WHAT INFLUENCES OVERALL CITIZEN SATISFACTION WITH THE POLICE?

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Over the last two years it has seemed that overall public support for law enforcement officers has declined. Media coverage of police activities has been markedly skewed toward covering news stories that display law enforcement officers in a negative light. These news reports have portrayed law enforcement in the United States as routinely racist, excessively violent, and frequently intruding on the constitutional rights of the public. Numerous public demonstrations against the police (some peaceful and some violent) have occurred within most of our major cities and college campuses. YouTube is filled with video images of people trying to create controversial interactions with law enforcement officers. In such an atmosphere it is important for law enforcement officers and agencies to ensure that they do not lose the support of the general public in their jurisdiction.

In democracies, law enforcement agencies must have the popular support of the people. Without this popular support, government (and its police) are viewed as a totalitarian system. While individual radicals will always oppose any sort of authority within society regardless of the circumstances, if a majority (or a substantial minority) of the public begins to fear and distrust its police, then democratic governance begins to dissolve. When the average American begins to question the integrity and legitimacy of the police, then our nation is in serious trouble. Therefore, law enforcement officers and agencies must conduct a self-examination to determine if they are doing everything they reasonably can to keep the average citizen safe and happy so that these citizens will support them in dark times such as the present.

This will be the first in a serious of articles that will review and summarize the existing social scientific research on general citizen satisfaction with the police. This first article will examine exactly what factors influence a person's overall satisfaction with the police. Later articles will then expand on the most important factors influencing citizen satisfaction and summarize what the research tells us are evidence-based strategies to address each factor, with the end goal of increasing overall citizen satisfaction.

General Satisfaction with the Police

This article will examine the factors that influence general citizen satisfaction toward the police. In order to do this, a review was conducted of all research studies of citizen satisfaction published since 2000. A total of 27 studies were located and reviewed for this article (see the end of this article for the complete list of these published studies). Of the 27 studies, one involved a nationwide sample of persons, three used statewide samples (Colorado, Ohio, and Washington), and the remaining 23 used samples from specific municipalities.
These municipalities ranged in size from New York and Chicago down to Monroe, North Carolina (population 36,397) and Newark, Delaware (population 31,454). All totaled, these 27 studies surveyed 55,421 persons. These studies measured citizen satisfaction by responses to statements such as, “In general, I am satisfied with the police in my community?” or “Overall, the police in my neighborhood do a good job.” Citizen response choices ranged on a scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. While each of these 27 studies varied slightly in the specific factors measured, the findings across studies were very similar and no urban-rural differences were found in people’s responses. The rest of this article will describe the factors that most of the studies revealed influenced people’s general satisfaction with the police.

Contact with the Police

Twenty of the studies asked the respondents if they had experienced a contact with the police within the last 12 months and whether or not they considered this contact to have been negative or positive. Every single one of these studies found that having had a recent negative contact with the police significantly reduced overall satisfaction with all police. Having had a recent negative contact with the police was the strongest predictor found regarding general citizen satisfaction with the police. Eleven of the 27 studies also asked about vicarious police contact, described as having a friend or family member who had contact with the police within the last 12 months. Again, 100% of these studies found that having a friend or family member with a recent negative contact with the police decreased overall satisfaction with the police.

Positive contacts with the police, however, failed to have a strong influence. While 20 of the studies measured whether the person had experienced a recent positive contact with the police, in only 22% of these studies was a positive contact a factor that influenced overall citizen satisfaction, and even in these cases the overall influence was weak. Likewise, only 8% of the studies that measured recent vicarious positive contact found that it influenced people’s general attitudes toward the police. So, to summarize, negative contacts between an officer and a citizen not only decreases that citizen's respect and support for the police, but it also diminishes respect and satisfaction for the police among that person’s relatives, friends, and any other bystanders who witnessed it. Very positive contacts, on the other hand, do not do much to improve a citizen’s satisfaction with the police.

Perceptions of Neighborhood Crime and Disorder

After negative contacts with police, the next strongest predictor of overall citizen satisfaction was the person’s level of fear of crime. The more fearful a person is about crime in his or her neighborhood, the less likely that person is to be satisfied with the police. It is important to note that several of these studies also measured the actual neighborhood crime rate and found the two were unrelated. Some people living in high crime neighborhoods expressed little fear of crime, while others living in relatively safe neighborhoods expressed great fear of crime. Regardless of the crime reality, however, the more fearful the person, the lower their perceptions of the police. To a lesser extent, citizen perceptions about neighborhood disorder and incivility also influence satisfaction with the police. The more run-down the person perceived his or her neighborhood, the less general satisfaction the person has with the police.

