Article Response

Criminology's Influence Problem: Credibility Matters[1]

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I am grateful for Thompson's engagement with my "Post-Truth Myth" essay (Burt, 2026a) and the exchange initiated by Sullivan (2025). To recap, Sullivan argued that criminology's limited influence over policy reflects an evidence problem. Specifically, political actors and publics distort or reject empirical evidence about crime. He provides constructive suggestions for communicating evidence more effectively, including attention to base rates, assumptions, uncertainty, and the boundaries between what evidence shows and what scholars infer from it. My essay was a "yes, but also" response. I agreed that political misinformation, ideological polarization, and declining receptivity to expertise are serious problems. My central argument was that what Sullivan called an evidence problem is more accurately called an influence problem, and the problem is not merely about evidence misuse but declining credibility. I added to the external-to-the-academy problems Sullivan identified (including Right-wing misinformation), the contention that the causes of the current credibility crisis are also internal. I highlighted our Left-liberal ideological homogeneity as a potential biasing influence, which can shape which questions we ask, which findings we scrutinize, which limitations we emphasize, which anecdotes we treat as representative, and which conclusions we publicly amplify—which, in turn, can undermine our credibility, especially among audiences who do not share our Left-liberal priors.

In his piece, Thompson accepts that we have a credibility problem but frames the problem as being solely external and, more specifically, due to Right-wing misinformation/propaganda. In his view, criminology experts are being drowned out by a distorted information environment, a problem that can be solved by communicating more and louder. By contrast, I argued that influence also depends on whether criminologists are regarded as credible, and that our own practices can play a role here. Our disagreement is consequential because the remedies Thompson proposes for the influence problem can make a credibility problem worse. You do not convert non-believers by asserting more boldly at them. You convert them by giving them reasons to believe, which for a scientific field includes transparency, consistent scrutiny, acknowledged assumptions and uncertainty, and being our own toughest critics, some of which, I argued, is lacking.

Criminology's Credibility Crisis

By a credibility crisis, I mean that we have lost credibility with an important audience. In the social sciences, including criminology, that loss is politically asymmetric. The most serious erosion has occurred among Right-leaning publics. This asymmetry is visible in broader attitudes toward science. Trust in science among conservatives has declined for decades (Gauchat, 2012), and recent data continue to show a substantial partisan gap in confidence in scientists, with slightly more than a third of Republicans and Republican leaners expressing distrust in scientists compared to 12% for Democrats and Democrat leaners (Kennedy & Kikuchi, 2026). Another poll suggested that 62% of Republicans say scientists' judgments are just as likely to be biased as other people's, compared with 36% of Democrats (Pew Research Center, 2024). Moreover, the partisan divide in distrust is especially consequential for fields whose subject matter is politically contested and whose members are overwhelmingly Left-liberal. Much of the Right-leaning public has stopped listening or, at least, believing us.

What produced this situation is multifaceted, and contra Thompson's essay, *I did not rank the causes*.[2] I argued that *in addition to* external influences, we have contributed nontrivially to the erosion of our own credibility in ways that are more visible in this current fractured and ideologically polarized information environment. In this environment, a politically homogeneous field's credibility is more easily undermined when its scholarship, public interpretations, and political commitments repeatedly appear to point in the same direction.[3] Whether those conclusions about the evidence are correct—which occupies much of Thompson's essay—is a separate question, and usually one the audience cannot readily determine. What audiences can observe is the alignment among the field's ideological composition, the questions it emphasizes, the interpretations it advances, the changes it calls for, and the political commitments and values of many of its members. To audiences outside that ideology or political coalition, our claims can begin to look less like independent assessments of evidence and more like conclusions predictable from our poli-

[1] I am immensely grateful to Kara Hannula for her careful reading and incisive comments on earlier drafts of this reply.

