

From Evidence to Justification: How Causal Attribution Shapes Public Judgments of Police Searches

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Abstract: Probable cause, required by the Fourth Amendment, and reasonable suspicion, articulated by the Supreme Court in *Terry v. Ohio* (1968), are distinct legal standards that authorize different levels of police intrusion. Although these standards differ in legal doctrine, both rely on subjective evaluations of evidentiary sufficiency. Drawing on attribution theory and research on heuristic judgment, this study investigates how evidence type (direct vs. indirect), crime-rate context (high vs. low), and competing legal standards influence public shape evaluations of police searches. A $2 \times 2 \times 2$ between-subjects experiment was conducted with 299 U.S. participants. was analyzed using a serial mediation model (PROCESS Model 6; Hayes, 2022). We find that evidence type was the strongest predictor of search justification, perception of guilt, and likelihood of finding relevant evidence. Crime-rate context also increased support for police searches, whereas legal standards had smaller effects on search justification and perception of guilt. Serial mediation analyses showed significant indirect effects through perception of guilt and the sequential pathway through perception of guilt and likelihood of relevant evidence from the search. These findings suggest that public evaluations of police conduct are shaped by evidentiary and contextual information as well as legal standards, highlighting the role of psychological processes in legal decision-making.

Keywords: Reasonable suspicion; Probable cause; Police searches; Attribution theory

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1. Introduction

In U.S. Law, the Fourth Amendment distinguishes between “reasonable suspicion” and “probable cause,” two evidentiary thresholds that authorize different forms of police intrusion. The reasonable suspicion standard, established in *Terry v. Ohio* (1968), allows brief investigatory stops based on specific, articulable facts suggesting criminal activity, while probable cause, required for arrests and search warrants, demands a higher evidentiary showing^[1-2]. Although these standards are formally differentiated in doctrine, neither is defined

by a fixed quantitative rule. Probable cause has been described as a “practical, nontechnical conception” grounded in “the factual and practical considerations of everyday life on which reasonable and prudent men, not legal technicians, act” (Page 175) ^[3]. Similarly, reasonable suspicion requires no numerical threshold but instead depends on “specific articulable facts, together with rational inferences from those facts” assessed under a totality-of-the-circumstances framework (Page 238; 417) ^[2, 4]. Because both standards require judges to exercise judgment rather than apply fixed rules mechanically, appellate courts retain the authority to review such determinations independently, rather than simply deferring to the conclusions of lower courts ^[5]. As a result, the interpretation of evidentiary strength becomes central to assessing police conduct ^[6–7].

Judgments of evidentiary sufficiency are not purely logical assessments of probability; they also reflect interpretive and normative evaluations of what the available evidence means ^[8]. Research in attribution theory suggests that individuals are sensitive to whether evidence appears causally connected to an outcome ^[9–10]. Direct evidence, such as eyewitness identification, provides a clearer causal pathway linking a suspect to a crime ^[11]. By contrast, behavioral cues or contextual indicators may be merely associative with wrongdoing, leaving greater room for interpretive flexibility ^[12]. This flexibility raises an important question about the role of environmental context. Legal doctrine permits consideration of whether an encounter occurs in a “high-crime area”, thereby incorporating base-rate information into assessments of suspicion ^[13]. However, research on heuristic judgment suggests that contextual cues can shape perceived diagnosticity, particularly when primary evidence is ambiguous ^[14]. Under such conditions, correlational cues may be perceived as more probative than they would be in isolation.

Despite extensive discussion of neighborhood context in both legal and psychological aspects, relatively little empirical work has examined how evidence type, crime context, and legal standards jointly influence public evaluations of police searches. In particular, it remains unclear whether lay observers meaningfully differentiate between reasonable suspicion and probable cause when evaluating a completed search and how different forms of evidence shape these judgments. Furthermore, few studies have examined the psychological mechanisms through which evidence type influences perceptions of search justification.

The present study addresses these questions using a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ factorial design manipulating evidence type (direct vs. circumstantial), crime context (high vs. low), and legal standard (reasonable suspicion vs. probable cause). Drawing on attribution theory and heuristic judgment, the study examines how these factors shape public evaluations of police searches and whether the influence of evidence type operates indirectly through perceptions of guilt and expectations regarding the likelihood of finding relevant evidence. The following literature review develops the theoretical rationale for examining how evidence type, crime context, and legal standards shape public evaluations of police searches and motivates the proposed serial mediation framework.

2. Literature review

2.1. The legal architecture of suspicion: Reasonable suspicion vs. probable cause

The Fourth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution governs the balance between individual privacy and public safety through two primary evidentiary thresholds (U.S. Const. amend. IV). Reasonable Suspicion (RS), established in *Terry v. Ohio* (1968), requires specific and articulable facts that would lead a reasonable officer to suspect criminal activity is afoot. In contrast, Probable Cause (PC) requires a higher “fair probability” of guilt to justify arrests or full searches. However, legal scholars argue that these standards are inherently “fluid” and “elastic” ^[15]. For the layperson, the distinction between a “reasonable” and a “probable” conclusion is often cognitively blurred.

This ambiguity may allow psychological heuristics to influence public evaluations of police decisions. Empirical evidence suggests that laypeople’s intuitive rankings of “suspiciousness” often diverge sharply

from the Supreme Court's categorical distinctions ^[16]. Furthermore, because precise mathematical probabilities do not define these standards, they are susceptible to "schema-consistent" interpretations, in which individuals use their prior beliefs about crime to fill in the gaps in the evidence ^[17].

