A Simple, Low-Cost, Scalable Approach for Enhancing Public Perceptions of Police Legitimacy

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Why care about police legitimacy?

- Perceptions of police legitimacy predict:
  - Voluntary compliance with the law
  - Cooperation with the police
  - Support for police practices
  - Trust in the broader criminal justice system

Enhancing police legitimacy

- Police services do many things to enhance public perceptions of police legitimacy, most of which are challenging and costly to implement

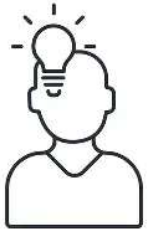
  - Training (procedural justice, anti-bias, cultural sensitivity)
  - Community policing (presence, relationships, engagement)
  - Accountability (transparency, oversight, body-worn cameras)
  - Communication and public engagement strategies
  - Etc.

A low cost, easy-to-implement solution?

The public doesn't understand policing

A lack of understanding can cause the public to question the legitimacy of the police

A low cost, easy-to-implement solution?



Reducing misconceptions should improve public understanding

Increased understanding should enhance perceptions of police legitimacy

How does the public learn about policing?

- Previous interactions with an officer
- College and university courses
- Film and TV (Canadian and American)
- News (Canadian and American)
- Social media, especially social media influencers
- Family/friend experiences

- Do these sources present an accurate, un-biased view of policing?

Public misunderstanding

- Public misunderstanding exists in relation to:
  - General policing issues
  - Specific policing issues, such as use of force
  - And very specific issues, such as the use of tactical teams
- An effective approach to enhance perceptions of police legitimacy likely needs to target a broad range of misconceptions

But lets first focus on general issues…

- Why the heck…
  - …are those cops parked at the construction site forever
  - …are those cops sitting in that parking lot at night doing nothing
  - …are those cops typing on their computer while driving
  - …are those cops killing him instead of just wounding him
  - …are those cops allowed to do a u-turn when it says no u-turn
- I told you cops were lazy, reckless, dangerous, law violators…

Our study

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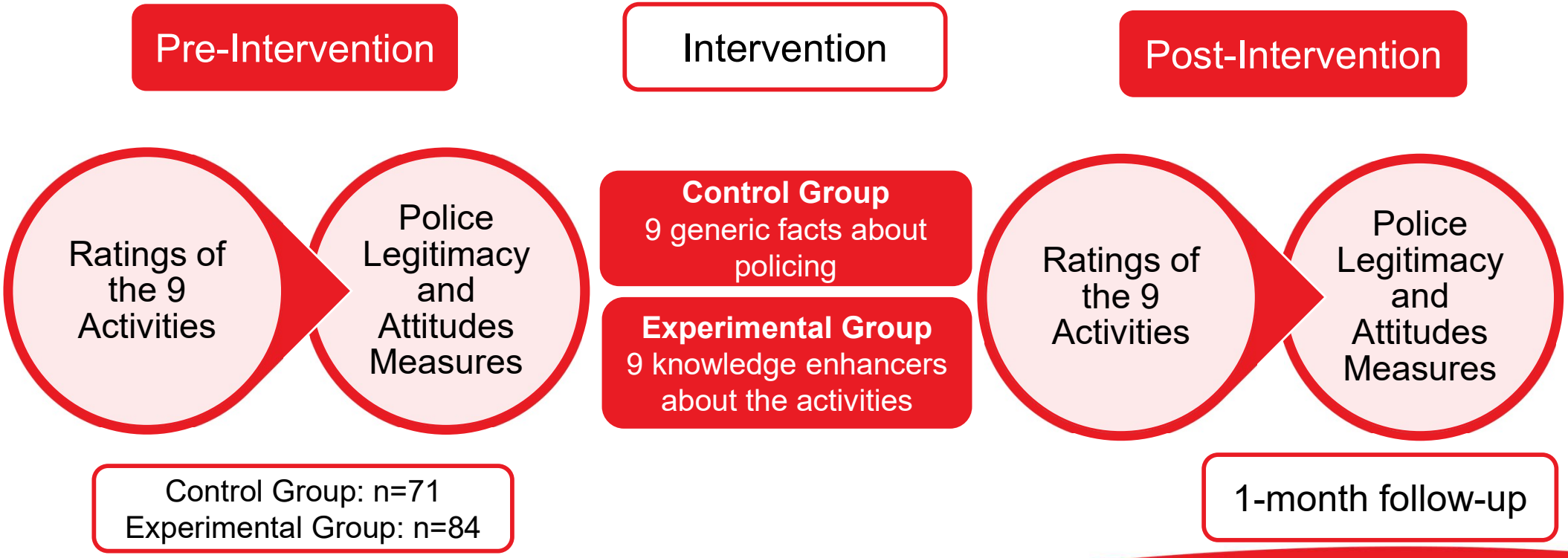
Pilot study

