

Attitudes of College Students toward Police

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Abstract

Despite numerous community policing programs which have been created in recent years, some adolescents still have negative perceptions toward police officers and their performance. This study will examine the attitude of college students toward police works. By using an online survey to ask among college students in a southern state, researchers will examine several factors such as demographic characteristics and personal and vicarious experiences with criminal justice system variables to use as predictors of students perception and attitude toward police.

Introduction

Most police departments have conducted citizens' satisfaction surveys to evaluate their performance and perception in the community. Police work without a doubt cannot be successful without help from people in the community. Decker (1981) stated that the police, as a public sector organization, needs community support to meet its goals. To gain such support, police agencies need to build trust within community. Dunham and Alpert (1988) have pointed out that citizen in neighborhoods that reflect distinct cultures have different values concerning the appropriateness of different police practices. These values are reflected in attitudes toward the

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police, and police practices that are incompatible with culturally-based attitudes may result in ineffective policing. In recent years, a new paradigm in policing increasing emphasizes on citizens and communities involvement. Examples of this new strategy include community policing, problem-oriented policing, and intelligence-led policing. The nature of community policing requires police agencies to pay attention to public expectations. The philosophy of community policing implies listening to citizens and treating seriously the citizens' problems (Jordan & Zager, 2001). Therefore, it is very crucial that the general public has a positive attitude and perception toward police.

Several studies have been focused on the importance of citizen's perceptions, attitude and satisfaction with police. Brown and Benedict (2002) found that the variable of age played an important role in influencing citizen's attitudes toward police. Most literature suggests that the older population is more satisfied with police than the younger population (Cao, 2001; Dowler, 2002; Hurst & Frank, 2000; O'Conner, 2008; Nofziger & Williams, 2005). Though, one study found that among minorities, age and satisfaction level are negatively related, which as age increases people's views toward the police become more negative (Sims, Hooper, & Peterson, 2002).

A number of studies preset an association between sociodemographic variables with perception of the police. However, these variables are still in debate among researchers. Gender has been identified as one of the variables which contribute to citizen's attitude toward police. However, researchers still do have a consensus regarding how gender can influence citizen's perception. Some studies found that females tend to show more confidence in police than their male counterpart (Cao, Frank, & Cullen, 1996; Nofziger & Williams, 2005; Reisig & Giacomazzi, 1998; Taylor, Turner, Esbensen, & Winfree, 2001). On the contrary, some studies found that males are actually present more positive perception toward police than females (Brown & Coulter, 1983; Correia, Reisig, & Lovrich, 1996).

Some suggest that lower class people ha more negative perceptions toward police more than upper class people (Frank, Smith, & Novak, 2005; Percy, 1980). It argues that people with low

socioeconomic status are more than likely to be in contact with police control action. On the other hand, people with high socioeconomic status are more likely to be in contact with police in terms of receiving police services. Additionally, some studies found that upper class people show more negative perceptions toward police than lower class groups (Murphy & Worrall, 1999; Peak, Bradshaw, & Glensor, 1992). Dowler (2002) found that people with higher income more than likely to have less confidence in the police. Cao (2001) presented that there are no correlation between socioeconomic status and citizen's perception toward police.

Police contact is another variable that is well studied. The quantity or intensity of police contact can influence citizen's opinions and attitude toward police. It shows that when citizens underwent involuntary contacts with police they are less likely to have positive attitudes toward police comparing to those who contact police voluntarily (Bordua & Tiff, 1971; Dean 1980; Wu & Sun, 2009). Studies have shown that attitudes toward the police are affected significantly by the positive or negative nature of police-citizen interactions (Griffiths & Winfree, 1982). The positive contacts result in more positive attitudes toward police (Scaglione & Condon, 1980).

Methodology

The data for this study comes from an online survey conducted in a university located in the southern region of the United States of America. The survey was modified from a study by Wu and Sun in 2009 on perception of police among Chinese college students. There are a total of 192 participants in this current study. Participants were informed about their voluntariness, anonymity, and confidentiality before participating in this study.

Descriptive statistics were calculated to describe demographic factors, socioeconomic factors, police contact variables, victimization and fear of crime variables, and perception of police variables.

Furthermore, logistic regression was employed to identify correlates of binary satisfactory of police.

