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Research for Practice



Satisfaction With Police—What Matters?

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Satisfaction With Police—What Matters?

Findings and conclusions of the research reported here are those of the authors and do not reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

This study was conducted using information from the Project on Policing Neighborhoods, directed by Stephen D. Mastrofski, Roger B. Parks, Albert J. Reiss, Jr., and Robert E. Worden. The project was supported by the National Institute of Justice under grant number 95-IJ-CX-0071.

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

What makes people satisfied with the police? What factors contribute to their positive views of police performance? The biggest factor, according to new research, is people's perceptions about the quality of their lives—their sense of safety, for example. Unfortunately, the police can do little to change perceptions about one's quality of life. But the research also shows that the second biggest factor in shaping opinions is direct contact with officers—how police behave when they interact with residents.

The implication: Improving the quality of daily interaction between patrol officers and citizens may be the best way for a police administrator to improve public satisfaction with police.

What did the researchers find?

- Residents who have a great sense of safety and who rate their neighborhoods favorably hold a higher opinion of police despite individual characteristics such as race and age.
 - Caucasians, nonblack minorities, and older residents were more satisfied with police than were blacks and younger residents (ages 18 to 32).
- To increase public satisfaction with police encounters and general perception of performance, police executives should consider taking the following steps:
- Identify each type of police-public encounter they would like to address.
 - Specify the behavior residents should rightfully expect in each type of encounter with a police officer.
 - Implement the appropriate officer training and field supervision to meet or exceed those expectations.
- A resident's personal experience with police is nearly as important as the resident's impression of the neighborhood and quality of life in determining his or her satisfaction with police.

Michael D. Reisig and Roger B. Parks

Satisfaction With Police— What Matters?

This report is based on a longer journal article. Readers may refer to it for details about the findings and methods: See Michael D. Reisig and Roger B. Parks, “Experience, Quality of Life, and Neighborhood Context: A Hierarchical Analysis of Satisfaction With Police,” *Justice Quarterly* 17(3)(2000): 607–629.

About the Authors

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Law enforcement administrators have long been concerned about the level of public satisfaction with police. Such sensitivity is especially appropriate in community policing jurisdictions that emphasize interaction with community members, seeking their trust, cooperation, and assistance.

How do police managers determine the factors (such as officer demeanor and crime rate) underlying public opinion of police performance? How can they measure these factors? How do they best apply this information toward improving public satisfaction?

A recent study involving telephone interviews with 5,361 residents in 58 neighborhoods in Indianapolis, Indiana, and St. Petersburg, Florida, addressed these questions.¹

The research examined whether and to what extent the following factors influence an individual’s satisfaction with police:

- Personal experience or encounters with police,

such as calls for service or traffic stops.

- One’s perception of neighborhood quality of life, including the level of crime, physical decay, and social disorder.
- Neighborhood context, defined by economic status and homicide rate.

The study found that perceived quality of life exerted the greatest influence on a person’s level of satisfaction with police. However, study results also suggest that residents’ direct experience or encounters with officers is a key element of satisfaction.

The policy implication is that good-faith efforts to meet or exceed public expectations of police behavior are likely to succeed even if neighborhood conditions remain the same. Conducting surveys to collect resident feedback on their encounters with police is recommended.

This report in NIJ’s Research for Practice series describes the results of the Indiana and

Individuals' feelings about the state of the neighborhood are associated with their level of satisfaction with police.

Florida telephone surveys and places these results in the context of other research to help managers determine what matters most in improving public satisfaction with police.

This study also examined how satisfaction with police varied according to the demographic characteristics of respondents. Caucasians and nonblack minorities expressed significantly greater satisfaction with police than did their black neighbors. The research did not find gender differences in satisfaction with police. Differences between age groups were evident, however; respondents ages 18 to 32 reported significantly lower levels of satisfaction than did older persons. Homeowners expressed greater satisfaction than renters. Generally, the higher a respondent's education, the greater his or her satisfaction with police.

Impact of encounters with police

Over the past few decades, many researchers have tried to identify factors that influence the public's evaluations of police. Early studies on police-public encounters discovered that people who

judged their encounters with police favorably were more likely to report greater general satisfaction with the police. Thus, researchers reasoned that enhancing service delivery could improve the public's overall evaluation of police.

Prior research into the effects of encounters with police also sheds light on what determines community satisfaction with police. For example, in one study, persons reported more positive attitudes when officers were respectful and met or exceeded service expectations, such as by explaining their course of action.²

Another early study found that crime victims and persons stopped for traffic violations expressed significantly less satisfaction with police than did those who had called the police for service.³

This study's findings reaffirm that improving the quality of services during police encounters enhances public satisfaction. Individuals who were satisfied with a call for service or a traffic stop were more satisfied with police than those who had no contact with police. Conversely, those who were dissatisfied with the response to a call

for service or a traffic stop were significantly less satisfied with police than those who had not experienced such encounters.