- Pilot study to identify police activities the public think are the least necessary, acceptable, and comprehensible (~appropriate)

Police car is speeding without lights and sirens activated	Police car is parked in a non-designated area
Two police cars are parked alongside road crews for 2 hours	Police officer is typing on computer while driving
Police shoot man in the chest rather than in the arm to wound him	Police officer is on their phone while driving
Police shoot knife wielding assailant who is 20 feet away	Police car is idling outside of a shop for 20 minutes with no officer in the car
Police shoot man holding replica handgun	

Study design



Control vs. experimental

- Control example (9 generic facts):
  - Fact #1: Modern police cars are typically based on civilian vehicles but are reinforced with upgrades such as stronger suspensions, improved brakes, and specialized electronics for law enforcement use. Police cars also feature upgraded alternators and batteries to support extra equipment like lights, radios, and computers.

Control vs. experimental

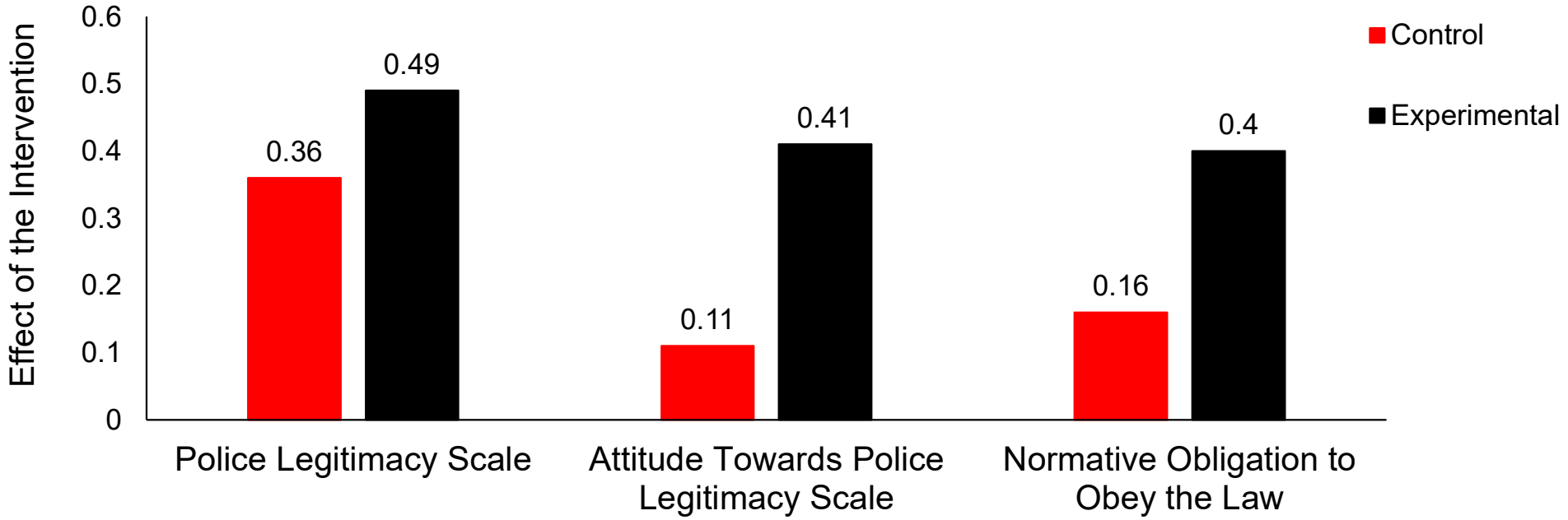
- Experimental example (9 knowledge enhancers):
  - Action #1: A police officer shot a young man, but it turns out the gun the man pointed at the officer was a toy replica handgun.
  - Explanation: Police officers are legally justified in using lethal force if they perceive that their life is in danger. While it may be clear after the fact that a gun being pointed at an officer was a toy replica, that might not be clear to the officer who had to make a split-second decision. Research has shown that it is very difficult to distinguish real from replica handguns given how accurate many replica handguns are.

