THE USE OF CITIZEN SURVEYS AS A TOOL FOR POLICE REFORM

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Some Surprising Findings About What Shapes People's View of the Police

Common sense would suggest that experience with the police is a key factor in determining how citizens perceive the police. Some researchers have argued that involuntary contacts with the police (for example, stops on the street) are particularly likely to generate negative reactions among citizens.[1] Police experts and civil rights leaders have believed that minority youth in the United States are especially likely to be disrespected verbally, threatened, or shoved by the police and that this leads to antipathy toward the police, particularly among African-Americans.

But a 1997 survey I conducted revealed that, while people's feelings about the police are affected by direct experience, they depend even more on culturally transmitted norms and beliefs. The survey was done in a multi-ethnic neighborhood in a predominantly middle-class section of Jackson Heights, New York. This is one of the most ethnically diverse neighborhoods of the city, with some deep-rooted ethnic communities but also many ethnic communities consisting largely of newcomers. We targeted six ethnic groups—African-Americans, Italians, Indians, Colombians, Dominicans, and Ecuadoreans. Using census data to identify high concentrations of the six communities in Jackson Heights, we used a scientific sampling procedure to interview representative samples of roughly 200 residents from each community.

Two of the ethnic groups—African-Americans and Italians—were well-established. The vast majority of residents in these communities were native-born, and they felt a strong sense of political empowerment. That is, residents tended to believe that their ethnic communities were represented in local politics and that politicians were responsive to their needs. The other four communities were composed largely of foreign-born residents who had a much weaker sense of political empowerment.

We found that being stopped by the police did play a role in shaping people's perceptions of police misconduct. But it was a relatively small role. Moreover, involuntary contacts with the police did not affect respondents' perceptions of police effectiveness or their willingness to report crimes. Instead, people's views of the police seemed to be largely derived from cultural influences. The most important factor in shaping how people viewed the police was the ethnic community to which people belonged. People who belonged to ethnic communities that experienced a low sense of political empowerment were less likely than others to believe that the police were effective and more likely to

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[1] Decker, S. and A. Wagner. "Race and Citizen Complaint Against the Police: An Analysis of Their Interaction." In *Evaluating Alternative Law Enforcement Policies*, edited by R. Baker and F. Meyer. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1979.

believe that the police engaged in misconduct. This same pattern carried over to behavior: people from communities low in political empowerment were less likely to contact the police to report crimes, discuss concerns about the neighborhood, or just stop to talk to an officer walking a beat.

In sharp contrast to current thinking among many U.S. experts, African-Americans were one of the two communities with the most positive views of the police. That position was shared by Italians who, like the Jackson Heights African-American community, had a strong sense of political empowerment. We concluded that it is not race that conditions attitudes toward the police, but rather membership in a *local* ethnic community. People's attitudes are affected more by neighborhood values and beliefs than by membership in larger social groups.

Findings like these suggest that, in order to change public perception in a positive way, police must change more than the way that officers relate to the public. They also need to work closely with community organizations—particularly within ethnic groups whose members feel politically weak—to change prevailing ideas about policing. By engaging in a close dialogue with ethnic communities and encouraging the participation of community members in setting priorities and developing strategies, police may begin to alter culturally transmitted beliefs about law enforcement.

Findings from Early Survey Work in the United States and United Kingdom

The use of surveys as a tool to assess police-citizen interactions dates back to the 1970s in the United States and the United Kingdom. Early surveys in these countries consistently showed that most people are supportive of the police and satisfied with the way they perform their duties.[2]

Although U.S. and British surveys have found that most people feel positively about their local police, they have also demonstrated that some segments of the population are far less satisfied than others. In general, younger Americans are less satisfied with the police than older Americans. For example, one study found that among respondents aged 18 to 26, nearly 20 percent felt that police use of excessive force was a big problem in their community, while only five percent of respondents aged 40 and over felt it was a big problem.[3]