2.2. Causal attribution and the weight of evidence

The way people evaluate encounters with police is strongly informed by Attribution Theory, which suggests that individuals act as "naive psychologists," continuously attempting to infer the causes behind observed behaviors ^[9-10]. In policing, this involves a critical distinction between causal evidence and correlational cues ^[18]. Causal evidence, such as a direct forensic link or physical evidence, establishes a mechanistic connection between a suspect and a specific criminal act. In contrast, many factors used to justify police stops are merely correlational or "associative," such as a suspect's presence in a high-crime area or an evasive demeanor. Despite their lower legal reliability, psychological research suggests that lay observers often overweigh these correlational cues ^[19]. This is partly due to the representativeness heuristic, in which individuals judge the likelihood of guilt based on how closely a suspect fits a stereotypical "criminal" prototype rather than on the statistical probability of crime ^[20].

When evaluating a suspect's actions (e.g., fleeing at the sight of police), the public is prone to the Fundamental Attribution Error ^[21]. This cognitive bias leads observers to over-attribute a suspect's behavior to internal, dispositional factors, such as "consciousness of guilt" or criminal intent, while systematically underestimating situational explanations, such as fear of police misconduct or social pressure ^[22].

Attribution theory also suggests that different forms of evidence vary in their perceived diagnostic value. Direct evidence provides a clearer causal connection between a suspect and an alleged offense, allowing observers to make stronger inferences regarding guilt and responsibility. In contrast, circumstantial evidence requires greater interpretation and may be viewed as less informative regarding a suspect's involvement in criminal activity. As a result, individuals may perceive police actions as more justified when they are supported by direct evidence rather than circumstantial evidence. This distinction is particularly important in legal decision-making contexts, where judgments often depend on how people interpret the strength and meaning of available evidence.

2.3. Heuristics and the "high-crime neighborhood" context

A central tension in Fourth Amendment jurisprudence is the "high-crime area" designation. While the Supreme Court ruled in *Illinois v. Wardlow* (2000) that a location's characteristics can be a relevant factor in an officer's assessment of suspicion, psychological research suggests that this context profoundly distorts lay evaluations of evidence through specific cognitive shortcuts. The most pervasive bias in this context is the base-rate fallacy ^[14]. When individuals evaluate a police stop in a "high-crime" neighborhood, they tend to over-rely on the salient "criminal" reputation of the area while neglecting the statistical reality that the vast majority of individuals in that neighborhood are law-abiding citizens. As Slobogin (1991) noted, lay observers often allow the "denominator" of the neighborhood to dictate the "numerator" of individual suspicion, effectively lowering the evidentiary bar required for a stop to be perceived as legitimate ^[23].

Neighborhoods function as powerful cognitive schemas. Research by Quillian and Pager (2001) demonstrates that perceptions of neighborhood crime are often decoupled from actual crime rates and are instead driven by social stereotypes ^[24]. When a neighborhood is labeled "high-crime," it activates an "associative network" of danger and criminality in the observer's mind. Consequently, according to the

availability heuristic, examples of crime are easily recalled, leading the public to overestimate the likelihood that any given individual in that space is engaged in illicit activity^[20].

High-crime environments may therefore function as heuristic cues that independently influence judgments of police conduct. Rather than changing the legal meaning of evidence, crime context may provide additional information that shapes perceptions of risk, suspicion, and public safety^[14, 20]. Research suggests that contextual crime information can activate crime-related schemas and increase the perceived diagnosticity of otherwise ambiguous cues, leading observers to draw stronger inferences regarding criminal involvement^[17, 24]. As a result, individuals may view police searches as more justified when they occur in high-crime settings, even when the evidentiary information remains constant^[13, 23].

2.4. The Present Study

Despite extensive discussion of neighborhood context in both legal and psychological aspects, relatively little empirical work has examined how evidence type, crime context, and legal standards jointly influence public evaluations of police searches. In particular, it remains unclear whether lay observers meaningfully differentiate between reasonable suspicion and probable cause when evaluating a completed search and how different forms of evidence shape these judgments. Furthermore, few studies have examined the psychological mechanisms through which evidence type influences perceptions of search justification.

We use a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ factorial design that manipulates evidence type (direct vs. circumstantial), crime context (high vs. low), and legal standard (reasonable suspicion vs. probable cause). We hypothesize that evidence type, crime context, and legal standards will each independently influence public evaluations of police searches. In addition, we examine whether the effect of evidence type on search justification operates through perception of guilt certainty and likelihood of relevant evidence from the search. This theoretical sequence provides the basis for the proposed serial mediation model.

2.5. Serial Mediation Framework

The theoretical accounts reviewed in the preceding sections suggest that evidence type and crime context do not influence justification judgments in isolation, but rather operate through a sequence of cognitive appraisals. To formalize this evaluative process, the present study adopts a serial mediation framework grounded in Hayes' PROCESS Model 6^[26]. This model allows for the decomposition of how situational inputs are translated into legal judgments through a structured chain of psychological inferences.

The proposed process model is illustrated in Figure 1, which depicts the serial mediational pathway linking evidence type to justification judgments via perception of guilt and likelihood of relevant evidence from search. The model specifies three indirect pathways linking evidence type to perceived search justification. The first indirect pathway (a1b1) operates through perception of guilt alone: direct evidence increases perceptions of the suspect's guilt, which in turn increases judgments that the search is justified. The second indirect pathway (a1d2b2) represents a serial mediation process, whereby direct evidence increases perception of guilt, which subsequently increases the perceived likelihood of finding incriminating evidence during the search, ultimately leading to stronger justification judgments. The third indirect pathway (a2b2) operates through the perceived likelihood of finding incriminating evidence alone, independent of perception of guilt. By estimating these three indirect effects simultaneously, PROCESS Model 6 decomposes the total indirect effect into three theoretically distinct mediation pathways.