Perceived appropriateness

Item	Control (/10)		Experimental (/10)	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Speeding without lights	4.50	4.38	3.86	8.28**
Parked cruiser idling	4.15	3.98	3.74	8.21**
Driving on computer	3.50	3.67	3.76	7.79**
Driving on phone	4.37	4.27	4.09	8.09**
Shoot person with knife	4.23	4.01	4.48	7.68**
Parked in non-designated area	5.00	4.99	4.67	7.80**
Shoot person with toy gun	5.22	5.10	5.49	7.84**
Parked at construction site	5.70	5.31	5.51	8.42**
Shoot in chest rather than arm	4.85	4.70	5.79	8.06**

** p <.001

Perceptions of police legitimacy
(Pre-intervention vs. post-intervention)



Higher values = larger improvement in perceptions of legitimacy

Experimental intervention led to bigger gains in perceived legitimacy than the control

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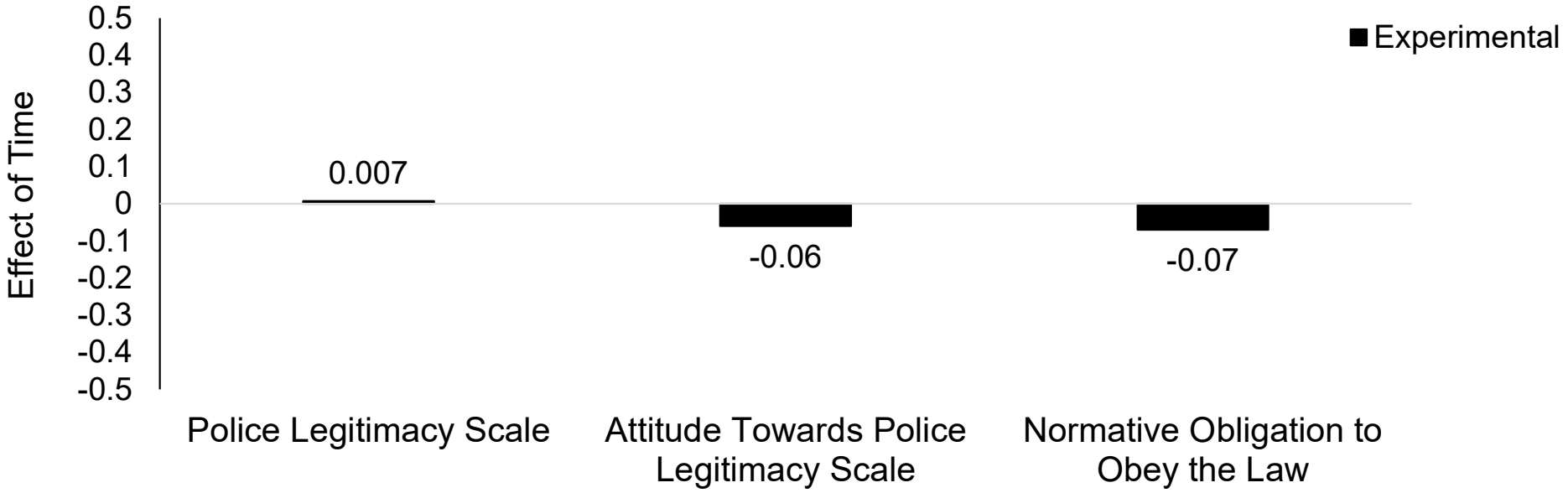
Perceptions of police legitimacy over time
(Post-intervention vs. 1-month later)



*Perceptions of police legitimacy **remained stable one month** after the intervention*

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Implications

- Do not assume the public understands police processes and procedures; police officers may think they do – they don't!

- A little effort to educate the public can increase public understanding of policing and ratings of activity necessity, acceptability, and comprehensibility

- Public understanding influences perceptions of police legitimacy, and these perceptions remain stable over the short-term

Practical strategies

- Practical strategies for police services:
  - Include information sheets on service/association websites
  - Include monthly “Did you know?” posts on social media
  - Correct errors in the media (+ social media) whenever possible
  - Include this topic in media relations courses
  - Make sure police boards/commissions are aware
  - Utilize neighbourhood/community officers to educate the public

Thank You!

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