



REDUCING FEAR OF CRIME AND INCREASING CITIZEN SUPPORT FOR POLICE

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In our July research newsletter we 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, or knowing a friend or relative who recently experienced a negative contact with the police. Our August research newsletter addressed the social science research on negative police contacts and how to reduce them. After negative police-citizen interactions, the second strongest predictor of overall citizen satisfaction with the police is citizen perceptions about neighborhood crime and disorder. This month's newsletter will address the research evidence on what law enforcement agencies, and their officers, can do to reduce citizen fears about crime and disorder in local neighborhoods.

Perceptions of Neighborhood Crime and Disorder

Among the 27 studies about citizen satisfaction with the police that were described in our July research newsletter, 100% of the studies found that citizens had lower overall satisfaction and confidence in the police when they had higher levels of fear of crime, higher perceptions of crime in their neighborhood, and higher perceptions of neighborhood disorder (such as trash, graffiti, abandoned cars, loud music, loitering homeless people, etc.). Perceptions of crime, however, do not always match actual levels of crime. For example, according to the FBI Uniform Crime Reports, both property and violent crime decreased steadily from 1993 through 2013.ⁱ National survey data from the Gallup organization reveals that fear of crime among Americans steadily declined from 1994 through 1998, but then began increasing again in 1999 and has continued to rise since then. So while *actual* crime has decreased, *perception* of the amount of crime has increased, with fear of crime at almost an all-time high in 2013.ⁱⁱ

Another important point to keep in mind is that policing tactics that decrease actual crime may, or may not, reduce fear of crime. Extensive research has found that specific policing tactics such as intelligence-led directed patrols, crime prevention by environmental design, nuisance abatement activities, and other problem-oriented policing strategies are very effective at reducing actual crime, but some of these tactics may have no effect on fear of crime or citizen satisfaction with the police.ⁱⁱⁱ Actual crime and perceptions of crime are two separate issues.

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What Reduces Fear of Crime?

Criminal justice researchers Jihong Zhao of Sam Houston State University, Matthew Scheider of the Department of Justice, and Quint Thurman of the University of the Southwest sought out every published research study of policing in the U.S. that measured whether or not certain police activities reduced citizen fear of crime.^{iv} They were able to locate 31 such studies, many of which examined multiple types of policing activities. They also found that almost all of these studies also measured citizen satisfaction with the police before and after implementing changes in policing activities. From these 31 studies they were able to determine what policing tactics reduced fear of crime, and increased citizen satisfaction with the police, a lot, a little, or not at all.

What Doesn't Work?

Decades ago social science research revealed that random vehicle patrol has no significant effect on neighborhood crime rates, but Zhao and his colleagues found it also has no effect on citizen fear of crime or satisfaction with the police. Twelve of the studies that they examined dealt with random patrol as part of the study, and all twelve studies found that increasing or decreasing the amount of random patrol in an area had no effect on citizen fear of crime or satisfaction with the police. Zhao and his colleagues also found that most community-relations focused tactics had little impact on reducing fear or crime. Although the number of studies of each specific type of activity was limited, no evidence was found that activities such as booths at community events, citizen police academies, neighborhood newsletters, neighborhood watch programs, and police department open-houses had any impact on fear of crime or satisfaction with the police. This is primarily because most of the folks who engage with the police through these events already have positive attitudes toward law enforcement before the interaction, and the personnel who staff these events are rarely the officers the citizen will actually encounter on the street. These activities also do not address the citizen's fears that are the direct result of what they see and hear in their neighborhoods.

What Works a Little?

Zhao and his colleagues reviewed 11 studies that included an evaluation of directed patrols. Intelligence-led directed patrols at hot spot locations, hot times, or for specific criminal activities (such as gun seizures) have been shown by other studies to be highly effective at reducing crime in the short-term.^v Zhao and his colleagues found that in 10 of the 11 studies of directed patrols, these patrols reduced fear of crime among the residents in the neighborhood. Unfortunately, in 7 of the 11 studies the directed patrols either had no impact on citizen satisfaction, or actually decreased citizen satisfaction with the police. Only about a third of the directed patrol studies found these patrols increased satisfaction with the police. This was likely because many of the law-abiding residents of the neighborhood experienced stops as they had to walk or drive near these hot spot locations. While they appreciated the crime reductions from the directed patrols, they were unhappy with frequently being stopped or having their family members stopped.

What Works Best?

