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Interpersonal influences on offending decisions: verbal communications and relationship to speaker

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Abstract

Objective This study examines whether the impact of verbal communications on a potential offender's perceptions of legal risks and anticipated social costs from crime varies depending on whether the communication is from a friend or a stranger.

Methods Data were analyzed from a $2\times2\times2$ experimental questionnaire administered to 1446 respondents via CloudResearch.

Results While no moderating effect of speaker relationship was observed for perceptions of the risk of legal punishment, significant moderating effects were found concerning anticipated social costs.

Conclusions Our findings contribute to the literature on peer influence and offender decision-making by elucidating social dynamics in offending contexts. Communications from friends exert the greatest influence on anticipated social costs from crime, likely due to friends' direct role in imposing these costs, in contrast to legal punishments imposed by the Criminal Justice System.

Keywords Decision making · Deterrence · Peers · Rational choice · Social influence

Introduction

One of the foremost criminological findings is that associated persons tend to behave more similarly to one another than less associated persons do. This behavioral concordance reflects a combination of peer influence (e.g. Akers, 1998; Warr, 2002) and selection, wherein "birds of a feather flock together" (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Regardless, there is little doubt that people *influence* the criminal involvement of others (Dipietro & McGloin, 2012; Gardner & Steinberg, 2005; Haynie & Osgood,

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2005; Weerman, 2011). The phenomenon is often termed *peer influence*. However, because non-peers can also influence one another, we use the more general terminology, *interpersonal influence*.

McGloin and Thomas (2019) distinguished two forms of interpersonal influence. Criminology has traditionally taken a *normative* perspective whereby associated individuals exchange and reinforce attitudes regarding antisocial behavior. Normative influence processes transcend specific offending opportunities and persist over time. In contrast, *situational* peer influence traces to Osgood et al.'s (1996) individual-level extension of routine activity theory. Principles of offender decision making have increasingly been extended to capture situational interpersonal influences.

For example, Thomas and Nguyen (2022) studied whether peer status hierarchies reflect *loss aversion*, a behavioral economic phenomenon whereby "losses loom larger than gains" (Pogarsky et al., 2018; Thaler, 2015). They found that interpersonal influence was strongest when the potential consequences were framed as a status loss, rather than as an unrealized status gain. This was true for transgression and compliance. Barnum and Pogarsky (2022) also studied situational interpersonal influence. They found that respondents adjusted both the perceived certainty of legal punishment and anticipated social costs from an offending opportunity consistent with verbal communications from their peers.

An open question, however, was whether the findings depended on the *relationship* between the speaker and recipient of verbal communications. Barnum and Pogarsky (2022) fixed this relationship as friends. But persons other than friends make verbal utterances during offending opportunities, including romantic partners, parents, co-workers, strangers, and others. Using a factorial survey experiment and a large sample of American adults ($n = 1446$), we investigate whether the relationship of the speaker of verbal utterances to a would-be offender during an offending opportunity moderates the impact of the utterance on the offending decision. Specifically, we compare the impact of communications by friends with the impact of communications by strangers on perceived legal sanctions and social costs of offending.

Theoretical background

Situational interpersonal influence

Normative influence processes are grounded in learning perspectives on crime. For example, under differential association theory, the cumulative balance of "definitions" favorable and unfavorable to delinquency drives behavior (Sutherland, 1947). These definitions are often likened to attitudes capturing the degree of justification or approval for criminal behavior (Matsueda, 1988; McGloin & Thomas, 2019). Social learning theory focuses on behavioral reinforcement in accordance with principles of operant conditioning (Skinner, 1948; Thorndike, 1898). In this view, people are more likely to commit antisocial behaviors they anticipate will be positively reinforced (Burgess & Akers, 1966; Matsueda, 1988). In symbolic interactionism, *reflected appraisals*, which capture how people believe others perceive them, shape

self-identities that influence behavior (Blumer, 1973; McGloin & Thomas, 2019; Mead, 1934). The common thread throughout *normative* explanations for interpersonal influence is the transmission and reinforcement of "delinquent values," which transcend specific offending opportunities and persist over time.

Research has recently begun to unpack *situational* interpersonal influences, which follow principles of offender decision making and rational choice. This type of influence, which is specific to a given offending opportunity, comes in two forms. *Passive* influence occurs, for example, when the mere presence of persons shapes the contemporaneous judgments and behaviors of the focal actor (Haynie, 2001). McGloin and Thomas (2016) found that respondents took more risks in the presence of others than when they were alone. This is because larger groups can offer more social reinforcement. Moreover, people tend to estimate lower social and legal costs from risky behaviors in large groups because transgression by any one group member is less apt to stand out.