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[2] See, for example, Homant, R.J., D.B. Kennedy, and R.M. Fleming. "The Effects of Victimization and the Police Response on Citizen Attitudes Toward Police." *Journal of Police Science and Administration* 12, no. 3 (1984): 323-332; Benson, P.R. "Political Alienation and Public Satisfaction with Police Services." *Pacific Sociological Review* 24 (1981): 45-64; O'Brien, J. "Public Attitudes Toward the Police." *Journal of Police Science and Administration* 6, no. 1 (1978): 303-310; Thomas, C. and J. Hyman. "Perceptions of Crime, Fear of Victimization, and Public Perceptions of Police Performance," *Journal of Police Science and Administration* 5 (1977): 305-317; Lundman, R. "Domestic Police-Citizen Encounters." *Journal of Police Science and Administration* 2 (1974): 22-27; Radelet, L. *The Police and the Community* (3rd ed.). Encino, CA: Glencoe, 1980.

[3] Skogan, W.G. and S.M. Hartnett. *Community Policing, Chicago Style*. New York: Oxford University

Surveys also have found consistently that race is an important factor in shaping how people view the police. Studies reaching back to the 1960s have found that African-American citizens evaluate the police more negatively than white citizens.[4] One study reported that Mexican-Americans as well as African-Americans gave the police lower ratings than whites.[5] Some researchers have attributed the less favorable evaluations of the police among African-Americans to that group's experience of more insulting language, unnecessary frisks, and police use of force. However, more recent surveys have called into question whether it is race per se that affects attitudes or whether race is a proxy for other factors. As mentioned earlier, our work in Jackson Heights found that a middle-class, politically empowered African-American community held the most positive feelings for police of six ethnic groups studied. Class distinctions also mediate citizen perceptions of the police. Two other recent investigations have noted that perceptions of police misconduct were quite different among African-Americans in middle-class neighborhoods than among African-Americans in lower-class neighborhoods.[6]

Current Use of Surveys in the United States

In the latter part of the 1990s, surveys of citizen attitudes toward the police gained new life. Well-publicized incidents of police misconduct galvanized minority communities to demand fair treatment by the police. A lack of reliable data on the use of *reasonable* and *excessive* force prompted the U.S. Congress, through the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, to instruct the Attorney General to develop a national system for collecting data on police use of force. This led to a series of government studies designed to obtain information on the prevalence and nature of citizens' encounters with the police.[7] And, indeed, these studies found evidence that police were more likely to use force against African-Americans and Latinos than whites with whom they came into

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Press, 1997.

[4] Hahn, H. "Violence: The View from the Ghetto." *Mental Hygiene* 53 (1969): 509-512; McCord, W. and J. Howard. "Negro Opinions in Three Riot Cities." *American Behavioral Scientist* 11 (1968): 24-27; Jacob, H. "Black and White Perceptions of Justice in the City," *Law and Society Review* 5 (1971): 69-89; Cambell, A. and H. Schuman. "A Comparison of Black and White Experiences in the City." In *The End of Innocence: A Suburban Reader*, edited by C.M. Haar. Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman, 1972; Skogan, Wesley G. "Citizen Satisfaction with Police Services." In *Evaluating Alternative Law Enforcement Policies*, edited by Ralph Baker and Fred Meyer. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1979; Scaglion, R. and R. Condon. "Determinants of Attitudes Toward City Police." *Criminology* 17 (1980): 485-494; Browning, S., F.T. Cullen, L. Cao, R. Kopache, and T. Stevenson. "Race and Getting Hassled by the Police: A Research Note." *Police Studies* 15 (1994): 3-22.

[5] Hadar, I. and J.R. Snortum. "The Eye of the Beholder: Differential Perceptions of Police by the Police and the Public." *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 2 (1975): 37-54.