What Zhao and his colleagues found worked best at reducing citizen fear of crime and increasing citizen satisfaction was intentional, non-enforcement, face-to-face contact between officers and citizens in the neighborhoods of greatest need. These contacts were not public relations fluff, handing out pencils and stickers to kids, but real police work activities focused on maintaining order, detecting crime, making citizens feel safe. For example, in one study the Houston Police Department targeted a couple of high crime neighborhoods and required patrol officers to stop twice during their shift to meet residents at their homes, or business people at their stores or offices. During these brief contacts (usually about 10 minutes), the officer would introduce him or herself, say the purpose of the visit was simply to get acquainted and learn whether there were any problems in the area the citizen felt the police should know about. The officer then left a

business card. For each contact, the officer completed a citizen contact card listing the citizen's name, address, phone number, and any problems discussed. Neighborhood surveys that were conducted before and after these contacts revealed that fear of crime fell substantially in the neighborhoods targeted, and citizen satisfaction with the police rose.^{vi}

Zhao and his colleagues examined 10 studies that utilized some variation of this activity and found that 100% of these studies showed decreases in fear of crime and increases in citizen satisfaction with the police. Some of the studies, like the one in Houston, involved officers being given a quota of two interactions per shift, but were also given the discretion to decide where and with whom to conduct these contacts. Other studies involved situations where officers were assigned specific addresses at which they were to conduct their contacts. Regardless of method, the same results were found. I also recently learned that the Portland Police Bureau in Oregon is currently engaging in public contacts like these, but the time and locations of the contacts are assigned by Computer-Aided Dispatch (CAD) based on hot spot locations and hot times for criminal activity within the officer's beat. This puts officers on locations and at times with the greatest risk of crime in order to help alleviate citizen fears.

Another tactic that showed strong results for reducing fear and increasing satisfaction was the use of community meetings, especially with a problem-solving component. Thirteen studies reviewed by Zhao and his colleagues included the use of community meetings of various sorts. Some were neighborhood watch meetings and some were "town hall" style meetings where citizens came to state their grievances with the police, both of which had only a small impact on fear of crime and satisfaction with the police. Community problem-solving meetings were different. These meetings involved inviting neighborhood residents to meet, receive instruction in problem-oriented policing strategies and the S.A.R.A. process, and then work in small groups with officers to develop strategies for addressing specific neighborhood problems that were of concern to neighborhood residents. All of the studies of community problem-oriented meetings with citizens found they reduced fear of crime among the participants and increased their satisfaction with the police.

It is worth noting that these meetings could also be used to address more problems than just crime. This could be an excellent format for discussing how to address issues relating to citizen concerns about police use of force, with citizens being given details of the recent use of force incidents and asked to decide, in groups, how they could have handled the situation any differently. Such activities open the eyes of citizens to the realities and difficulties police officers face, but may also reveal to officers unknown or untapped community resources available to assist them.

Finally, Zhao and his colleagues found that community substations had encouraging effects on fear of crime and attitudes toward the police. They found 10 studies that dealt with the implementation of a police substation within a strip mall, housing project, or community center. Some of the substations studied were staffed by officers only and others by a mixture of officers and civilian personnel. Some substations were operated 24-hours a day, while others were only open during the day or evening shift. In all of the studies, the presence of a substation in the neighborhood reduced fear of crime among neighborhood residents. In two-thirds of the studies the presence of a substation increased citizen satisfaction with the police among neighborhood residents as well. The reason they did not increase citizen satisfaction 100% of the time is likely related to the quality of the attitudes and social interactions with the personnel staffing the substation. Staffing a substation with an angry, burned-out employee will likely reduce the effectiveness of the substation at improving community relations.

Isn't This All Just Community Policing Again?

According to data collected from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the number of law enforcement agencies utilizing community-oriented policing strategies, and the number of specific community-oriented policing activities each agency utilized, grew steadily from the early 1980s, peaking between 1996 and 1998. After that,

the extent of utilization of community-oriented policing strategies began to decline steadily and by 2007 had leveled off at a rate much lower than in the past two decades.^{vii} This decline is due in part to a 1998 Department of Justice study that revealed problem-oriented policing strategies (such as directed patrols, hot spot policing, nuisance abatement, crime prevention by environmental design, etc.) were more effective at reducing crime than community-oriented policing strategies.^{viii} Just a couple of years later, after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, federal funds supporting community-oriented policing projects declined sharply in favor of funding opportunities with a homeland security orientation.^{ix} The recession of 2008-2012 further exacerbated things as police budgets shrunk and layoffs occurred nationwide.

While it is true that problem-oriented policing tactics, with or without community involvement, are more effective at reducing actual crime, research also reveals that most of these tactics do little to reduce citizen fear of crime or increase citizen satisfaction and confidence in the police. Therefore, it is no coincidence that the national decrease in fear of crime in the mid-1990s coincided with the growth of community policing, and the national increase in citizen fear of crime began at the exact period of history when use of community-oriented policing declined. Some community-oriented policing strategies (but not all) help reduce citizen fear of crime and increase citizen satisfaction and confidence in the police.

