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Factors That Influence Public Opinion of the Police

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ABOUT THIS STUDY

Police can improve public opinion by increasing their informal contacts with citizens. According to a survey of Los Angeles residents' opinions of police job performance and officers' demeanor, police can increase residents' approval of their job performance by participating in community meetings, increasing officers' visibility in neighborhoods, and talking with citizens. Such informal contacts had a positive impact on job approval ratings even when other factors associated with lower approval ratings—such as residents' perceptions that their neighborhoods are crime ridden, dangerous, and disorderly—were present.

Informal contacts with police also lessened the negative impact of residents' formal contacts with police (such as being arrested or questioned by police). Residents with both types of contact reported higher approval ratings than residents with only formal contact. Race and ethnicity were not found to be as important as neighborhood characteristics or personal contacts in determining the public's satisfaction with police, although race and ethnicity did seem to play a role in residents' assessment of officers' demeanor. The media were also found to

have little influence on public opinion of the police.

What did the survey reveal?

- Residents' perception of the level of crime and disorder in their neighborhood was a significant factor shaping their opinion of the police.

- Residents with informal police contacts had more positive perceptions than residents with formal contacts.

- Residents' opinion of police performance did not vary by race or ethnicity in disorderly neighborhoods.

- Media did not affect residents' approval of police job performance or their perception of officers' demeanor.

What were the survey's limitations?

Although care was taken to survey residents from diverse communities in Los Angeles, the four areas covered by the survey are not, nor were they intended to be, representative of the entire city.

Cheryl Maxson, Karen Hennigan, and David C. Sloane

Factors That Influence Public Opinion of the Police

About the Authors

Cheryl Maxson, Ph.D., is an assistant professor in the Department of Criminology, Law, and Society at the University of California at Irvine. Karen Hennigan, Ph.D., is a research assistant professor in psychology at the University of Southern California (USC). Both authors are research associates in the Social Science Research Institute at USC. David C. Sloane, Ph.D., is an associate professor in the School of Policy, Planning, and Development at USC.

A new study has found that neighborhood characteristics and interactions with police are the factors that most influence public opinion of the police. The study, conducted in Los Angeles, found that residents from neighborhoods perceived to be crime ridden, dangerous, and disorderly were less likely to approve of the police.[1] In contrast, residents who had informal personal contact with police were more likely to express approval. Race and ethnicity, factors cited as influential in other studies, were not found to be as important as community disorder in determining the public's satisfaction with police. Race and ethnicity did affect assessment of police demeanor. The media were found to have little influence on public opinion of the police.

Measuring opinions in Los Angeles

Researchers mailed a survey to residents in four diverse areas of Los Angeles. (See "Study Background and Methodology.") Using a series of questions, they measured two aspects of police performance:

- **Job approval.** The measure of job approval was based on a six-question scale modified from Skogan's work in Chicago, which asked residents how well police in their neighborhood prevent crime, help victims, and solve problems.[2]

- **Officer demeanor.** The measure of officer demeanor was formed from five questions that asked respondents whether police were respectful, trustworthy, fair, or helpful and how concerned they acted.

The study focused on four factors that were thought to influence public opinion of the police:

- Residents' perceptions of the levels of disorder and

crime in their neighborhood and the neighbors' sense of mutual trust and responsibility.

- Residents' formal and informal contacts with police and prior experience as victims of violent and property crime.

- Residents' demographic characteristics.

- The role of the media.

Previous research suggests that an individual's opinion of the police is filtered through these factors, but relatively little is known about how they work together to influence perceptions of police performance.

Perceptions of the neighborhood

As might be expected, residents expressed less

STUDY BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

Area Description

The study sample was taken from four of the Los Angeles Police Department's (LAPD's) 18 geographic areas. The areas were chosen to reflect contrasting rates of reported property and violent crimes and demographic profiles, especially income and race/ethnicity. One representative from each of the LAPD's four administrative bureaus was included. However, the four areas are not, nor were they intended to be, representative of the entire city.

