Comparison of Race-Gender, Urban-Suburban Criminal Justice College Students Satisfaction of the Police Department

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Abstract

This quantitative study explored criminal justice college students' satisfaction with the police. 176 college students in Suffolk County, Long Island and New York City participated in a survey. The study examined the extent to which satisfaction with the local police department differs by location (urban and suburban), gender (female and male), and race (Black, Latino, and White). The results suggested that students who were from suburban settings had higher levels of satisfaction with the police than students who were from urban settings. In terms of race, White students were significantly more satisfied than Black students. Regarding gender, females tended to have slightly lower satisfaction levels than males. The present findings can be used by urban and suburban police departments to gauge the levels of satisfaction and attitudes towards their institution by upcoming police officers and reflect on their own relations with their communities.

Introduction

Within the last 40 years, criminal justice researchers and law enforcement agencies across the United States have given significant attention to the assessment of police and police service. The study examined criminal justice college students' satisfaction with police. From an administrative point of view, public perceptions can assist in the formulation of policy change, allocation of resources, program development and police accountability (Furstenbeg & Wellford, 1973). While criminal justice students are not necessarily representative of the general population, an examination of their perceptions provides a picture of those that will eventually enter into the police force.

Prior research has shown that men and women respond differently on a variety of behavioral attitudinal measures related to police. Recent research suggests that there is not widespread support for the police among juveniles either by race, age or gender. However, as the population gets older, there is a slightly higher positive regard of police by older females. However, findings suggest that overall attitudes of Black and White girls toward the police are significantly different from one another. When a regression equation was estimated, race continued to be a significant predictor of less positive attitudes. However, hearing about police misconduct aimed at a third party was a stronger predictor of women negative attitudes toward the police (Hurst, McDermontt, & Thomas, 2005).

The study aimed to update the empirical literature surrounding attitudes towards the police by exploring college criminal justice students' satisfaction with the police. Because many will likely enter the police force in the future, this research explores a unique aspect of police-community relations. It is possible that there are more positive attitudes towards the police department among criminal justice college students. Because they are hoping to become police officers, they might have positive attitudes towards the police department (Taylor, 2001). While the empirical literature supports differences among the general population in satisfaction with the police by gender, ethnicity, and location, it is unclear if those differences persist among these future police officers. The study therefore examined the extent to which the criminal justice college students' satisfaction with the local police department differs by location, gender, and ethnicity. The research questions were:

1. How do criminal justice college students who live in New York City and Suffolk County differ in level of satisfaction with their local police department?

2. How do male and female criminal justice college students differ in their level of satisfaction with their local police department?

3. Are there differences among ethnic groups (Black, White, and Hispanic) in level of satisfaction with their local police department?

Background

Historically, the overwhelming majority of the U.S public has held positive attitudes towards the police. Early research suggested that citizens tend to trust and support the manner in which police perform their duties especially in their communities (Albrecht & Green, 1977, Bell, 1979). Many findings have been descriptive in nature, taking into

consideration variables such as population characteristics, and socioeconomic levels (e.g., Scaglion & Condon, 1980). Other studies that have attempted to investigate the effectiveness of police community relations programs. Some have suggested that there is a strong correlation between positive attitudes toward the police and police community contacts. It has been shown that police perceptions improve when strong community relations are established. (Scaglion & Condon, 1980).

Research suggests that an important determinant how the community satisfaction and attitudes toward the police are related to how a person experiences the encounter with the police. In the case of victims of crime, one of the most consistent variables is that response time as an important factor to victims. A critical component to the satisfaction argument is how long does it take for the police to arrive as quickly as possible. There is some evidence that suggests that officers that arrive sooner than expected, the victims and the community are more likely to feel satisfied with the police ("Victims' Attitudes," 2015). Because experience with police can differ by demographic factors, many studies have examined the relationships among gender, Correia, Reisig, and Lovrich (1996) argued that the lower likelihood for women to have frequent contact with police than men accounts for their more negative attitudes towards the police.

