

Research Article

Communication for Coproduction in Public Safety: Does the Messenger Matter?

Danyao Li*, Huafang Li†

Abstract: A disconnect exists between government calls for citizen coproduction and public response. Effective communication may bridge this gap. This study investigates whether the deliberate choice of messenger, as a key element of communication design, affects public willingness to coproduce. Focusing on public safety, we examine whether different messengers—Civilian Review Board (CRB) vs. Public Information Officer (PIO)—impact citizens' intention to cooperate with law enforcement when communicating public safety information. While CRBs that institutionalize civic participation are expected to be more effective, our experiment finds no messenger effects. However, certain citizen characteristics consistently predict views on police, public safety, and coproduction willingness. We discuss these findings and their implications for police communication strategies and future research.

Keywords: Messenger Effects, Government Communication, Police, Public Safety, Coproduction

Supplements: [Preregistrations](#)

Following the 2014 Ferguson incident, in which an unarmed Black teenager was fatally shot by a police officer, high-profile police-citizen confrontations have spurred widespread demands for reform as public trust in law enforcement plummeted (Nhan & Noakes, 2020; President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015). To rebuild community relations, police organizations increasingly rely on strategic communication to encourage coproduction in public safety—a popular model for public service provision (Haug, 2023; Voorberg et al., 2015). However, information asymmetry and credibility gaps hinder citizen coproduction, raising questions about how communication strategies can address these challenges (Li, 2020b; Li & Lu, 2024). We know limited about how police communication is received by the public and to what extent it motivates coproduction. This study examines whether and how a specific communication design—the choice of messenger—impacts the public willingness to coproduce with police.

We compare two institutional designs: the Public Information Officer (PIO) and the Civilian Review Board (CRB). The PIO, embedded within police agencies, traditionally serves as the primary communication link between the police and the public. In contrast, the CRB is an external entity composed of citizen representatives and has emerged in recent years in response to increasing demands for greater police oversight. While both are designed to provide public-facing information, CRB differs from PIO in key features, especially in formalizing civic participation. Drawing from messenger effects in communication research and other theoretical lenses such as policy feedback, we expect that communication delivered by a CRB may yield higher levels of public support and a greater willingness to cooperate with police.

We tested our expectation in a survey experiment of a national representative sample ($n=1,130$). Findings show no evidence of the expected messenger effects—regardless of the messenger disseminating public

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safety information, respondents' coproduction willingness is statistically indistinguishable. However, individual characteristics—specifically, age, gender, income, political view, information seeking tendency and public safety news consumption habits—consistently and significantly shape reported intentions to coproduce public safety and overall evaluations of law enforcement.

This study contributes to the research on informational public administration by focusing on critical issues of information credibility in government communication. It advances ongoing conversation on how government communication may impact citizens' cooperative behaviors. Our quantitative findings suggest that, while the messenger design that signals civic involvement might not yield the expected results, the significant variations among the public point to an opportunity for more targeted communication strategies that resonate with diverse characteristics of community groups. Our preliminary qualitative evidence further indicates that preexisting distrust and disengagement with police, along with a lack of contextual knowledge, may dilute messenger effects.

Communication for Coproduction: Does the Messenger Matter?

Governments increasingly rely on citizens to coproduce public services, especially when resources are limited (Bovaird, 2007; Brudney, 2020; Brudney & England, 1983; Ostrom, 1990; Parks et al., 1981). In public safety, voluntary coproduction plays a similarly critical role (e.g., Musso, Young, & Thom 2019). Yet, a disconnect often exists between government appeals for citizens' coproduction and actual public response. Bridging this gap required effective communication. Government can better motivate citizens to coproduce by reducing information asymmetry (Li, 2020a), especially in contexts of low trust (Li, 2020b, 2021) and during crises (Wang & Zhang, 2024; Wu et al., 2022). Research has shown several factors may shape the effectiveness of such communication, including information sources, types, credibility and technologies. For example, Li and McDougale (2017) find that when gaining information from their personal experience, citizens are more likely to contribute to nonprofits compared to when they rely on word-of-mouth, online channels and traditional news media. Li (2020a) in a systematic review shows that different types of information, including mission-related, financial, and performance information, influence citizens' coproduction decisions in distinct ways. Increasing information credibility (Li, 2020b) and providing information timely and accurately (Zhai & Han, 2024) have also been shown to encourage citizen coproduction. Clark et al. (2013) find that technologies such as smartphone access increase the use of 311 system in coproducing public services among disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Our primary question concerns whether the “messenger” who communicates information influences how the public receives it, develops attitudes about the organization, and makes coproduction decisions. First, communication research generally shows that the characteristics of the information source, such as competence and likability, affects perceived credibility and consequent attitudes and behaviors. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as “source effects,” “communicator effects” (e.g., Pornpitakpan 2004; Choo 1964; Chaiken 1980; Hovland and Weiss 1951) or “messenger effects” (e.g., Favero et al. 2021).