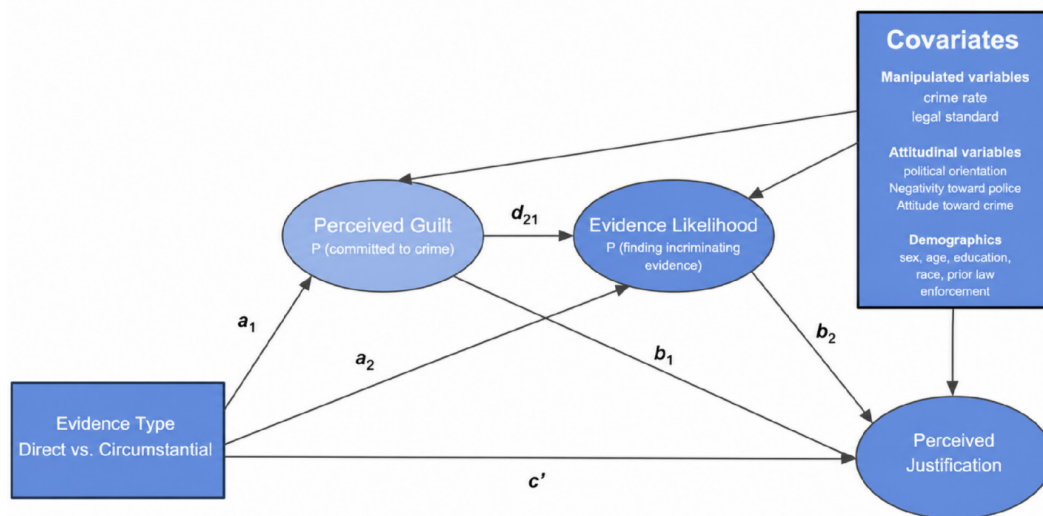


Figure 1. Process model

3. Method

3.1.Design Overview

The present study employed a 2 (Evidence Type: direct vs. circumstantial) $\times$ 2 (Crime-Rate Context: high vs. low) $\times$ 2 (Legal Standard: reasonable suspicion vs. probable cause) between-subjects factorial design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of eight experimental conditions, each presenting a written vignette describing a police officer's decision to search an individual. The three independent variables were systematically manipulated across vignettes, while all other information was held constant to eliminate potential confounding variables. The primary dependent variables were search justification, perception of guilt, and likelihood of relevant evidence from search.

3.2. Participants

A prior power analysis indicated that a total sample of 299 participants achieves sufficient power ($\geq .80$) to detect medium and large effect sizes for the $2 \times 2 \times 2$ between-subjects ANOVA ($\alpha = .05$). We recruited 300 participants through Qualtrics, distributed by Prolific. After exclusions, the final sample included 299 participants. One participant was excluded for failing the attention check item embedded within the questionnaire. Inclusion criteria are: (a) fluency in English, and (b) current residence in the United States, to ensure a basic familiarity with domestic legal concepts and policing. Because this study examines legal concepts grounded in the U.S. Constitution, (c) participants are required to be U.S. citizens. (d) Participants should have a general background in legal concepts; currently enrolled in law school or holding a Juris Doctor degree will be excluded. Demographic characteristics of the final sample are presented in Table 1. The sample was predominantly female (52.8%) and White (75.3%), with a mean age of 41.3 years ($SD = 13.4$, range = 18–78). Most participants reported relatively high educational attainment, with 35.5% holding a bachelor's degree and 13.7% holding a graduate or professional degree. Additionally, 15.4% of participants reported prior law enforcement experience. Political orientation varied across the sample, with 43.8% identifying as conservative, 24.4% as moderate, and 23.4% as liberal.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Female	158	52.8
Male	138	46.2
Prefer not to disclose	3	1.0
Race/Ethnicity		
White	225	75.3
Black or African American	50	16.7
Hispanic or Latino	23	7.7
Asian	21	7.0
Native American	7	2.3
Education		
Less than high school	4	1.3
High school/GED	51	17.1
Some college	64	21.4
Associate degree	33	11.0
Bachelor's degree	106	35.5
Graduate/Professional degree	41	13.7
Political Orientation		
Conservative (1-3)	131	43.8
Moderate (4)	73	24.4
Liberal (5-7)	70	23.4
Prefer not to answer	25	8.4
Prior Law Enforcement		
Yes	46	15.4
No	253	84.6

Note. *N* = 299. Age: *M* = 41.3, *SD* = 13.4, range = 18–78. Participants were recruited via Prolific and were required to be U.S. citizens. One participant was excluded for failing an embedded attention check. Percentages for race/ethnicity may exceed 100% because participants could select multiple categories.

3.3. Measures

The following measures were administered to all participants. Descriptive statistics for each scale are integrated into the relevant sections of the Results below.

Search Justification. Participants rated how justified the officer's decision to search the individual was on a continuous scale from 0 (Not at all justified) to 100 (Absolutely justified).

Perception of Guilt. Participants rated how likely they thought it was that the suspect committed the crime under investigation on a continuous scale from 0% (Not certain at all) to 100% (Absolutely certain).

Likelihood of Finding Evidence. Participants rated how likely they thought incriminating evidence would be found during the search on a continuous scale from 0% (Not likely at all) to 100% (Extremely likely).

Police Perception. Participants completed a 9-item measure assessing general perceptions of the police, which combined two domains: community engagement (3 items assessing police responsiveness, visibility, and availability) and institutional performance (6 items assessing public safety priorities, response speed,

fairness, transparency, and effectiveness in addressing violent crime). The first three items were originally measured on a three-point frequency scale (1 = Never, 2 = Often, 3 = Always), whereas the remaining six items were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly agree, 5 = Strongly disagree). All items were coded in the same direction, with lower scores indicating more favorable perceptions of the police and higher scores indicating more negative perceptions. The combined scale demonstrated high internal consistency ($\alpha = .88$, $M = 2.06$, $SD = 0.61$).