In contrast, *active* situational influence occurs when someone affirmatively does or says something that affects the specific offending decision of another person. Rather than enduring norms and attitudes, situational interpersonal influence occurs when someone affects a contemporaneous judgment by the focal actor about a specific crime opportunity. Two such judgments are paramount: (1) the estimated certainty of legal sanctions and (2) the anticipated social costs associated with a given crime. These latter *extralegal* costs can include impaired social relationships, compromised employment, and adverse educational consequences, as well as guilt, shame, and loss of status (Apel & Ramakers, 2018; Grasmick & Bursik, 1990; Thomas & Nguyen, 2022).

This form of influence involves situational decision making. Long ago, Geerken and Gove (1975) likened the behavioral responsiveness to potential rewards and sanctions to a process of information transmission. *Bayesian Updating* principles address how individuals revise and maintain baseline judgments about criminal justice consequences based on informational *signals* over time (Anwar & Loughran, 2011; Lochner, 2007). This said, various circumstances of offending opportunities prompt situational adjustments. These include substance use (Exum, 2002), visceral states (Barnum & Solomon, 2019; Loewenstein et al., 1997), cognitive biases (Pogarsky et al., 2017, 2018; Thomas & Nguyen, 2022), a *code of the street* (Anderson, 1999), and informal status dynamics (Brown & Larson, 2009). To these, Barnum and Pogarsky (2022) added verbal communications by peers, which influence both perceived sanction certainty and anticipated social costs, consistent with the communication.

A background issue regarding interpersonal influence involves the age of the focal actor. Normative influence stems from the Life Course theory, wherein adolescence marks a critical developmental transition when connections to family caretakers loosen, and bonds with others strengthen (Sampson & Laub, 2003). Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to nefarious influences by others because they are less "psychosocially mature" than their older counterparts—that is, brain development relating to self-regulation and cognitive executive functions often remains ongoing until about age 25 (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Thus, adolescence begins a time when other persons, beyond primary caretakers, begin to contribute to the adolescent's cumulative and developing "worldview."

Because of their distinct theoretical origins, situational interpersonal influence is less developmentally grounded than normative interpersonal influence and is more apt to persist into adulthood. In Gardner and Steinberg's (2005) seminal study on age differences in the effect of group size on risky decision making, overall interpersonal influences were greatest during adolescence but remained significant among adults. Specifically, the authors found no age differences in the impact of group size on risk preference. Similarly, Steinberg and Monahan (2007) found that although "resistance to peer influence" was generally lowest in adolescence, such resistance did not increase between ages 18 and 30 (see also Bruin et al., 2012). Although interpersonal influence is salient in adolescence, particularly for situational decision making, adults are prone to such influences as well.

The earlier discussion of psychosocial maturity implicates another factor in interpersonal influence processes—namely, the capacity for self-regulation. Several studies have found that, irrespective of age, having low self-control corresponds with greater susceptibility to peer influence (e.g., Hay & Forrest, 2008; Mears et al., 1998; Wright et al., 2001). Thomas and McGloin (2013, p. 252) found evidence that higher impulsivity corresponded with more peer influence, presumably because "individuals high in impulsivity tend to make fast decisions based on immediate, situational stimuli" which can include the prodding or discouragement of others during an offending opportunity.

In their study of interpersonal situational influence, Barnum and Pogarsky (2022) found that respondents—who were over 18 with an average age of 37 years—adjusted both the perceived certainty of legal punishment and anticipated social costs from a crime opportunity consistent with verbal communications from their peers.[1] Their study, however, did not control for respondents' levels of self-control. Moreover, an open question was whether the findings depended on the *relationship* between the speaker and recipient of verbal communications, which Barnum and Pogarsky (2022) held constant as friends.

Type of relationship

Research from outside of criminology underscores that the relationship between persons can affect their influence on one another. Consider the role of peer proximity in public health. Young persons are more likely to start smoking if pressure to do so comes from someone socially close rather than distal (Paek, 2009; Paek & Gunther, 2007). During natural disasters and other crises, individuals often place just as much weight, even more sometimes, on the opinions of friends and family over experts (Haynes et al., 2008). Thus, the words or attitudes of another person not only influence behavior but can even trump conventional logic.

Comparable findings emerge from social psychological research on peer pressure. The relationship to a speaker affects that speaker's ability to elicit charitable donations,

[1] For example, "do it you won't get caught" was a communication suggesting higher perceptions of legal sanction risk. Whereas, "no one likes a drunk driver" suggests a higher estimate of the anticipated social costs from offending.

for example, with friends holding far more sway than strangers (Meer, 2011). People also report fewer workplace transgressions by friends than by mere associates (Miller & Thomas, 2005). Peer influence can generate harmful behaviors, such as drug use or smoking, especially if one's best friends partake in these acts as well (Aloise-Young et al., 1994). Importantly, peer pressure can also coalesce around prosocial involvements (Baruah & Boruah, 2016; Calvo-Armengol & Jackson 2010).