Second, a growing body of literature examining the messenger effects in public sector yields mixed findings. Van Ryzin and Lavena (2013) find no credibility differences for street cleanliness information across government, non-governmental, or unnamed sources, possibly because the service was highly observable. Using a policy area with greater information asymmetry, James and Van Ryzin (2017) show that government performance data receive higher credibility ratings when reported by independent sources. Hafner et al. (2019) find no messenger effects (i.e., neighbor; government official; industry expert; utility provider) in pro-environment messaging. Meier et al. (2022) find that for-profit nursing home information is less credible than that from government or nonprofit organizations.

More recently, in the context of health communications amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, Everett et al. (2020) find no difference in the public's willingness to comply with the stay-at-home order whether the message is from government leader or a private citizen. Abu-Akel et al. (2021), however, find that messages calling for social distancing are more effective when associated with a government official over a celebrity. Favero et al. (2021) find that regardless the levels of government sending the health communication, the public's intentions to engage in preventative health measures are not statistically different. Li and Lu (2024) find that

politician's messages regarding COVID-19 are not as significant as policy and factual information in motivating citizens to voluntarily reduce public transit usage during the pandemic.

Building on above works, we expect that the deliberate choice of messengers, as a key communication design, would shape public attitudes and behaviors, and argue further that certain institutional characteristics, especially the visible involvement of the public, could foster citizens' coproduction willingness. Several lines of research provide support for this expectation.

First, policy feedback theory holds that "policies make citizens" (Campbell, 2003). Institutional design can shape civic engagement through various mechanisms (Mettler & Soss, 2004; Soss, 1999, 2005), including incentives for participation (Campbell, 2003), civic skills enhancement (Landy, 1993; Marston, 1993), and cues that reinforce civic identity (Mettler, 2002). A messenger that signals citizens are integral to governance may prompt them to act on civic responsibilities (Kumlin, 2002; Mettler, 2002; Mettler & Soss, 2004; Soss, 1999) and thus increases the coproduction willingness. Similarly, procedural justice research shows that when citizens believe their voices are included in governance processes, they display a more positive orientation toward the institution and this is particularly evident in law enforcement (Mazerolle, Antrobus, et al., 2013; Mazerolle, Bennett, et al., 2013). Moreover, studies on voting and philanthropic behaviors show that highlighting the pivotal impact of one's involvement in governance can increase the likelihood of participation (Bursztyjn et al., 2017; Duncan, 2004; Gee et al., 2023; Gee & Schreck, 2018; Prendergast, 2023).

Taken together, we anticipate that in government communications, messengers that feature civic participation or are designed to formally involve the public are more likely to increase citizens' willingness to coproduce (Proposition 1).

Messengers in Police Communication to the Public

Public safety communication offers a fertile empirical setting for testing this proposition where the messenger effects remain underexplored. In response to heightened demands for transparency and accountability, law enforcement agencies have increasingly focused communication strategies to improve community trust and police legitimacy (Chermak & Weiss, 2005; Davis, 2010; Lee & McGovern, 2013; Mawby, 2002; Nhan & Noakes, 2020; President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015).

In this context, two types of institutions that can fulfil the messenger role in police communication. The first is the Public Information Officer (PIO), which is the most common practice among various communication methods. PIOs are structured within the police department and function as the official spokesperson. This position is the primary conduit for communicating accurate and timely information to the public (Vermeer et al., 2020). The second institution, Civilian Review Board (CRB)—an external oversight body with civilian members investigating police misconduct allegations—has emerged in response to increasing demands for police transparency and accountability in recent years (De Angelis et al., 2016; Walker & Archbold, 2018).¹ The first is the Public Information Officer (PIO), which is the most One of their core missions is to ensure that the citizenry is well-informed about law enforcement actions. While their scope of authority varies from advisory roles to holding the power to issue subpoenas or enact disciplinary measures (Ofer, 2016a), the institutional design positions CRB as a potential messenger in police communication.²

To specify our Proposition 1 into a hypothesis, whereas PIOs speak from inside the organization they represent, CRBs symbolize community voice and involvement. The institutionalization of civilian participation embodies the inclusive and participatory governance principles highlighted in policy feedback and procedural-justice theories and thus should make CRB-delivered messages more credible and persuasive to the public. We therefore expect that when delivering identical public safety information, a CRB frame will prompt more favorable reactions than a PIO-centric approach:

Hypothesis 1: Compared to a PIO, police communication that involves a CRB is positively associated with the public's 1) evaluations of the communication, police organizations, and public safety; and 2) willingness to cooperate with police.