From the gender perspective, many studies have been conducted in reference to citizens' attitudes towards police. It shows that females tend to have higher satisfaction levels and hold more positive views on police and their performance than males (Apple, O'Brien, Cao, Huebner, & Taylor, 1983). However, studies by Correia, Reisig, & Lovrich (1996) demonstrated the opposite trends with females in urban settings holding more negative attitudes towards the police. Lytle and Randa (2015) found that the negative attitude is related to fear, those who perceive greater levels of physical disorder had greater levels of fear and more negative attitude towards police.

However, when it comes to the aspect of race, positive attitudes and support towards the police is not a universal view. Race has become a significant variable in relation to the communities' attitudes toward the police. Since 1971, Jacob has been actively investigated race is a determining attitudinal factor in the evaluation of the police. Jacob's view is that historically, that the Afro-American experience with the criminal justice system has been adversely affected by unfairness and bias which has led to negative attitudes towards the police. For the most part, in many Black communities, the police were viewed negatively (Dean, 1980). In another study Black Americans hold less favorable attitudes toward the police than white Americans (Jacob, Thomas, Hyman, Decker & Eres, 1980).

Researchers have found excessive use of force and brutality by the police come from neighborhoods that are heavily populated with African-American communities (Decker & Smith, 1980). Many state that civil strife and racial riot in Los Angeles, Detroit, New York and Miami began as a result of social problems and injustices by police practices (e.g., Hahn, 1971). Current exmaples of police injustices are in Ferguson Missouri and Baltimore Maryland.

Many incidents and riots served as symbols and hostility and negative attitudes toward the police which was reinforced by the media's thirst for stories about inappropriate law enforcement law enforcement. Block (1971) found that with media coverage of crime and police abuse that there was a rise of negative attitudes, fears and antagonism towards the police.

Studies that are more recent have established that when comparing non-white and white populations on the issue of racial profiling, perceptions are very contrary to the overall criminal justice system particularly in minority communities (Tyler & Wakslak, 2004). How people react towards police behavior based on their race was analyzed by Pew research. Pew research stated that the public has two different reactions to the grand jury decisions in these two police-related deaths that sparked protests in cities across the country.

Methods

This study is part of a larger study conducted by Toulon Jr. (2011). Toulon developed a survey to evaluate views and perceptions on the police by urban and suburban undergraduate college students studying in a criminal justice curriculum; criminal justice college professors who teach in both an urban and suburban setting; and police chiefs who work in both an urban and suburban settings.

For the present study, Toulon's (2011) survey was factor analyzed. One variable that emerged was satisfaction with police. The survey also included demographic questions such as race/ethnicity , gender, where do they live and age. The eight items in the satisfaction with police variable were all measured on a five point Likert scale (1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree 3= Slightly Agree, 4= Agree, 5= Strongly Agree). The satisfaction with police variable obtained a reliability of .820.

The survey was distributed to 176 undergraduate students that were enrolled in a criminal justice curriculum. Out of the 175 usable surveys, 139 of the surveys were used for the purpose of this paper. The respondents to the survey had a racial and ethnic background that included 65 (46.8%) Hispanic/Latino, 41 (29.5%) as Caucasians/White, 29 (20.9%) as African-American/ Black and 4 (2.9%) not response (**Table 1**). The median age of participants was 22 years old. The gender breakdown of the participants was 71 female (51.1%) and 68 males (48.9%).

Table 1	Race/Ethnicity of Participants				
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Black	29	20.9	21.5	21.5
	White	41	29.5	30.4	51.9
	Hispanic	65	46.8	48.1	100.0
	Total	135	97.1	100.0	
	Not response	4	2.9		
Total		139	100.0		

For the purpose of this paper, an urban or suburban resident is defined as a person who lives permanently or who resides on a long term basis in New York City or Suffolk County respectively. Demographics of the 139 respondents were 58.3% (81) residing in New York City's five boroughs and 41.7% (58) of the respondents reside in Suffolk County, New York. This is shown in **Table 2** below.

Findings

Research Question 1

How do criminal justice college Students who reside in New York City and Suffolk County differ in their levels of satisfaction of their local police department? To examine this question, researchers conducted an analysis of item responses and an independent samples t-test. **Table 3**, illustrating the item analysis, is shown below.

