

In the Aftermath: Perceptions of Police in an African American Community

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Abstract: Our work is exploratory in nature and is designed to give a snap shot of current attitudes and beliefs of a specific population toward police. In this article we present descriptive findings from a household survey of low income African Americans living in public housing. Given the recent protests over police treatment of African Americans, it is important to get a current measure of African American perceptions of police. We question if the incidents of police violence around the country will cause negative attitudes toward police, and, thereby, damaging police-community relations. In addition, we measure levels of fear of crime and feelings of safety.

Keywords: Police, Community, Relations, Fear of Crime, Neighborhood Safety, Perceptions, Citizen, Attitudes, Government, Efficacy, Race, Low-Low Income, Public Housing, Minorities.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this article we examine the perceptions of police by African Americans in the advent of recent racial events. Specifically, we question if the numerous shootings of young black men, and the treatment of African Americans, in general, over the last decade, influence African American perceptions of the police, and, thereby impacting police-community relations. It is important for us as a society to understand how a relatively small number of independent, isolated events impact police-community relations across the country. Even more troublesome is the extent to which public satisfaction with police services influence broader notions of justice within the criminal justice system (Elliott Et al., [1] 2012, p. 439).

According to Ross [2] (2015), the topic of bias in police shooting has been of interest to sociologists for many years. Writing in 1978, Peek et al [3] notes that "A consistently favorable attitude on the part of the general public toward the local police has been well documented. However, it is recognized that certain segments of the population, notably nonwhites and the young, do not regard the police highly (Peek, et al [4], 1978, p. 370)." Police-citizen encounters have been studied as far back as the mid 1960s, (Piliavin and Briar [5], 1964), and in the 1970s race and gender both became variables of interest in understanding police-community relations (Black and Reiss [6], 1970; Dannefer and Schutt [7], 1982; and Gainey and Payne [8], 2009). Research was also conducted on the opposite side of the relationship, with researchers investigating the correlates of police behaviors (Lundman [9], 1974; Friedrich [10], 1980), as well as organization structure and gender in community policing (Corsianos [11], 2011).

Work on police bias continues with structural and psychological explanations offered (Ross [12], 2015, p. 3/32) and advanced police-community relations models being developed. Along with age (Peek, et al [13], 1978) cultural factors and race play a role in the perceptions of police (Wiley [14], 2001; Howell [15], 2004), as do the perceptions of crime, and being a victim of crime (Howell [16], 2004). Sigelman et al [17] (1997) studied the impact that police beatings of citizens have on public perceptions of the police, while more recently, Ross [18] (2015) has used advanced statistical techniques to analyze the relationship between race and police shootings.

Tewksbury and West [19] (2001) conducted a study examining crime victims' satisfaction with police and found that police attributes such as courtesy, concern, and helpfulness are all correlated with overall satisfaction with police (p. 279).

Elliott et al [20] (2012) identify that for victims of crime, dignity and trust are important factors in determining efficacy with not only the police, but the criminal justice system, in general. Further, according to work by Weitzer and Tuch [21] (2005) “race structures citizen views of police racial bias, as it does other aspects of policing. In all four models, blacks and Hispanics are more likely than whites to believe that police bias is a problem. Blacks, however, are more likely to perceive such bias than Hispanics, net of other factors (p. 1024).”

Taylor and Hale [22] (1986) suggest that people living in neighborhoods with higher rates of crime do not necessarily have high levels of fear of crime, while in their 1995 work, Parker et al [23] looked at the relationship between high-crime neighborhoods and perceptions of police, finding that residents in high-crime areas had more negative attitudes than residents of low crime neighborhoods. Following the lead of Parker et al [24] (1995) and Palmiotto [25] (1998) we examine the perception of low income African American residents toward the police, and also look at their fear of crime. Palmiotto [25] (1998) studied fear of crime in public housing and an adjacent neighborhood and found that a stronger police presence made residents feel safer, but did not examine attitudes toward police.