Research Design

For empirical test, we designed a pre-registered survey experiment with a national representative sample of 1,504 participants recruited from the CloudResearch's Connect service,³ an established crowdsourcing platform (Hartman et al., 2023). After excluding participants who failed the attention check (i.e., participants were instructed to choose "Strongly Agree" in response to a question; 24 respondents failed the check) and manipulation check (i.e., participants were asked to correctly identify which messenger were shown in the email announcements they viewed; 350 respondents failed the check), the final sample size was 1,130.⁴

Participants were randomly assigned into one of the three groups that varied in the way public safety information of a hypothetical jurisdiction was communicated: by PIO of the city police department ($n=430$), the CRB ($n=366$); and jointly ($n=334$). The message focused on crime statistics, along with a call for cooperation with local police in reporting crimes. The crime statistics used real-world data sourced from Council on Criminal Justice,⁵ Participants were prompted to imagine themselves as residents of a hypothetical city receiving an email containing important public safety information. The message read as follows:

"Dear Community Members,

We want to keep you informed about recent developments regarding the safety of our area.

As the [Public Information Office/Civilian Review Board/Civilian Review Board, in Collaboration with Public Information Office] at the Middletown Police Department, we are committed to transparency and effective communication with the public. After careful examination of the latest crime data in the Middletown jurisdiction, we are sharing the following findings regarding our community's safety:

In the past year, we observed a 5.5% increase in robberies, an 11% increase in nonresidential burglaries, a 2% decline in residential burglaries, and an 8% increase in larcenies.

Your active participation in enhancing community safety is crucial. We encourage you to embrace the "See something, say something" principle and partner with the Middletown Police Department to maintain a secure environment for all.

Your engagement makes a significant difference. Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

[Public Information Office/Civilian Review Board/Civilian Review Board and Public Information Office]

Middletown Police Department"

The primary outcome of interest measures participants' willingness to coproduce with police in reporting potential crimes. To that end, we asked the participants if they would consider calling police in three hypothetical scenarios that varied in the degree to which they decided voluntary coproduction might be necessary: 1) hearing a disturbance from neighbors; 2) noticing a suspicious group in a nearby park; 3) witnessing a car accident in their neighborhood. Those who chose not to call were asked to briefly explain their hesitation and to indicate if they would consider alternatives, including calling other neighbors, family and/or friends, city government service such as 311, etc.

To assess attitudinal changes post-treatment, we asked participants to rate on a scale from 1 to 100 about 1) information credibility; 2) intention to stay informed; 3) approval of police performance; 4) sense of security living in the area; 5) feelings of being valued; 6) feelings of having an impact on public safety. Factor analyses show that measures 5) and 6) can be effectively explained by an underlying factor "self-efficacy," with an eigenvalue of 1.64, factor loading of 0.91 and uniqueness of 0.18. Measures 3) and 4) are highly correlated (eigenvalue=1.62; factor loading=0.9; uniqueness=0.19) and thus are combined into a single measure capturing the respondents' assessment of local public safety performance. Ratings on information credibility and future

subscription intention remain as distinct dimensions and thus we preserved these two variables. In the following analyses, we will use four standardized variables, “self-efficacy”, “approval of public safety performance”, “rating of information credibility”, and “future subscription willingness,” to reduce data dimensions.

We also gauged participants’ perceptions on the messenger across seven attributes on a scale from 1 to 100: neutrality, professionalism, competence, engagement, representation, trustworthiness, and respectfulness. Factor analyses show that professionalism and competence load into an “expertise” factor (eigenvalue=1.72; factor loading=0.92; uniqueness=0.14), while engagement, representation, trustworthiness, and respectfulness load onto a factor we call “warmth” (eigenvalue = 3.06; factor loadings over 0.81; uniqueness below 0.34). Neutrality stands out as a unique dimension. Therefore, in subsequent analyses, seven items are reduced to three standardized measures of “expertise”, “warmth”, and “neutrality.”

We collected data on our participants’ characteristics, including age, race/ethnicity, gender, education, income, political leanings, and residential environment. Additionally, we asked questions regarding their past-year direct contact with law enforcement and their public safety news (PSN) consumption regularity as a measure of their indirect exposure to policing related issues. Last, we also attempted to measure participants’ underlying information-seeking tendency that could impact engagement with the communication treatments in our study—participants were given the option post-intervention to view additional information about the hypothetical police department. 68.86% of the sample chose to view more and thus we identified them as active information seekers.

Findings

Primary Outcome: Coproduction Willingness

Before examining differences in coproduction willingness across messenger conditions, we performed a randomization check (Appendix Table A1) to verify the balance of covariates across groups. The only significant difference was in participants’ political views ($p=0.015$).⁶

To address this imbalance in a conservative approach, we used the entropy balancing method to weight groups and ensure comparability.⁷ This method is based on a maximum entropy reweighting scheme that calibrates unit weights so that the processed treatment and control groups meet a large set of prespecified balance conditions that incorporate known information about samples (Hainmueller, 2012; Hainmueller & Xu, 2013). This allows us to match our three groups based on the balancing conditions detailed in Appendix Table A1, prior to estimating the causal effects of messengers.⁸ The entropy balancing estimates are presented in Table 1. We find no significant difference in coproduction willingness across groups receiving public safety information from different messengers.