In general, **Table 3** shows similarities and disparities between criminal justice students living in New York City and Suffolk County. In New York City, college criminal justice students' satisfaction levels with police scored SD/D (strongly disagreed/Disagree) at 30.25% percent. While Suffolk County-college criminal justice student's satisfaction levels with police scored SD/D (strongly disagreed) at 12.71%. In the same way, major differences were found in item 3 "I feel safe going out at night in my community" New York City- college criminal justice student's Agreed /Strongly Agreed) at 33.3%, while Suffolk County college criminal justice student's Agree/Strongly Agreed 60.3%. Similarly, in item question 4 "I will feel safe at home in my community" approximately 20% more Strongly Agreed with that statement.

Table 2	Number of Responders by Residency				
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	New York City (Urban)	81	58.3	58.3	58.3
	Suffolk (Suburban)	58	41.7	41.7	100
	Total	139	100	100	

Table 3	Item analysis by Residency	New York City residency (Urban)			Suffolk County residency (Suburban)		
		SD/D	SA	A/SA	SD/D	SA	A/SA
1. I am satisfied with the police department		24.%	42%	33.3%	12.1%	31%	56.9%
2. The police reflect the community they work in		21.%	22%	56.8%	10.3%	27.6%	60.3%
3. I feel safe going out at night in my community		**32.%**	34.6%	33.3%	**10.3%**	27.6%	60.3%
4. I feel safe at home in my community		**24%**	29.6%	45.7%	**5.2%**	12.1%	82.8%
5. Police officers are competent in my community		**24%**	38.3%	34.6%	**10.3%**	34.5%	55.2%
6. There is a visible presence of the Police department in my community		27.%	25.9%	46.9%	13.8%	36.2%	50.0%
7. Police officers attitudes are supportive of residents community		40%	34.6%	24.7%	**19.0%**	44.8%	36.2%
8. The management of the police department and its ability to address the needs of the community is satisfactory		40%	34.6%	24.7%	20.7%	36.2%	37.9%

Table 4	Independent samples t-test on satisfaction with police, by location					
		M	SD	SEM	t	p
Satisfaction with police	Urban (NYC)	24.85	6.97	0.77	-3.15	0.00
	Suburban (Suffolk)	28.36	5.51	0.74		

Table 5	Independent samples t-test on satisfaction with police, by gender						
	Gender	N	M	SD	SEM	T	p
Satisfaction with police	Male	73	27.53	6.66	0.78	1.88	0.06
	Female	74	25.68	6.58	0.76		

The t-test for independent groups illustrated that New York City criminal justice college students' satisfaction with police (M=24.9, SD=7.0)was significantly different (t =-3.15, p=0.00) than Suffolk County criminal justice college students' opinions on police satisfaction (M=28.36, SD= 5.5) (**Table 4**).

Research Question 2

How do male and female criminal justice college students differ in their level of satisfaction with their local police department? This question was examined through an independent samples t-test (**Table 5**).

The independent-samples t-test indicated satisfaction scores approaching significance (p=0.06) where males (M= 27.6, SD=6.7) were slightly higher than females (M=25.7, SD=6.6). The data suggests that males have a tendency to perceive their local police slightly more positively than females.

Research Question 3

Are there differences among ethnic groups (Black, White, and Hispanic) in level of satisfaction with their local police department? This question was answered through descriptive statistics and a one-way ANOVA.

Table 6 shows the levels of satisfaction with the police by ethnicity. Participants were 31 Black students, (M=24.26, SD=5.85), 43 White students, (M= 29.14, SD=5.37), 69 Hispanic students, (M=26.13, SD=7.05). The one way ANOVA (**Table 7**) illustrated there were significant differences among ethnicities and their views about police.

Through a post-hoc test, it was found that White students (Mw=29.1) were significantly more satisfied than Black students (MB=24.3). No significant difference was found between Hispanic students (MH =17) and either White or Black students.

Table 6	Descriptive statistics on satisfaction with police, by ethnicity				
		N	M	M/items	SD
Satisfaction with police	Black	31	24.26	3.03	5.85
	White	43	29.14	3.64	5.37
	Hispanic	69	26.13	3.26	7.05
	Total	143	26.63	3.32	6.54

Table 7	One Way ANOVA on satisfaction with police, by ethnicity				
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	P
Satisfaction with police	Between Groups	462.43	2.00	231.22	5.76	.00
	Within Groups	5616.92	140.00	40.12		
	Total	6079.36	142.00			

Conclusion

Location (suburban vs. urban), gender, and ethnicity all appear to be factors in students' perception of the police department. The study was primarily limited to small samples of each ethnic group as well as the college student population (criminal justice) and geographic location. However, these findings serve to highlight issue of the importance of attitudes toward police and support attempts by police departments to improve relations between the police and the community. There is little doubt that resident support is needed for policing efforts to be successful and in high crime areas where resident support is mostly lacking.