- **Area A** is in South Central. It has one of the highest violent crime rates in the city, more than three times higher than any of the other areas surveyed. In the 1990 census, area A had approximately 150,000 residents, who were 55 percent black and 40 percent Latino. Latinos have moved into this traditionally black area in increasing numbers. Eighty-six percent of residents reported household incomes below $45,000 and 43 percent below $15,000.

- **Area B** is just north and east of downtown. It has the second highest violent crime rate,

fueled by the largest gang population in the city, with more than 7,000 gang members in approximately 40 gangs. Area B, however, has the lowest property crime rate among the four areas sampled. Area B is primarily Hispanic (84 percent) and low income, with many residents living in multigenerational households. In the 1990 census, 80 percent of residents reported household incomes below $45,000 and 32 percent below $15,000.

- **Area C** is on the city's west side. It has a relatively low violent crime rate but the highest property crime rate among the surveyed areas. Area C has approximately 200,000 residents and is ethnically diverse (61 percent white, 22 percent Latino, 10 percent Asian, and 6 percent black). In the 1990 census, 59 percent of residents reported household incomes below $45,000 and 17 percent below $15,000.

- **Area D** is in the San Fernando Valley. It has a very low violent crime rate and the second lowest reported property crime rate (higher only than area B). Area D is primarily white

approval of officers and the way they do their job when residents perceived problems with disorder or violent crime in their neighborhood or reported being fearful (see exhibit 1).

The level of social cohesion and informal social control present in a neighborhood also influenced residents' assessments of the police. This characteristic describes residents' sense of mutual trust and responsibility.[3] To determine the level of neighborhood cohesion and control, residents in this survey were asked, among other questions, whether people in their neighborhood got along with each other, shared the same values, could be trusted, were willing to help their neighbors, and could be counted on to intervene in neighborhood problems, such as children skipping

(73 percent) with growing Latino (17 percent) and Asian (8 percent) populations. Residents of area D have higher incomes than those in other areas surveyed: 50 percent reported household incomes above $45,000 and 26 percent above $75,000 in the 1990 census.

Survey Methods

Residential addresses were obtained from city-wide utility service lists that were coded to permit selection of addresses within the four geographic areas. A random sample of 375 addresses for each area composed the original sample. Survey procedures were adopted from Dillman's Total Design Approach, including up to six contacts with potential respondents: a prenotification postcard, four survey mailings (the last two with a $1 incentive), and a thank you/reminder following the first survey mailing.[a] All mailed materials included Spanish translations. Other languages were offered, but they were requested only rarely.

Mailings to 14 percent of the selected addresses were returned by the post office, primarily because of inaccurate address information. Excluding these nondeliverable surveys, the response rate varied from 44 percent to 65 percent across the four areas, with a combined response rate of 57 percent. In all, 714 completed surveys were available for analysis. However, respondents sometimes skipped individual questions, so the number of responses varies in each analysis.[b]

Notes

a. Dillman, D.A., *Mail and Telephone Survey: The Total Design Method*, New York: Wiley and Sons, 1978; "The Design and Administration of Mail Surveys," *Annual Review of Sociology* 17 (1991): 225–249.

b. For more information about the study methods, see Hennigan, K., C. Maxson, D. Sloane, and M. Ranney, "Community Views on Crime and Policing: Survey Mode Effects on Bias in Community Surveys," *Justice Quarterly* 19 (3), 2002, 565–587.