We also conducted a regression analysis to include the covariates on participants, and findings highlight several consistent patterns across three coproduction scenarios. Results of logistic regressions are displayed in Table 2 as odds ratios, but to facilitate interpretation, we computed the average marginal effects in following interpretations. First, regular consumption of public safety news (PSN) is significantly associated with an increased coproduction willingness. All else being equal, individuals who follow PSN regularly are predicted to be 2.9-9.6 percentage points more likely to participate in collaborative activities with law enforcement, compared to those who do not consume such news routinely. Second, income level plays a substantial role. Higher-income participants—those earning over \$100,000 annually—are shown to be 4-14.7 percentage points more likely to engage with police compared to those in the lower-income category of less than \$50,000. Last, demographics—particularly gender and age—also show significant impacts in certain circumstances. Female respondents are more likely to report neighbor disturbances and car accidents than males. Older respondents are more inclined to report suspicious activities and car accidents. Liberal respondents demonstrate a significant lower willingness, by about 18.3 percentage points, to coproduce with police in reporting suspicious activities compared to conservatives.

**Table 1. Entropy Balancing Analysis:
Difference across Groups in Coproduction Willingness**

		PIO (N=430)	CRB (N=366)	Joint (N=334)	Total (N=1,130)
Report a Disturbance					
	No	81 (18.84%)	81 (22.13%)	62 (18.56%)	224 (19.82%)
	Yes	349 (81.16%)	285 (77.87%)	272 (81.44%)	906 (80.18%)
			Difference		p value
		CRB vs PIO	-0.033		0.24
		Joint vs PIO	-0.010		0.76
		Joint vs CRB	0.017		0.58
Report Suspicious Activities					
	No	124 (28.84%)	114 (31.15%)	85 (25.45%)	323 (28.58%)
	Yes	306 (71.16%)	252 (68.85%)	249 (74.55%)	807 (71.42%)
			Difference		p value
		CRB vs PIO	-0.001		0.98
		Joint vs PIO	0.023		0.48
		Joint vs CRB	0.017		0.60
Report a Car Accident					
	No	27 (6.28%)	16 (4.37%)	16 (4.79%)	59 (5.22%)
	Yes	403 (93.72%)	350 (95.63%)	318 (95.21%)	1,071 (94.78%)
			Difference		p value
		CRB vs PIO	0.020		0.21
		Joint vs PIO	0.005		0.75
		Joint vs CRB	-0.016		0.33

Table 2. Regression Analysis: Respondents' Characteristics and Coproduction Willingness

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Report a Disturbance	Report Suspicious Activities	Report a Car Accident
Messenger:			
CRB	0.808 (0.147)	1.008 (0.166)	1.570 (0.533)
Joint	0.950 (0.182)	1.168 (0.202)	1.163 (0.391)
Individual Characteristics:			
Age	1.009 (0.00587)	1.019*** (0.00544)	1.026* (0.0112)
Female	1.422* (0.225)	1.144 (0.163)	2.033* (0.606)
Race and Ethnicity (Base: White):			
Black	0.958 (0.230)	1.048 (0.228)	1.913 (0.970)
Hispanic	0.947 (0.248)	0.909 (0.218)	0.755 (0.295)
Others	1.273 (0.438)	1.264 (0.382)	6.015 (6.242)
Political View (Base: Conservative):			
Moderate	0.955 (0.198)	0.707 (0.142)	1.380 (0.556)
Liberal	0.971 (0.182)	0.377*** (0.0666)	0.826 (0.274)
Residential Area (Base: Rural):			
Suburban	1.052 (0.229)	1.266 (0.250)	0.303* (0.166)
Urban	1.035 (0.254)	1.063 (0.235)	0.481 (0.286)
Income (Base: Less than \$50k):			
Between \$50k and \$100k	1.264 (0.221)	1.178 (0.187)	1.501 (0.472)
More than \$100k	2.179*** (0.491)	2.306*** (0.475)	2.471* (1.011)
Education (Base: < College):			
College	0.423** (0.126)	0.986 (0.228)	0.386 (0.241)
Master and above	0.505 (0.179)	0.925 (0.263)	0.381 (0.271)
Active Information Seeker	0.956 (0.160)	0.879 (0.135)	1.512 (0.433)
Previous LE Contact	1.057 (0.188)	1.026 (0.166)	0.993 (0.317)
PSN Regular Consumption	1.401* (0.219)	1.669*** (0.237)	1.884* (0.548)
Observations	1,126	1,126	1,126

Note: Coefficients displayed as odds ratio; Standard errors in parentheses; * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$

Secondary Outcomes: Attitudes and Perceptions

Regarding respondents' attitudes and perceptions, the entropy balancing analyses again find no significant differences across experimental groups (Appendix Tables A2.1 and A2.2). However, regression analyses consistently identified patterns linking information receivers' characteristics to various attitudinal outcomes. One evident pattern emerges in Table 3 is that moderate and liberal respondents exhibit notable disengagement, showing significantly lower ratings across all attitudinal measures. Specifically, they express more skepticism about the credibility of the disseminated information (Column 1), with credibility ratings lower by 0.14-0.17 standard deviation compared to their conservative counterparts.

