



CITIZEN SATISFACTION WITH THE POLICE: THE IMPACT OF A NEGATIVE POLICE CONTACT

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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. Last month's research newsletter examined the findings of the 27 most recently published research studies on overall citizen satisfaction with the police. These studies revealed that the strongest factor influencing general citizen satisfaction with, and trust in, 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. Those individuals who had experienced a recent negative interaction with law enforcement officers were significantly more likely to hold very negative attitudes toward all law enforcement officers.

Having had a recent positive contact with law enforcement officers, on the other hand, only had a small influence on raising citizen general satisfaction with the police. In several recent conversations with law enforcement executives I have heard a few theories for why this may be so. One chief suggested that it is the same human phenomenon that is observed regarding restaurant service. If we receive poor service at a restaurant we tell all of our friends and colleagues and never return to that restaurant, but when we receive good service at a restaurant we may tell only a few people and only return to the restaurant on occasion. Another chief suggested that there just are not that many positive police-citizen interactions because the majority of contacts involve encountering citizens at their worst – victimized, scared, angry, intoxicated, injured, or just plain out-of-control. A third chief felt it was because a positive encounter with law enforcement officers is simply the standard: what the public expects as normal.

This month's newsletter examines the existing social scientific research on citizen satisfaction with specific types of police-citizen encounters. Nationwide phone surveys conducted by the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics have revealed that only about 21% of Americans have any official contact with the police annually. Of these contacts, about 50% involved a vehicle or pedestrian stop. Another 48% involved being a witness, suspect, or complainant to a report of a crime, disturbance, or emergency situation. Only 2% contacted the police under any other circumstance. Therefore, the research examined here will examine studies on driver satisfaction with traffic stop encounters, citizen satisfaction with non-crime calls for service, and crime victim satisfaction with the officers who responded to their call. Finally, it will offer suggestions for reducing negative contacts between your officers and members of your community.

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Driver Satisfaction in Traffic Stops

While no one enjoys being stopped and cited for a traffic code violation, a growing body of research is revealing that how the driver was treated during the stop matters more than whether or not the driver received a citation. Four research studies have specifically examined what factors influence citizen satisfaction with the police following a traffic stop. These studies were conducted in Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, and Michigan and, combined, surveyed 1,386 drivers who had recently been stopped for a traffic violation. All four studies ended up revealing almost identical results, showing consistency around the nation in how people want and expect to be treated during a traffic stop encounter. Across these studies, the officer behaviors that were associated with higher ratings of citizen satisfaction were (in no particular order):

- The officer introduced him/herself
- The officer explained the reason for the stop
- The officer listened to my excuse and verbally empathized
- The officer explained options for handling the citation
- The officer answered my questions
- The officer helped me merge back into traffic
- The officer was courteous and polite; or the officer was businesslike
- The officer was fair (i.e., the enforcement action fit the severity of the offense)
- The officers called me “sir” or “ma’am” or by my last name (i.e., “Mr. Smith”)

These four studies also were consistent in their findings about what behaviors decreased satisfaction with the traffic stop interaction. These behaviors were:

- Officer yelled or spoke in an angry tone
- Officer was sarcastic
- Officer called me by my first name
- Officer called me by a slang term (i.e., “dude” or “bro”)
- Officer remained mostly silent
- I received a citation

It is important to note that how the officers spoke to the drivers, and what officers called the drivers, were consistently as important as receiving a ticket. As most traffic fines are typically over \$100 today, this fact reveals just how important the officers’ behaviors are to citizens if these behaviors are just as important as whether or not a citation. Additionally, after controlling for the positive and negative officer behaviors listed above, the following factors were not found to have any significant influence on citizen satisfaction with the stop: driver sex, driver age, driver education level, and driver race. While many surveys have suggested that African-Americans and Hispanics hold less confidence and satisfaction with the police, after controlling for these specific officer behaviors, this “race effect” disappears.