Influence of perceived quality of life

Quality-of-life measures reflect both positive and negative aspects of residents' immediate surroundings. The study included four such measures: residents' perceptions of crime, incivilities (i.e., physical decay and social disorder), safety, and general rating of the neighborhood.

For perceptions of crime, residents were asked whether "neighborhood crime is getting worse." "Incivilities" measures the extent to which respondents reported the following as problematic in their neighborhood: litter/trash, loitering, vandalism, gangs, abandoned buildings, and drug dealing. Perceived safety was measured by asking citizens how safe they would feel walking alone in their neighborhood after dark. Finally, the neighborhood rating reflected answers to the question, "In general, how do you rate your

THE PROJECT ON POLICING NEIGHBORHOODS

NIJ is committed to providing relevant research that helps practitioners in the field. This Research for Practice is one in a series of reports from the Project on Policing Neighborhoods (POPEN), conducted in 1996–1997. POPEN researchers examined police and citizen interaction, attitudes, and behaviors in 12 neighborhoods in Indianapolis, Indiana, and 12 similar neighborhoods in St. Petersburg, Florida. They directly observed patrol officers on duty, interviewed patrol officers and their supervisors, and conducted telephone surveys of individuals randomly selected in each neighborhood.

NIJ is publishing several reports that summarize scholarly reports and articles written by POPEN researchers. The summaries present key information police managers need to know about problem solving and community policing. Additional topics include encounters with juvenile suspects, police supervisory styles, gender differences in officer attitudes and behavior, police attitudes toward the public and the public's attitudes toward police, how officers spend their time with the community, and race and everyday policing.

Knowledge about how officers interact with neighborhood residents and other officers can help law enforcement administrators improve policies and practices and lead to better community relations. With this goal in mind, NIJ invites comments and suggestions concerning this research. To comment, write to Steve Edwards, National Institute of Justice, 810 Seventh Street N.W., Washington, DC 20531; e-mail edwardss@ojp.usdoj.gov; or call 202–307–0500.

Public perceptions of neighborhood quality of life best account for levels of satisfaction with police.

neighborhood as a place to live?”

The research found that individuals’ feelings about the state of the neighborhood are associated with their level of satisfaction with police. Residents who believe that crime and disorder are problems in their neighborhood reported less satisfaction with the police than those who did not perceive such problems. Respondents who reported a greater sense of safety and rated their neighborhood more favorably hold the police in higher regard, even after considering neighborhood characteristics and such individual characteristics as race and age.

Effect of neighborhood context

Neighborhood context pertains to the characteristics of a neighborhood as revealed by such objective measures as census data and crime rates, in contrast with individual perceptions of neighborhood conditions.

A previous study noted that ethnicity and socioeconomic status combine to help produce neighborhood climates or cultures that shape attitudes toward policing practices.⁴ Armed with data from

8,782 residents of 343 Chicago neighborhoods, another study found that concentrated disadvantage (a measure of economic disadvantage in racially segregated neighborhoods) is associated inversely with satisfaction with police.⁵ Specifically, this Chicago study found that dissatisfaction with police was more dependent on neighborhood context than such factors as race or age.

The current study viewed neighborhood context in terms of the neighborhood homicide rate and concentrated disadvantage. As the homicide rate increased, levels of satisfaction with police decreased. Much of the variation between neighborhoods in the levels of satisfaction with police was explained by concentrated disadvantage. Overall, results of the research demonstrate that neighborhood context matters.

What matters most?

The findings suggest that the public’s perceptions of neighborhood quality of life best account for levels of satisfaction with police. Although cognitive and emotionally based, these responses to neighborhood conditions appear to have the greatest

influence on individual attitudes toward police.

Residents of the same neighborhood, however, often disagree about the extent of neighborhood problems and may perceive neighborhood conditions quite differently. Different individuals respond differently to quality-of-life survey questions even though they are exposed to similar neighborhood conditions.

Moreover, persons from the same neighborhood report different levels of satisfaction with police. This inconsistency seems to limit the relevance of the quality-of-life measure for development of policies to improve satisfaction with police.

The study also found that residents' evaluations of their encounters with police are important factors in determining satisfaction, although to a lesser degree than perceived neighborhood conditions.

The significance of this second finding to police managers is its practical translation into policy: It is easier for a police officer to influence an individual's impression of him or her than to influence that individual's impression of the neighborhood.