For this study, we investigate the perceptions of crime and police in a small, African American, low socioeconomic status (SES) neighborhood, located in a southern city of approximately seventy-five thousand residents. Our principle interests are to measure and share the descriptive attitudes and perceptions of African Americans toward crime and the police, in a time that has seen contested police actions against people of color. We wonder, do the national events of the last five years taint the most disenfranchised of African Americans against the police, and even government, in general? We expect that in this low income African American neighborhood, in 2016, attitudes towards police will be poor.

2. METHODOLOGY

The data analyzed for this research were collected via a households survey conducted face-to-face with one-hundred-one residents of a public housing authority neighborhood in a small southern city located in the state of Georgia, United States of America. Randomization within the household was not used and the completed surveys represent approximately sixty percent of the occupied units. Multiple contacts, at various times, and on various days, were attempted to increase participation. Prior to data collection, the survey instrument was approved by the Institutional Review Board.

Students from a local university were employed for data collection. All surveyors were trained by the Principal Investigators (PIs) in proper face-to-face interviewing techniques. The surveyors were in the field approximately three weeks during the months of May and June 2016. All questions were of an ordinal level, with four or five response categories. The actual question wording can be found within the tables displayed.

Data were entered from paper surveys into spreadsheet format using Microsoft Excel and then imported into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for analyses.

3. DATA ANALYSIS

In this paper we analyze these data in univariate fashion to answer our research questions listed below. Descriptive frequencies and percentages are presented in this paper, with future work containing a more in-depth multivariate analysis.

Research Questions:

How do low socioeconomic status (SES) residents of an African American community perceive police behaviors?

What are residents' attitudes concerning a greater police presence in their neighborhood?

What are residents' attitudes concerning police and minorities?

What are residents' feelings of safety and fearfulness?

What do residents think about the job performance of police?

Descriptive Findings:

In this section we present the descriptive findings from our survey of African American residents of a low income public housing authority.

Our first table (Table 1, below) shows the distribution of responses to a series of questions concerning the police attributes. Specifically, we asked if the police treat people with respect, if the police take time to listen to people, if, generally, the police act professionally, and if the police treat people fairly.

Table 1: Resident's Attitudes Toward Police Attributes

Do you agree or disagree that the police:	treat people with respect.	Take time to listen to people.	Generally act professionally.	treat people fairly.
Strongly Agree	26.3%	25.3%	28.3%	25.3%
Agree	50.5%	49.4%	49.5%	47.4%
Disagree	12.1%	15.2%	14.1%	19.2%
Strongly Disagree	5.1%	6.1%	6.1%	5.1%
Don't Know	6.0%	4.0%	2.0%	3.0%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Recently the news has been full of reports about the mistreatment of African Americans by the police. One could make the reasonable assumption that this behavior, on the part of some police officers, combined with intensive media coverage would influence citizen attitudes toward police, particularly those of African Americans. Our data indicate that for this African American neighborhood, residents tend to be very positive toward their police.

Table 1 shows that a vast majority of residents feel that the police do treat people with respect. Over three-quarters (76.8%) either strongly agree (26.3%) or agree (50.5%) that the police are respectful. The figure remains high (74.7%) for those that strongly agree (25.3%) or agree (49.4%) that the police take time to listen to people. The most favorable responses are those concerning police professionalism. Over twenty-eight (28.3%) of residents strongly agree that the police act professionally, while 49.5% agree. Only 6.1% of these residents strongly disagreed with the statement.

Our last question in this series addresses the notion of police bias by race. We find that these African American residents overwhelmingly (72.7%) strongly agree (25.3%) or agree (47.4%) that the police treat people fairly.

We also asked residents a series of questions about their beliefs concerning their efficacy in the police (Table 2). As with police behaviors, a vast majority of residents either strongly agree or agree that police perform their duties in a positive manner.