Citizen Satisfaction with Non-crime Calls for Service

Two studies have examined citizen satisfaction with police service at non-crime calls for service. These studies took place in Chicago and Raleigh, with a combined total of 2,554 complainants surveyed. Both of these studies revealed consistent results and showed that the officer behaviors that most increased citizen satisfaction were:

- The officer listened and paid attention to me
- The officer was courteous and polite
- The officer helped explain the cause or solution to the problem
- The officer tried to help me
- The officers arrived in a reasonable amount of time

Similar to the factors influencing satisfaction with traffic stop encounters, courteousness and politeness, listening to the citizen, and showing empathy were again very important officer behaviors. Realizing that citizens often have unrealistic expectations about what the police can do for them in many disturbance calls, it is important to note that it was the perception that the officer *tried* to help, rather than actually did help, that influenced satisfaction. It is also important to note the significance of response time to these non-crime, non-emergency calls for service. This may illustrate the importance of dispatchers giving callers a response time estimate and explaining the reason for any expected delay. (In such situations it might also be best to slightly over-estimate the expected time of arrival and call complainants back if extended delays in officer response time results.)

Like was found among drivers in traffic stops, the complainants' personal characteristics played no significant part in their satisfaction with how the officers handled the call. After controlling for the factors above, the complainants' age, sex, race, income level, and education level had no bearing on their satisfaction with the encounter.

Satisfaction among Crime Victims

Five studies have examined crime victims' satisfaction with the handling of their cases. These studies occurred in Connecticut, Michigan, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania and, combined, surveyed a total of 1,452 victims of crimes such as burglary, robbery, theft, vandalism, and domestic violence. Across all five studies the same pattern of results was found. The officer behaviors that influenced victim satisfaction included:

- The officer was courteous and polite
- The officer appeared to want to help
- The officer listened to the victim
- The officer searched the crime scene and collected evidence
- The officer looked for and questioned witnesses
- The officer politely gave safety advice to help prevent future victimization
- The officer explained insurance compensation options
- The officer gave contact information and contacted later with follow-up information

- The officers arrived quickly
- The offender was apprehended and / or property was recovered

These five studies also showed consistent results about what factors did not influence victim satisfaction, such as the victim age, sex, race, education level, socioeconomic status, severity of injury, value of property stolen, or extent of property damage. The results of these studies suggest that crime victims expect the officers to show them respect and make them feel like the officers have done everything possible to help them. In today's "CSI effect" world, citizens expect officers to collect at least some evidence (such as take photos, dust for a fingerprint, or collect some broken glass), no matter how inconsequential the actual evidence may be to the case.

So What Can We Do?

Now that we are armed with this knowledge about what factors contribute to citizen perceptions of a negative contact with the police, what can law enforcement leaders do to improve police-citizen contacts? The first place to start would be training as no officers should be held accountable for failing to do what they have not been properly equipped to do. Many law enforcement leaders have suggested that young officers today, because of our society's current emphasis on electronic communications, come to the profession with poorly developed interpersonal communication skills. There is research evidence to support this position. But my own experiences as a law enforcement officer in the 1980s and 1990s showed me that many older generations of officers (myself included) were far from perfect when communicating with challenging citizens.

Therefore, training is a must and there are a number of excellent, law enforcement-specific, interpersonal communications courses available today. For example, PATC offers seminars in "Surviving Verbal Conflict" that teaches officers how to engage with difficult citizens and survive the encounter with their career, and the reputation of their agency, intact. Law enforcement-specific interpersonal communications training should be mandatory for all new officers, and made a part of continuous in-service training. Since it is a fact that officers are required to use their communication skills thousands of times more often than their use of force skills, and more citizen complaints each year result from officer communication than occur from use of force, why do we spend so little time training for verbal communication under stress? Just like with our scenario-based live fire or Redman training, officers should routinely be put through difficult communication scenarios and required to perform. Also, since presence and verbal commands are part of the use of force continuum, verbal communication skills should be combined with other forms of scenario-based use of force training as physical force is not always the outcome of encounters with uncooperative citizens.

In addition to formal training, short roll call training sessions can occur through the use of YouTube videos. Sadly, YouTube has hundreds of short videos of police-citizen interactions (most posted by someone who has intentionally antagonized officers to get a reaction) that can be shown and evaluated at roll call. While most of these are examples of what not to do, there are a few examples of excellent officer demeanor and communication skills. At roll call briefings a video can be shown and then the supervisor can lead a brief discussion about what the officer did, what could have been done differently, and what their own agency's expectations would be concerning this interaction.

