. For example:

*My name is Constable Smith from Oxley Traffic Branch. You have been stopped for a random breath test. I now require you to provide a specimen of breath for a breath test. This is a breath-testing device. To comply with my requirement, I direct you to place your mouth over the mouthpiece of the device and blow directly and continuously through that mouthpiece until told to stop by me.*

For the purposes of the control encounter, the only variation to routine RBT procedure was the provision of a sealed envelope to the driver after the breath test was completed. Police handed out 400 surveys to drivers at each control RBT operation. The research team hoped to obtain a minimum of 30 surveys per operation and as it was anticipated that fewer drivers would respond without the longer encounter with police (e.g. experimental encounter), more surveys were distributed in the control operations.

## EXPERIMENTAL ENCOUNTER

In the experimental encounter, the police were asked to deliver an extended script and provided drivers with a police community information bulletin (developed by QPS personnel). The script that police in the experimental encounter delivered included the 4 elements of procedural justice, in addition to the existing RBT requirements. The card given to police included the following instructions:

- Neutrality – “We are pulling cars over today at random. That means you were not singled out for this test. We are **randomly** testing drivers for alcohol use so that we can reduce the number of alcohol related traffic crashes on our Queensland roads.”
- Trustworthy motives – “In Queensland alone there were **354 deaths** in 2009. One of the hardest parts of our job is to tell a person that their loved one has died or has been seriously injured in a traffic crash. Can you please help us to reduce these accidents by continually driving carefully and responsibly?”
- Citizen Participation – “Here is a police bulletin that has additional crime prevention tips. It also **tells you about what’s going on in this community** and gives you some important numbers if you want to get in contact with us for any event that is not life threatening. Please be aware that thieves are targeting money, satellite navigation systems, and

<sup>7</sup> Murphy and Cherney 2011

mobile phones that are left in people's cars. Please make sure you remove all valuables when you leave your car. **Do you have any questions about this?"**

- "Researchers at the University of Queensland are running an important survey about this RBT for you to fill in at home. I have attached they survey to the bulletin. We would really appreciate your feedback. Do you have any other questions for me about this RBT or anything else?
- I now require you to provide a specimen of breath for a breath test...and **mandated message** to the driver.
- Dignity and Respect – "I just want to finish off by thanking you for... [something positive to the driver... e.g. child being buckled up in car seat/seatbelt use etc...]. Thank you for taking part in this random breath test. **I appreciate your time and attention.**"  
If over the limit, process as usual.

Whilst officers were provided with the 'script' and dot points, they were also encouraged to adapt their own personal style to the delivery, allowing for a more fluid and mutually engaging police-citizen encounter.

Clearly if the driver exceeded the legal limit for blood alcohol content (or committed any other infringement) then normal enforcement actions were taken; however, in such cases, the survey with the attached bulletin was still provided. For each experimental RBT operation, police handed 300 surveys to drivers.

## DRIVER SURVEY

A comprehensive survey incorporating procedural justice and legitimacy constructs was developed for drivers drawing on seminal work by Murphy and Mearns (2008) and Tom Tyler (1997, 2003, 2004, 2008) and colleagues (Tyler and Fagan 2008; Tyler and Huo 2002; Tyler and Wakslak 2004).

Drivers were asked about the purpose of random breath testing and the quality of their interaction with the police during their encounter, their general perceptions of police in Queensland (e.g. 'the police treat people with dignity and respect'), neighbours' perception of the police (e.g. 'people in my neighbourhood think that police are fair'), levels of community engagement (e.g. 'I feel strong ties to others living in my local neighbourhood') and demographic questions. No directly identifiable information was requested and completion of the survey was voluntary.