Table 2: Resident's Beliefs About Efficacy In Police

Do you agree or disagree that the police officers:	can be trusted to make decisions that are right for my community.	usually explain their actions and/or decisions.	try to solve problems or do something when called.	in my community do their job well.
Strongly Agree	19.2%	20.2%	20.2%	22.4%
Agree	42.4%	50.5%	59.6%	54.1%
Disagree	21.2%	23.2%	11.1%	14.3%
Strongly Disagree	11.1%	5.1%	4.0%	3.1%
Don't Know	6.1%	1.0%	5.1%	6.1%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Approximately two-thirds (61.6%) strongly agree (19.2%) or agree (42.4%) that police can be trusted to make decisions that are right for the community. Similarly, 70.7% strongly agree (20.2%), or agree (50.5%) that police usually explain their actions. Almost eight-of-ten (79.8%) respond that they strongly agree (20.2%) or agree (59.6%) that police try to solve problems when called. Just over three-quarters (76.5%) strongly agree (22.4%) or agree (54.1%) that police in their community do a good job. Overall, the table data (Table 2) shows strong support for the police by this community.

Table 3: Treatment of Minorities

Do you agree or disagree that the police generally treat racial or ethnic minorities differently.		Percent
	Strongly Agree	23.2%
	Agree	39.5%
	Disagree	22.2%
	Strongly Disagree	3.0%
	Don't Know	12.1%
Total	100.0%	

Perhaps one of the most intriguing questions we asked of respondents concerns their view of the treatment of minorities by police. In response to this question, approximately two-thirds (62.7%) of responding residents strongly agreed (23.2%) or agreed (39.5%) that police do treat minorities differently. Approximately one-in-five (22.2%) disagreed, and only 3.0% strongly disagreed. For just over one-in-ten (12.1%), the verdict is still out and they reported that they did not know (Table 3).

Clearly, these African Americans think that there are some problems when it come to police treatment of minorities, but curiously, this negative aspect does not seem to strongly influence perceptions of job performance (Table 4).

Table 4: Police Do A Good Job

Do you agree or disagree that most police officers in my community do their job well.		Percent
	Strongly Agree	22.4%
	Agree	54.1%
	Disagree	14.3%
	Strongly Disagree	3.1%
	Don't Know	6.1%
Total		100.0%

Hence, we find in Table 4 that approximately three-quarters (76.5%) strongly agree (22.4%) or agree (54.1%) that the police officers in their community do their job well. The fact that this question is asking the respondents about the police in their community, while the previous question concerns 'the police generally,' may explain this perceived dissonance in responses. Still, given the negative actions of police across the country and the extensive media coverage, these findings are somewhat unexpected.

Table 5: Police Effectiveness

How effective are the police in:	controlling violent crime?	controlling drugs?
Very Effective	21.2%	18.2%
Effective	53.5%	34.4%
Ineffective	11.1%	23.2%
Very Ineffective	5.1%	13.1%
Don't Know	9.1%	11.1%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

The trend of positive assessment continues when residents were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of police. Approximately three-quarters (74.4%) rate the police as very effective (21.2%) or effective (53.5%) in controlling violent crime, while just over one-half (52.6%) rate them as effective (18.2%) or effective (34.4%) in controlling drugs. Needless-to-say, the national struggle to combat drug use, the devastating impact that drugs have on low-low income communities and on the black community, make this a particularly salient issue.

Table 6: Are Police Disrespectful

How often do the police treat people disrespectfully?		Percent
	Very Frequently	5.1%
	Frequently	19.4%
	Infrequently	30.6%
	Very Infrequently	26.5%
	Don't Know	18.4%
Total		100.0%

Finally, in terms of police attributes, we asked how often police treat people with disrespect. Just about one-quarter (24.5%) of responding residents report that the police very frequently (5.1%) or frequently (19.4%) treat people disrespectfully. That a majority (57.1%) find the incidence of police disrespect to be infrequent (30.6%) or very infrequent (26.5%) is another positive finding.

In communities where fear of crime and safety is of concern to the residents, we would expect a desire for an increased police presence. Conversely, in communities where there is a distrust of police, we would expect residents to be more hesitant of having a greater presence in their neighborhood. These residents express attitudes that are counter to expectations. Although there are low to moderate fear of crime and concern for safety (see tables 8 and 9, below) and a moderate to strong (table 3, above) racial distrust of police, these residents clearly want a greater police presence in their community.