Crime Perception. Participants completed a 5-item measure assessing general perceptions of crime prevalence. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The item assessing media coverage of crime (“Media coverage makes me feel that crime is more common than it actually is”) was reverse-coded, as those who agree with this statement are presumed to perceive lower actual crime prevalence. The remaining four items were retained in their original direction, with higher scores indicating greater perceived crime. Internal consistency was acceptable ($\alpha = .73$, $M = 2.74$, $SD = 0.71$).

3.4. Procedure

The study is administered online via Qualtrics. After providing electronic informed consent and a legal background check, participants are randomly assigned to one of the eight conditions and read about the corresponding vignette. They then complete the measures in the following fixed order: (1) justification rating, (2) perception of guilt, (3) manipulation checks, (4) exploratory covariates, and (5) demographic questionnaire. Finally, all participants receive a comprehensive debriefing statement explaining the study’s purpose, the experimental manipulations, and the legal definitions of reasonable suspicion and probable cause.

4. Results

For all analyses, the three experimental factors were coded as follows: Evidence Type was coded 1 for direct evidence and 0 for circumstantial evidence. Crime-Rate Context was coded 1 for high-crime context and 0 for low-crime context. Legal Standard was coded 1 for probable cause and 0 for reasonable suspicion. The three primary outcome variables—Search Justification, Perception of Guilt, and Likelihood of Relevant Evidence from Search—were measured on continuous scales. Distributions of all three outcome variables were approximately normal (justification: skewness = -0.32 , kurtosis = -1.09 ; perception of guilt: skewness = -0.10 , kurtosis = -0.95 ; likelihood of finding evidence: skewness = -0.17 , kurtosis = -0.90), supporting the use of parametric analyses.

4.1. Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations

Pearson correlation analyses were conducted to examine the relationships among the three experimental manipulations (evidence type, crime-rate context, and legal threshold) and the primary study variables, including perception of guilt, likelihood of relevant evidence from search, and search justification.

Table 2: *Correlations of All Variables With Mediating and Outcome Variables*

Variable	Search Justification	Perception of Guilt	Likelihood of Finding Evidence
1. Evidence Type ¹	.473***	.483***	.371***
2. Crime Rate ²	.155**	.177**	.204***

3. Legal Standard ³	.149**	.139*	.088
4. Search Justification	—	.778***	.759***
5. Perception of Guilt	.778***	—	.854***
6. Likelihood of Finding Evidence	.759***	.854***	—
7. Crime Perception	.122*	.177**	.180**
8. Police Perception	-.214***	-.282***	-.223***
9. Education	-.087	-.111	-.073
10. Political Orientation	.160**	.242***	.227***
11. Prior Law Enforcement	-.057	-.081	-.101
12. Age	.106	.094	.140*
13. Gender	-.103	-.077	-.001
14. Race	.089	.051	.115*

Note. N = 299. Evidence Type: Direct Evidence = 1, Circumstantial Evidence = 0. Crime Rate: High = 1, Low = 0. Legal Standard: Probable Cause = 1, Reasonable Suspicion = 0. 1Evidence Type, 2Crime Rate, and 3Legal Standard are dummy-coded variables. Crime Perception was scored with the media item reverse-coded and the remaining four items in their original direction ($\alpha = .73$).

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

The correlation matrix is presented in Table 2. Evidence type demonstrated the strongest associations with the primary outcome variables. Participants exposed to direct evidence reported significantly higher levels of perception of guilt, $r = .483$, $p < .001$, greater expectations that incriminating evidence would be discovered during the search, $r = .371$, $p < .001$, and stronger perceptions that the officer's search decision was justified, $r = .473$, $p < .001$. These moderate correlations provide preliminary support for the hypothesis that evidentiary quality serves as a central determinant of legal judgments.

Crime-rate context was also significantly associated with all three evaluative outcomes, although the magnitude of these relationships was notably smaller. Participants exposed to the high-crime context reported greater perception of guilt, $r = .177$, $P = .002$, stronger likelihood of finding evidence, $r = .204$, $P < .001$, and higher levels of search justification, $r = .155$, $P = .007$. These findings suggest that contextual crime information may influence legal evaluations, but to a substantially lesser extent than evidentiary information.

Similarly, the legal threshold was positively associated with perception of guilt, $r = .139$, $P = .016$, and search justification, $r = .149$, $P = .010$. However, the legal threshold was not significantly associated with expectations of evidence discovery, $r = .088$, $P = .126$. This pattern suggests that legal standards may shape evaluative judgments regarding guilt and procedural legitimacy without substantially altering expectations about the likelihood of discovering additional evidence.

Strong positive associations were observed among the three psychological judgment variables. Perception of guilt was highly correlated with likelihood of relevant evidence from search, $r = .854$, $P < .001$, indicating that participants who believed the suspect was more likely to have committed a crime were also more likely to expect incriminating evidence to be uncovered. Perception of guilt was also strongly associated with search justification, $r = .778$, $P < .001$. Likewise, likelihood of relevant evidence from search was strongly related to search justification, $r = .759$, $P < .001$. The magnitude of these relationships is consistent with the proposed theoretical account linking guilt judgments, evidence-discovery expectations, and evaluations of investigative justification.

Additional correlational analyses were conducted to examine the role of crime perception. Crime

perception was not significantly associated with the crime-rate manipulation ($r = .043$, $p = .459$), indicating that participants' preexisting beliefs about crime prevalence were largely independent of the experimental manipulation. This finding suggests that crime perception functioned as an individual-difference variable rather than as a manipulation check for the crime-rate condition.