Exhibit 1. Percentage of residents who approve of police, by neighborhood characteristics

■ Job approval

■ Officer demeanor

Percentage

Neighborhood characteristic
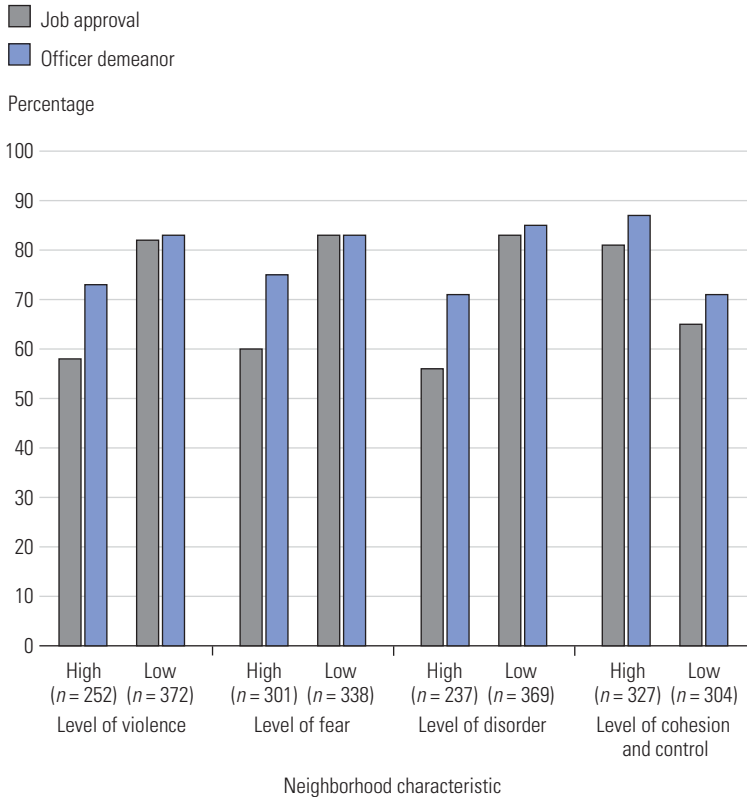
school or the potential closing of a fire station because of budget cuts. As indicated in exhibit 1, residents who responded positively to these and related questions were much likelier to approve of police performance and demeanor.

Public opinion was associated with neighborhood cohesion and control for two reasons. First, residents who reported living in neighborhoods where neighbors got along, shared similar values, and could rely on each other were likelier to have informal

contacts with police officers than those who reported living in neighborhoods where these traits were less common. Second, these respondents are likelier to believe that the community shares responsibility with the police for a safe and orderly neighborhood. They are therefore less likely to judge police officers harshly when crime and social disorder occur.

Contacts with the police

The survey captured two kinds of contact with officers: formal and informal. Forty-eight percent of the respondents reported some type of formal contact with local police. These formal contacts included residents' calls to police stations requesting service and police questioning of residents regarding possible crimes. These formal contacts also included arrests of 1 percent of the respondents.

Forty-seven percent of the respondents reported informal contacts with police. These informal contacts included conversations with police officers on patrol and interactions with police at community meetings, police-sponsored youth activities, and community safety fairs. Although almost half the respondents reported informal contacts with police, less than one in five residents said they knew or recognized police officers who worked in their community.

Exhibit 2 shows how residents rated police based on the types of contact they had (formal only, informal only, both, neither). Those with only informal contacts hold the highest opinions of police performance and officer demeanor. Those with only formal contacts hold the least positive attitudes toward local police on these two measures. Individuals with no contacts with police have high opinions of job performance and officer demeanor.

Informal contact with police had a significant effect on job approval ratings, even when considering residents' perceptions of the level of disorder in their neighborhood. For residents who reported low levels of disorder, job approval ratings ranged from 71 percent for residents with only formal contact with police to almost 90 percent for those with

Exhibit 2. Percentage of residents who approve of police, by type of contact they had with local officers