[2] Thompson states that I "locate[] the discipline's diminished influence *primarily* in the ideological homogeneity of social scientists" (p.5; emphasis added). The "primarily" here is Thompson's invention, not my argument. I argued that Sullivan's external diagnosis was "only part of the story," and that the causes "are not simply 'post-truth' politics or public indifference to evidence but are *also* self-inflicted" (p.7, emphases added). I wrote that the influence problem is "primarily a credibility problem"; the primarily modifies the kind of the problem, not the cause of it (p.7). To wit, I did not argue that criminology's diminished influence is caused primarily by ideological homogeneity.

[3] Of course, one reading of that—which is Thompson's—is that this alignment is due to the fact we are right. But, as I discuss, *even if true*, that alone is not enough to bolster our credibility among those who do not trust us because they view us as hopelessly biased.

tics. People of all political persuasions routinely discount claims from sources whose conclusions appear predictably aligned with their interests or commitments.

Articles, data, methodological critiques, public statements, videos, competing analyses—and, perhaps most important, their discussions on social media—are increasingly accessible to audiences inclined to check our claims and compare how we treat findings, interpretations, or anecdotes that support versus contradict our Left-liberal beliefs and commitments. If (or when) politically inconvenient findings receive extraordinary scrutiny while congenial ones are more readily accepted, qualified less aggressively, or amplified more confidently, that pattern permits an inference of bias because that pattern is exactly what we would expect ideological bias to produce.

The challenge for criminology, then, is not merely to point again to the evidence more boldly, but to engage in practices that give skeptical audiences more reason to trust us, including those Sullivan discussed. One such practice is demonstrating that our rules of inference do not change with the political valence of the conclusion.

Credibility Requires Consistency

Thompson calls my comparison of the Floyd and Riley cases a "false equivalency" because the broader empirical evidence differs. However, I explicitly acknowledged that racial disparities in police use of force are supported by substantial research, whereas contemporary claims that immigrants are disproportionately dangerous are not. My argument/concern did not equate the cases, the underlying phenomena, or the evidentiary bases for the broader claims. I am instead comparing the patterns criminologists display when responding to salient cases. Thompson's objection effectively answers: Are claims about racial disparities in policing and immigrant dangerousness equally well supported? Of course not. That was not my question. I asked: When a politically salient individual case is invoked to demonstrate a broader claim, do we impose the same inferential standards regardless of the politics of that claim? I said we do not. In the same way that Riley's killing did not demonstrate that immigrants are dangerous, that immigration produces crime, or that mass deportation is warranted, Floyd's killing did not demonstrate that police devalue Black lives, that policing is systematically racist, or that defunding the police is warranted. Neither case alone can do that inferential work.

Thompson's argument—again, that we are right; that is to say, the evidence supports claims of racial disparities in police use of force against Black individuals—is both true and misses the mark because Floyd's killing was not used merely as an illustration of racial disparities in police use of force. It was widely used to support significantly broader claims that Black lives do not matter to police, that police are racist and dangerous to Black people as a group, and, in some quarters, that the police should be abolished. Our evidence does not clearly establish those stronger claims. Indeed, Floyd's killing was not obviously about race. We cannot know from the event whether the outcome would have been different had Floyd been White. No amount of aggregate evidence showing racial disparities in policing can make a single case demonstrate that Floyd was killed *because he was Black*. A skeptical audience, especially one that already suspects ideological bias, can see that fact.

For a skeptical audience who did not share our priors this reasonably seems inconsistent with our collective response to Riley's killing, which was to discourage the use of a single case, bringing in contemporary evidence that immigrants are not, in fact, more dangerous or crime-prone (and may be less). What skeptical audiences see is an inconsistent inferential move: a single event is permitted to carry broad symbolic and causal meaning in one direction, while a single event in the other direction is dismissed as anecdotal and illegitimate.

Thus, being right about the background evidence is not enough if we want to reach skeptical audiences who do not share our priors. Different background evidence can justify different conclusions, of course, but not different standards for what a single case is allowed to prove.