Crime perception was significantly related to search justification, $r = .122$, $p = .034$; perception of guilt, $r = .177$, $p = .002$; and likelihood of relevant evidence from the search, $r = .180$, $p = .002$. Participants reporting higher perceptions of crime prevalence exhibited greater certainty regarding the suspect's guilt, greater expectations that incriminating evidence would be discovered, and stronger judgments that the search was justified.

4.2. Main Effects of Experimental Manipulations

4.2.1. Search Justification

A $2 \times 2 \times 2$ between-subjects analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted to examine the effects of evidence type, crime-rate context, and legal standard on search justification ratings, controlling for demographic and attitudinal covariates. Figure 2 presents the estimated marginal means for search justification across all eight experimental conditions.

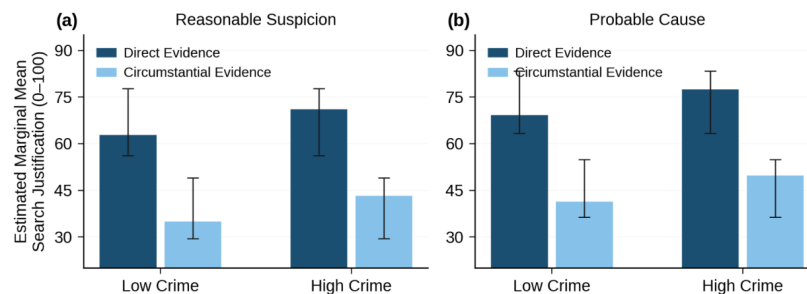


Figure 2 : *Estimated Mean Justification Ratings by Evidence Type and Neighborhood Crime Rate Across the Two Legal Standards.*

After adjusting for these covariates, the overall model remained significant, $F(11, 287) = 13.03$, $p < .001$, explaining 33.3% of the variance in justification ratings ($R^2 = .333$). Evidence type continued to exert a strong and significant effect on justification judgments, $F(1, 287) = 84.02$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .226$. Crime context also showed a significant main effect, $F(1, 287) = 8.30$, $p = .004$, $\eta^2 = .028$, as did legal standard, $F(1, 287) = 4.66$, $p = .032$, $\eta^2 = .016$. All two-way and three-way interactions were non-significant. Among the covariates, only attitudes toward police significantly predicted justification ratings, $B = -6.76$, $SE = 2.20$, $t = -3.08$, $p = .002$. The negative coefficient indicates that participants with less favorable attitudes toward police tended to view the officer's search decision as less justified. All other covariates were not significant predictors.

4.2.2. Perception of Guilt

A parallel ANCOVA was conducted with perception of guilt as the dependent variable. Figure 3 displays the estimated marginal means for perception of guilt across all eight experimental conditions.

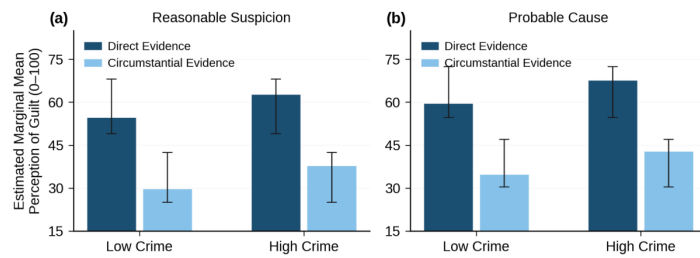


Figure 3: Estimated Mean Perceived Guilt Ratings by Evidence Type and Neighborhood Crime Rate Across the Two Legal Standards.

For the certainty that the suspect committed a crime, the overall model was significant, $F(11, 287) = 17.45$, $p < .001$, explaining 40.1% of the variance in certainty judgments ($R^2 = .401$, Adjusted $R^2 = .376$). After controlling for the covariates, a strong main effect of evidence type emerged, $F(1, 287) = 98.69$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .256$. Participants in the direct evidence condition reported certainty ratings that were, on average, 24.88 points higher than those in the reference condition ($B = 24.88$, $SE = 2.50$, $p < .001$). A significant main effect of crime context was also observed, $F(1, 287) = 11.50$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .039$. The main effect of the legal standard was significant, $F(1, 287) = 4.10$, $p = .043$, $\eta^2 = .014$. No significant two-way or three-way interactions were found.

Several covariates were significantly associated with certainty ratings. Positive attitudes toward police significantly predicted certainty judgments ($B = -7.84$, $SE = 1.82$, $p < .001$). Higher levels of education predicted lower certainty ($B = -1.90$, $SE = 0.88$, $p = .032$), whereas greater political conservatism was associated with higher certainty ratings ($B = 1.95$, $SE = 0.67$, $p = .004$). Higher crime perception also predicted greater certainty ($B = 4.04$, $SE = 1.84$, $p = .028$). Age, gender, race, and prior law-enforcement experience were not significant predictors.

4.2.3. Likelihood of Finding Evidence

A third ANCOVA examined the effects on the likelihood of finding relevant evidence. Figure 4 shows the estimated marginal means across all eight experimental conditions.

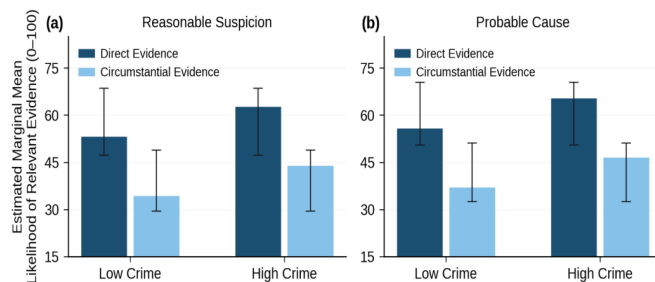


Figure 4: Estimated Mean Likelihood of Relevant Evidence from Search by Evidence Type and Neighborhood Crime Rate Across the Two Legal Standards.

