Legal cynicism and the enduring legacy of abusive policing

Thiago R. Oliveira[1]

with David S. Kirk,[2] Robert J. Sampson,[3] & Charles C. Lanfear[4]

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[1] The University of Manchester
[2] University of Pennsylvania
[3] Harvard University
[4] University of Cambridge

DEEP HISTORY OF POLICING IN CHICAGO

> *"In Chicago, the belief that the police hate Black people and mistreat them, brutalize them, torture the and kill them is so commonplace as to be banal"*

(Ralph, 2020, p. 186)

> *"(. . .) Chicago's South Side neighborhoods were under siege. The police broke down doors, pointed guns at parents and children, and assaulted suspects"*

(Hagan et al., 2022, p. 11)

⇝ Does this enduring legacy of **abusive policing** produce more violence?

The theory of legal cynicism

THE THEORY OF LEGAL CYNICISM

"a state of normlessness in which the rules of the dominant society (and hence the legal system) are no longer binding in a community"

(Sampson and Bartusch, 1998, p. 782)

Legal Cynicism and (Subcultural?) Tolerance of Deviance: The Neighborhood Context of Racial Differences

Robert J. Sampson Dawn Jeglum Bartusch

We advance here a neighborhood-level perspective on racial differences in legal cynicism, dissatisfaction with police, and the tolerance of various forms of deviance. Our basic premise is that structural characteristics of neighborhoods explain variations in normative orientations about law, criminal justice, and deviance that are often confounded with the demographic characteristics of individuals. Using a multilevel approach that permits the decomposition of variance within and between neighborhoods, we tested hypotheses on a recently completed study of 8,782 residents of 343 neighborhoods in Chicago. Contrary to received wisdom, we find that African Americans and Latinos are *less* tolerant of deviance—including violence—than whites. At the same time, neighborhoods of concentrated disadvantage display elevated levels of legal cynicism, dissatisfaction with police, and tolerance of deviance unaccounted for by sociodemographic composition and crime-rate differences. Concentrated disadvantage also helps explain why African Americans are more cynical about law and dissatisfied with the police. Neighborhood context is thus important for resolving the seeming paradox that estrangement from legal norms and agencies of criminal justice, especially by blacks, is compatible with the personal condemnation of deviance.

THE THEORY OF LEGAL CYNICISM

"a cultural frame through which the law and the agents of its enforcement, such as the police and courts, are viewed as illegitimate, unresponsive, and ill equipped to ensure public safety"

(Kirk and Papachristos, 2011, 1191)

Cultural Mechanisms and the Persistence of Neighborhood Violence[1]

David S. Kirk
University of Texas, Austin

Andrew V. Papachristos
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Sociologists have given considerable attention to identifying the neighborhood-level social-interactional mechanisms that influence outcomes such as crime, educational attainment, and health. Yet, cultural mechanisms are often overlooked in quantitative studies of neighborhood effects. This paper adds a cultural dimension to neighborhood effects research by exploring the consequences of legal cynicism. Legal cynicism refers to a cultural frame in which people perceive the law as illegitimate, unresponsive, and ill equipped to ensure public safety. The authors find that legal cynicism explains why homicide persisted in certain Chicago neighborhoods during the 1990s despite declines in poverty and declines in violence citywide.

THE THEORY OF LEGAL CYNICISM

⇝ **Legal cynicism** can refer to:

- *Moral cynicism*: Cynicism about social norms about collective moral rules (Sampson and Bartusch, 1998)
- *Police cynicism*: Cynicism about about the legitimacy and trustworthiness of legal institutions (Kirk and Papachristos, 2011)

⇝ Similarly, **legal cynicism** can operate as a:

- *Cognitive frame*: an individual attribute that influences individuals' behaviours (Oliveira and Jackson, 2025)
- *Cultural frame*: a collective (neighbourhood) attribute that constrains people's strategies of action (Bell, 2017)

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THE THEORY OF LEGAL CYNICISM

⇝ Putting the two dimensions together:

	Cognitive frame (individual)	**Cultural frame** (neighbourhood)
Moral cynicism	*Individual belief that collective moral rules do not bind one's own conduct* (Oliveira and Jackson, 2025)	*Shared perception that legal norms are not morally binding in the community* (Sampson, 2012)
Police cynicism	*Individual belief that legal agents are disinteresed in ensuring public safety* (Oliveira, 2025)	*Shared perception that police officers do not care about ensuring public safety* (Kirk and Papachristos, 2011)