■ Officer demeanor

■ Job approval

Percentage

Type of contact
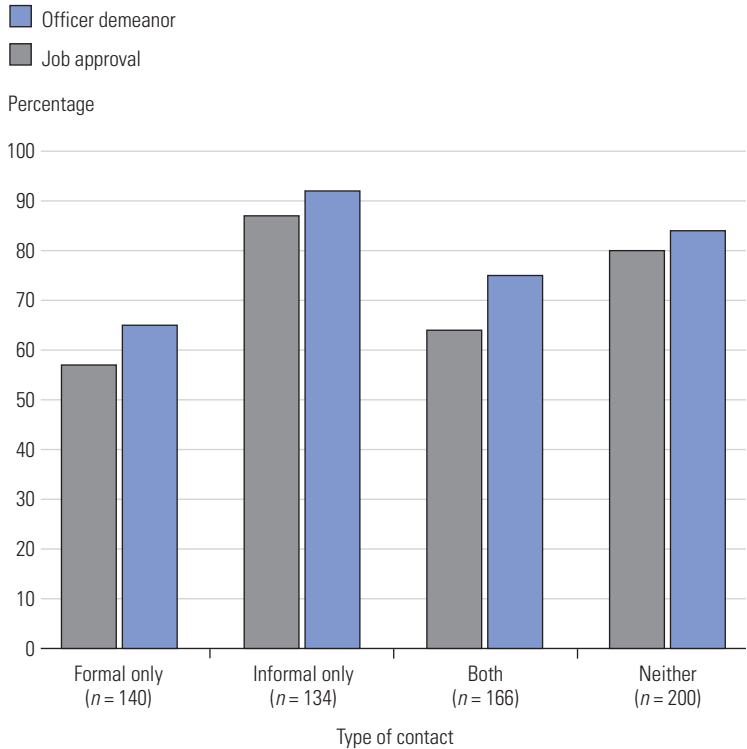
either no contact or only informal contact. Residents who reported high levels of neighborhood disorder had a wide range of opinion about job performance—35 percent who had only formal contact, 49 percent who had both formal and informal contact, and 85 percent who had only informal contact approved of police performance.

Prior crime victimization

Prior victimization, especially violent crime victimization, significantly lowered residents' approval of the police. As exhibit 3 shows, 57 percent of respondents who were violent crime victims and 70 percent who were property (but not violent)

Exhibit 3. Percentage of residents who approve of police, by type of victimization

■ Job approval

■ Officer demeanor

Percentage

Type of victimization
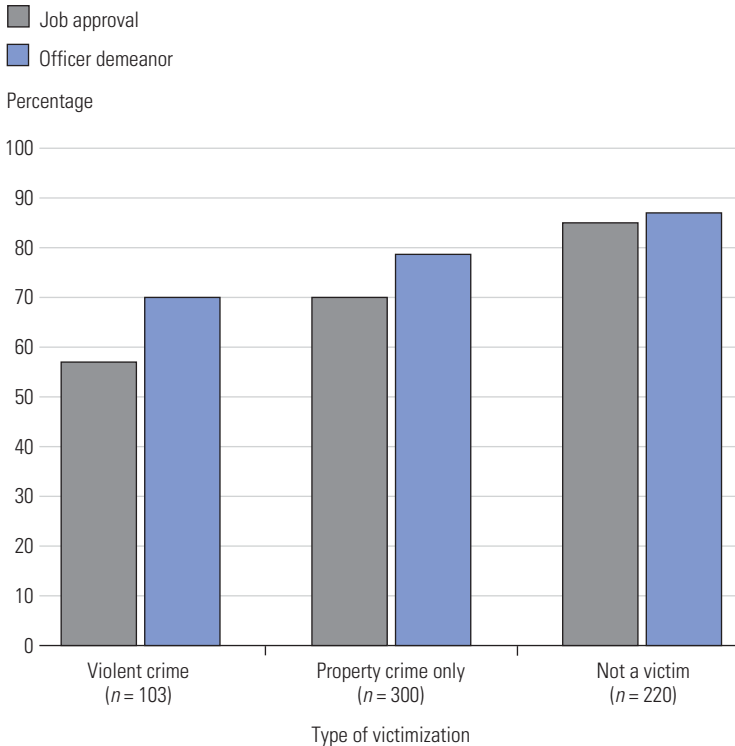
crime victims approved of police performance. In comparison, 85 percent of residents who were not crime victims approved of the job their local police were doing. This pattern held for respondents' opinions of officer demeanor, although the difference in perceptions between crime victims and nonvictims was not as great. The lower approval ratings for crime victims are consistent with past research.[4]