Results

Of the 192 participants, more than half of the participants are female (56.3%). Majority of participants (65.4%) can be considered as a traditional student, which age ranges from 18 to 25 years old. Roughly 70.7 percent of participants are single and 23 percent are married. Undergraduate students composed 81.6 percent of the participant sample, with a majority of these participants being classified as senior (58.4%); follow by junior (13.2%), sophomore (5.3%), and freshman (4.7%) status, respectively. Graduate students composed 18.4 percent of this sample. More than half of the participants are non Criminal Justice majors (53.9%) and Criminal Justice majors made up 46.1 percent of the sample. Most of the participants live off campus (86.2%) compared to only 13.8 percent of participants who live on campus. Participants were asked about their school performance. It was found that approximately 31.9 percent of students currently have a GPA of 2.51-3.00 follow by GPA of 2.00-2.50 (22%), GPA of 3.51-4.00 (22%), GPA of 3.01-3.50 (21.5%), and GPA below 2.00 (2.6%) respectively. More than half of the participants grew up in a town with 50,000 population or less.

When looking at socioeconomic variables, three questions were asked: 1) estimate total household income, 2) father's highest level of education, and 3) mother's highest level of education. Shockingly, it shows that approximately 39.1 percent of participants comes from a family with total household income less than \$30,000 a year. According to the US Census Bureau, the US median household income (2007-2011) is \$52,762 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). Approximately one in every four participants comes from a family with household income of \$30,001-60,000. The highest education of father and mother presents an almost identical pattern. It shows that approximately half of the participants' fathers (50.3%) and mothers

(45.3%) have a high school diploma or GED. A bachelors degree was obtained by the father among 20.4 percent of the participants, with a bachelors degree being obtained by the mother among 19.3 percent of the participants.

Next, participants were asked about their personal contact experience with police officers in the past 12 months. They were also asked if any of their family members relatives, or close friends had been in contact with police officers in the past 12 months. There were seven types of police contact included in this study: 1) traffic violations/traffic accidents, 2) officer responding to a call for service, 3) was the victim of a crime, 4) was an offender, 5) was a witness to a crime, 6) casual conversation, and 7) asked for information or advice.

Table 1 Frequency and percent of students and family/friends police contact

Type of Contact	Self		Family/Friends	
	Frequen cy	Perce nt	Frequen cy	Perce nt
Traffic violations/ accidents	69	35.9	79	41.1
Officer responding to a call	29	15.1	19	9.9
Was the victim of a crime	14	7.3	17	8.9
Was an offender	3	1.6	30	15.6
Was a witness to a crime	12	6.3	9	4.7
Casual conversation	76	39.6	42	21.9
Asked for information or advice	32	16.7	22	11.5

About 61 percent of participants reported that they have been in contact with police officers in the past 12 months and nearly 64 percent reported that their family members, relatives, or close friends have been in contact with police officers in the past 12 months. Table 1 presents types of contact that participants, participant's family

member, relatives, and close friends. It shows that the majority of participants were in contact with officers for a casual conversation. This is a very good indicator that police officers are approachable and students feel comfortable to talk to. The second most type of contact is traffic violations/accidents followed by asking officers for information or advice, officer responding to a call, was the victim of a crime, was a witness to a crime and was an offender respectively. For participants' family members, relatives, and close friends, the most common type of contact with police officers is related to traffic violations/accidents followed by a casual conversation with officers. Surprisingly, participants report that about 15.6 percent of their family members, relatives, and close friends were in contact with police officers as an offender.

Recently more and more news, radio, and TV shows present content related to the criminal justice system, particularly in law enforcement. These programs sometimes present inaccurate information that can negatively influence viewers. Participants were asked how often they hear or read about incidents of police misconduct. It shows that 44.8 percent answer they hear or read about police misconduct sometimes, follow by often (28.6%), rarely (22.9%), and never (1%) respectively.