Criminological research also suggests that interpersonal influences depend on the relationship between the persons involved. Using school network data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Rees and Pogarsky (2011) found that the criminogenic influence of best friends far surpasses that from lesser friends. However, the study is unable to address intervening perceptual processes, particularly involving the perceived legal risks and social costs from committing the crime. The preceding discussion leads to the following hypotheses:

> Hypothesis 1a: Contemporaneous communications from a friend regarding the certainty of sanctioning for a crime are more strongly and positively associated with the perceived certainty of punishment for that crime than identical communications from a stranger are.
> Hypothesis 1b: Contemporaneous communications from a friend regarding the social costs of a crime are more strongly and positively associated with the perceived social costs for that crime than identical communications from a stranger are.

Type of consequence

Moreover, we expect the moderating role of whether the communication comes from a friend to be stronger for anticipated social costs than for the perceived certainty of legal sanctions. Friends certainly have relevant information about potential legal sanctions. They experience punishment and punishment avoidance (Stafford & Warr, 1993), witness indicators of police presence, involving foot patrol or drunk driving enforcement, for example, and can even provide a "sounding board" for their associates. However, friends do not *impose* legal sanctions; the Criminal Justice System does. Social costs are different. We expect the status of friend rather than stranger to have the greatest impact for social costs because friends impose stigma, disapproval, and even ostracism on one another. Thus, even more than legal risks, friends are uniquely knowledgeable about the prospects for social costs. This suggests,

> Hypothesis 2: The difference in the moderating effect of friend versus stranger on the impact of contemporaneous verbal utterances should be greater for perceived social costs than for perceived legal costs.

Methods

Analytic sample

In June 2022, a total of 1539 respondents from CloudResearch completed our experimental questionnaire.[2] Respondents were compensated $1.00 each for participating. Of these respondents, we excluded 26 who did not complete at least 98% of the survey and another 36 who had missing data for at least one study variable. Finally, we excluded an additional 31 respondents who failed at least one of two attention checks described below. This left a final analytic sample of 1446 respondents.[3]

Of these, 77% were white and 55% were female.[4] The first and third quartiles of the distribution of age across respondents were 32 and 53 years, respectively, with an average age of 43 years old. Moreover, 67% of respondents reported having attended at least some college. Additionally, 51% reported having a family member with a prior arrest, whereas 19% of respondents reported having previously been arrested themselves. Thus, the sample closely resembles online samples generally, which tend to be slightly more educated and more white than national averages (Weinberg et al., 2014). Importantly, opt-in online samples have been shown to produce comparable results to randomized probability samples for experimental surveys, such as the present one (Coppock, 2019; Mullinix et al., 2015; Peyton et al., 2022; Weinberg et al., 2014).[5]

Experimental procedures

Each respondent received two separate vignettes depicting hypothetical crime opportunities. One involved drinking and driving, and the other involved an altercation in a bar.[6] The order in which respondents received the scenarios was randomized. Prior to the first experimental vignette, each participant completed a single-question attention check. Each vignette randomly manipulated three factors: (1) whether the

[2] CloudResearch employs various methods for online data collection, including the MTurk Toolkit, which interfaces with Mturk through a vetted pool of workers. Comparative research on online opt-in platforms indicates high data quality relative to platforms such as MTurk, Qualtrics, and Prolific (Douglas, Ewell, & Brauer, 2023). Given our focus on experimentally comparing conversations between friends and strangers, a national online opt-in sample is suitable (Mize & Manago, 2022). Extensive research spanning nearly a decade supports the use of online opt-in samples for producing experimentally valid findings that generalize well to the U.S. population (Coppock, 2019; Mullinix et al., 2015; Peyton et al., 2022).

[3] Comparisons were conducted on non-missing variables between included and excluded respondents and there was no evidence of differential sample attrition.

[4] Of the respondents who were non-white 10.8% were Black or African American, 8.2% were Asian, 2.4% were American Indian or Alaska Native, 2% preferred not to answer, and.1% were Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander.

[5] Replication materials including data and code will be made available on OSF.

[6] We selected these behaviors to directly replicate and extend Barnum and Pogarsky (2022). Additionally, these behaviors reflect realistic scenarios that are likely to occur in barroom settings, consistent with the age and sociodemographics of the current sample.

relationship to the speaker was a stranger or friend, (2) whether the focal judgment entailed perceived certainty of legal punishment or estimated social costs, and (3) whether the verbal communication was designed to increase or decrease the corresponding cost perception. All vignettes and manipulations appear in Appendix Table 4. Following each vignette, respondents estimated the social costs and legal risk from offending. Following the second vignette, respondents reported basic sociodemographics and completed a second attention check. The attention checks appear in Appendix Table 5.