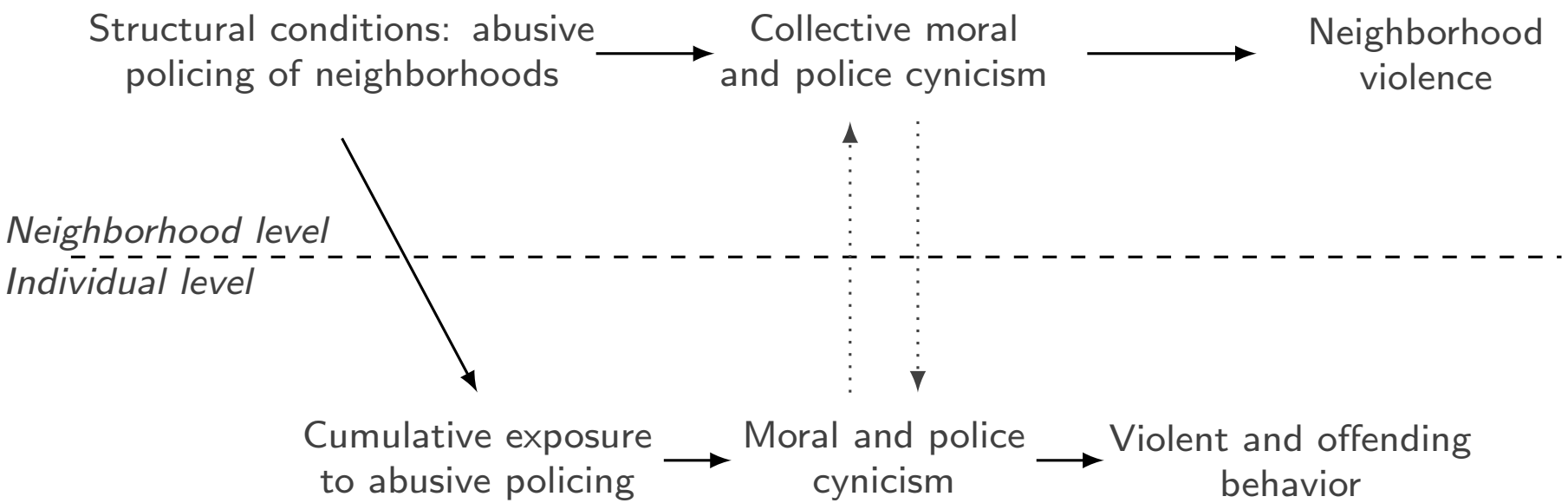
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THE THEORY OF LEGAL CYNICISM

A conceptual diagram



This study

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⇝ This study. . .

. . . tests all testable implications of the conceptual diagram above

. . . takes a historical approach, analysing data over from Chicago over three decades

. . . has two parts and four studies

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Part A: Neighbourhood-level analysis

⇝ **Study 1**: Exposure → Outcome: Does abusive policing produce neighbourhood violence?

⇝ **Study 2**: Exposure → Mediators → Outcome: Does collective legal cynicism (moral/police) mediate those effects?

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Part B: Individual-level analysis

⇝ **Study 3**: Exposure → Outcome: Does cumulative neighbourhood exposure to abusive policing produce more propensity to violent and offending behaviour?

⇝ **Study 4**: Exposure → Mediators → Outcome: Does legal cynicism (moral/police) mediate those effects?