Next, we examined victimization and fear of crime. It shows that close to 31 percent of participants have been crime victims during the past three years. More than three fourths of those who have been victimized are property offenses and about 21.3% are violent offenses. Unlike other victimization studies, three in every four participants who were victimized reported the crime to the police. When asked about fear of crime in their neighborhood, around 70.2 percent of participants feel safe in their neighborhood. Some reported that they are not at all fearful (22.1%) and many reported that they are not very fearful (48.1%) of crimes in the neighborhood. Only 29.9 percent of participants indicated that they are in fear of criminal activity. It shows that they feel somewhat fearful (28.2%) and very fearful (1.7%) of crimes in the neighborhood. More than half of the participants reveal that they rarely worry about becoming victim of crimes. About 32.3

percent of them report that they occasionally worry, followed by never worry (8.8%) and frequently worry (2.2%) about becoming victim of crimes.

Perception of police fairness, honesty, and job performance were examined. A group of questions that were asked of participants is presented in table 2. The range of response is from 4 = strongly agree to 1 = strong disagree. The table presents that almost half of the participants agree there are inequality treatment between the rich and the poor. Around 41.7 percent of participants believe minority groups are treated differently than Caucasians. More than half of the participants feel that police officers are friendly. Nearly one in every two participants disagreed that police officers do not give people a chance to explain. Further, more than half of participants disagreed with the idea that police do not show concern when people ask them questions.

Table 2 Police fairness

Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	SD
Treat wealthy better than poor	3.1	24.0	49.0	19.3	2.89	0.75
Treat Whites better than minorities	3.1	33.3	41.7	17.7	2.77	0.78
Friendly	4.2	19.8	58.3	13.0	2.84	0.70
Do not give people a chance to explain	5.7	49.5	31.8	8.9	2.46	0.74
Not concerned when you ask questions	5.7	55.7	27.6	6.8	2.35	0.70

Table 3 presents participants' perception on police honesty. More than half of participants agreed that police officers are honest,

but almost 30 percent disagree that police officers are honest. More than half of participants disagreed that police officer are corrupt compared to 31.3 percent that agree that police officers are corrupt. When looking at the issue of police officer's abuse of power, about 41.1% of participant agree that police officers often abuse their power with 33.3 percent who disagreed on this issue.

Table 3 Police honesty

Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	SD
Honest	4.2	29.7	56.8	4.2	2.64	0.63
Corrupt	7.3	51.6	31.3	5.2	2.36	0.70
Abuse their power	2.6	33.3	41.1	17.7	2.78	0.77

Participants' perception of police performances is presented in table 4. More than half of the participants agree that police officers respond quickly to calls for help and assistance. Almost half of them agree that police do a good job in solving crime as well as preventing crime. Approximately 71.4 percent of participants agree that police officers do a good job in responding to crime victims. Around 64.1percent of participants agree that police are able to maintain order on the streets and in their neighborhood. This is a good indicator that roughly half of the participants are happy with local police performances.

Table 4 Police performances

Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	SD
Respond quickly to calls	4.2	23.4	55.2	11.5	2.78	0.70

Table 4 (Con.)

Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	SD
Respond quickly to calls	4.2	23.4	55.2	11.5	2.78	0.70
Good job in solving crimes	5.7	32.8	49.0	7.8	2.62	0.72
Good job in preventing crimes	4.7	37.5	46.4	6.8	2.58	0.69
Good job in responding to crime victims	1.0	14.6	71.4	8.3	2.91	0.52
Able to maintain order on the streets	2.1	21.4	64.1	7.8	2.81	0.60

Lastly, when generally asked of the participants how satisfied they were with police officers who serve their neighborhood, the response includes 1 = very dissatisfied, 2 = dissatisfied, 3 = satisfied, and 4 = very satisfied. About 57.8 percent of participants are satisfied, followed by the remainder being very satisfied (17.7%), dissatisfied (15.6%), and very dissatisfied (4.2%) with mean of 2.93 and SD = 0.723.

Table 5 Logistic regression model predicting satisfaction of police performance

	B	S.E	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp (B)	95% C.I. for EXP (B)	
							Lower	Upper
Male	-.27	.52	.28	1	.60	.76	.28	2.10
Classification			2.41	4	.66			
Sophomore	-.18	1.37	.02	1	.89	.83	.06	12.18
Junior	-1.21	1.05	1.33	1	.25	.30	.04	2.34
Senior	.50	.85	.35	1	.56	1.65	.31	8.66
Graduate student	-.09	.61	.02	1	.89	.92	.28	3.03
Criminal Justice major	-.56	.46	1.45	1	.23	.57	.23	1.42
Live on campus	.68	.69	.96	1	.33	1.97	.51	7.64
Father	.64	.55	1.37	1	.24	1.90	.65	5.58
Bachelor or higher								
Mother	-.22	.57	.15	1	.70	.80	.26	2.46
Bachelor of higher								
Single	1.80	.68	7.06	1	.01	6.02	1.60	22.65
Hometown population < 50,000	-.13	.46	.08	1	.78	.88	.35	2.19
GPA higher than 2.5	-.04	.54	.00	1	.95	.96	.33	2.80

Table 5 (Con.)