Table 7: Greater Police Presence

Do you agree or disagree that:	we need more police squad car patrol in this neighborhood?	we need more police foot patrol in this neighborhood?	we need a greater police presence, in general?	the police should hold more town hall meetings to find out what the residents think?
Strongly Agree	44.4%	47.5%	44.4%	47.5%
Agree	35.4%	35.4%	34.3%	40.4%
Disagree	7.1%	4.0%	5.1%	6.1%
Strongly Disagree	10.1%	9.1%	11.1%	3.0%
Don't Know	3.0%	4.0%	5.1%	3.0%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Well over three-quarters (79.8%) strongly agree (44.4%) or agree (35.4%) that there should be more squad cars in the neighborhood, while 82.9% strongly agree (47.5%) or agree (35.4%) that more foot patrols are needed. Over three-quarters (78.7%) also strongly agree (44.4%) or agree (34.3%) that a greater police presence, in general, is needed in their neighborhood. In addition, residents would like a greater opportunity to communicate with police with 87.9% strongly agreeing (47.5%) or agreeing (40.4%) that police should conduct more town hall sessions.

For our last set of descriptive findings, we turn to residents' feeling of safety and fear of crime (tables 8 and 9, below).

Table 8: Feeling of Safety

	Percent	
Can you tell me how safe you feel in your community?	Very Safe	26.0
	Somewhat Safe	32.0
	Neither Safe or Unsafe	14.0
	Somewhat Unsafe	15.0
	Very Unsafe	13.0
Total	100.0	

Well over half (58.0%) of respondents report feeling very safe (26.0%) or somewhat safe (32.0%) in their community, while 14.0% feel neither safe nor unsafe. Just over one-quarter (28.0%) feel somewhat unsafe (15.0%) or very unsafe (13.0%).

Table 9: Fear of Crime

	Percent	
How fearful are you of being the victim of a violent crime?	Very Fearful	15.0
	Somewhat Fearful	22.0
	Neither Fearful or Unfearful	29.0
	Somewhat Unfearful	8.0
	Very Unfearful	26.0
Total	100.0	

Turning to fear of crime (Table 9), approximately one-third (37.0%) of residents are very fearful (15.0%) or somewhat fearful (22.0%) of being a victim of a violent crime. Just under one-third (29.0%) are neither fearful or unfearful, while one-third (34.0%) are somewhat unfearful (8.0%) or very unfearful (26.0%). In a future analysis, we will examine, in closer detail, the impact that the levels of fearfulness have on perceptions of police, as well as quality of life.

4. CONCLUSION

Our research is inspired by Parker, et al. [26] (1995) in their investigation into the attitudes of African Americans toward police. For our part, we find, to a higher degree than anticipated, an overall positive view within our community of study. Our expectations, in light of the vast amount of media coverage given to the seemingly endless reports of police violence toward African American, more negative perception of police by African American residents of public housing authority.

Instead, we found most residents expressing positive views of the police. Our data show positive attitudes concerning behavioral attributes of police (Table 1), efficacy in the police (Table 2), and job performance (Table 4). Police are also viewed as effective (Table 5) and respectful (Table 6). There is one notable exception, however. When it comes to race and ethnicity (Table 3), police are viewed as treating minorities differently.

Given our findings concerning the performance of police (Table 1, Table 2) and the perception of police treatment of minorities (Table 3) there is some dissonance among these public housing residents. Thus, as noted in text, even though local police are viewed as effective and having positive behavioral attributes, police, in general, are viewed as biased in their treatment of minorities. The police department is largely African American from the chief down to patrol officers, this might explain some of the dissonance, yet it would logically suggest a more positive view of equal treatment by police involving race.

This research has been a cursory, exploratory, and descriptive look at perceptions of police in an African American community. In future work, we will go beyond the descriptive and dig deeper into these data with analyses of the relationships between race, gender, perceptions of police, fear of crime, and feelings of safety. Further, in future research we would like to determine if there is a relationship between perceptions of police and community reactions to police conduct. Our current descriptive findings stand alone, however, in giving us greater insight into an important population, and comes at a significant time when understanding perceptions of police is of vital importance to American society.

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