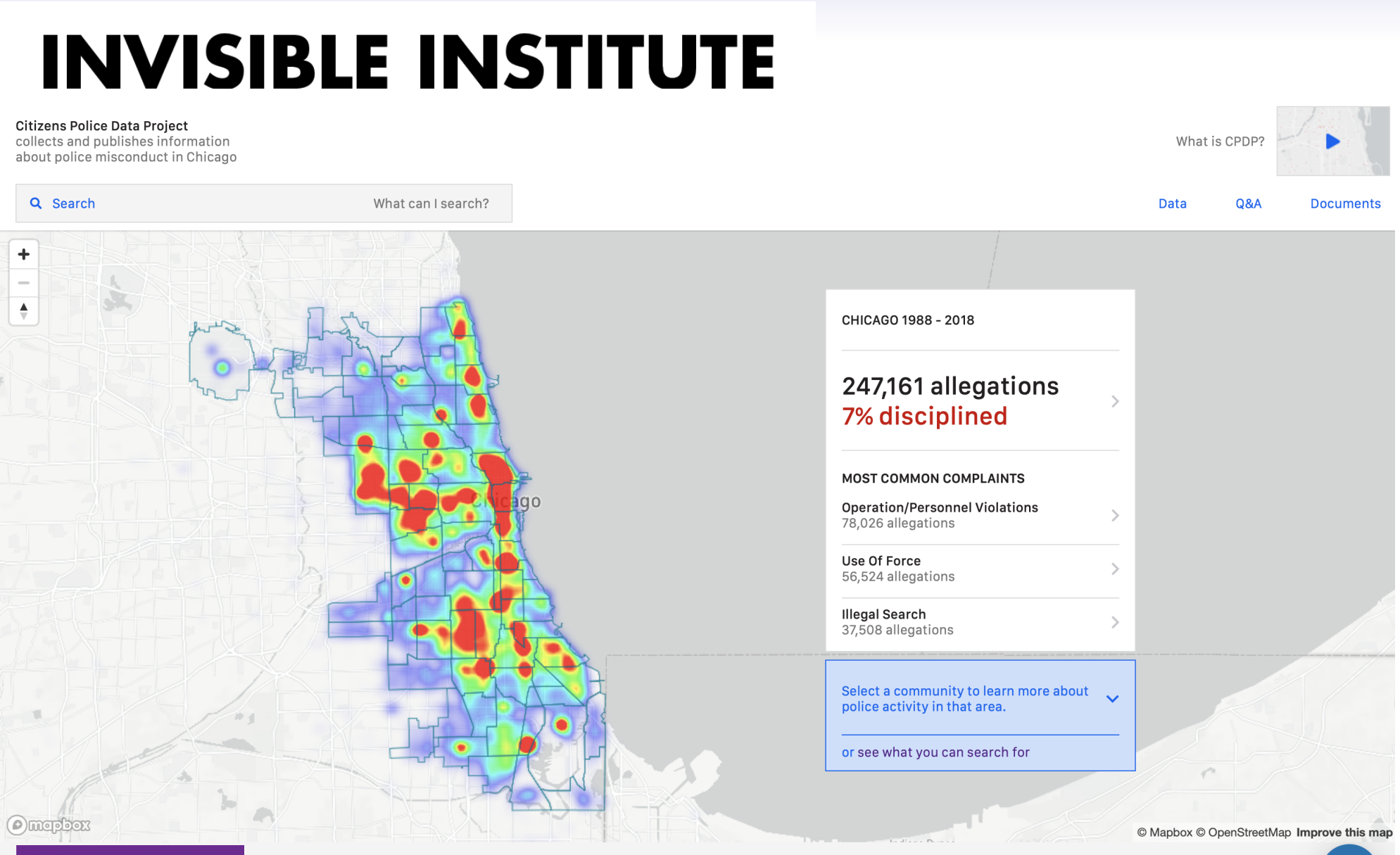
Part A

Neighbourhood-level analysis

PART A: DATA SOURCES

Data sources

- ⇝ Invisible Institute's Citizens Police Data Project (CPDP)
- ⇝ Chicago Police Department (CPD)
- ⇝ US Census (1990)
- ⇝ Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN)
  - Community Survey conducted in 1994-1995 ($n = 8,782$)


INVISIBLE INSTITUTE
Citizens Police Data Project
collects and publishes information
about police misconduct in Chicago
What is CPDP?
Search
What can I search?
Data
Q&A
Documents
CHICAGO 1988 - 2018
247,161 allegations
7% disciplined
MOST COMMON COMPLAINTS
Operation/Personnel Violations
78,026 allegations
Use Of Force
56,524 allegations
Illegal Search
37,508 allegations
Select a community to learn more about police activity in that area.
or see what you can search for
mapbox
© Mapbox © OpenStreetMap Improve this map

PART A: MEASURES

Outcome: Neighbourhood violence

- ⇝ Annual counts of robberies and homicides, 1991–2016 (CPD)

Exposure: Abusive policing

- ⇝ Annual counts of complaints about abusive policing, 1991–2016 (CPDP)

Mediators: Legal cynicism in the neighbourhood

- ⇝ Collective moral cynicism,* 1995 (PHDCN-CS)
- ⇝ Collective police cynicism,* 1995 (PHDCN-CS)
- ⇝ . . . both measured as a sum of level-three Empirical Bayes residuals and predicted values under an IRT framework

Controls: Structural antecedents

- ⇝ Concentrated disadvantage, residential stability, immigrant concentration, and population density, 1990 (US Census)

PART A: MEASURES

*Measures of legal cynicism from the PHDCN Community Survey

Police cynicism

(Kirk and Papachristos, 2011)

- The police are doing a good job preventing crime in your neighborhood
- The police maintain order on the streets and sidewalks in your neighborhood
- The police in your neighborhood are fair to all people regardless of their background such as race and wealth
- The police in your neighborhood can be trusted
- The police do a good job of responding to 911 calls in your neighborhood

Moral cynicism

(Sampson and Bartusch, 1998)

- Laws are meant to be broken
- It's okay to do anything you want as long as you don't hurt anyone
- To make money, there are no right or wrong ways anymore, only easy ways and hard ways
- Nowadays a person has to live pretty much for today and let tomorrow take care of itself

PART A | STUDY 1

Study 1: Exposure → Outcome

Is the concentration of abusive policing associated with subsequent increases in violent crime?

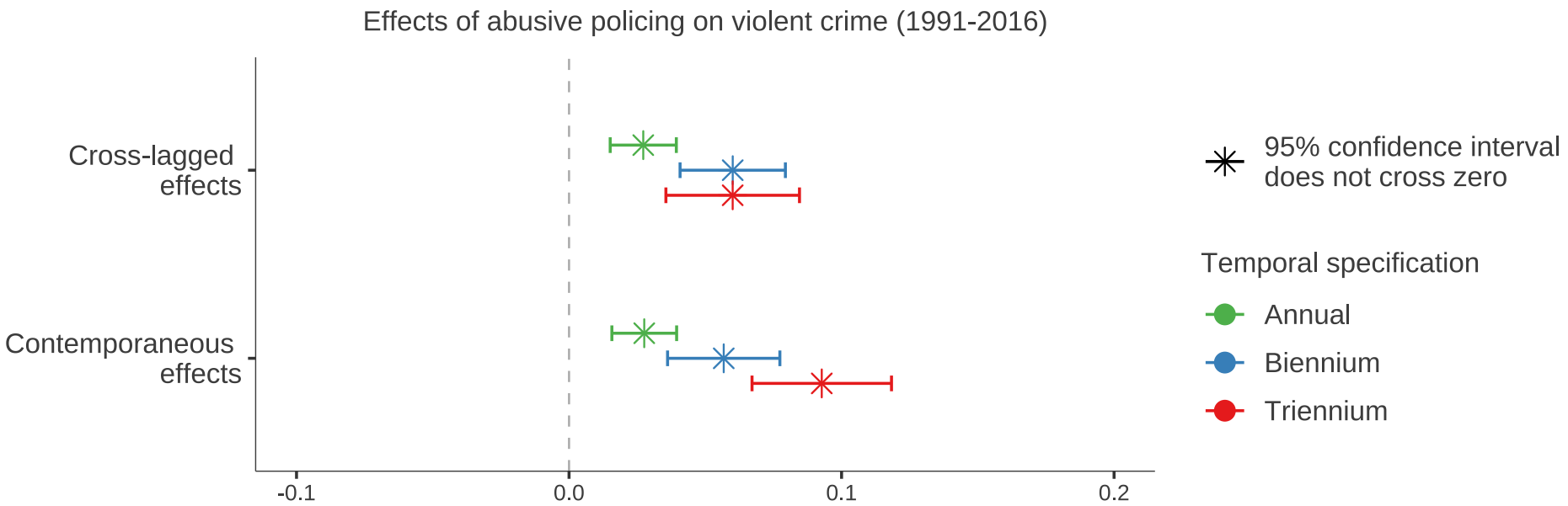
Estimation strategy (unit of analysis: 342 neighbourhood clusters)