Table 3. Information Receivers' Characteristics and Attitudinal Outcomes

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Credibility	Subscription In- tention	Eval of Public Safety	Efficacy
Messenger:				
CRB	-0.00670 (0.0698)	0.0597 (0.0665)	-0.0262 (0.0676)	0.0585 (0.0687)
Joint	-0.0380 (0.0713)	0.0120 (0.0680)	0.00944 (0.0691)	-0.0308 (0.0702)
Individual Character- istics:				
Age	0.0148*** (0.00222)	0.0180*** (0.00212)	0.0180*** (0.00215)	0.0141*** (0.00218)
Female	0.0585 (0.0596)	0.153** (0.0569)	0.136* (0.0578)	0.0860 (0.0587)
Race and Ethnicity (Base: White):				
Black	-0.0141 (0.0931)	0.0799 (0.0888)	0.192* (0.0902)	0.314*** (0.0916)
Hispanic	0.0281 (0.105)	0.0178 (0.100)	0.0240 (0.102)	0.0382 (0.103)
Others	-0.0201 (0.125)	0.00855 (0.120)	-0.167 (0.121)	0.0849 (0.123)
Political View (Base: Conservative):				
Moderate	-0.172* (0.0785)	-0.230** (0.0749)	-0.110 (0.0760)	-0.269*** (0.0773)
Liberal	-0.143* (0.0703)	-0.199** (0.0670)	-0.170* (0.0681)	-0.351*** (0.0692)
Residential Area (Base: Rural):				
Suburban	-0.00909 (0.0832)	-0.0531 (0.0793)	-0.104 (0.0806)	-0.0733 (0.0818)
Urban	-0.121 (0.0945)	-0.0762 (0.0901)	-0.109 (0.0915)	-0.0813 (0.0930)
Income (Base: Less than \$50k):				
Between \$50k and \$100k	0.139* (0.0691)	0.105 (0.0659)	0.120 (0.0669)	0.132 (0.0680)
More than \$100k	0.199* (0.0810)	0.249** (0.0772)	0.0864 (0.0784)	0.129 (0.0797)
Education (Base: < College):				
College	-0.0962 (0.100)	-0.0118 (0.0954)	-0.243* (0.0969)	-0.0855 (0.0985)
Master and above	-0.0743 (0.121)	0.0720 (0.116)	-0.210 (0.118)	0.00872 (0.119)
Active Information Seeker	0.00870 (0.0638)	0.278*** (0.0609)	0.325*** (0.0618)	0.157* (0.0628)
Previous LE Contact	-0.0546 (0.0678)	0.0700 (0.0646)	0.106 (0.0656)	0.0114 (0.0667)
PSN Regular Consumption	-0.000631 (0.0592)	0.285*** (0.0565)	0.0653 (0.0574)	0.202*** (0.0583)
Observations	1,126	1,126	1,126	1,126

Note: DVs are standardized; Standard errors in parentheses; *p<0.05 **p<0.01 ***p<0.001

They also report a diminished desire to stay informed in the future (Column 2). Moreover, liberals disapprove public safety performance more than conservatives (Column 3) and both moderates and liberals report a lower level of self-efficacy (Column 4), reflecting reduced feelings of impact and value in public safety matters

In addition to political leanings, gender, age and income levels are also consistent and significant predictors of attitudes. Older respondents show higher ratings on all attitudinal measures. Females demonstrate more willingness to stay informed and higher approval of police performance. Individuals with higher incomes express more trust in information credibility and greater willingness to engage in future communications. Counterintuitively, given the racial tension in American policing, Black respondents express higher approval of public safety performance and efficacy compared to their white counterparts.