Measures

Perceived social cost

For each vignette respondents reported "how much you agree or disagree that if you actually drove drunk/fought in this scenario, the people you are close with would LOSE RESPECT FOR YOU." Responses were on a 7-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (strongly agree) to 7 (strongly disagree). Items were reverse coded such that higher scores indicate greater perceived social costs.

Perceived legal risk

Each respondent also estimated the likelihood that they would be arrested if they committed the crime that was described. Specifically, respondents were asked, "Imagine you actually drove drunk/fought in this scenario, how likely or unlikely is it that you would be CAUGHT BY THE POLICE?" This was also measured on a 7-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (extremely likely) to 7 (extremely unlikely). Again, items were reverse coded to reflect greater perceived legal risk.

A 7-point Likert scale was used for both primary measures to preserve consistency with Barnum and Pogarsky (2022). Moreover, research suggests that 7-point scales may more accurately capture a respondent's true evaluation of an item (see Finstad, 2010; Taherdoost, 2019), are shown to have good reliability and validity (Lozano et al., 2008; Tanujaya et al., 2022), and produce fewer "uncertain" answers than 5-point Likert scales (see Matell & Jacoby, 1972). As well, 7-point scales can be re-scaled to higher or lower point formats if such a transformation is needed (Dawes, 2008).

Low self-control

Pursuant to the earlier discussion, the survey also measured respondents' levels of self-control. We utilize the abbreviated self-control scale recently validated by Roche et al. (2024; see also Jones, 2017).Specifically, participants rated how much they agree or disagree with four items from the Grasmick et al. (1993) scale: (1) act on the spur of the moment; (2) do not devote much thought and effort to preparing for the future; (3) do whatever brings pleasure here and now; (4) more concerned with what happens in the short run than the long run. Items were rated on a 5-point

Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). We reverse coded the items and averaged them to create a low self-control index (α=.83). The index has a mean of 3.7, and all items load on a single factor.

Sociodemographics

The survey also measured respondents' gender, race/ethnicity, age, educational attainment, whether a family member or close friend had ever been arrested, and whether the respondent had ever been arrested.

Results

Communication from friend versus stranger

Table 1 compares the mean risk and cost perceptions across groups, and Fig. 1 reexpresses these results in graphical form. As a threshold matter, we replicate the finding from Barnum and Pogarsky (2022) that verbal communications during an offending opportunity produce situational adjustments in legal risk and social cost perceptions consistent with the content of the utterance. In 7 of 8 comparisons, respondents who received a communication suggesting high legal risk or social cost had significantly higher estimates than their counterparts who received a communication suggesting the risk or cost was low. As well, the former estimates were nominally higher than the latter estimates in all eight cases. On a Binomial probability distribution, under an assumption of independent estimates (p=.5), the probability of 8/8 successes is.004. Thus, we find that risk and cost estimates are indeed influenced by the directionality of verbal communications contemporaneous with an offending opportunity.

Hypotheses 1a and 1b propose that the influence of verbal communications from a friend should exceed that from a stranger. These expectations are only partially reflected in the data. On visual inspection, Fig. 1 reflects little difference between friend and stranger in the effect of contemporaneous verbal communications on the focal actor's estimate of arrest risk. This is confirmed in Table 1, wherein the difference in mean legal risk estimates between the increase and decrease cost conditions is statistically indistinguishable whether the communication comes from a friend or stranger. This is true for both drunk driving and fighting. Thus, we find little support for hypothesis 1a.

In contrast, we find strong support for hypothesis 1b regarding perceptions of the social costs from crime. For both fighting and drunk driving, the effect of verbal communication, as reflected by the difference in heights between the increase and decrease bars, is far larger for communications by a friend than by a stranger. Table 1 provides additional information regarding these differences, which are substantial. Specifically, for drunk driving, a communication suggesting higher social cost from a stranger produces estimated social costs that are nominally higher by 5.85 − 5.36 = .49 on a 7-point Likert scale. In contrast, for a verbal communication

Table 1 Sanction certainty perceptions by experimental conditions

Perceived cost matching information

	Social cost										Legal risk									
	Friend					Stranger					Friend					Stranger				
	Mean	SD	Min	Max	*N*	Mean	SD	Min	Max	*N*	Mean	SD	Min	Max	*N*	Mean	SD	Min	Max	*N*
Drunk driving																				
Matching info																				
Increase cost	6.05**	1.41	1	7	181	5.85**	1.40	1	7	181	4.59**	1.60	1	7	183	4.53	1.66	1	7	178
Decrease cost	4.72**	1.94	1	7	177	5.36**	1.66	1	7	188	3.98**	1.73	1	7	181	4.28	1.67	1	7	177
Fighting																				
Matching info																				
Increase cost	5.16**	1.63	1	7	179	4.83**	1.80	1	7	180	5.93**	1.42	1	7	182	5.71**	1.50	1	7	182
Decrease cost	3.71**	1.98	1	7	181	4.28**	1.88	1	7	184	3.40**	1.70	1	7	179	3.38**	1.70	1	7	179

higher values reflect greater perceived certainty of legal sanction or social cost