For the likelihood of finding evidence, the overall model was significant, $F(11, 287) = 10.94$, $P < .001$, explaining 29.5% of the variance in participants' likelihood judgments ($R^2 = .295$, Adjusted $R^2 = .266$). After adjusting for the covariates, a significant main effect of evidence type was observed, $F(1, 287) = 49.49$, $P < .001$.

.001, $\eta^2 = .147$. Consistent with the previous dependent variables, participants in the direct evidence condition reported significantly higher expectations that incriminating evidence would be discovered than those in the reference condition ($B = 18.78$, $SE = 2.67$, $p < .001$). A significant main effect of crime context also emerged, $F(1, 287) = 14.11$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .047$, indicating that participants expected incriminating evidence to be found more often in higher-crime environments. In contrast, legal standards did not significantly influence likelihood judgments, $F(1, 287) = 1.00$, $p = .318$, $\eta^2 = .003$. None of the two-way interactions between evidence type, crime context, and legal standard, nor the three-way interaction, reached statistical significance.

Among the covariates, positive attitudes toward police significantly predicted higher likelihood ratings ($B = -5.91$, $SE = 1.94$, $p = .002$). Political orientation also significantly predicted likelihood judgments ($B = 1.74$, $SE = 0.71$, $p = .015$), indicating that more conservative participants tended to report greater expectations that incriminating evidence would be found. Crime perception was also a significant predictor ($B = 4.42$, $SE = 1.96$, $p = .024$). Age, gender, race, education, and prior law-enforcement experience were not significant predictors.

4.3.Note. N = 299. Serial Mediation Analysis

To examine the psychological mechanisms through which evidence type influenced evaluations of search justification, a sequential mediation model (PROCESS Model 6; Hayes, 2022) was estimated with perception of guilt as the first mediator and likelihood of relevant evidence from search as the second mediator. Crime-rate context, legal threshold, demographic variables, and attitudinal measures were included as covariates. Figure 5 presents the results of the serial mediation analysis, including all path coefficients and indirect effects.

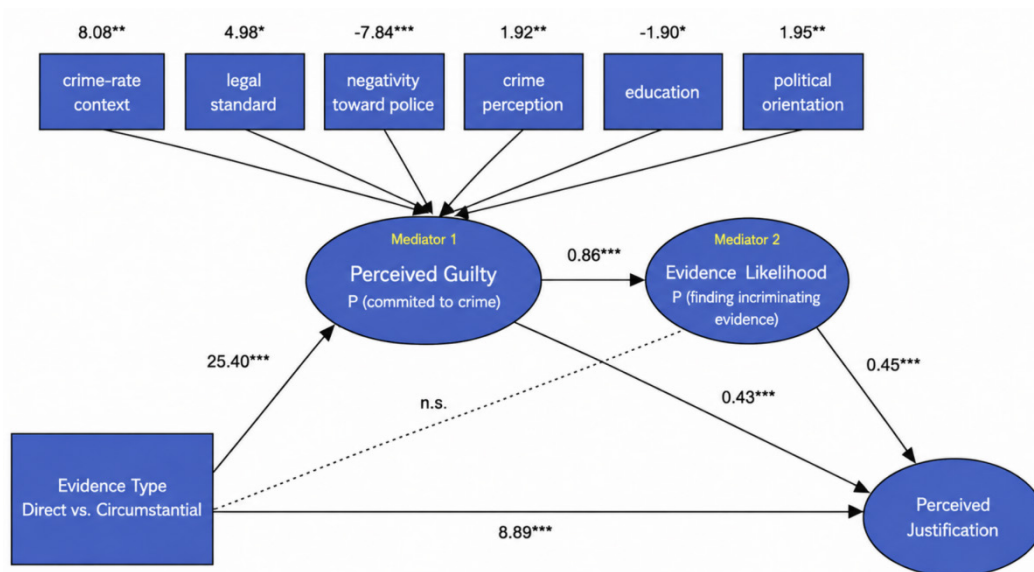


Figure 5 :Serial Mediation Model: Effect of Evidence Type on Search Justification Through Perception of Guilt and Likelihood of Relevant Evidence from Search

Table 3 presents the full regression coefficients for each path of the serial mediation model, along with bootstrap estimates of indirect effects based on 5,000 resamples.

Table 3 :Regression Coefficients and Indirect Effects for the Serial Mediation Model

Predictor	B	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Model 1: Outcome = Perception of Guilt (M1) $R^2 = .368, p < .001$						
Evidence Type	25.40	2.56	9.93	< .001	20.39	30.41
Crime-Rate Context	8.08	2.38	3.39	.001	3.39	12.77
Legal Standard	4.98	2.46	2.03	.043	0.15	9.80
Police Perception	-7.84	1.82	-4.32	< .001	-11.39	-4.28
Crime Perception	1.92	0.68	2.80	.005	0.58	3.25
Education	-1.90	0.88	-2.15	.032	-3.63	-0.17
Political Orientation	1.95	0.67	2.91	.004	0.64	3.26
Model 2: Outcome = Likelihood of Relevant Evidence (M2) $R^2 = .744$						
Evidence Type	-2.72	1.86	-1.46	.144	-6.37	0.93
Perception of Guilt (M1)	0.86	0.04	23.34	< .001	0.79	0.93
Model 3: Outcome = Search Justification (Y) $R^2 = .660$						
Perception of Guilt (M1)	0.43	0.09	5.06	< .001	0.26	0.60
Likelihood of Relevant Evidence (M2)	0.45	0.08	5.67	< .001	0.29	0.60
Evidence Type	8.89	2.51	3.54	< .001	3.97	13.81
Indirect Effects (Bootstrap 5,000 resamples)						
Total indirect effect	19.48				14.37	24.87
Evid. Type → M1 → Justification	10.78				4.93	16.75
Evid. Type → M1 → M2 → Justification	9.77				5.84	14.98
Evid. Type → M2 → Justification	-1.17				-2.82	0.29

Note. N = 299. B = unstandardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error. LLCI and ULCI = lower and upper limits of 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals (5,000 resamples). Indirect effects estimated using PROCESS Model 6 (Hayes, 2022). Crime Perception was scored with the media item reverse-coded and the remaining four items in their original direction ($\alpha = .73$).