[6] Weitzer, R. "Citizen Perceptions of Police Misconduct: Race and Neighborhood Context." *Justice Quarterly* 16 (1999): 819-846; Sampson, R.J. and D.J. Bartusch. *Attitudes Toward Crime, Police, and the Law: Individual and Neighborhood Differences.* Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Justice, 1999.

[7] Ewin, T. *National Data Collection on Police Use of Force*. Washington, D.C.: Bureau of

contact.[8] The U.S. Justice Department has since decided to make people's experience with the police a part of its annual National Crime Survey.

Recent surveys of attitudes toward the police have also been used to evaluate federal efforts to promote community policing. Studies conducted in Indianapolis, Indiana and St. Petersburg, Florida have attempted to determine whether this new working relationship with residents leads to favorable attitudes towards the police.[9] In San Diego, a city whose police department is believed by many experts to offer the best example of community policing in the United States, the police commissioner instituted annual citizen surveys to measure the success of the program. By far the most extensive effort to evaluate a local community policing program has been undertaken in Chicago by Skogan and his associates.[10] Those researchers have conducted a series of surveys over a five-year period to assess the success of community policing and its effects on citizen perceptions of neighborhood conditions and the police.

The Chicago work is an excellent example of how surveys can be used in the process of police reform. The researchers did not set out to do a "hands-off" study. Police and city administrators made clear that they did not want a book coming out in five years telling the world what they had done wrong. Rather, the officials wanted to get continual feedback on the results of the evaluation in order to make mid-course changes in the community policing program. The researchers agreed to this principle. Rather than seeking to grab newspaper headlines, they attempted to give strategic advice to stakeholders in the program. This was done through memos and private briefing sessions with the mayor, the police chief and other top administrators, police district commanders, community organizers, and rank-and-file police officers who contacted researchers to learn what they were finding. The researchers also made detailed reports and presentations of findings through various forums.

The evaluators documented that policing did, indeed, change in the prototype districts selected for the community policing experiment. Police officers' jobs were restructured and teams of officers were assigned to particular beats for at least a year. Officers had time to engage in community-oriented work and responded mostly to calls from their own beats. Each district held beat meetings regularly, which gave community members a chance to interact with officers. Residents were able to ask questions of their beat officers or the district commander and to make their concerns known. The evaluators were pleasantly surprised to find that the beat meetings were better attended in poor, high-

Justice Statistics, 1996.

[8] Greenfeld, L.A., P.A. Langan, and S.K. Smith. *Police Use of Force: Collection of National Data.* Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1997.

[9] Mastrafski, S.D., R.B. Parks, A.J. Reiss, and R.E. Worden. *Policing Neighborhoods: A Report from St. Petersburg.* National Institute of Justice Research in Brief, July 1998.

[10] Skogan, W.G. and S.M. Hartnett. *Community Policing, Chicago Style.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

crime precincts than in districts where improved policing was not as urgently needed. (This is in contrast to most studies of citizen anticrime organizations, which have found that participation in poor, high-crime neighborhoods is generally lower than in other areas.)

The evaluation documented a number of achievements of the Chicago community policing experiment. Police officers, many of whom resisted the change to community policing initially, became more positive over time. Community residents surveyed in the prototype districts said that they saw police officers more frequently and saw them doing community-oriented work more frequently than residents of comparison districts that did not have community policing. There was also evidence that community policing improved neighborhood conditions. There were positive changes, according to residents surveyed in each of the prototype districts. In some of the districts, residents indicated that crime was down; in others, drug and gang problems were down; and in still others, signs of physical decay (abandoned buildings, trash-strewn lots) were down relative to comparison districts. Across the board, survey respondents in community policing districts were more likely to view the police as responsive than residents in comparison districts.