⇝ **Dynamic Panel Model** (ML-SEM) (Allison et al., 2017)

- Cross-lagged panel model with fixed effects estimated using maximum likelihood
- Powerful at controlling for reverse causality, temporal lags, and time-constant confounders (Lanfear and Oliveira, 2026)
- Controls: Concentrated disadvantage, residential instability, immigrant concentration, racial composition, and population density (1990), spatial lags

PART A | STUDY 1

Results



PART A | STUDY 2

Study 2: Exposure → Mediators → Outcome

Does legal cynicism mediate the effects of abusive policing on violent crime?

PHDCN Community Survey

- Large survey conducted in Chicago in 1994-1995 ($n = 8,782$)
- Representative of the population residing in Chicago
- Crucially, also representative of Chicago neighbourhoods
  - . . . neighbourhood-level survey measures are possible
- Survey used for several pivotal studies in sociology and criminology
  - . . . e.g., collective efficacy (Sampson et al., 1997; Sampson, 2012), legal cynicism (Sampson and Bartusch, 1998; Kirk and Papachristos, 2011), among others
- Data publicly available on the ICPSR website

PART A | STUDY 2

Study 2: Exposure → Mediators → Outcome

Does legal cynicism mediate the effects of abusive policing on violent crime?

Estimation strategy (unit of analysis: 342 neighbourhood clusters)

Complaints about abusive policing (CPDP, 1991–1994) → Legal cynicism (PHDCN, 1995) → Violent crime (CPD, 1996–2016)

· Causal mediation analysis general framework (Imai et al., 2010)

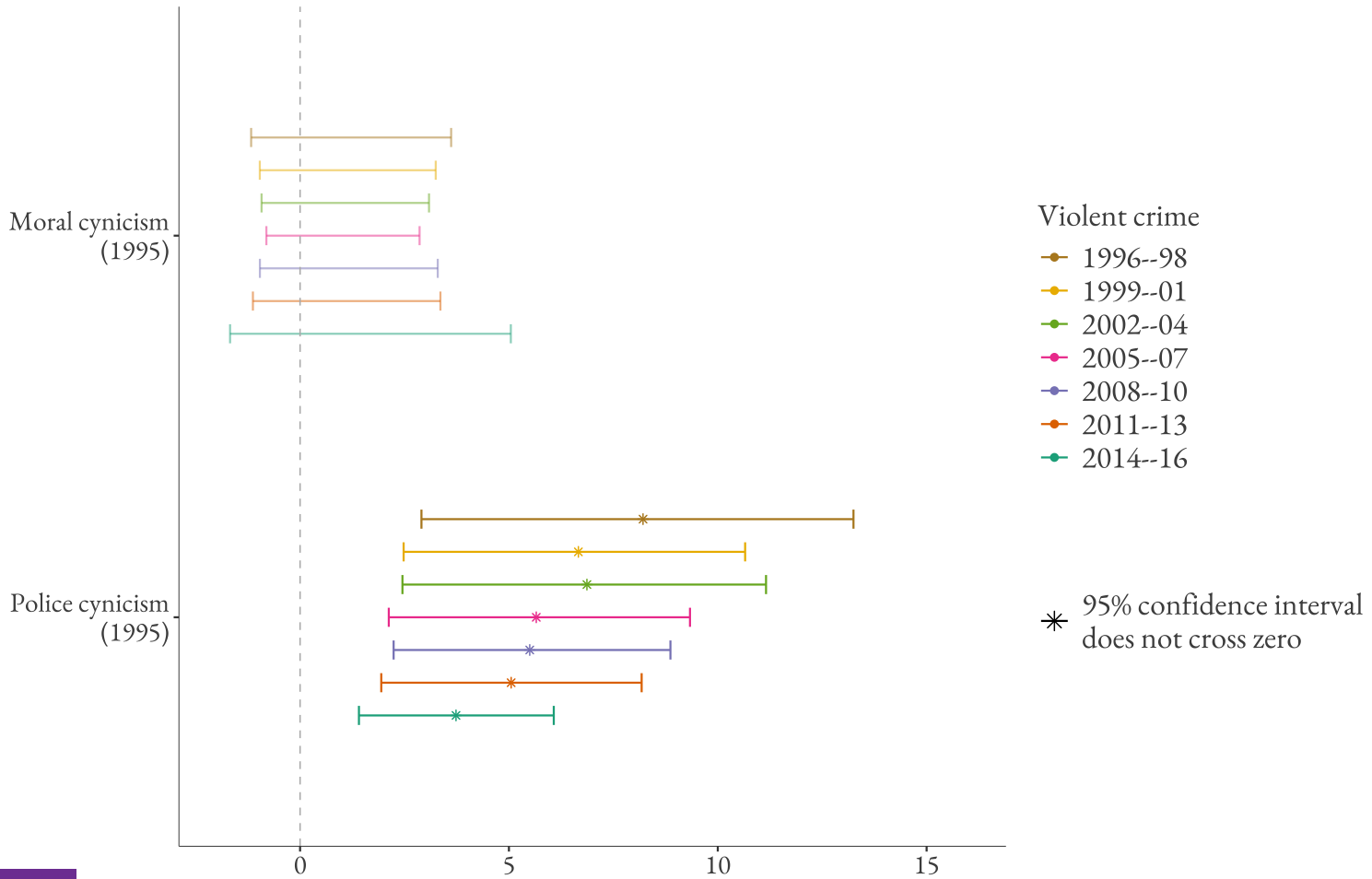
· **Indirect effects** estimated based on two steps