Thompson's discussion of Fryer's work is similar and again misses the point. What attracted extraordinary scrutiny to Fryer's study *was its finding*, not the existence of a limitation (in this case a denominator problem). Thompson argues that the methodological criticisms of the study were valid, which I never questioned. In fact, I explicitly encouraged the high scrutiny because it strengthens our science. However, the denominator problem Thompson highlights as the reason for the high scrutiny *is not particular to Fryer's study*. Every analysis of racial disparities in police force must choose a benchmark, and there is *no uniquely correct, unproblematic one*. My concern was not that Fryer's study was scrutinized too closely, but instead whether politically congenial criminology findings with similar limitations receive equivalent scrutiny. If we are honest with ourselves, we will recognize that they do not (Savolainen, 2024). Showing that Fryer's study had limitations that justified a critique therefore does not answer the concern, which is about relative (symmetrical) scrutiny.

The answer, then, is not less scrutiny of ideologically uncongenial findings but equivalent scrutiny of congenial ones. We increase our credibility with high scrutiny for all findings.

Public Criminology as a False Alternative to Symmetric Scrutiny

Finally, Thompson contrasts "self-policing," his term for my proposed disciplinary self-scrutiny, with a stronger public criminology.

Frankly, I do not follow his logic. This is a false opposition. Public engagement and internal scrutiny address different dimensions of the problem. In my reading, Thompson's polemic against disciplinary "self-policing" appears directed less at my argument than at Sullivan's recommendations, which I endorsed. In his section "Be Humble Without Surrendering Expertise," Sullivan urged criminologists to identify assumptions, acknowledge uncertainty, attend to base rates, and communicate the boundaries of their findings. I agree. I added that such epistemic humility and scrutiny should be applied consistently, including to ideologically congenial claims. Thompson recasts this shared position as "walking on eggshells," "timid hedging," "tiptoeing," and "weaseling," then calls instead for criminologists to "confidently flex their expertise."[4]

When audiences already distrust the messenger, greater visibility and more emphatic declarations of expertise do not necessarily increase influence. Thompson's remedies—to speak more often and more confidently—may increase reach (getting criminological claims in front of more people), without increasing influence (shaping what people believe about the world). And a louder, more confident approach may even increase discounting among distrusting audiences, exacerbating the influence problem.

Conclusion

Thompson and I agree that Right-wing actors propagate falsehoods, that contemporary media amplify them, and that criminologists can engage more effectively with publics and policymakers. Our primary disagreement is whether criminologists have a credibility problem and whether our own practices may contribute to it and can ameliorate it. I argue we do, and that we must conduct self-audits, including considering how our ideological commitments shape the knowledge we produce and promote (Burt, 2026c). Thompson does not address that question. He restates the externalizing post-truth narrative my essay criticized: distortion resides on the Right, and scholars should boldly "flex" an expertise whose internal asymmetries need not be examined.

The audiences we have lost credibility with may have stopped believing us largely because of Fox News and the broader right-wing media ecosystem Thompson describes. But in this information environment, our claims can be checked, and when they are, these audiences can see a field whose findings, framings, and political commitments point the same way, and whose scrutiny arrives forcefully when the rare findings do not. No amount of reach can fully correct that impression.

A field that wants to be trusted by people who do not share its ideology has a way to earn that credibility: look for its own biases as hard as it looks for everyone else's. Sullivan asked us to be humble about what our evidence shows. To that I add that we should pursue the truth as if we did not already know it, scrutinizing the findings we like as rigorously as the ones we do not. This, of course, is not the solution to everything that limits criminology's influence. But it is something we can control. Otherwise, we risk limiting our influence primarily to those who already agree with us. Surely, we all agree we should do more than preach to the choir.

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[4] To be clear, epistemic humility means calibrating claims to evidence, acknowledging uncertainty, and subjecting congenial conclusions to meaningful scrutiny. Nothing about it requires silence, detachment, or political neutrality.