*$p<.05$; **$p<.01$ for two-tailed hypothesis tests ($n=1446$)

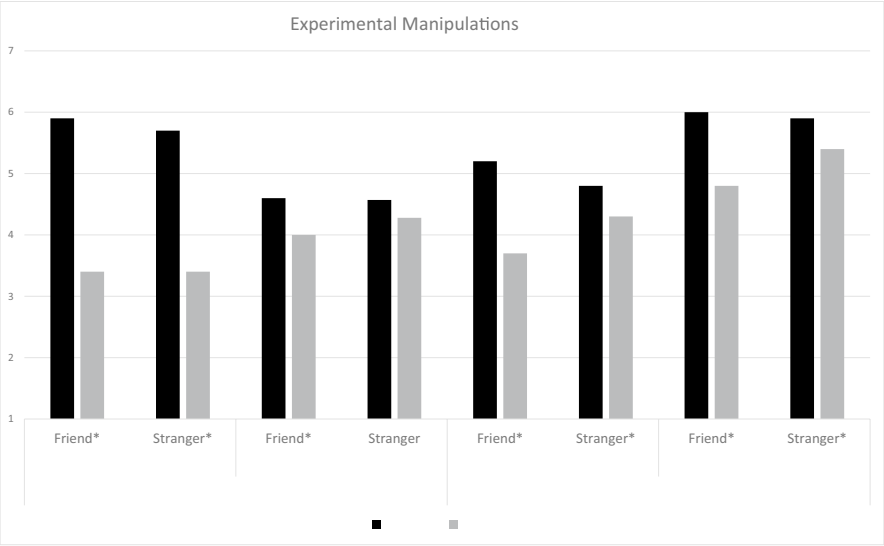

Fig. 1 Experimental manipulations; notes: $*p < .05$ for two-tailed t-test for difference in means; $n = 1446$

suggesting higher social costs from a friend, estimated social costs are higher by $6.05 - 4.72 = 1.33$. This two-and-a-half-fold difference is statistically significant at $p < .05$. Virtually, the same "difference in difference" is obtained for fighting.

This overall pattern of findings for hypotheses 1a and 1b accords with hypothesis 2, that the larger impact of communications by friends relative to strangers should be most pronounced for the perceived social costs from offending. Next, we reproduce these findings in a multivariate setting and provide statistical tests for hypothesis 2.

Multivariate findings

Table 2 presents the results from 8 OLS regressions that correspond to the bivariate findings in Table 1. The effects of friend versus stranger communications are compared for each type of perception, social cost, and legal risk, and for each offense.[7] In all regressions, a communication implying lower cost is the omitted reference category. Control variables are included for respondents' age, race, college attendance, sex, whether a family member was ever arrested, whether the respondent was ever arrested, and self-control. The regressions confirm the bivariate findings above. The verbal communication significantly influenced respondents' risk and cost perceptions in the hypothesized direction in 7 of 8 models. The only case in which the contemporaneous communication did not influence respondents' perceptions was for

[7] We acknowledge that each outcome variable is measured on a 7-point Likert scale and is therefore ordered and categorical. Unreported analyses confirm the general pattern of findings using Ordered Logit models. We report OLS regressions here to simplify the presentation and interpretation of models.

a communication by a stranger regarding the risk of criminal punishment for drunk driving.

Regarding hypothesis 2, we performed coefficient comparison tests for whether each pair of estimated coefficients for a communication of increased costs differed between friend and stranger (see Paternoster et al., 1998). For both drunk driving and fighting, the coefficients for a communication of higher legal risk are *statistically indistinguishable* between friends and strangers. The contrary is true for communications regarding the social costs of offending. In that case, the friend and stranger coefficients are statistically distinguishable from one another at $p < .01$. This supports hypothesis 2 that the greater impact of communications from a friend rather than a stranger is most pronounced for the perceived social costs from crime. This is consistent with our earlier observation that friends should know more about the social costs than about the legal costs because friends are directly responsible for imposing social costs.

Supplemental analyses

Table 3 presents additional analyses in which the sample is stratified by past criminal justice involvement and then by age to test the robustness of the findings. The identical model specification from Table 2 was estimated within subgroups. For tractability, Table 3 only reports the coefficient in each model for whether the verbal communication suggested increased costs. A respondent was considered to have prior criminal justice involvement if *either* the respondent was previously arrested *or* if a family member or close friend was previously arrested. Even within subgroups based on past criminal justice involvement, virtually all coefficients are statistically distinguishable from zero and positive, reflecting the overall finding that verbal utterances about increased costs generally correspond with higher cost estimates. As in Table 2, the only exception involves a communication of higher legal risk from a stranger, which has no statistically discernible impact on estimated legal risk.