The present findings can be used by urban and suburban police departments to gauge the levels of satisfaction and attitudes towards their institution by upcoming police officers and reflect on their own relations with their communities. A central tenet of this study is that it is crucial that the police are perceived positively and that they should earn the trust of the community. This is not a novel idea which can be traced to the Metropolitan Police Act 1829 (Ushida, 1997). The history of policing in the United States has been marked with shifts and changing attitudes towards the police.

Major findings of this article were:

- A significant difference between satisfaction with the police between Urban and Suburban groups. Suburban groups (Suffolk) were more satisfied than Urban groups (NYC).

- Males were slightly more satisfied with the police than Females.

- White students were significantly higher satisfied with the Police than Black Students. No difference was found between Hispanic Students and Black or White Students.

Discussion

Some studies suggest that residents appear to be more concerned with having the police patrol their neighborhoods rather than interacting with them. Other data (Webb, Katz, & Graham, 1987) suggested that when assessments of community solidarity towards the police are controlled, and the police become more visible regardless of location, the number of interactions have no effect on levels of satisfaction with the police. It is Webb's (1987) contention that regardless of location, residents who see the police controlling crime or at least trying to control crime tend to view the police favorably and feel satisfied. Weitzer's (2000) study suggested that the greater the interactions between the police and the community, the greater the positive perceptions and satisfaction levels but also it can damage the police image. It is when police are viewed as respectful and possessing authority that residents hold positive attitudes towards the police. However other researchers argue that it is neither the location, nor the amount of contacts that improves police resident relations but the nature of the interactions (Cheurprakobkit, 2000).

Greenberg, Rohe, and Williams (1985) study suggested that the greater the stability in the communities, the greater the possibility that those members of that community will interact and think of the police positively. This research is supported by Carter (1999) which stated that those in the community who have positive relations with the police are usually the ones who have the most respect by the police. Thus, favorable opinions toward the police correspond with respect to community solidarity (Carter & Radelet, 1999). In the same way, in 2015, Lytle and Randa shown that there was a positive correlation between fear of crime and police satisfaction.

Recognizing these facts and the problems that police efforts face in urban or suburban disorganized communities have led some to suggest that the police should take on the additional role of "community builder" (Oliver, 2001, p. 82). Assuming that the police had the skills to accomplish the formidable task of building a community, one wonders if most officers would have the time and resources needed to do so.

Research by Hawdon and Mobley (2000) suggested that police efforts to improve the community attitudes toward them usually succeed only among middle-income, White (suburban) homeowners (Greene, 1987) and that is if they succeed at all. The main implication of this research is that location is an important component on attitudes towards the police by criminal justice students. As Friedman (1994) argued, attitudes toward the police can be improved by working through neighborhood associations that represent and work closely with the community. Members of such organizations are likely to be the most socially integrated into the neighborhood, and therefore the residents who would be most likely will support the police.

Another implication of this research is that police administrators should attempt to increase their officers' visibility; this appears to be an important factor in residents' perceptions and attitudes towards the police. Actions such as foot or bike patrols, police substations, and the permanent assignment of officers to a neighborhood (urban or suburban) would probably increase the visibility of the police. This visibility, in turn, would most likely lead to favorable attitudes toward the police.

Public knowledge of crime, the criminal justice system, and attitudes toward the police are also derived from the media (Roberts & Doob, 1986). Therefore, it is imperative to examine the effects that the mass media have on attitudes towards criminal justice and the police. However, there are few studies that examine the media's influence on public ratings of police effectiveness. The favorable view of policing is partly a consequence of police's public relations strategy. Reporting of proactive police activity may create a more positive image of the police as effective and efficient investigators of crime (Christensen, Schmindt, & Handerson, 1982).

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