· Separate models for moral and police cynicism, separate models for seven trieniums between 1996 and 2016

PART A | STUDY 1

Results

(c) Indirect effects of abusive policing (1991-1994) on violent crime (1996-2016) transmitted via moral and police cynicism (1995)



Part B

Individual-level analysis

PART B: DATA SOURCES

Data sources

- ⇝ all of the above, plus. . .
- ⇝ . . . Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN)
  - Longitudinal Survey, a multi-cohort study of children coming of age, 1995 to 2021 ($n = 682$)



PHDCN+

Sampson, Robert J., David S. Kirk and Rebecca Bucci. 2022. "Cohort Profile: Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods and Its Additions (PHDCN+)." *Journal of Developmental and Life-Course Criminology* 8: https://doi.org/10.1007/s40865-022-00203-0.

PART B: DATA SOURCES

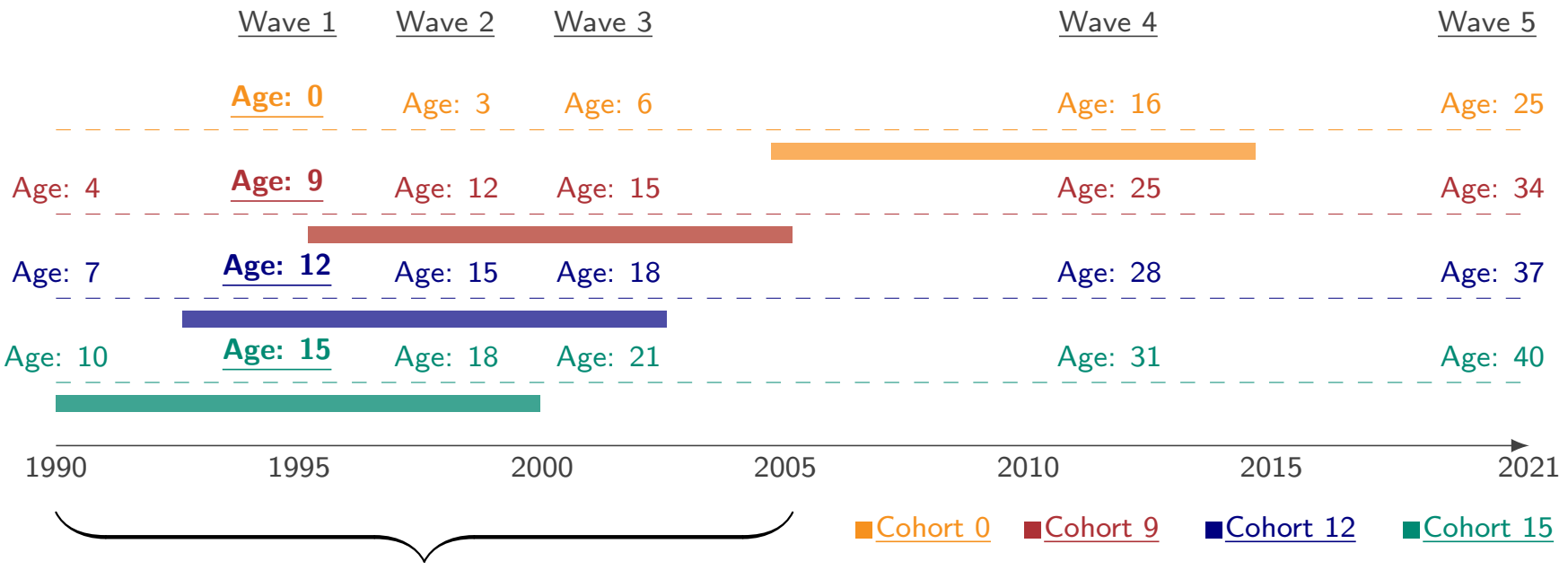
PHDCN Cohort Study

- 6200 children in 7 birth cohorts
  - Infant, 3, 6, 9, 12, 15, 18
- 3 waves of data collection from 1995–2002
- Data publicly available on the ICPSR website