First, we assess whether the impact of the communication on respondents' risk and cost perceptions differs by whether the respondent had prior criminal justice involvement. Disaggregating the sample in this way has no discernible impact on the overall pattern of findings. Beginning with fighting, each pair of estimated OLS coefficients is virtually identical regardless of prior criminal justice involvement. This is true whether the communication concerned legal or social costs, and whether the utterance was made by a friend or stranger. For drunk driving, while there are small nominal differences within each pair of coefficients, none are statistically significant. For example, receiving a communication suggesting higher social costs from a friend corresponded with a social cost estimate that was 1.48 higher on a 7-point Likert scale among respondents who had no prior criminal justice involvement. The same coefficient was nominally lower, 1.18, among respondents with prior criminal justice involvement. A potential explanation is that those with prior criminal justice involvement likely have more information, beyond the contemporaneous utterance, to construct their cost estimate, such that any one item of information has relatively less impact on their judgments. In the end, though, no statistical

Table 2 OLS regressions of perceived cost on experimental conditions

Drunk driving	**Social cost**		**Legal risk**	
	Friend	**Stranger**	**Friend**	**Stranger**
	Model 1	***Model 2***	***Model 3***	***Model 4***
Increase cost	1.33**[a]	.48**[a]	.59**	.24
Age	.02**	.00	−.01*	−.01
White	−.14	.07	−.38	−.60**
College	−.37	−.06	.01	−.17
Male	−.35*	−.36*	−.42*	−.58**
Family arrested	.01	.13	−.11	−.02
Personal arrest	−.27	−.16	.00	.10
Low self-control	−.07	−.27**	−.02	−.02
n	358	369	364	355
R^2	.1746	.0646	.0697	.0669
Fighting	**Social cost**		**Legal risk**	
	Friend	**Stranger**	**Friend**	**Stranger**
	Model 5	*Model 6*	*Model 7*	*Model 8*
Increase cost	1.52**[b]	.58**[b]	2.53**	2.33**
Age	.03**	.01	−.00	.00
White	.22	.68**	.01	.20
College	.05	.11	−.27	−.02
Male	−.31	.19	−.21	−.01
Family arrested	−.31	−.00	.36*	.03
Personal arrest	−.33	−.11	.04	−.37
Low self-control	−.12	−.23*	−.04	−.16
n	360	364	361	361
R^2	.2052	.0818	.4133	.3610

$n = 1446$

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$

[a]Coefficients statistically distinguishable from one another at $p < .01$

[b]Coefficients statistically distinguishable from one another at $p < .01$

differences were obtained for the focal coefficient when the sample was disaggregated by whether the respondent had prior criminal justice involvement.

We also tested for differences in the OLS coefficient corresponding to a communication of higher cost after stratifying the data by age. Following Gardner and Steinberg (2005), three age strata were created: Young Adults, those 34 and younger ($n = 463$); Middle Adults, those aged 35 to 54 ($n = 681$); and Older Adults, those 55 and above ($n = 302$).[8] Beginning with fighting, disaggregating the sample by age had no impact on the pattern of findings. For both social cost and legal risk perceptions, the coefficients for a communication of higher cost were about comparable across subgroups. Although there were nominal differences between coefficients across

[8] Comparable findings were obtained after varying the age-cutoffs for the three groups.

Table 3 OLS coefficient for communication of increased cost, stratified by past criminal justice involvement and age

	Social cost		Legal risk	
	Friend	Stranger	Friend	Stranger
Drunk driving				
CJ involvement				
Involved	1.18**	.45*	.49*	.23
Not involved	1.48**	.55*	.68*	.27
Age				
< 35	1.61**	.62	.82**	.52
35 to 54	1.41**	.32	.47	.27
> 54	.64*	.53	.54	−.40
Fighting				
CJ involvement				
Involved	1.53**	.53*	2.50**	2.37**
Not involved	1.55**	.64*	2.59**	2.16**
Age				
< 35	1.58**	.89**	2.35**	2.25**
35 to 54	1.56**	.43	2.55**	2.02**
> 54	1.33**	.55	2.51**	3.05**

Each cell reports the coefficient for communication, suggesting higher cost in the same OLS regression as specified in Table 2, with the exception that when criminal justice involvement and age are used to stratify the sample, the stratification variable is then excluded as a control ($n = 1446$)

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$

subgroups, there was no clear pattern to these differences, and regardless, none of the coefficients were statistically distinguishable from one another.