Demographic characteristics

Much past literature focuses on the association of race and ethnicity with public opinion of the police. Studies have found that ethnic minorities, particularly blacks,

Exhibit 4. **Percentage of residents who approve of police, by race/ethnicity**

■ Job approval
■ Officer demeanor

Percentage

Race/ethnicity
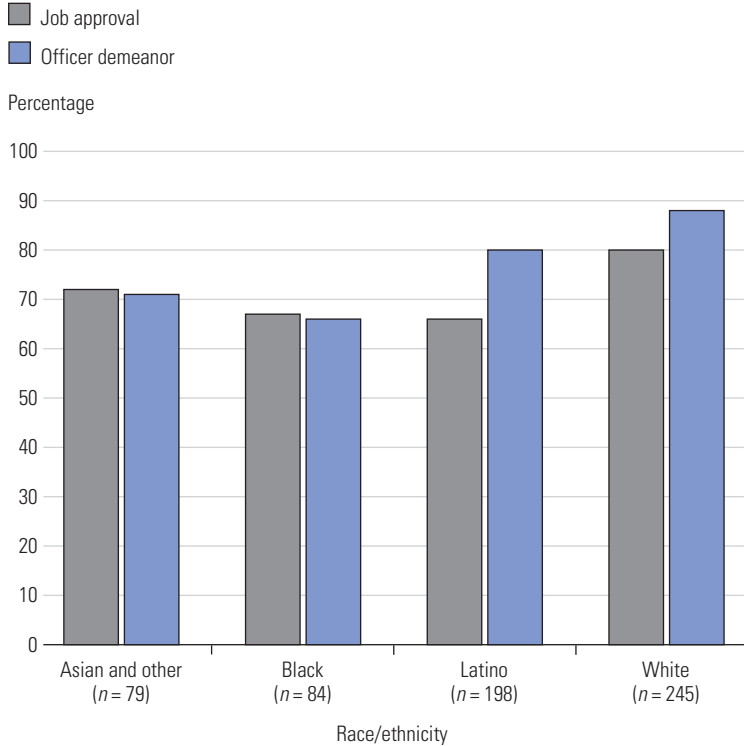
report less favorable attitudes toward the police than whites, possibly because of their perception that minorities are mistreated more often by police.[5] At first glance, the results of the current study seem to confirm the findings of these studies. As exhibit 4 shows, whites express higher opinions of police performance and demeanor than any other race/ethnic group.

However, once respondents are categorized further by the level of perceived disorder in their neighborhood, the racial/ethnic-based differences in approval of job performance disappear (see exhibit 5). Although whites in low-disorder neighborhoods appear to have a higher opinion of police performance, disorder is clearly the main influence. Conversely, residents' opinions about

Exhibit 5. Percentage of residents who approve of police, by race/ethnicity and neighborhood disorder