The work of Skogan and his associates stands as an excellent model of how citizen surveys can be used to diagnose problems, measure program success, and interact with police administrators to make mid-stream corrections to improve the success of a reform program.The same type of approach—integrating research into the program development process— has been used successfully in England. For example, in an effort to reduce hate crimes in a London housing estate, researchers helped program planners identify the location and nature of the incidents. The researchers then assessed changes in the volume of incidents before and after the program was implemented.[11]

International Democratization of Policing

Over the past two decades, there has been an unprecedented movement of governments worldwide toward democratic principles. Unfortunately, policing practices have often not changed as rapidly as other aspects of government in the transition to democracy. Police administrators under new democratic regimes often include many of the same individuals who abused civilian populations when they were acting as agents of control under authoritarian governments. Democratization has frequently been accompanied by dramatic increases in crime rates and calls for police tactics that the public thinks will bring down crime, even at the expense of civil liberties.

Still, police reforms, including community policing, civilian complaint review boards, and efforts to facilitate reporting of violence against women, are springing up all

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[11] Sampson, A. and C. Phillips. *Reducing Repeat Racial Victimization on an East London Estate*. London: Home Office Police Research Group, 1995.

over the world—from Brazil to Uganda to Hungary.[12] As reformers continue to advance their agendas, it is important to know whether their efforts are bringing about true change. In other words, are police agencies being transformed into organizations to protect citizens and to be accountable to them? Or do they remain instruments to control the populace and to maintain power by those who possess it? One powerful way to assess the rate of progress is to conduct surveys that gauge citizen experiences with the police and their opinions of the police. The same kinds of surveys that have been so valuable in the United States to uncover ethnic and class differences in confidence in the police could also serve as a scorecard for determining whether policing abroad is moving toward a democratic ideal.

Such an approach has been taken by the Vera Institute, members of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and the Ford Foundation in St. Petersburg, Russia. Last year, a representative sample of 2,400 residents of the city were surveyed. The questionnaire, developed jointly by Vera staff and members of the Russian Academy of Sciences, used a set of core questions from Skogan's Chicago community policing survey and added to these questions of local interest. This effort represented the first time that Russian citizens had been polled about their experiences with police. Survey responses were analyzed to determine how frequently St. Petersburg residents had voluntary or involuntary contacts with the police, whether those experiences were positive or negative, and how they felt about police effectiveness and police misconduct. Special analyses were also carried out to identify which police districts were viewed especially favorably or unfavorably by citizens.

The results of the survey were discussed with local police administrators and a press conference was held at which researchers, human rights activists, and police representatives were present. The survey project sought to identify areas of police deficiency and police districts that performed significantly worse than others in the city, and thereby encourage police administrators to take corrective measures. A second survey was conducted in spring 2000 to assess what changes may have occurred.

Skogan's survey will also be used in 2000 to gauge citizen-police interactions in Washington, D.C. and London. Russian members of the St. Petersburg team are working to implement similar surveys in another Russian city and a German city.

Surveys as a Tool for Promoting International Police Reform

From the experience of conducting surveys in the United States and Great Britain, we can abstract a number of ways that citizen surveys can promote the cause of police reform around the world. First, surveys can assess the current state of police-citizen relations. Most countries have some forum in which dissatisfied citizens can file complaints against the police. But citizen complaint agencies, often for good reason, do not always have the

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[12] Neild, R. *From National Security to Citizen Security: Civil Society and the Evolution of the Public Order Debate*. Washington, D.C.: Washington Office on Latin America, 1999.

confidence of citizens. If citizens do not perceive the agency to be impartial and powerful enough to bring about disciplinary action in cases where it is warranted, they are unlikely to file complaints. Unfortunately, impotent citizen complaint agencies are most likely to be found where police abuses are worst.

Citizen surveys offer a way to gauge the degree of police misconduct in places where other reliable sources are not available. Surveys can provide a snapshot of how the police interact with citizens. Unlike citizen complaints, which measure only gross misconduct, surveys can also assess whether police are doing their jobs well. They can gauge whether people are satisfied with how the police respond to calls for service, with the job they are doing fighting crime, or with the way that police interact with the community.