For drunk driving, however, we did find some isolated differences in the focal coefficient across subgroups based on age. Starting with legal risk, the impact of the communication was nominally higher for young adults than in the remaining two groups. However, none of these coefficients were statistically distinguishable from each other and only one—the coefficient for a friend communication of higher legal risk to respondents under 35 years old—was on its own statistically different from zero. Moving to social costs, none of the focal coefficients for a stranger's communication was statistically different from zero. These null results for the focal coefficient within subgroups are likely attributable to reduced statistical power from stratifying the sample.

The most salient differences in coefficients across age groups are obtained for a communication of higher social costs from a friend: 1.61 for the < 35 group, 1.41 for the 35–54 group, and only.64 for those > 54. However, although the coefficient for the > 54 group is close to statistically distinguishable from each of the other two, in the end, it is not. Again, using the coefficient comparison test explicated in

Paternoster et al. (1998), for the comparison between the < 35 group and the > 54 group, $p = .02$, whereas for the comparison between the 35–54 and > 54 groups, $p = .03$. However, because there are three separate (multiple) statistical comparisons, a Bonferroni correction reduces the significance level to $\alpha = .05/3 = .017$. Therefore, although close, none of the three pairwise statistical tests reaches conventional significance when the significance level is adjusted downward to reflect the number of statistical comparisons. In sum, neither respondent age nor past criminal justice involvement had any consistent moderating effects on our central findings.

Discussion

Recently, McGloin and Thomas (2019) underscored the distinction between normative and situational peer influence. This provided the intellectual impetus for a productive merger of two previously disparate areas of criminological scholarship, one on peer influence and the other on offender decision making. Peer research had historically focused on normative processes whereby associated individuals reinforce each other's attitudes, values, and preferences regarding crime and conformity. But this emphasized temporally distal causes for crime, while neglecting situationally proximate social dynamics. As Reiss (1986) observed, offenders regularly commit crimes in the presence of other persons, and a comprehensive account of how these others influence criminal conduct is critical.

Research on offender decision making is typically grounded in the traditions of deterrence and rational choice. Although those perspectives address the potential influence of others—an example being Stafford and Warr's (1993) concepts of vicarious punishment and avoidance—too often, such models depict a solitary offender and thereby neglect situationally proximate social dynamics. The growing literature merging these traditions has increasingly unpacked how individuals influence one another, not just in terms of values and norms, but also during an opportunity to offend (e.g. Barnum & Pogarsky, 2022; Hoeben & Thomas, 2019; Hoeben et al., 2025; McGloin & Nguyen, 2012; Thomas & Nguyen, 2022).

Adding to this literature, Barnum and Pogarsky (2022) showed that "words matter," in that verbal utterances between associated individuals contemporaneous with a potential crime can influence core perceptions about the crime that, in turn, influence its likelihood. These perceptions involve the risk of legal punishments and the anticipated social costs. Our results put a finer point on this finding in that not all speakers are alike with respect to the impact of statements on the situational modification of these judgments. Although we found no moderating effect of speaker relationship for perceptions of the risk of legal punishment, substantial moderating effects *were* found with respect to the anticipated social costs. This comports with our ex ante expectation that any difference in the impact of friend versus stranger verbal communications should be most pronounced for the perceived social costs from crime. This is because, unlike legal consequences imposed by the Criminal Justice System, friends directly impose social costs on one another.

Since individuals are only boundedly rational (Kahneman, 2011; Simon, 1955), additions to an already robust stock of information about the risks and

costs from crime still generate perturbations in key judgments when crimes are considered. Going back to Geerken and Gove (1975), deterrence is often characterized as a process of information transmission. Our findings demonstrate, however, that it is critical where such information comes from, and the relationship to the person providing it truly matters. The current study offers a proof of concept for this point with two distinct relationships, friend versus stranger. Yet these two relationship statuses are by no means collectively exhaustive. Follow-up research would therefore be useful on other types of relationship, such as employers, governmental officials, and even romantic partners. Moreover, real world offending opportunities are naturally less "cut and dried" than in the research laboratory, and there are often multiple items of information, rather than one, communicated to a person contemplating a criminal offense. Unpacking the net impact of these multiple sources of information, particularly when they conflict, would only further illuminate the situational social dynamics of criminal opportunities.