■ Job approval
■ Officer demeanor

Percentage

Race/ethnicity and level of neighborhood disorder
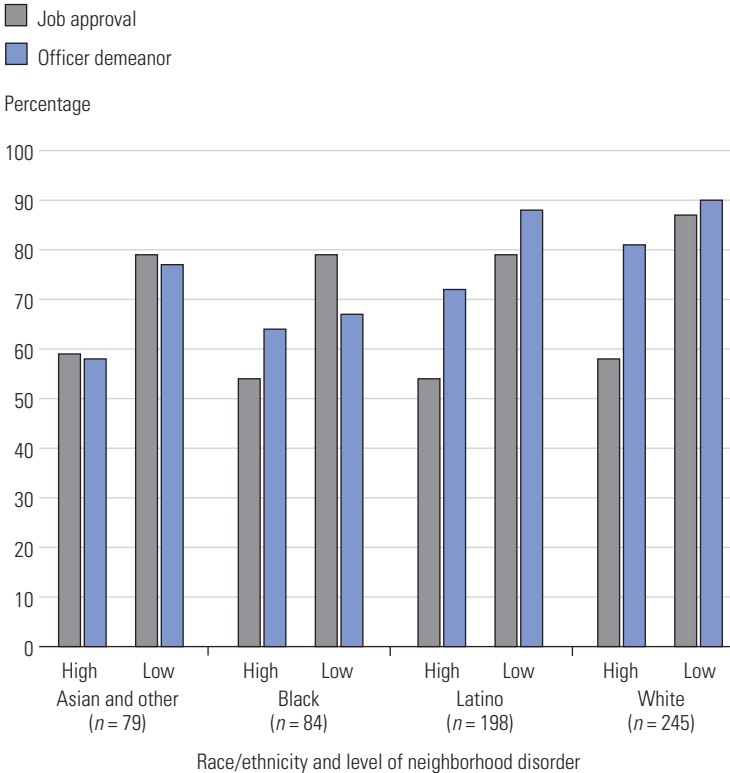
officer demeanor were more affected by their race and ethnicity, even though disorder remained important. Blacks were less likely to think that local police were trustworthy, fair, helpful, concerned, and respectful of others in both orderly and disorderly neighborhoods.

Role of the media

Police are particularly concerned about the media's influence on attitudes toward them. Several Los Angeles police supervisors who were interviewed before the survey was conducted stated that they believed that a few highly publicized incidents

THE NEED FOR MORE SURVEYS

Surveying and understanding the public's opinion of police performance is important for several reasons:

- Public acceptance of police authority is essential to maintain public order.

- Public confidence in police can lead to cooperation that is needed for effective policing.

- Public support is crucial to maintaining and expanding police funding.

- Sensitive measurement of public opinion is an important way to monitor local police activities.

- Exchange of information fosters police-community partnerships that can be tailored to specific community concerns.

Perceptions of police activities, crime, and fear and the identification of neighborhood problems and strengths represent important aspects of the community context of policing.

Regular surveys are essential for understanding these issues further. Such surveys should be conducted by independent organizations to avoid biased responses. Conducting the surveys over a number of years would allow for greater comprehension of the public's opinion. An annual survey with standard samples and procedures crafted to examine trends would be most meaningful. Then, police officials and community representatives would notice anomalies in the pattern of opinion as influenced by respondents' experiences and the neighborhood sense of community. Community stakeholders could track indicators of issues that can be targets of intervention, such as neighborhood conditions or people's lack of informal contact with officers.

Surveying community residents can provide valuable information about the public's assessment of police activities. As this study demonstrates, such a survey can provide surprisingly rich information about the relationship between communities and the police. This information can direct police and community change and help monitor the effectiveness of interventions.

might have a widespread negative influence on residents' view of the police.

In this survey, 65 percent of the respondents indicated that personal experience (including respondents' experience with other police agencies and their secondhand knowledge of the experience of others) most shaped their opinions of the LAPD. Thirty-five percent were most influenced by mass media (including newspapers, radio, and television). The study found that residents who rely most on the media did not report less favorable opinions regarding the overall job performance and demeanor of the police than those most influenced by personal experience.

Implications for police practice

According to this study, disorderly neighborhoods and neighborhoods with poor social cohesion and control present a challenge for officer-community relations. Local community surveys can help police to identify and address residents' situations and concerns (see "The Need for More Surveys"). Communities also may benefit from community policing strategies that increase informal

contact between local officers and residents.