A total of 20,985 surveys were distributed to drivers during the trial, with an overall response

rate of 13.09% (N = 2747). Overall, 50.42% of respondent were female, with there being equivalent numbers of males and females in the control and experimental groups, ( $\chi^2 = 1.55, p = .213$ ). The ages of participants ranged from 17 to 90 years (mean age = 47.25 years, standard deviation = 14.71 years), with no significant differences in mean age between experimental and control groups,  $t(2668) = .100, p = .920$ . There was also no significant variation in ancestries between control and experimental groups ( $\chi^2 = 2.93, p = .569$ ).

Establishing equivalency between the experimental and control RBT operations on gender, age and ancestries ensures that any differences in driver responses could be attributed to the treatment received (e.g. experimental or control) rather than pre-existing demographic differences between drivers taking part in either encounter.

## RESULTS

This section provides a summary of key questions and results that stemmed from QCET.

### Did the experimental condition change drivers' views on drink-driving and the way drivers' view the police?

*Mazerolle, Bennett, Antrobus and Egginis 2012.*

- Drivers who received the experimental RBT encounter were 1.24 times more likely to report that their views on drinking and driving had changed following their RBT experience than those in the control group who received the standard RBT encounter.
- Drivers who participated in the experimental RBT encounter were almost 1.5 times more likely to report that the way they think about police had changed following their RBT experience than those in the control group who received the standard RBT encounter.

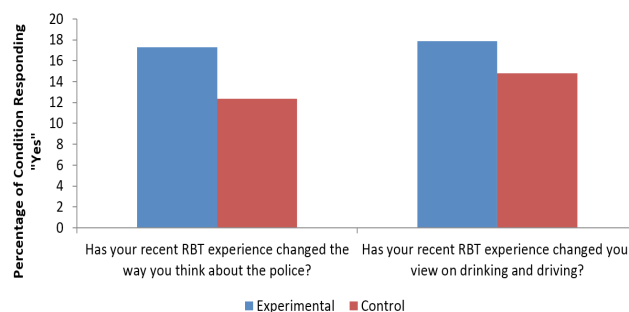


Figure 1. Percentage of experimental and control respondents indicating their views on the police and on drinking and driving has changed following their RBT encounter

## Did the experimental intervention have an impact on how drivers felt they were treated by police during the RBT encounter?

*Mazerolle, Bennett, Antrobus and Eggins 2012.*

- Drivers who received the experimental RBT encounter reported significantly stronger perceptions of police fairness, police respect, compliance with police, satisfaction with police, trust in police, and confidence in police (specifically in relation to the RBT) than drivers who received the standard RBT encounter.

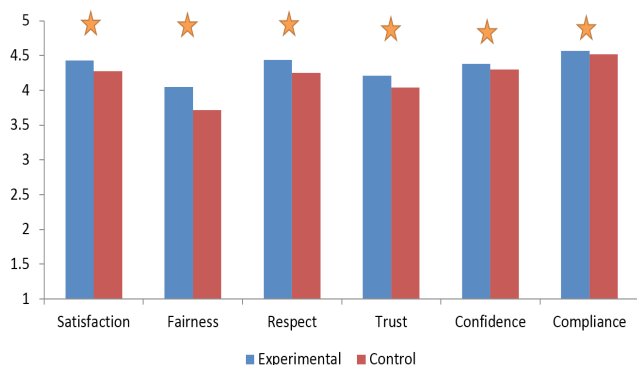


Figure 2 illustrates the drivers' survey results. Mean survey scores for the experimental RBT encounter are presented in blue and survey means for the control RBT encounter are presented in red. A star indicates a statistically significant result favouring the experimental RBT encounter.

Note: Scores on measures range from 1 to 5, whereby higher scores indicate stronger/higher levels of the relevant construct.

## Did the experimental intervention have an impact on how drivers felt they have been treated generally by police?

*Mazerolle, Antrobus, Bennett and Tyler 2013.*

The survey asked drivers to consider their perceptions of police during the specific RBT encounter (see results in previous section) and their generalised perceptions of police. Figure 3 illustrates the following findings from the driver survey:

- Drivers who received the experimental RBT encounter reported significantly stronger generalised perceptions of police fairness, police respect, higher satisfaction with police how 'do their job' in a general sense than drivers who received the standard RBT encounter.
- Drivers who received the experimental RBT encounter did not appear to have stronger motivation to comply with police in general, confidence in police, or report significantly higher general trust in police than drivers who received the standard RBT encounter.