Table 4. Information Receivers' Characteristics and Perceptions about Messenger

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Neutrality	Expertise	Warmth
Messenger:			
CRB	0.0925 (0.0719)	-0.0440 (0.0701)	0.0195 (0.0692)
Joint	0.0501 (0.0735)	0.00968 (0.0716)	0.0129 (0.0707)
Individual Characteristics:			
Age	0.00126 (0.00229)	0.0129*** (0.00223)	0.0142*** (0.00220)
Female	0.00211 (0.0614)	0.155** (0.0599)	0.125* (0.0591)
Race and Ethnicity (Base: White):			
Black	-0.0600 (0.0959)	0.131 (0.0935)	0.150 (0.0923)
Hispanic	-0.0318 (0.108)	0.125 (0.105)	0.0805 (0.104)
Others	0.207 (0.129)	0.123 (0.126)	0.145 (0.124)
Political View (Base: Conservative):			
Moderate	0.00634 (0.0809)	-0.109 (0.0788)	-0.212** (0.0778)
Liberal	0.0947 (0.0724)	-0.0916 (0.0706)	-0.213** (0.0697)
Residential Area (Base: Rural):			
Suburban	-0.0220 (0.0857)	-0.0791 (0.0835)	-0.146 (0.0825)
Urban	0.139 (0.0973)	-0.176 (0.0949)	-0.228* (0.0937)
Income (Base: Less than \$50k):			
Between \$50k and \$100k	0.116 (0.0712)	0.0404 (0.0694)	0.152* (0.0685)
More than \$100k	0.183* (0.0834)	0.152 (0.0813)	0.189* (0.0803)
Education (Base: Less than high school):			
College	-0.109 (0.103)	-0.244* (0.100)	-0.185 (0.0992)
Master and above	-0.150 (0.125)	-0.217 (0.122)	-0.188 (0.120)
Active Information Seeker	0.0265 (0.0657)	0.137* (0.0641)	0.112 (0.0633)
Previous LE Contact	0.0960 (0.0698)	-0.00731 (0.0681)	-0.0581 (0.0672)
PSN Regular Consumption	-0.0145 (0.0610)	0.00761 (0.0595)	0.0568 (0.0587)
Observations	1,126	1,126	1,126

Note: DVs are standardized; Standard errors in parentheses; *p<0.05 **p<0.01 ***p<0.001

Finally, respondents' self-revealed information-seeking tendency is associated with a significantly greater subscription intention to receive future communications, higher approval of police performance and a greater sense of efficacy, with effect sizes ranging between 0.16 to 0.33 standard deviation. Regular PSN consumption has similar impacts, except for its effect on police performance evaluation.

Table 4 presents how participants' characteristics shape their views of the organization acting as the messenger in communication. Consistent with prior findings, age, gender, political views, income levels, and information preferences significantly influence these perceptions. First, females hold more favorable views of the messengers' expertise and warmth than males. Older respondents share this perception. Higher-income individuals report higher ratings on the messengers' neutrality and perceived warmth. Second, all else being equal, moderate and liberal respondents consider the messengers to be less warm, compared to their conservative counterparts. Last, active information seekers demonstrate higher regards for the messengers' information-related quality—expertise—by 0.14 standard deviation more than non-seekers.

Discussion of Null Findings on Messenger Effects and Implications

The null results of messenger effects warrant a deeper discussion. Several factors in qualitative responses we collected offer preliminary explanations. We first used Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), a widely used topic modeling technique in natural language processing (NLP) (Blei et al., 2003; Grün & Hornik, 2011; Hvitfeldt & Silge, 2024), to uncover the underlying themes in open-ended survey responses. LDA uses a probabilistic model to assign words to topics and identifies clusters of words that frequently co-appear. Based on coherence scores,⁹ we generated six topics (Figure 1) and interpreted the meanings by linking key words back to the original responses.