The model revealed a significant direct effect of evidence type on search justification, $B = 8.89$, $SE = 2.51$, $t(285) = 3.54$, $P < .001$, 95% CI [3.97, 13.81]. Evidence type strongly predicted perception of guilt, $B = 25.40$, $SE = 2.56$, $P < .001$. In turn, perception of guilt significantly predicted both likelihood of relevant evidence from search expectations, $B = 0.86$, $SE = 0.04$, $P < .001$, and search justification, $B = 0.43$, $SE = 0.09$, $P < .001$. Evidence discovery expectations also significantly predicted search justification, $B = 0.45$, $SE = 0.08$, $P < .001$. Notably, evidence type did not directly predict likelihood of relevant evidence from search expectations once perception of guilt was included in the model, $B = -2.72$, $P = .144$.

Bootstrap analyses based on 5,000 resamples indicated a significant total indirect effect of evidence type on search justification, $B = 19.48$, 95% CI [14.37, 24.87]. Examination of specific indirect pathways revealed two significant mediation effects. First, evidence type exerted an indirect effect on search justification through perception of guilt alone, $B = 10.78$, 95% CI [4.93, 16.75]. Second, a significant sequential indirect effect emerged through perception of guilt and evidence discovery expectations, $B = 10.78$, 95% CI [4.93, 16.75]. Second, a significant sequential indirect effect emerged through perception of guilt and evidence discovery expectations, $B = 9.77$, 95% CI [5.84, 14.98]. In contrast, the indirect pathway through evidence discovery expectations alone was not significant, $B = -1.17$, 95% CI [-2.82, 0.29].

Taken together, these findings are consistent with the proposed theoretical account. The persistence of a significant direct effect of evidence type on search justification ($B = 8.89$, $SE = 2.51$, $P < .001$), together with significant indirect effects, indicates partial mediation.

5. Discussion

Across three dependent variables—perceived search justification, perception of guilt likelihood of relevant evidence from search—evidence type emerged as the strongest and most consistent predictor. Participants exposed to direct evidence consistently evaluated the suspect as more likely guilty, expected a greater likelihood of discovering incriminating evidence, and viewed the officer's search decision as more justified. Furthermore, the serial mediation analysis revealed that evidence type influenced justification judgments through a sequential cognitive process in which evidence shaped guilt perceptions, guilt perceptions shaped expectations regarding additional evidence, and these expectations ultimately influenced evaluations of police conduct. These findings suggest that public evaluations of legal decisions are shaped less by formal legal standards alone and more by how individuals interpret the causal meaning of available evidence.

- (1) Two significant mediating paths, both involving guilt perception. (2) Partial rather than full mediation ($c' = 8.89$, $p < .001$). (3) Crime-rate context and legal standard influence guilt (Model 1) but not evidence expectations (Model 2) or justification (Model 3). (4) Attitudes toward police, political orientation, education, and crime perception all influence guilt perceptions (Model 1).

5.1. Evidence type as the primary driver of legal judgment

The strongest finding of the present study is that evidence type played a central role in shaping legal evaluations. Direct evidence produced substantially stronger effects than crime context or legal standards across all outcomes, indicating that individuals place particular importance on information that establishes a clear causal connection between a suspect and a criminal act.

Importantly, the current findings extend previous research by demonstrating that causal evidence influences not only judgments of guilt but also perceptions of procedural legitimacy. Participants appeared to use evidence-based assessments of responsibility as a foundation for evaluating whether police intervention was appropriate. Consistent with procedural justice theory, evaluations of legal authority are shaped by perceptions of fairness and appropriateness rather than outcomes alone^[27]. Thus, the perceived strength of evidence may serve as a psychological bridge between information processing and normative judgments regarding the legitimacy of police searches.

5.2. Cognitive mechanisms underlying legal evaluation

The serial mediation findings provide important insight into how individuals translate evidentiary information into legal judgments. Rather than directly determining whether a police search was justified, evidence type influenced evaluations through a structured inferential process. Specifically, direct evidence increased perceptions of a suspect's guilt, which subsequently increased expectations that additional incriminating evidence would be discovered during a search.

This pattern suggests that individuals may engage in a form of inferential confirmation when evaluating police decisions. Once a suspect is perceived as likely responsible for a crime, observers may become more inclined to expect the discovery of additional evidence and, consequently, view investigative actions as more reasonable and appropriate. Such findings are consistent with research on confirmation bias, which demonstrates that individuals often seek, interpret, and evaluate information in ways that reinforce their existing beliefs and expectations^[28]. Similarly, theories of belief-consistent information processing suggest that initial judgments can shape expectations about future outcomes, creating a self-reinforcing evaluative process^[29].

More broadly, the present findings indicate that legal judgments may be influenced not only by the evidence available at the time of a police decision but also by assumptions regarding what future investigation is likely

to reveal. Individuals appear to construct coherent narratives that connect current evidence, inferred guilt, and anticipated evidentiary outcomes, rather than relying exclusively on objective assessments of the facts. Consequently, perceptions of search justification may reflect a broader psychological process of sense-making, in which expectations about future evidence become integrated into evaluations of procedural legitimacy.