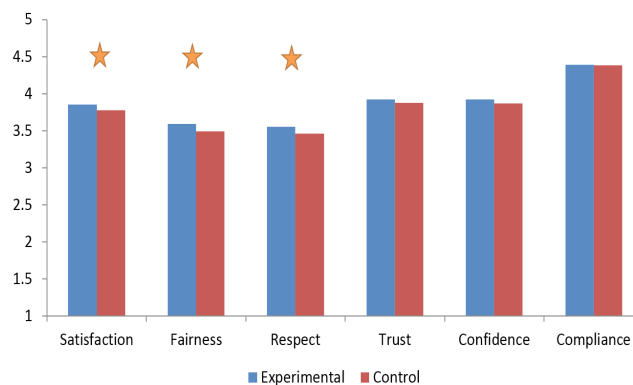


Figure 3. Citizen perceptions of police in general.

Note: Scores on measures range from 1 to 5, whereby higher scores indicate stronger/higher levels of the relevant construct. Stars indicate statistically significant difference between control and experimental.

## Did the experimental RBT encounter have an impact on drivers' perception of how good a job police are doing in their neighbourhood (e.g., solving crime etc.)?

*Murphy, Mazerolle and Bennett 2013.*

RBTs represent a high volume, routine and specific encounter between police and drivers. Researchers were interested in understanding whether the experimental RBT encounter would positively impact drivers' perceptions of how police perform in other policing activities such as solving crime.

- Drivers who received the experimental RBT encounter did not report significantly more positive perceptions of police performance than drivers who received the standard RBT encounter. It is possible that perceptions of police performance are specific to the task/activity/context? For example, it may be that drivers who experienced the experimental encounter with police thought police were doing a good job in relation to traffic, but did not translate these positive performance perceptions to other police activities.

## Does the length of the encounter contextualize the results?

*Mazerolle, Bates, Bennett, White, Ferris and Antrobus 2014.*

Given the extra procedures that police officers were introducing in the experimental condition, the experimental RBT encounter was significantly longer than the control condition (average 1 min 37.22 secs in the experimental encounter, compared to 25.34 secs in the control encounter).

Therefore, encounter length was also considered an important variable. However, encounter length was not available for all police-citizen interactions, as only average encounter length was taken for each RBT operation based on a sample of encounters.

- Results revealed that encounter length had an effect on general compliance and confidence in police, but not general trust in police.

### **If the QPS increases the encounter length period of RBTs, could this compromise the absolute number of RBTs possible in Queensland? And if QPS conducts fewer RBTs, how might this affect alcohol-related crash rates over time?**

*Ferris, Mazerolle, King, Bates, Bennett and Devaney 2013.*

Research demonstrates a strong relationship between the number of RBTs conducted annually and the number of alcohol-related crashes that occur where a driver's BAC reached or exceeded 0.05g/dL of alcohol in the blood. Ferris and colleagues (2013) show that as the number of RBTs conducted increases the number of drivers willing to risk being detected for drinking driving decreases, showing that the optimal ratio of RBTs to licensed drivers is 1:1. This finding suggests that the QCET dialogue used in the experimental condition is likely too long for rolling out across all RBT encounters statewide. A compromise position would be to maintain the 1:1 ratio of RBTs to licensed drivers, yet extend the encounter length from 20 seconds to 40 seconds, using that short time period to engage the driver in a procedurally just dialogue, along the lines of the QCET encounter.

## **QCET REPLICATIONS**

Research replications, which are standard in the medical sciences and growing in the social sciences, are conducted to confirm that the effects of an experimental intervention are consistent across different people and/or contexts. Replications of QCET have been conducted in several countries throughout the world including Turkey, Scotland, and the United States. This section describes the replications and a summary of their results.