There are helpful books that could be used to supplement training as required reading. Three classic books that contain excellent material based on research and actual proven practice in verbal communication in public safety settings are:

Woodhull, A. V. (1993). *Police Communication in Traffic Stops*. Rochester, VT: Schenkman Books.

Thompson, G. J. (1993). *Verbal Judo: The Gentle Art of Persuasion*. New York, NY: Morrow.

Acosta, J., & Simon-Prager, J. (2002). *The Worst is Over: What to Say When Every Moment Counts*. San Diego, CA: Jodere Group.

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After training, next come clear policies. Clear policies need to be established that specify how officers are to communicate with citizens when representing your agency. Such policies could require that officers, unless prohibited by an emergency situation, identify themselves and state the reason for the interaction with the citizen when detaining citizens or arriving at calls. Policies should outline the manner in which officers are to address citizens (i.e., “Ms. Smith” or “Ma’am”) and what types of references are forbidden (i.e., “bro” or “cuz”). Again, the Surviving Verbal Conflict course can assist personnel in outlining policies dictating verbal communication standards.

Finally, there is accountability. Research has demonstrated that training and written policies are of little value if officers are not held accountable to follow their training and policies. Unfortunately, since citizen complaints about poor officer demeanor are the most common complaints made, and often the most difficult to substantiate, many agencies relegate these complaints to be investigated informally by first-line supervisors. As a result, these sorts of complaints often are not taken very seriously until they end up as a video that goes viral on the internet. Considering the impact bad officer demeanor can have on overall citizen satisfaction with the police as these videos are widely shared, it is important that officers know that all such complaints will be taken seriously.

As with most other policy violations, repercussions for violating agency policies on interpersonal communication should first focus on correcting the behavior. This can be accomplished through additional training such as the formal training mentioned above, or having the officer repeat the complaint scenario in writing and with a trainer until the officer demonstrates proficiency in being able to handle the encounter within policy guidelines. When dealing with a toxic employee who ends up being resistant to corrective actions and re-training, progressive discipline (sometimes to the point of termination) may be necessary. PATC offers an excellent training seminar on this particular topic entitled “Supervising the Toxic Officer.”

Conclusion

To summarize, recent research has revealed that the strongest predictor of overall citizen satisfaction with the police is having had a recent negative contact with the police, or knowing about someone who had experienced a negative contact with the police. In order to determine the characteristics of these negative contacts, we examined the research on citizen satisfaction among drivers in traffic stops, complainants in non-crime calls for service, and victims reporting crimes. Across all of these contexts some common themes appeared. Regardless of their age, sex, race, or socioeconomic status, members of the public expect officers to identify themselves, be courteous and polite, treat them respectfully, listen to what they have to say, show empathy, explain their actions, show fairness, and do whatever they can to help. To help improve citizen satisfaction with the police nationally, and in each individual community, law enforcement agencies need to emphasize training in interpersonal communication skills, help officers hone these skills, create policies that require use of these skills, and hold officers accountable when they fail to utilize these skills.

Broken Windows Theory suggests that small signs of physical decay, if left unrepaired, lead to apathy among the area residents that eventually permits further physical decay. This decay signals to criminals that social norms are loosely enforced here, emboldening them to commit more crime in the area. Just like this chain of events eventually snowballs from a single broken window or abandoned car to open drug dealing and street shootings, perhaps a negative contact with the police is the first step toward the lack of support for the police we are seeing today. When a single officer engages in unprofessional demeanor with a citizen, the research shows this negatively impacts the attitude toward all police for that citizen, and any citizens who witnessed the encounter (including on YouTube or in the news). If no negative repercussions are experienced by that officer for the event, that officer is emboldened to repeat the behavior in more interactions with citizens, and the officer’s peers are also emboldened to behave the same way when they see there are no consequences from their department. As this unprofessional demeanor spreads, it has a cumulative effect on the public as more and more citizens lower their impressions of law enforcement officers. The law enforcement profession loses social capital among the general public and the media, and when high profile incidents occur – such as the

lethal application of force – there is a lack of support and trust for the police. Just like Broken Windows Theory, unprofessional interactions with the public may be the first step in the chain of events that had brought us to where we are today.

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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.