5.3. The role of crime context in public judgment

Across the ANCOVA models, a consistent pattern emerged: while evidence type and crime context both independently influenced legal evaluations, no significant interaction effects were observed. This suggests that participants did not integrate evidentiary and contextual information in a multiplicative or contingent manner. Instead, the effects of each factor appeared to operate additively with evidence type exerting a substantially stronger and more stable influence across outcomes.

The absence of interaction effects is theoretically informative. It indicates that individuals do not appear to dynamically adjust the weight of evidence based on contextual crime severity, nor do they reinterpret contextual cues in light of evidentiary strength. Rather, these factors seem to be processed in parallel but relatively independent evaluative channels. This pattern aligns with prior research in judgment and decision-making suggesting that individuals often rely on simplifying strategies that avoid complex integration of multiple probabilistic cues, particularly in socially or morally loaded contexts^[30].

More broadly, the additive pattern observed here is consistent with research on legal judgment indicating that lay evaluations of guilt and procedural appropriateness are often dominated by salient, individuating evidence rather than contextual base-rate information^[31]. Although contextual cues such as crime rate may shift overall baseline perceptions of risk, they do not necessarily interact with diagnostic evidence in shaping final judgments. Instead, individuals appear to treat direct evidence as a privileged source of information that is relatively insensitive to contextual modulation.

This lack of interaction also has implications for how people construct legal judgments under uncertainty. Rather than engaging in fully integrated Bayesian-style updating across multiple sources of information, individuals may adopt a quasi-sequential evaluation strategy in which evidentiary information is given primary diagnostic weight, and contextual information functions as a secondary adjustment that shifts overall perception but does not alter the interpretation of core evidence. This interpretation is consistent with bounded rationality accounts of judgment, which propose that people rely on cognitively efficient heuristics rather than exhaustive integration of all available information^[32-33].

5.4. Limited influence of legal standards on lay judgment

The present study also examined whether different legal standards influenced public evaluations. Although legal standards had some influence on judgments of justification and guilt certainty, their effects were weaker than those of evidence-based information. Additionally, legal standards did not significantly influence expectations regarding whether incriminating evidence would be discovered.

These findings suggest that laypeople may recognize broad differences between legal concepts but do not necessarily apply formal legal reasoning when evaluating police decisions. Instead, individuals may rely on intuitive assessments of evidence strength and perceived responsibility. Because legal standards such as reasonable suspicion and probable cause require nuanced probabilistic reasoning, they may be interpreted through everyday cognitive frameworks rather than through strict legal definitions.

This finding contributes to research examining the gap between legal reasoning and public judgment. Although legal systems rely on carefully defined evidentiary thresholds, public evaluations of legal decisions may depend more heavily on psychological impressions of causality, responsibility, and risk.

5.5. Individual differences in legal evaluation

Beyond experimental manipulations, individual differences also contributed meaningfully to legal evaluations. Attitudes toward police consistently predicted judgments of search legitimacy, suggesting that broader institutional trust shapes how individuals interpret and evaluate police conduct. Participants with more favorable views of police authority were more likely to perceive searches as justified and expressed greater confidence in both guilt judgments and expectations of discovering incriminating evidence.

Political orientation also emerged as a significant predictor of some outcomes, with more conservative participants reporting higher certainty of guilt and stronger expectations that additional incriminating evidence would be found. Together, these findings indicate that legal judgments are not solely determined by situational evidence but are also systematically influenced by preexisting belief systems regarding authority, crime, and social order.

This pattern is consistent with research on motivated reasoning, which suggests that individuals interpret ambiguous information in ways that align with their prior attitudes and ideological commitments^[34]. In legal contexts, such predispositions may function as interpretive frameworks that shape how evidentiary information is perceived. Rather than processing evidence in a purely neutral manner, individuals appear to integrate experimental information with stable dispositional beliefs that guide their interpretation of guilt and procedural legitimacy^[35].

5.6. Practical implications

The present findings have important implications for understanding public perceptions of policing and legal decision-making. The dominant role of evidence type suggests that individuals place primary weight on diagnostic, causally informative evidence when forming legal judgments. This indicates that improving public understanding of evidentiary standards may require explicitly distinguishing between evidence that directly establishes responsibility and information that merely signals situational suspicion without identifying individual culpability.

At the same time, the observed influence of crime context suggests that environmental cues can still shape baseline perceptions of risk and police legitimacy, even when they provide limited diagnostic value regarding individual responsibility. This pattern is consistent with research showing that people often rely on contextual risk cues when evaluating uncertain legal scenarios, particularly when such cues activate generalized associations about danger or criminality^[25,36].

For legal communication and public education, these findings underscore the importance of improving “evidence literacy,” or the ability to differentiate between causal, individuating evidence and broader contextual information. Without such conceptual clarity, individuals may default to intuitive judgments driven by perceived risk or situational suspicion rather than systematically evaluating the evidentiary link between a suspect and alleged wrongdoing. This is consistent with dual-process accounts of judgment, which suggest that people often rely on fast, intuitive assessments when cognitive resources or domain knowledge are limited, especially in socially and morally charged contexts^[33,37].

6. Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that public evaluations of police searches are shaped primarily by perceptions of evidentiary strength and causal responsibility. Direct evidence influences judgments through a sequential psychological process in which individuals infer guilt, anticipate additional evidence, and evaluate investigative actions as justified. Although crime context and legal standards contribute to legal evaluations, their influence is comparatively limited. Overall, the findings reveal that public legal judgments are not

determined solely by formal rules but are deeply influenced by cognitive processes involving attribution, inference, and interpretation of evidence.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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