	B	S.E	Wald	df	Sig	Exp (B)	95% C.I. for EXP (B)	
							Lower	Upper
Income < \$60,000	-1.56	.62	6.35	1	.01	.21	.06	.71
Older than 25	1.49	.60	6.15	1	.01	4.42	1.37	14.34
Self contact with police	.98	.54	3.35	1	.07	2.67	.93	7.67
Family/friend contact with police	-.40	.49	.67	1	.41	.67	.25	1.76
Have been a victim of crimes	-.46	.47	.94	1	.33	.63	.25	1.59
Constant	1.01	1.09	.86	1	.35	2.76		

To be able to examine who are most likely to be satisfied with the police performance, logistic regression was employed in this analysis to predict an outcome of satisfy or dissatisfy. Recoding is necessary to appropriately analyze the outcome. The response of very dissatisfied and dissatisfied were combined and code as 0, and satisfied and very satisfied were combined and code as 1. Thirteen demographic predictor variables were included in the model. A test of full model compared with a constant-only or null model was statistically significant, $X^2 = 28.519$, $p = 0.039$. The strength of the association between satisfaction of police performance and predictor variables was relatively weak with Cox and Snell's $R^2 = .152$ and Nagelkerke's $R^2 = .239$.

Presented in table 5, logistic regression analysis was employed to distinguish demographic characteristics among participants who were

more likely to be satisfied with police performance. Of the thirteen variables, marital status, household income, and age were found to be statistically significant predictors of satisfactory of police performance. Significant at the .05 alpha level, marital status ($B = 1.80$) suggests that singles were about six time more likely to be satisfied with police performance than married, widowed, divorced and separated people. Household income ($B = -1.56$) is another predictive variable significant at the .05 level. Students who come from a family with household income more than \$60,000 are more likely to satisfy with police performance than students who come from family with less than \$60,000 household income. Lastly, age ($B = 1.49$) suggests that students who are older than 25 years old have approximately four times more likelihood of being satisfied with police performance.

Conclusion

This study intends to provide some general idea of college students' attitudes toward police. From the current study, we found that around three in every four students are satisfied with police performance in their neighborhood. This is a very good sign that, presumably, indicates that police officers perform their jobs in a professional manner. However, almost half of the students still believe that police officers treat Caucasians and wealthy people better than minorities and indigent groups. When we look at the type of contact that students have with police officers, more than half of them reported that it's simply a casual conversation. This can also imply that police officers' manners are friendly and approachable.

When we examined our logistic regression model, there were only three variables that showed statistically significant outcomes in this model. This is consistent with prior studies that show that age is a significant predictor to identify how confidence or satisfied of citizen towards the police. This presents in a positive correlation that the older you are, the more satisfied you are with the police. The income variable also shows statistically significant in this study. This finding

also revalidate prior studies, which indicate that people with higher socioeconomic status are more than likely to satisfy with the police comparing to people with low socioeconomic status. Lastly, the model presents that single people are satisfied with the police more than those in the married, divorced, and separated group. This finding is quite interesting. If we look back to our age variable, which presents that people who are older than 25 are more than likely to be satisfied with the police, it is fairly paradoxical. Because when we get older, we are more than likely to get married, or divorced, or separated. Thus, we would likely conclude that, among all groups, people who are single, not married, and over 25 would be most pleased with police. This seems counter-intuitive to what many American stereotypes might portray.

Future research needs to recruit more participants which can increase the validity of that study. Researchers also need to consider different statistical methods as well as include more predictive variables in to an analysis model. So, we will be able to find more accurate methods for measuring citizen's satisfaction. This will also provide a stronger predictive power variable to predict factors that influence citizen's attitudes toward police.

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