Citizen surveys can also measure how the police are perceived by subgroups within the general population. Surveys have been instrumental in documenting the racial gap in the United States between how African-American and white citizens feel about the police. They also helped to suggest that differential treatment of African-Americans by law enforcement officers is one of the reasons for this group's lower confidence in the police.

As they are doing in St. Petersburg, Russia, citizen surveys can also pinpoint police districts that are performing significantly better or worse than others, according to residents. In the case of high-performing precincts, researchers and police administrators can make an effort to understand what police are doing right. In an earlier paper in this series, for example, we investigated two New York City police precincts that had been successful in reducing both crime and citizen complaints. Our investigation revealed management practices shared by the two precincts' commanders that accounted for their success.[13] In the case of precincts identified as performing below par by surveys, local commanders or central administrators can take corrective action.

As surveys are done in more and more cities around the world, it will become possible to compare results across countries. We have already analyzed some preliminary comparisons between the first Russian survey done in St. Petersburg and the U.S. surveys done in Chicago and New York. We had expected to find that more residents of St. Petersburg would be stopped by the police than in Chicago or New York. But that expectation was disproved: the rate of involuntary contacts with the police was somewhat higher in St. Petersburg than in the U.S. cities, but the differences were small. Instead we found a big difference in *voluntary* contacts with the police. Residents of St. Petersburg were far less likely to initiate contact with the police than were residents of Chicago or New York. The 2000 survey in St. Petersburg is exploring the reasons residents are reluctant to use the police in instrumental ways and what they do instead of calling the

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[13] Davis, Robert C. and Pedro Mateu-Gelabert. "Respectful and Effective Policing: Two Examples in the South Bronx." New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 1999.

police when confronted with a neighborhood problem.

Citizen surveys can also be used to promote democratic policing by measuring the success of reforms. An initial survey can assess the state of police-citizen interactions prior to introducing a reform or demonstration program. This is called a "baseline" measure. At some point following the introduction of the reform, a second survey using the same questions can be administered. If citizen evaluations of their encounters with the police or citizen attitudes toward the police change significantly from the first to the second survey, that would be reason to believe that the reform had an effect.

Of course, it is also possible that other changes may have occurred between surveys as well, and that those changes might be responsible for the observed change in citizen attitudes. To be sure that observed changes are due to the reform being studied and not to other factors, it is useful to include one or more comparison areas. The comparison areas are chosen to be similar to the target area in as many respects as possible, except that they do not get the reform or demonstration program. Surveys are done in both the target and comparison areas prior to introducing the reform in the target area and again after it has been introduced. If the reform has an effect, then we would expect to see a change in attitudes from the first to the second survey in the target area but no change in the comparison area.

Take as an example a community policing program. It will be introduced into police district A. The promoters of the program believe that it will reduce crime by stimulating residents to participate in neighborhood watch and other anticrime programs. Before the program is introduced, program evaluators choose a second police district (district B) that matches district A as closely as possible in terms of population, crime rates, and community demographics. Citizen surveys are administered to residents of both districts A and B, measuring attitudes toward the police and citizen involvement in policing activities. Following the introduction of the community policing program in district A, surveys are again administered in both districts.

In our example, imagine that there was no drop in crime in district A following the introduction of the community policing program. However, looking at survey results, the evaluators find that citizen attitudes toward the police became more positive in district A after the program was introduced. No change is observed in attitudes toward the police among residents of district B. Program promoters rightfully argue that the community policing demonstration had a positive effect because citizens gained more confidence in the police. If they had relied only on crime rates to determine program impact, evaluators would have incorrectly concluded that the program had no beneficial effect.

A final way that citizen surveys can be useful in promoting democratic policing is by helping to conduct a "post-mortem" on demonstration programs that didn't work. In our community policing example, evaluators might well wonder why crime rates didn't improve as well as confidence in the police. A well-constructed survey might have shown

that people had heard about the community policing program, and that enhanced the image of the police. But the survey might also have found that participation in the anticrime activities sponsored by the police was low. Further, it might have shown that the principal neighborhood organizations in which people tended to participate were church-sponsored groups. This could suggest that the police might have had better success if they had worked through church organizations to promote participation in anticrime programs.