Media Exposure

All of the studies that measured the extent of the person’s radio and television media exposure found that as media exposure increases, satisfaction with the police decreases. While media representations of the police produce unrealistic expectations about the capabilities of the police, and news programs tend to concentrate on sensational crimes, this only partially explains the media exposure effect. None of these studies specifically measured the types of shows the person watched, simply measuring how many hours the person watches television and listens to the radio on average per day. Regardless of the media contact, higher media exposure reduces citizen satisfaction (and also increases fear of crime). As this was the case, it would be safe to
assume that those with the highest levels of media exposure included the unemployed, the retired, and the disabled – persons who tend to be socially isolated from others in their community.

**Neighborhood Police Resources**

All of the studies that measured citizen perceptions of police resources in their neighborhood found this perception tied to the citizen’s overall satisfaction with the police. Regardless of actual neighborhood crime rate, persons who felt the police rarely patrolled their neighborhood or did not like handling calls in their neighborhood, were more fearful of crime and held more negative views of the police. Similarly, about half of the studies also found that when citizens knew the officers who patrolled their neighborhood by name, they were less fearful of crime and had more positive attitudes toward the police.

**Immigrant Status**

Seven of the 27 studies asked if the respondent was an immigrant to the United States. In all but one of these seven studies, immigrants were found to be less satisfied with the police even after controlling for fear of crime and recent contact with the police. These attitudes were consistent whether the person was an immigrant from Latin America, Asia, or Africa. Considering the fact that most recent immigrants come from third world countries with police agencies connected to oppressive government regimes and known for human rights violations, this should not be surprising. People who grew up in a nation where the police officers were routinely uneducated, violent, and corrupt would understandably have unfavorable perceptions of the police everywhere unless their new police experiences repeatedly reveal something different.

**Other Factors**

While a few other characteristics were associated with people’s general satisfaction with the police, these remaining influences were weak and inconsistent. In 30% of the studies citizen age had no influence, but in 70% of the studies older persons generally had more positive attitudes toward the police than did younger persons. In 77% of the studies the person’s sex had no influence, but in the remaining studies men sometimes had more positive attitudes toward the police than did women, while in other studies the reverse was true. In 18% of the studies the person’s education level influenced satisfaction with the police, but some studies found a college education increased satisfaction while in others a college education decreased satisfaction with the police. In only 5% of the studies did socioeconomic status influence citizen satisfaction with the police with satisfaction decreasing the more impoverished the person.

While citizen race is often assumed to be a factor influencing citizen satisfaction with the police, these 27 studies revealed that race was only a minor influence after controlling for the more influential factors discussed earlier. For example, less than half of the studies found that being African-American influenced one’s satisfaction with the police after controlling for other influences. Of the 12 studies that found being African-American was an influence, two (both in Chicago) found that African-Americans held more satisfaction with the police than did people of other races. The remaining 10 studies found that African-Americans were less satisfied with the police. Regarding Hispanics, only 6 of the 27 studies found Hispanic ethnicity influenced satisfaction with the police, and again some found Hispanics were more supportive of the police (in Houston), and others found that Hispanics were less satisfied with the police.

**Conclusion**

Maintaining the popular support of the majority of the citizens within the jurisdiction is a responsibility of every law enforcement executive and officer in a democratic society. Recent social scientific research has revealed that the strongest factor influencing general citizen satisfaction with the police is having had a recent negative contact with the police themselves, or knowing a friend or relative who recently experienced a negative contact
with the police. The next most influential factor influencing citizen satisfaction is the citizen’s fear of crime and disorder in their neighborhood. Degree of media exposure, perception of police resources dedicated to their neighborhood, and being an immigrant were also important factors. Factors such as sex, age, race, education, and socioeconomic status were weak or inconsistent influences on citizen satisfaction with the police.

Social scientific research offers insights and evidence-based strategies targeted at reducing negative police-citizen contacts, reducing citizen fear of crime, reaching those disconnected with the community, and reaching out to immigrants. Upcoming newsletters will discuss these evidence-based strategies, beginning with ways to help reduce negative contacts between officers and citizens. Perhaps if enough law enforcement agencies used evidence-based strategies targeted to improve citizen satisfaction with the police, nationwide public attitudes toward law enforcement could improve again.

The 27 Studies on General Citizen Satisfaction with the Police


Dai, M., Jiang, X. (Forthcoming). A comparative study of satisfaction with the police in the United States and Australia. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology*


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**Note:** Court holdings can vary significantly between jurisdictions. As such, it is advisable to seek the advice of a local prosecutor or legal adviser regarding questions on specific cases. This article is not intended to constitute legal advice on a specific case.