PHDCN+

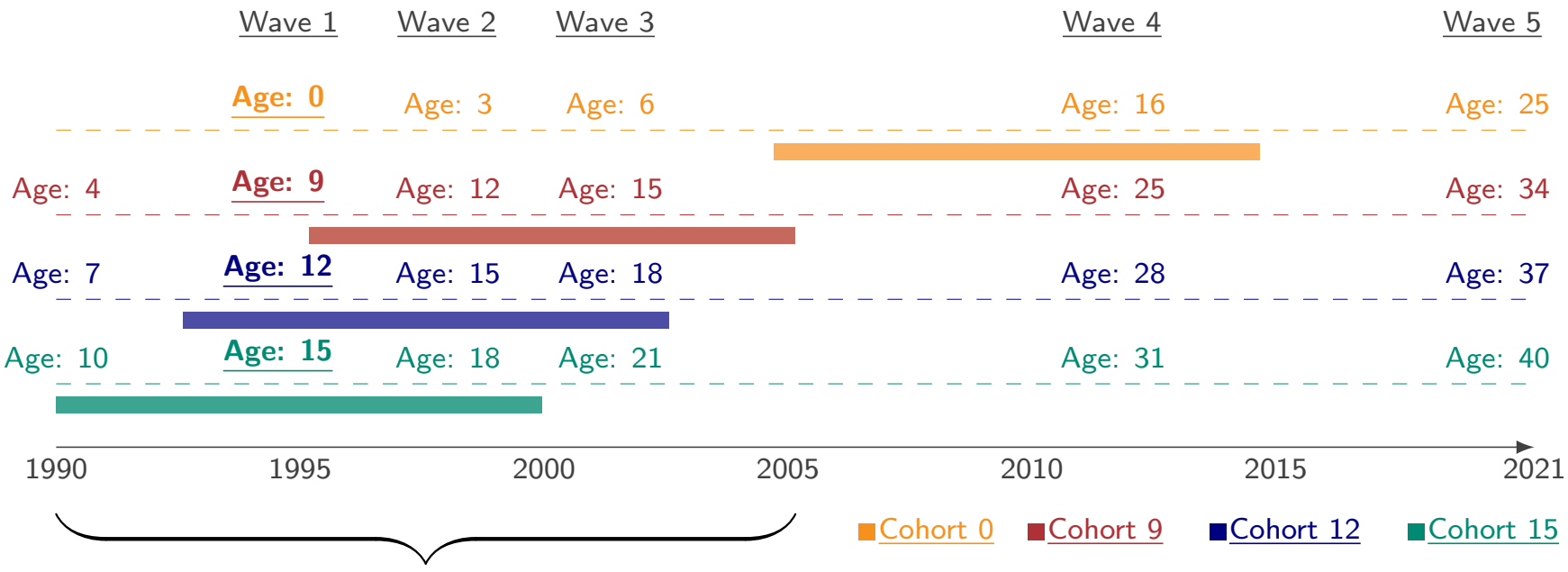
- Representative of 4 cohorts
  - Infant, 9, 12, 15
- Wave 4: 1057 respondents in 2012
- **Wave 5: 682 followed-up in 2021**
  - Data to be made publicly available after the end of the grant

PHDCN+



Residential history between ages 10 and 19 → Outcomes in adulthood

PHDCN + linked with **INVISIBLE INSTITUTE**



Residential history between ages 10 and 19 → Outcomes in adulthood

Cumulative neighbourhood exposures to abusive policing between ages 10 and 19 → **Legal cynicism and self-reported offending by age 40**

PART B: MEASURES

Outcome: Self-reported violent or offending behaviour

- ⇝ *Propensity to violence among adolescents and young adults*: Eight survey items measured in wave 3 tapping measuring different self-reported violent and offending behaviours, 2000-01 (cohorts 9, 12, 15 only)
- ⇝ *Recent violent or offending behaviour among adults*: Five survey items measured in wave 5 tapping measuring different self-reported violent or offending behaviours, 2021 (all cohorts)

Exposure: Cumulative neighbourhood exposure to abusive policing

- ⇝ Annual count of complaints about abusive policing filed in respondents' neighbourhood of residence

PART B: MEASURES

Mediators: Legal cynicism in the neighbourhood

- ⇝ Moral cynicism, 2021 (PHDCN+)
- ⇝ Police cynicism, 2021 (PHDCN+)
- ⇝ . . . both measured as factor scores extracted from a two-factor model using pairwise maximum likelihood

Controls:

- ⇝ Ethnicity, gender, immigrant generation, respondents' primary caregiver education, previous self-reported offending behaviour, self-control, impulsivity, sensation-seeking, internalizing score, externalizing score, neighbourhood conditions

PART B | STUDY 3

Study 3: Exposure → Outcome

Is the cumulative neighbourhood exposure to abusive policing associated with greater propensity to violence?