Summary

After decreasing the frequency of unnecessary negative police-citizen contacts from poor decorum on the part of officers, the next best thing law enforcement agencies can do to improve citizen satisfaction and confidence in the police is to help reduce citizen fear of crime, especially in the neighborhoods of most need. Research has revealed that the most effective tactics law enforcement agencies can implement to reduce citizen fear of crime and increase citizen satisfaction with the police are:

- Routine, non-enforcement, face-to-face contacts with citizens during patrol shifts
- Community meetings with a problem-focused orientation
- Neighborhood substations

What these three things have in common is interaction between average citizens and officers in the field for the purpose of discussing and addressing neighborhood problems of crime and disorder. One will see that this is really the type of policing that goes on every day in small town police departments. In small towns and villages across the nation the residents usually know their officers by name and vice versa, with several personal friendships existing between the two. Officers hear concerns from residents almost daily and often develop solutions in cooperation with the reporting residents. The police station is usually within walking distance to everyone in town and the door is always open. Some residents even routinely stop by the station just to visit.^x But would the citizenry of this type of community support their police when they are under attack?

Outside of Toledo, Ohio, is the mostly blue collar town of Woodville (population 2,101). The Woodville Police Department only has 5 full-time and 3 part-time officers. In December 2014, during the height of the Ferguson unrest and the media coverage of the shooting of Tamir Rice in Cleveland, a Woodville K9 officer shot a loose dog that threatened him during a traffic stop. This brought an outcry from the Toledo-area news media which jumped on the police-bashing bandwagon and ran numerous stories attacking the Woodville Police Department. They accused the officers of being untrained, even though all of the officers completed a state academy and are state-certified. They accused the Woodville police of operating a speed trap to prey upon out-of-town motorists, even though records released by the court revealed citations were generally not issued until the speed exceeded 15 miles per hour over the speed limit, and each officer only averaged 1 or 2 citations per shift. Nevertheless, the media onslaught continued for weeks.

But what did the citizens of Woodville think? Readers of the Toledo newspaper may post Facebook comments about articles. Most articles in the paper receive no comments, but particularly controversial articles sometimes

receive as many as 30 comments. In response to one of the most abusive editorial articles attacking the Woodville police, in less than 24 hours there were 147 Facebook postings from readers. Of these 147 Facebook comments, only 11 (7.5%) were unsupportive of the police.^{xi} The remaining 136 reader comments (92.5%) praised or defended the Woodville Police Department! That is one positive comment for every 15 residents of Woodville! Most of these positive comments described officers by name and demonstrated that the residents of Woodville knew and interacted with their officers. No town hall protests occurred demanding the resignation of an officer, and the chief was not run out of office. I'm sure every law enforcement officer in the nation would want that level of community support. Perhaps through reducing unnecessarily negative police-citizen contacts and increasing non-enforcement, face-to-face official police contacts between officers and citizens, we can move closer to this ideal.

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.

ⁱ Worrall, J. (2014). *Crime Control in America*. Boston, MA: Pearson.

ⁱⁱ Worrall Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hoover, L. T. (2014). *Police Crime Control Strategies*. Clifton Park, NY: Cengage.

^{iv} Zhao, J., Scheider, M., & Thurman, Q. (2002). The effect of police presence on public fear reduction and satisfaction: a review of the literature. *The Justice Professional*, 15(3), 273-299.

^v Hoover Ibid.

^{vi} Brown, L., & Wycoff, M. A. (1987). Policing Houston: reducing fear and improving service. *Crime and Delinquency*, 33(1), 71-89.

^{vii} Kim, M., & de Guzman, M. (2012). Police paradigm shift after the 9/11 terrorist attacks: the empirical evidence from the United States municipal police departments. *Criminal Justice Studies*, 25(4), 323-342.

^{viii} Sherman, L. W., Gottredson, D. C., MacKenzie, D. L., Eck, J. E., Reuter, P., & Bushway, S. D. (1998). *Preventing Crime: What Works, What Doesn't, What's Promising*. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Justice.

^{ix} Kim & de Guzman Ibid.

^x Weisheit, R. A., Falcone, D. A., & Wells, L. E. (2005). *Crime and Policing in Rural and Small-Town America*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.

^{xi} Burriss, K. C., (February 15, 2015). "Woodville: worst little town in Ohio." *Toledo Blade*, Online Edition: <http://www.toledoblade.com/Keith-Burriss/2015/02/15/Woodville-Worst-little-town-in-Ohio.html>