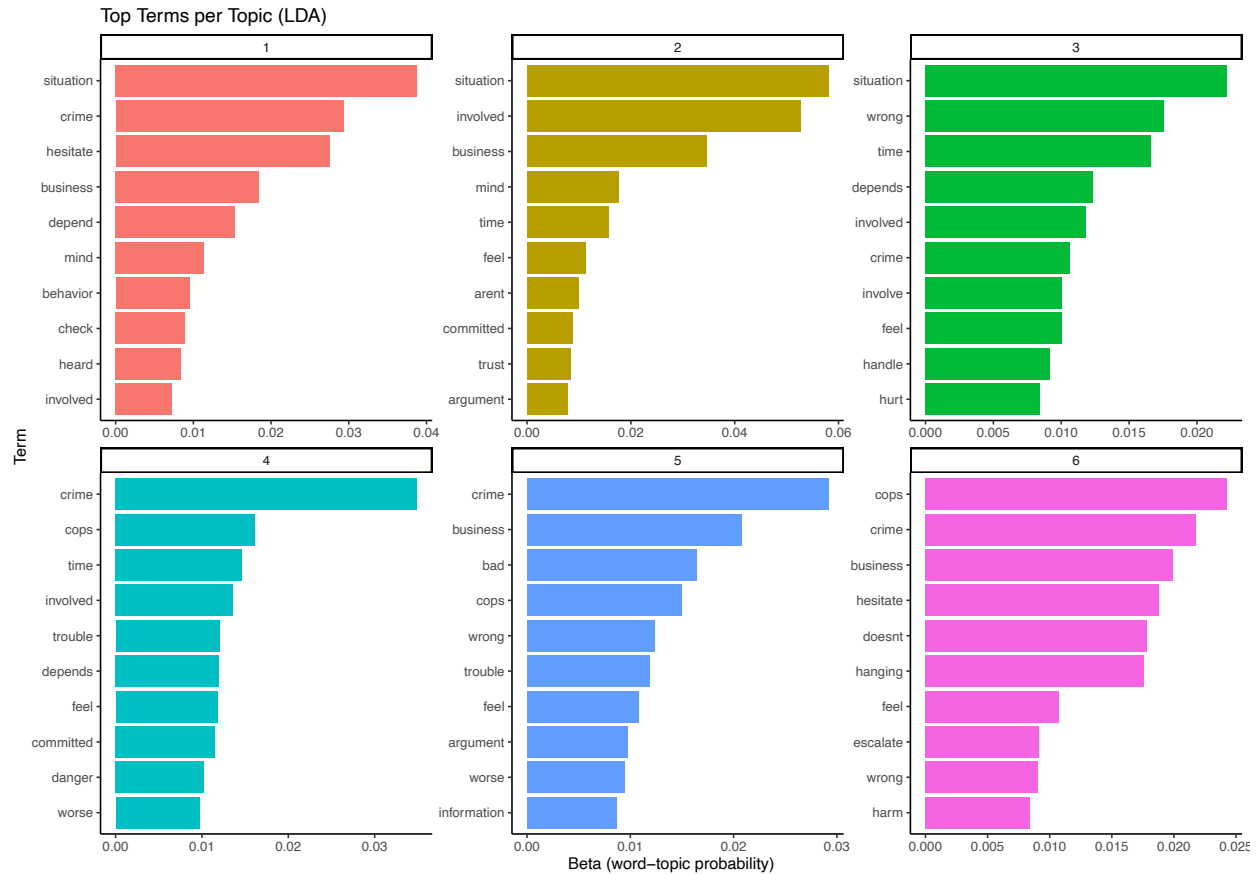


Figure 1: Results of LDA Topic Modeling

We identified three main factors that may help explain the null effects of messengers based on our interpretation of the topic modeling results. First, citizens might need more information to make their coproduction decisions. The null results may be attributed, in part, to the limitations inherent in current experimental design which asked participants to indicate their intention to coproduce *in the moment*. This design cannot capture any potential coproduction behavior if more information was provided. Therefore, the lack of contextual information may have weakened the any messenger effects. Topics 1-4 all indicate that respondents were reluctant to be “involved” because of lacking situational information. Terms such as “depends” and “situation” suggest that their willingness to coproduce was conditional on specific circumstances. Moreover, term “information” was explicitly mentioned in Topic 5. To name a few examples of the original responses, one respondent stated, “It depends on the urgency of the situation.” Another expressed, “I guess it depends on the situation.” Respondents also raised clarification questions such as “What does suspicious mean?” These patterns align with previous research indicating that coproduction intention is shaped by situational factors (Hattke and Kalucza 2019).

Second, some respondents expressed a desire to “mind their own business” and distance themselves from the police, as shown in terms “mind, business” across Topics 1, 2, 5, and 6. This predisposition may limit the effectiveness of messenger strategies as citizens are fundamentally uninterested in engagement, regardless of communication efforts. This mentality might also be linked to the lack of sufficient information. For example, one respondent stated, “I would mind my business if I cannot prove they are doing something illegal.” Another noted, “I don’t want to insert myself into other people’s business. Unless I heard something that was clearly abuse I wouldn’t intercede.”

Third, the low willingness to coproduce is rooted in the skepticism about *policing* itself. The pervasive distrust in law enforcement may overshadow the impact of any particular messenger, regardless of its desirable features. Among 606 rejections of coproduction with police across three scenarios, over 18% explicitly cited their negative perceptions of the police. Topic 2 term “trust” clearly show a trust issue. One respondent stated straightforwardly, “I would never trust any cops.” Term “worse” in Topics 4 and 5 and Term “escalate” in Topic 6 also indicate that respondents’ hesitance might come from a lack of confidence in police integrity and their de-escalation skills. One respondent stated that “Cops cannot be trusted. They are more likely to escalate a situation and harm or kill someone.” Another respondent stated, “I would be concerned about the police’s ability to mitigate the situation without escalating it; I question the value added of police intervention.” Another respondent also mentioned “police would irresponsibly escalate the situation.” In addition, respondents related to their personal experiences and shared, “I just don’t have a good experience with them and I don’t trust that they will make the situation better. Not to mention the countless number of stories I’ve seen in the news where whenever they come they just make things worse and potentially even kill somebody.” These strong statements demonstrate the intensity of distrust and negative sentiment toward the police (see more examples in Appendix).

While our respondents did not explicitly mention them in qualitative answers, we posit two additional possibilities of the null results. Our design assumes that the public would recognize and value the CRB’s key characteristics. However, first, the public may not sufficiently understand or appreciate the CRB. Previous work has shown that, despite its growing popularity, citizens often lack awareness of the CRB’s purpose, functions, and potentials to enhance police transparency and accountability (Fledderus et al., 2014). Our study did not include a direct measure of respondents’ awareness or knowledge of CRBs, which limits our ability to assess how such familiarity—or lack thereof—may have shaped their reactions. Second, the public may also perceive CRBs as too closely affiliated with the police, potentially undermining its credibility as an independent oversight entity (Clarke, 2009; Ofer, 2016b; Stephens et al., 2018). As our quantitative evidence showed earlier, there is no statistical difference in public views of CRBs in comparison to PIOs. Such perceptions may diminish CRBs’ effect.