In Turkey (see Sahin 2014), drivers who were stopped for speeding violations were randomly

assigned on the spot to either a business as usual/control encounter with police or to an experimental condition in which officers delivered the four components of the procedurally-just encounter before issuing a speeding ticket. The experimental encounter was very similar in content to QCET. Following the stop, drivers completed a short 2 minute survey at the scene. The survey results indicated that drivers who had participated in the experimental encounter had very positive perceptions of police and a greater sense of satisfaction than drivers dealt with in the standard way.

In the US, similar procedures to QCET were also used in the context of their sobriety checkpoints, however, no significant differences between experimental and control drivers' perceptions of police emerged, potentially due to the small numbers of surveys being returned.

In Scotland, a nationwide road safety campaign was utilised, whereby half of the traffic units in the country were trained in procedural justice and asked to conduct their traffic stops in a similar manner to those in the QCET intervention<sup>8</sup>. However, in Scotland, the intervention was quite varied as officers pulled drivers over for reasons from tyre checks (on slippery roads) to speed enforcement, so no script could be developed to cover such a broad range of interactions.

The experimental intervention also included a leaflet designed by the police which harshened some of the procedurally just message. For example, while in QCET the officers in the experimental condition asked drivers to help reduce accidents by continuing to drive responsibly, in the Scottish the leaflet highlighted that many people do the wrong thing on the roads, informing drivers of the numbers of drivers caught speeding or driving under the influence.

***"...you can mess with the dialogue and get a backfire effect."***

In the Scottish study, the results again showed quite positive driver perceptions of police, however, experimental drivers actually showed a significant decline in satisfaction and perceptions of procedural justice compared to control drivers. That is, the intervention actually appeared to have a backfire effect on drivers' perceptions of police

<sup>8</sup> see MacQueen and Bradford 2015

in this situation. Big take home message – you can mess with the dialogue and get a backfire effect.

## SUMMARY AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Despite over 20 years of prolific work in the area of police legitimacy, QCET represents the first experimental field trial testing how police legitimacy can be enhanced. Our hypotheses suggested that the citizens receiving the experimental treatment would perceive greater levels of procedural justice and thus have higher levels of perceived police legitimacy.

Results indicated that procedurally just policing improved (specifically and generally) levels of satisfaction with police, perceptions of police fairness and perceptions of police respect. This policing tactic, involving elements of procedural justice and community engagement also improved trust in police, confidence in police and compliance with police directives, specifically in relation to the RBT encounter.

***“...procedurally just policing improved levels of satisfaction with police, perceptions of police fairness and perceptions of police respect.”***

Our results also found that procedurally just policing did not improve general perceptions of confidence in police, compliance and trust but encounter length may be an influencing factor in relation to confidence and compliance, but not trust.

Results also indicated that drivers did not translate their positive perceptions of police performance during the RBT to other specific policing activities such as solving crime.

QCET is a foundational piece of research and the research results have obvious policy implications, particularly in relation to police RBT procedure, as well as providing important insight into the impact of procedurally fair policing on perceptions of police legitimacy.

Yet there are still many unanswered questions. In particular, how could procedurally just policing be generalised beyond RBT encounters? How might we work with police to translate principles of procedural justice into routine police-citizen interactions?

In addition, we need to conduct more analysis to understand what is it about “trust”, and under-

stand how our results vary across ethnicity, age, gender, police districts and the community at large.

***“...how could procedurally just policing be generalised beyond RBT encounters?”***

The collateral benefits of QCET run deeper than examining the outcomes of a procedurally just approach to police encounters during RBT operations. The partnership between police and academics, within the context of running randomised controlled trials, sets the foundation for building the clinical capacity of police practitioners to design, implement and assess police practice and thus build the type of evidence base over time to enhance operational practice.

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