



The Others Will Help: Citizen Coproduction and Bystander Apathy

Skyler Miller & Jessica Rodgers

Research Mentor: Dongfang Gaozhao

Askew School of Public Administration and Policy



Introduction

The psychological principle of the Bystander Effect, developed in the 1960s by John M. Darley and Bibb Latané, posits that with a greater presence of bystanders in a critical situation, the likelihood of an individual helping greatly decreases. Previous research has deduced that this societal fallacy may result from any number of variables like diffusion of responsibility, perceived danger of a situation, a lack of preparedness, and the level of closeness an individual has to a victim.

It has also been found that interactions between public organizations and the general public may be influenced by the bystander effect. Thus, the collaboration between public organizations and citizens (co-production) in the general interest of creating a safer, more functional society may be hampered by a citizen's emotional disconnect or diffusion of responsibility.

By collecting more information on what can impact the bystander effect, public policy can be shifted in a way that will increase societal participation in public matters and co-production in the future.

Our Study

In an effort to increase co-production and find ways to lessen the power of the bystander effect, we conducted an online experiment and collected data from our surveys asking participants to choose which ways they would react to particular emergency scenarios. H1 posits that if a situation is interpreted as more urgent, a citizen is more likely to co-produce. H2 proposes that co-production increases as the amount of bystanders decreases as a result of increased personal responsibility.

Our research did find that the urgency and risk of each situation positively influenced co-production, supporting H1. However, our research did not support H2 and we found no influence on our results due to the bystander effect. Our findings also showed that unclear information (clear messages and instructions rather than "unknown" information help citizens engage in co-production) and high amounts of effort and costs required from the participants negatively impacted co-production.

By understanding what lessens the likelihood for an individual to co-produce, there is an opportunity to apply that information to public policy and public safety protocols in a way that might increase co-production as a whole.

Hypotheses

- 1) A citizen is more likely to engage in co-production when the situation is more urgent.
- 2) A citizen is more likely to engage in co-production when no bystander is present and, thus, the citizen feels personally responsible.

Methods

- Qualtrics survey to collect participants' demographic information and answers
- Distributed to 942 members on Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk)
- Conjoint experiment design
- Participants were asked in which scenario they would most likely call 911
- Participants chose their responses to five pairs of randomly given emergency scenarios described by six fully randomized attributes and provided their assessment of the urgency of the situation
- The structure of the surveys revealed their multidimensional co-production preferences

Results Continued

We found Participants were more likely to respond by calling 911 when:

- The situation was more urgent
- There was more descriptions of the situation or offender
- The offender was described as tall and fierce
- Participants could call 911 then leave the scene

We also found that the presence of others did not influence participants' responses.

Discussion

Ultimately, our findings confirmed Hypothesis I, but not Hypothesis II. The salience of a situation was an important factor in determining to what degree citizens will coproduce.

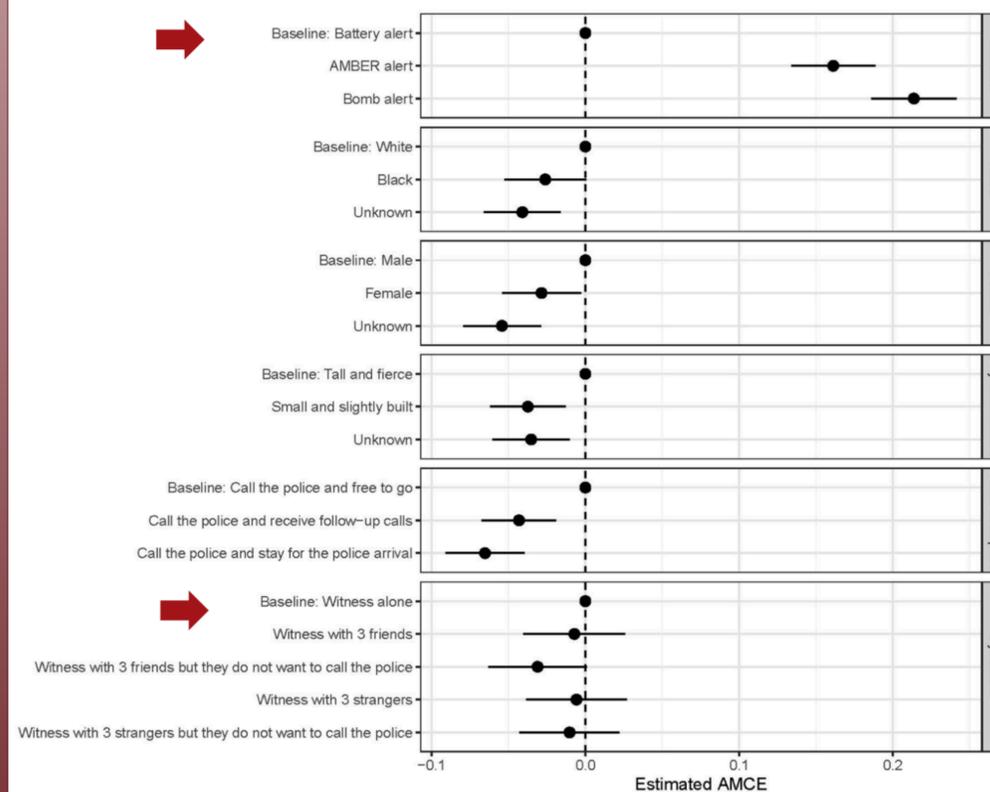
- Since our participants were more willing to coproduce when the situation was high risk and the characteristics of the suspect implied risk, our assumption that a citizen is more likely to engage in coproduction when a situation is more urgent was confirmed.
- Presenting unclear information in these situations resulted in participants downplaying the severity and not intervening. Thus, in real-life scenarios, we could conclude that citizens would be more likely to intervene when they are more informed.
- Many participants chose to intervene in a situation to avoid the discomfort of not knowing what might have happened if they did not respond. Therefore, we can conclude that if intervening in a situation is costly or inconvenient, citizens will be less likely to engage in coproduction.
- High effort costs in various situations will result in civilians being less likely to intervene.

On a societal level, the results reveal how citizens will respond to certain actions the government takes. In high alert situations, citizens will be more likely to coproduce, insinuating that they will intervene when they do not agree with the decisions the government is making. This can apply to policies that are put in place in which some citizens may not agree with.

References

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Results



Note: Average marginal component effect (AMCE) captures the causal effect of a scenario's attribute on the probability that this scenario will be surveying respondent's prioritized choice to call 911. Estimates are based on the regression estimators with clustered standard errors. Bars show 95% confidence intervals. $n = 9,420$

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