Conclusions

The growing field of informational public administration attempts to address issues such as information asymmetry and incredibility in government communication. We contribute to this line of research by investigating whether the deliberate choice of messenger can enhance credibility, public trust, support, and coproduction.

We argue that CRB might outperform traditional PIO as a messenger in fostering citizen coproduction as it institutionalizes public participation. While theoretically grounded, our experimental evidence shows no statistical difference in respondents' coproduction willingness across different messengers. Interestingly, we discover coherent patterns regarding the impacts of individual characteristics on coproduction—political stance, public safety news consumption habits, information preferences, gender, age, and income levels consistently predict public's views about the police and their cooperative intentions. They suggest to policymakers and practitioners that communication strategies tailored to specific audience segments may improve outcomes.

Despite the null findings on our main hypothesis, we believe they offer implications for a larger research agenda to further explore government communication design. First, our design did not include a direct measure of respondents' prior knowledge of CRBs, limiting our evaluation of how unfamiliarity may have shaped their reactions. Still, the findings may authentically reflect real-world dynamics, as many members of the public are indeed unfamiliar with CRBs or uncertain about their role. The muted effect we observed may therefore mirror the real-world challenges CRBs face in engaging communities. To better assess the generalizability of our findings, future studies should incorporate measures of public awareness and test whether providing more detailed information—such as CRB board composition or track record—can improve perceptions of credibility and enhance public support. Second, coproduction engagement may depend on the valence of the information being presented (Porumbescu et al. 2021). Would other types of information, instead of crime statistics we used in current study, be more powerful to convince the public to coproduce? Is CRB more effective at communicating one type of information over another? Third, since our study did not include a no-information group, we cannot assess whether the information itself—regardless of the source—had any effect on coproduction intentions. This limits our ability to disentangle the effects of the message from the effects of the messenger, an area where future studies should explore more. In addition, information overload theory (Arnold et al., 2023) suggests that individuals who would have been receptive to our treatment interventions may have already obtained similar information through other sources that impact their behavioral intentions prior to our experiment. As such, it may diminish the extent to which CRB can be leveraged as a potential credible messenger.

Last but not the least, it is important to acknowledge that present findings may not directly translate beyond the realm of law enforcement. That said, the theoretical framework we advance—a deliberate choice of messenger as a component of program design—offers broader relevance. The idea that messengers that formalize civic participation may yield better communication outcomes can inform research and practice in other governance settings. In the broader backdrop of declining public trust in government institutions, future research may build on this study to explore how different communication strategies influence state–citizen interactions across policy domains and institutional contexts.

Notes

1. Many were created through referendums to enhance police transparency, accountability and community relations. As one example, the CRB of Pittsburgh was created on May 20, 1997, through a referendum amending the Home Rule Charter for the above-mentioned purposes. See cprbpg.org
2. However, in practices most boards have not explicitly included this as one of their primary functions.
3. The pre-registration can be found at <https://osf.io/tsja2>; For more information about CloudResearch, see <https://www.cloudresearch.com/cloudresearch-connect-faqs/>
4. In our design, at least 900 participants (300 in each subgroup) are required to detect the minimum detectable effect (Cohen's $f = 0.10$) at 0.05 significance level with a power of 0.80.
5. <https://counciloncj.org/pandemic-social-unrest-and-crime-in-u-s-cities-year-end-2022-update/>
6. However, the observed imbalance in political views may stem from multiple comparisons. Applying the Bonferroni correction method, we find no statistically significant differences remain across any variables between groups.
7. We performed ANOVA tests for three coproduction outcomes and found no significant differences across treatment conditions. Specifically, the p-value for “Report a disturbance,” “Report suspicious activities” and “Report a car accident” are 0.4, 0.2 and 0.4, respectively.

8. In contrast to other popular matching techniques in social science, such propensity score matching techniques, coarsened exact matching, entropy balancing has multiple advantages, including obtaining a high degree of covariate balance, retaining valuable information in the preprocessed data, more flexibility, versatility, and computationally attractive. See detailed technical discussion in Hainmueller (2012) and Hainmueller and Xu (2013).
9. After loading responses as textual data, we removed words that repeated our question and frequently over-loaded terms (e.g., don't, I'm, I'd) to more accurately identify latent topics within the text. To determine the optimal number of topics, we calculated coherence scores, measuring semantic similarity among the most relevant words within each topic. Higher coherence scores indicate better topic quality. Our results indicated that for topic counts (k) ranging from 2 to 8, it produced similar coherence scores of 0.5 (see Appendix Figure A1). We then conducted a closer qualitative examination for each number within this range to choose the lowest count ($k = 6$) that provided.

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