The findings confirm and expand on earlier studies that suggested informal contact raises public opinion of the police. In this survey, speaking to officers on patrol or at community events was associated with a positive opinion of police performance, whether or not the resident lived in a disorderly neighborhood. It could be that those predisposed to be more favorable are likelier to initiate informal contact with officers. In any event, it seems likely that promoting informal social contact may favorably influence public opinion. Police departments may want to evaluate the ways that they encourage or discourage informal contact with residents. Police-community partnerships are more effective when they incorporate greater informal contact with residents.

Although past literature relies heavily on demographic characteristics to explain public opinion, this study found that the most important factors influencing favorable opinion of the police were greater informal contact with police, less victimization, less fear of crime, lower perceived level of violent crime, lower perceived disorder in one's neighborhood, and higher neighborhood cohesion and control. Race and ethnicity were not shown to significantly determine public opinion of police performance once other factors (such as perceived neighborhood disorder) were considered. Residents' trust in the police, however, was influenced by race and ethnicity.

Police and others often perceive the media as having a significant effect on the public's opinion of police performance. According to this study's findings, the media did not appear to be a source of negative opinion of the LAPD. Instead of relying on the media for their opinions, respondents appeared to react primarily to their own experiences and expectations in forming opinions of their local police.

Notes

1. For more information about this report, see Hennigan, K., C. Maxson, D. Sloane, and M. Ranney, "Community Views on Crime and Policing: Survey Mode Effects on Bias in Community Surveys," *Justice Quarterly* 19 (3), 2002, 565–587.

2. Skogan, W., *Disorder and Decline: Crime and the Spiral of Decay in American Neighborhoods*, New York: Free Press, 1990; Skogan, W., and S. Harnett, *Community Policing*

Chicago Style, New York: Free Press, 1997.

3. Social scientists often refer to the combination of neighborhood social cohesion and informal social control as "collective efficacy." Sampson, R.J., and S.W. Raudenbush, "Systematic Social Observation of Public Spaces: A New Look at Disorder in Urban Neighborhoods," *American Journal of Sociology* 105 (3) (November 1999): 603–651; Sampson, R.J., S.W. Raudenbush, and F. Earls, "Neighborhoods and Violent Crime: A Multilevel Study of Collective Efficacy," *Science* 277 (1077): 918–924; Sampson, R.J., S.W. Raudenbush, and F. Earls, *Neighborhood Collective Efficacy: Does It Help Reduce Violence?* Research Preview, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, April 1998, NCJ 184377.

4. Kansas City Police Department, 1977, studies cited in S.G. Brandl and F. Horvath, "Crime-Victim Evaluation of Police Investigative Performance," *Journal of Criminal Justice* 19 (1991): 293–305; Brown, K., and P.B. Coulter, "Subjective and Objective Measure of Police Performance," *Public Administration Review* 43 (1983): 50–58; Carter, D.L., "Hispanic Perception of Police Performance: An Empirical Assessment," *Journal of Criminal Justice* 13 (1985): 487–500; Jesilow, P., J. Meyer, and N. Namazzi, "Public Attitudes Toward the Police," *American Journal of Police* 14 (2) (1995): 67–88.

5. Flanagan, T.J., and M.S. Vaughn, "Public Opinion and Police Abuse and Force," in W.A. Gelban and H. Toch, eds., *Police Violence*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996; Huang, W.S., and M.S. Vaughn, "Support and Confidence: Public Attitudes Toward the Police," in W.A. Gleban and H. Toch, eds., *Police Violence*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996; Sacco, V., "Evaluating Satisfaction," in J.P. Brodeur, ed., *How to Recognize Good Policing: Problems and Issues*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1998; Waddington, P.A.J., and Q. Braddock, "Guardians or Bullies? Perceptions of the Police Among Adolescent Black, White, and Asian Boys," *Policing and Society* 2 (1991): 31–45.

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