So what matters most in public satisfaction with police? The short answer suggested by this study is individuals' perceptions of or satisfaction with their neighborhood (quality of life). But policing policy cannot be founded solely on such an intangible factor. Improving the quality of public encounters with police may provide a more practical approach.

Conclusions and policy implications

Three factors—encounters with police, perceived neighborhood quality of life, and neighborhood context— influence public satisfaction with police, according to this research. Although the study found quality-of-life perceptions best indicate satisfaction with police, this finding offers the police manager little practical application. Moreover, one individual's perception of quality of life is often inconsistent with another's, even though both persons live in the same neighborhood.

If individual perceptions of quality of life do not consistently reflect actual neighborhood conditions, it follows that more community policing activities, such as neighborhood cleanup programs

Public expectations for police officer behavior are likely to differ from one type of encounter to another.

and aggressive maintenance of order, may have only a modest effect on residents' satisfaction with police. Such efforts may have other positive outcomes, including increased citizen-police communication and cooperation.

However, police may want to seek additional means of increasing public satisfaction with their performance. For example, individual encounters with police are a more fruitful area on which to focus efforts to improve satisfaction. After all, through departmental policies and training, police can more easily influence what occurs during a police-citizen encounter than they can affect residents' feelings about the neighborhood.

Research from the field of consumer psychology is relevant to the link between expectations of police services and citizen satisfaction.⁶ Residents respond positively when police exceed expectations. Research further indicates that individuals' expectations regarding officer demeanor and task performance exert a tremendous influence on their subsequent level of satisfaction after encounters with police.⁷

In light of these research findings, it is recommended that police executives identify residents' expectations pertaining to police demeanor and behavior.⁸ Most residents expect police to behave in a professional manner, avoid sarcasm, and act courteously and respectfully.

However, expectations for task-oriented police officer behavior are likely to differ from one type of encounter to another. For example, research shows that drivers expect police officers to tell them why they were stopped during traffic encounters and how to handle the ticket. Burglary victims expect police to arrive on the scene in a timely manner and keep them informed on case status.

Police executives should start by identifying the most common types of police-public encounters where officer behavior can be modified or improved. Protocols can be developed that specify the behavior the officer should adopt, e.g., take the extra time to keep a victim informed of the status of his/her case, remain courteous despite an egregious traffic violation, and so forth. Training and supervision will close

the loop by ensuring the officer on patrol has the necessary experience and knows that management cares about public satisfaction.

To monitor results of such efforts, departments can conduct encounter-level surveys, which should solicit respondents' assessments of their experiences or encounters with officers.

Notes

1. Telephone interviews were conducted in 1996 and 1997. Homicide data from 1995 and census data from 1990 were also used. "Satisfaction with police" reflects citizens' evaluations of local police in general terms. Respondents were asked, "How satisfied are you with the quality of police service in your neighborhood?" "Do the police provide services that citizens want?" and "How would you rate the job the police are doing in terms of working with people in your neighborhood to solve local problems?"
2. See, for example, Furstenberg, F.F., and C.F. Wellford, "Calling the Police: The Evaluation of Police Service," *Law and Society Review* 7(1973): 402.
3. Dean, D., "Citizen Ratings of the Police: The Difference Contact Makes," *Law and Policy Quarterly* 2(1980): 462.
4. Dunham, R.G., and G.P. Alpert, "Neighborhood Differences in Attitudes Toward Policing: Evidence for a Mixed-Strategy Model of Policing in a Multi-Ethnic Setting," *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 79(1988): 504–523. See also, Reisig, M.D., and A.L. Giacomazzi, "Citizen Perceptions of Community Policing: Are Attitudes Toward Police Important?" *Policing* 21(3)(1998): 547–561.
5. Sampson, R.J., and D. Jeglum-Bartusch, "Legal Cynicism and (Sub-cultural?) Tolerance of Deviance: The Neighborhood Context of Racial Differences," *Law and Society Review* 32(4)(1998): 777–804.
6. For an example of research on the link between consumer expectations and satisfaction, see Oliver, R.L., "A Cognitive Model of the Antecedents and Consequences of Satisfaction Decisions," *Journal of Marketing Research* 17(1980): 460–469.
7. See Reisig, M.D., and M.S. Chandek, "The Effects of Expectancy Disconfirmation on Outcome Satisfaction in Police-Citizen Encounters," *Policing* 24(1)(2001): 88–99.
8. For a more detailed discussion, see Reisig, M.D., "Citizen Input and Police Service: Moving Beyond the 'Feel Good' Community Survey," in *The Move Toward Community Policing: Making Change Happen*, ed. M. Morash and J.K. Ford, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2002.

Recommended reading

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