In addition, there are several limitations in the current study that should be borne in mind for future research. First, we investigated two offenses, drunk driving and fighting, that were chosen to have the widest potential applicability across age groups. Future research should expand the range of offenses examined in order to more comprehensively address the potential moderating impacts of respondents' age. For example, interpersonal influences might be paramount in adolescence for adolescent-oriented transgressions, such as vandalism or recreational drug use. In contrast, age is likely to be a less important factor in interpersonal influence for more adult-oriented transgressions, such as shoplifting or embezzlement. Second, future research might consider whether the current findings and those from Barnum and Pogarsky (2022) are replicated in an immersive experimental setting such as Virtual Reality and 360° videos. Recent advancements in these immersive technologies have been found to more realistically account for important emotional dynamics entailed in real-world offending decisions (Herman et al., 2024; van Gelder et al., 2022; see van Gelder et al., 2024). Finally, although the present study had wide age variation amongst our adult respondents, the current study design rendered us unable to include adolescents. Thus, an important next step would be to compare a sample of adolescents to a sample of adults to further assess the robustness of the findings. Doing so would require more attention to the distinction between normative influence processes, which involve attitudes and values, and situational influence processes, which involve contemporaneous judgments about a specific crime opportunity.

In the end, we sought to lend further nuance to understanding how individuals influence one another toward either crime or conformity at the time of a potential criminal offense. We remain optimistic that this nascent merger of peers and offender decision-making research will provide synergies that improve our understanding of situational social dynamics in a manner that keeping these lines of research separate could not.

Appendix

Table 4 Vignettes and manipulations

	Stem	Added content			
		Increase social cost	Decrease social cost	Increase legal risk	Decrease legal risk
Drunk driving					
Friend	"Now, imagine that you are finishing dinner with your good friend at a local restaurant around 9 pm on a Thursday night. Your friend hasn't had any drinks, but you've had several drinks throughout the evening, and you suspect your blood alcohol content may exceed the legal limit. Earlier, you and your friend made conversation with someone dining alone at the next table over. After dinner, you decide you are going to drive the five miles home because you need your car the next morning for work. You tell your friend, who has noticed that you've had several drinks, that you're about to drive home. Your friend responds…"	"Don't do it! NO ONE drives drunk anymore it is so irresponsible! People who drive drunk are just selfish jerks!"	"Go for it! No one's going to judge you, EVERYONE drives drunk these days. Sometimes the ONLY way to get home after some drinking is to drive!"	"Don't do it! I know LOTS of people who have driven drunk and ALL of them have been pulled over by the police. It's too risky!"	"Go for it! I know LOTS of people who have driven drunk and none of them have EVER been pulled over by the police. You'll be fine!"
Stranger	"Now, imagine you are out at a bar on a Saturday night. You're holding an empty cup of water since you didn't feel like drinking. On your way to the counter to get another water, a drunken man runs into you causing him to spill some of his own drink. Suddenly, the man gets right in your face insulting and threatening you. You make eye contact with a friend of yours who you just noticed is nearby. You tell your friend that you are going to punch the drunk guy if he doesn't back off. Your friend responds…"				

Table 4 (continued)

	Stem	Added content			
		Increase social cost	Decrease social cost	Increase legal risk	Decrease legal risk
Fighting					
Friend	"Now, imagine that you are finishing dinner with your good friend at a local restaurant around 9 pm on a Thursday night. Your friend hasn't had any drinks, but you've had several drinks throughout the evening, and you suspect your blood alcohol content may exceed the legal limit. Earlier, you and your friend made conversation with someone dining alone at the next table over. After dinner, your friend leaves, and you decide you are going to drive the five miles home because you need your car the next morning for work. You tell the stranger, who has noticed that you've had several drinks, that you're about to drive home. The stranger responds…"	"Do it! NO ONE is going to judge you. He deserves it! Sometimes you have to STAND UP for yourself!"	"Don't do it! It's just a drink, it's NOT worth it. Besides, NOBODY likes people who get into bar fights anymore!"	"Don't do it! They have ZERO tolerance for fighting at this bar. They'll DEFINITELY call the cops, and you might get arrested!"	"Do it! They don't call the cops for fighting at this bar, it's NOT worth their time. The MOST they'd do is kick you out!"
Stranger	"Now, imagine you are out at a bar on a Saturday night. You're holding an empty cup of water since you didn't feel like drinking. On your way to the counter to get another water, a drunken man runs into you causing him to spill some of his own drink. Suddenly, the man gets right in your face insulting and threatening you. You make eye contact with a nearby stranger. You tell the stranger that you are going to punch the drunk guy if he doesn't back off. The stranger responds…"				

Table 5 Attention checks

We would like to get a sense of your general preferences	Options:
Most modern theories of decision making recognize that decisions do not take place in vacuums. Individual preferences and knowledge, along with situational variables can greatly impact the decision process. To demonstrate that you have read this much, just go ahead and select both red and green among the alternatives below, no matter what your favorite color is. Yes, ignore the question below and select both of those options	Purple Pink Blue Red Green Yellow
What is your favorite color?	
Please answer "neither agree nor disagree" for this question	1, strongly agree 2, somewhat agree 3, neither agree or disagree 4, somewhat disagree 5, strongly disagree

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