Understanding Differences in Public Perceptions of the Police

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Introduction

- In light of recent events, few issues could be more important than understanding how citizens form their attitudes about the police. As Adam Geller (2016) notes, "Years of tension have left people wary in both the policing community and in minority neighborhoods, with many yearning for one another's respect."
- Public support of the police in a democracy is essential for police to function effectively.
- Theories for building public support differ radically:
  - Support depends on safety (Skogan, 1990)
  - Your place in the social structure—power (Wilson, 1968)
  - Openness of police organization affects support (Sherman, 1997)
  - Quality of personal experience with the police (Tyler, 2003)

Hypotheses

- Does one bad experience with the police or crime color a citizen's evaluation of the police forever or does the social organization of the police send a meta message that counteracts or contextualizes a person's direct experience with the police or victimization?
- Hypotheses:
1. The more open the police department to the community the greater the public support (H1).
2. Victims of crime will be less satisfied with the police than non-victims (H2).
3. Persons who are helped by the police support them (H3).
4. The higher a person's social status the greater the support (H4).

Methods

- Police organization data was taken from the Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics (LEMAS) 2000 Sample Survey of Law Enforcement Agencies.
- Person-level data was taken from the Criminal Victimization and Perceptions of Community Safety in 12 United States Cities 1998 Survey.
- The data sets were merged to provide information on the organization of the police and the social position and experience of citizens with crime and the police.
- Measures were constructed using both a conceptual and operational model.

Dependent Variable: Satisfaction With Neighborhood Police

Perceptions of Police Responsiveness

Police Organization Factors:
- Interactive Programs w/Community
- Accessibility
- Visibility
- Representative Bureaucracy

Person-Level Factors:
- Race/Ethnicity
- Age
- Victimization
- Education

- Through the use of IBM SPSS software, data was then recoded, computed, and cross-tabbed against the dependent variable.
- The satisfaction variable was dichotomized for use in the linear probability model. The data were also analyzed using logistic regression.

Results

Table 1. Bivariate Model

	Value Labels	Valid Percent	Satisfaction Percent		
			Dissatisfied	Satisfied	Very Satisfied
Race/Ethnicity	White	73.7	1.9	74.7	23.4
	Black	19.9	6.1	79	14.9
	Hispanic	6.4	4.9	80.5	14.6
Age	12-17	9.2	4.5	81.9	13.6
	18-26	17.5	4.5	82.4	13.1
	27-50	5.2	2.8	76.3	20.9
	50-90	21.2	1.6	1.6	1.6
Victimization	Not Victimized	71.2	1.6	74.2	24.2
	Victimized	28.8	5	78	16.9
Education	LT High School	43.9	3.9	74.9	21.2
	GT High School	56.1	2.2	76.4	21.4
Police Contact	Not Favorable	81.5	2.4	76.6	20.9
	Favorable	18.5	3.9	73.4	22.7
Community Policing	Not Open	57.5	2.6	75.3	22.1
	Open	42.5	3.2	76.4	20.5

Table 2 Linear Probability Model Predicting Public Satisfaction with Police in 12 Cities

Variable	Model1		Model 2		Model3	
Social Position	Beta	T	Beta	T	Beta	T
Race 1= White	.091*	7.83	.086*	7.38	.085*	7.35
Education 1= College	-.015	-1.33	-.014	-1.17	-.014	-1.24
Age 1= GT 27	.096*	8.37	.089*	7.75	.089*	7.76
Safety/Civility						
Victimized 1= 1+ Victimization			-.075*	-6.31	-.075*	-6.30
Positive police contact 1= 1+ Contacts			.042*	3.53	.042*	3.53
Community Policing						
Community Policing 1= Open Organization					.010	-.89
Model R Sq	.018*	44.91	.024*	35.88	.024*	30.34

* Statistically significant at .05 or less.

Discussion

This analysis indicates that police organization factors have significantly less influence over how the public perceives the police than do person-level factors and that there were no substantial differences in the results in the multi-variate models.

Police Organization
- Community policing as an organizational strategy has little effect on satisfaction (H1).

Person-Level: Social Position
- Based on our findings, we were able to identify modest significance regarding race/ethnicity, age, victimization, and education.
- The social structural position of respondents has the strongest effect on satisfaction. Racial minorities and younger persons are less satisfied than White persons and older persons even when differences in experience with police are held constant (H4).
- Educational attainment does not affect satisfaction.

Person-Level: Safety and Interaction with the Police
- Safety has a strong effect on satisfaction with victims being much less satisfied (H2).
- Positive interactions with the police are related to higher levels of satisfaction, but not as strongly as victimization is to dis-satisfaction (H3).

These findings suggest that there is a relationship between a person's own characteristics and experiences and how positively and/or negatively they view the police.

Future Research

- A more in depth look at different police organization factors and data from various datasets will be required.
- Further investigation will require the replication of this analysis with the construction of new measures.
- Improving the quality of measures of community policing may enhance its effect on satisfaction.
- The fear of crime and vicarious victimization may have as strong of an influence as actual victimization and this should be taken into account.

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