Estimation strategy (unit of analysis: 1,655 respondents, cohorts 9, 12, 15)

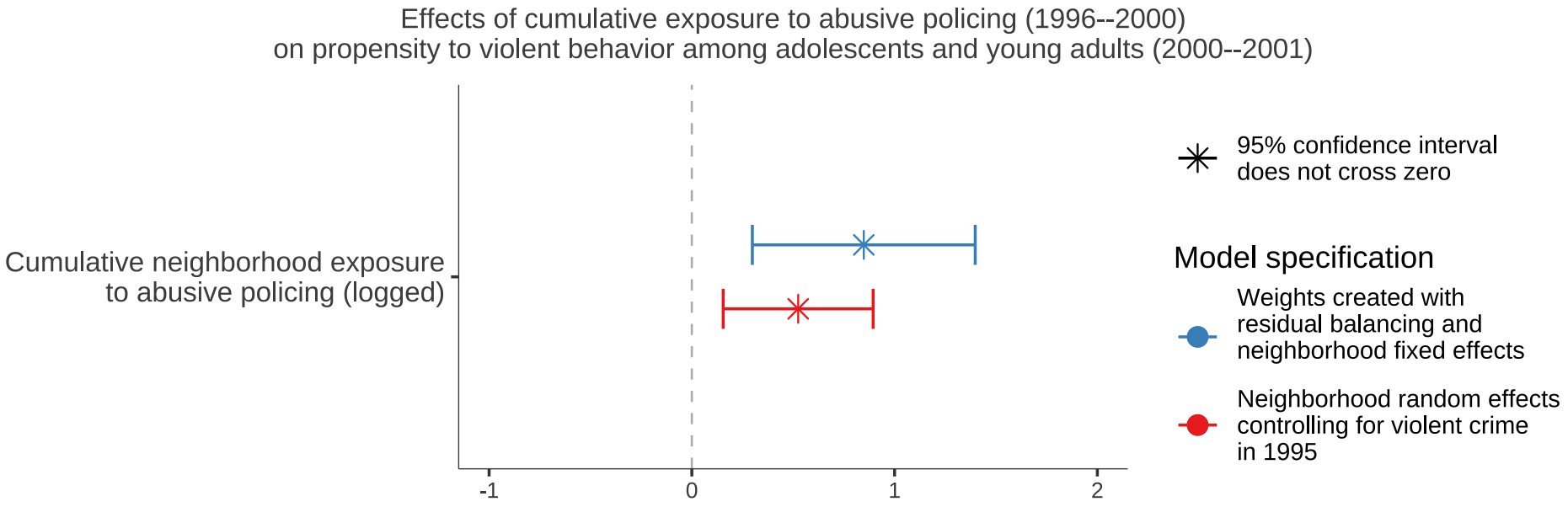
Cumulative neighbourhood exposure to abusive policing (1996–2000) → Propensity to violent behaviour (2000–2001, ages 14–21)

⇝ Marginal structural model with residual balancing (Zhou and Wodtke, 2020)

- Estimates cumulative effects while handling time-varying confounders
- Powerful at controlling for dynamic confounding from neighbourhood exposure to violent crime
- Multilevel, multivariate Rasch approach captures likelihood that a given respondent, residing in a given neighborhood, will commit a specific offending behavior, while taking into account that some offenses are rarer than others (Raudenbush et al., 2003)

PART B | STUDY 3

Results



PART B | STUDY 4

Study 4: Exposure → Mediator | Mediator ↔ Outcome

(a) Is the cumulative neighbourhood exposure to abusive policing during adolescence associated with legal cynicism in adulthood?

(b) Is legal cynicism associated with recent violent or offending behaviour among adults

Estimation strategy (unit of analysis: 535 respondents, all cohorts)

Cumulative neighbourhood exposure to abusive policing during adolescence (ages 10–19) ⟶ Legal cynicism in adulthood (2021)

⇝ **(a) Marginal structural model with residual balancing** (Zhou and Wodtke, 2020)

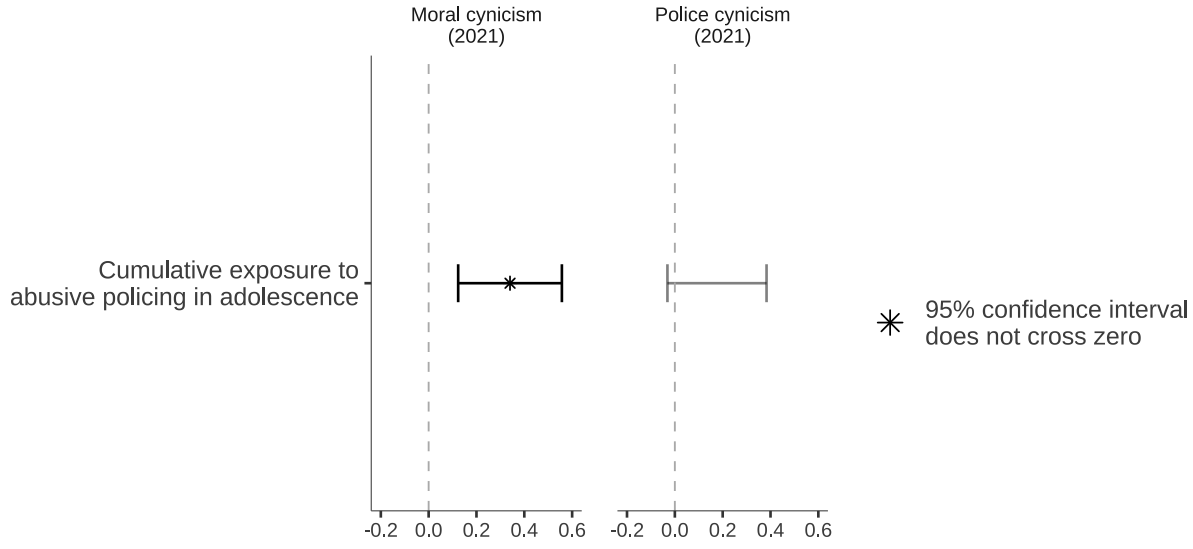
⇝ **(b) Firth's penalised Poisson regression model (cross-sectional)**