Some Considerations in Conducting Citizen Surveys

Up to now, we have argued that surveys can play a useful role in efforts to promote democratic policing. But they will be most useful if survey administrators keep several points in mind. Surveys are conducted on a sample of people, usually numbering in the hundreds, but survey administrators almost always intend to apply the results to the population from which the sample was drawn. That population may include all residents of a police district, an entire city, or other geographic unit. In order to apply the sample results to the population from which it was drawn, the sample needs to be *representative.* The sample must be drawn in such a way that everyone in the population has an equal chance of being picked. Usually this means using a plan to select households systematically—for example, selecting streets at random and then knocking on every fourth door on the selected streets. Choosing a representative sample normally would preclude interviewing people at a fair, rally, or other place where certain types of people are likely to attend and other types are not.

Survey administrators also need to keep in mind that using the same questions that surveys in other countries have used is a good idea, but results need to be interpreted carefully. It can be very enlightening to compare results in one country or city to results in another, especially when the two places have similar characteristics. But the same questions may be interpreted differently from one culture to the next. When we conducted the first survey of residents of St. Petersburg, Russia, we were disturbed to find that as many as four in ten respondents declined to answer questions about police misconduct. (In the United States, the nonresponse rate was under 10 percent for the same questions.) We did not know whether this was because people feared recriminations or whether respondents were simply declining to answer questions about which they had no direct knowledge. Fortunately, we were able to evaluate these two alternatives in the pretest to the second wave of the St. Petersburg survey. It turned out that Russians were far less likely than Americans to venture an opinion on topics about which they did not have personal knowledge. Thus, a nonresponse in St. Petersburg to a question about whether the police take bribes meant essentially the same as a "No" response in the United States.

Finally, in order to promote the cause of reform, survey administrators must have police buy-in. This means that the survey designers bring police administrators into the planning process. The police need to be convinced that the survey will be of value to them

by pointing out ways they can improve or by identifying districts that are outperforming or underperforming the average. Survey administrators need to give the police the opportunity to participate in the design process, by allowing them to suggest topics to be covered or fine-tune questions. Most important, the police need to be reassured that the survey administrators are not out to capture headlines at the expense of the police. Survey administrators must convince the police that the effort is a partnership and that problems identified through the survey will be discussed within the partnership, not in the media. In exchange, the police give tacit agreement that they will take the results of the survey seriously and work to find solutions to problems the survey highlights.

The Chicago survey provides a good example of how this process can work effectively. From the start, researchers worked cooperatively with city and police administrators. Survey administrators did not try to publicize findings that reflected badly on the police. Rather, results were discussed in a variety of forums with members of the community policing implementation team. Officials used the results to make improvements in their implementation of the community policing experiment. Ultimately, the survey contributed substantially to our understanding of whether the demonstration was successful, why it was successful, and what aspects could have worked better.

Conclusions

For several decades, researchers have used citizen surveys to test hypotheses about police-citizen interactions. In recent years, surveys have also come to be used as a tool for promoting police reform. As a barometer of the state of police-community relations, citizen surveys can provide a more reliable snapshot of police performance than citizen complaints. Surveys not only can gauge misconduct, but can also assess what is right about police-community relations. They can measure citizen satisfaction with the police in areas such as crime-fighting effectiveness, response time to calls for service, and responsiveness to neighborhood concerns.

We may be witnessing the beginning of the use of citizen surveys as an interactive tool in the implementation of reform programs. Surveys can measure the state of police-citizen relations prior to the implementation of a reform, can suggest mid-stream corrections during the implementation process, can gauge the impact of the reform, and can suggest reasons why the reform effort was or was not successful. As citizen surveys are used in conjunction with police reforms, we will develop a body of research that will contain lessons about what works, what doesn't work, and why.