⇝ *No formal mediation analysis*

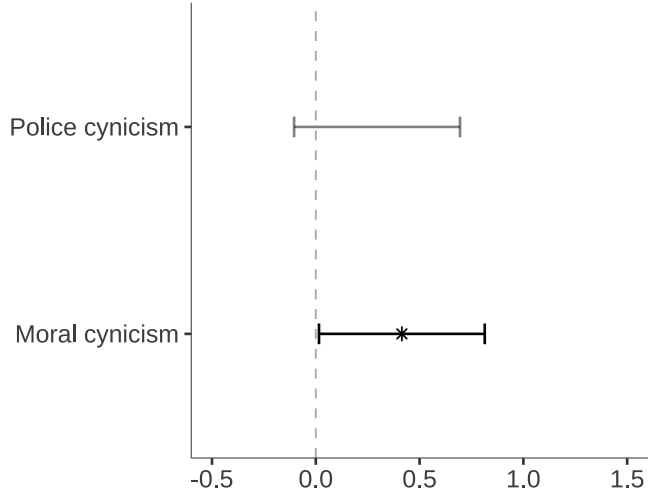
PART B | STUDY 4

Results

(a) Long-term effects of cumulative neighborhood exposure to abusive policing in adolescence on legal cynicism in adulthood



(b) Association between legal cynicism and violent/offending among adults



Final thoughts

FINAL THOUGHTS

> *"Neither I, nor my family, can be said ever really to have left; we are—perhaps—no longer as totally at the mercy of the cops and the landlords as once we were. In any case, our roots, our friends, our deepest associations are there. . .*
>
> (Baldwin, 1972, p. 40)

⇝ Enduring legacy of neighbourhood abusive policing

- for the crystallization of legal cynicism among individuals and neighbourhoods
- for the persistence of violent behaviour and neighbourhood violence

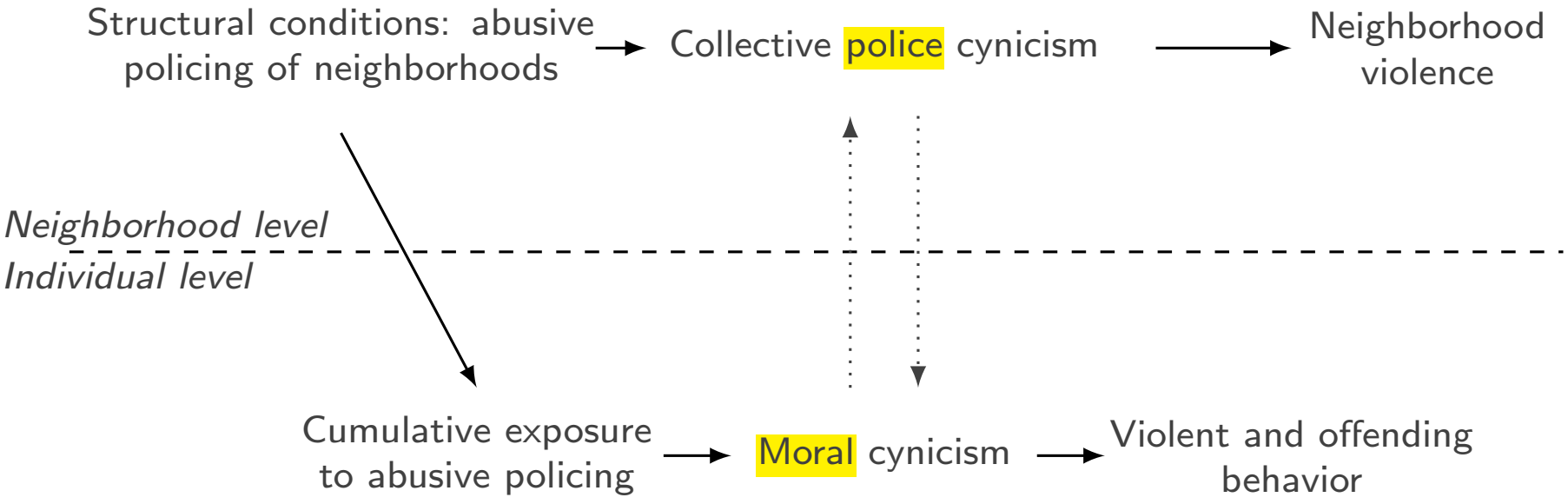
⇝ Legal cynicism appears to be central to a cyclical pattern through which abusive policing reproduces violence

FINAL THOUGHTS

Cultural and cognitive mechanisms

⇝ Police cynicism seems to mostly operate as a place-centred, cultural frame

⇝ Moral cynicism seems to mostly operate as a person-centred, cognitive frame



Thank you!

thiago.oliveira@manchester.ac.uk

ThiagoROliveira.com

thiago-oliveira

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