



Making Every Encounter Count: Building Trust and Confidence in the Police

by Jake Horowitz

About the Author

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Several years ago in the Flatbush neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, police officers responded to a report of youths stealing from a street vendor. When the uniformed officers arrived on the scene, the youths reacted confrontationally: “Why are you harassing me? I’m just on my way home from school. How dare you! You’re just doing this ‘cause I’m black.”¹

A large group of onlookers formed. One of the officers said that he sensed the youths were hoping to “get the crowd working against us ... [so we would] ... just back off.” While the officer was explaining to the crowd why they were there, a woman in the crowd spoke up. “I remember this guy,” she told the others. “I got my purse robbed 2 months ago and he was really good; he treated me well. I think he’s a good cop and I trust him.”

The woman’s unsolicited comments quelled the crowd, which quickly dispersed without incident. The officer later reflected on the encounter. “I never forgot that lesson,” he noted. “You never know when treating people well will pay off—not just in satisfying what you owe to citizens—but in this larger communal sense of gaining allies.”

What Factors Affect Public Satisfaction With the Police?

Satisfaction with the police, while generally high, is unevenly distributed. Understanding why some people harbor negative views about police officers is the first and most important step in building a positive relationship with the community.

NIJ recently funded five studies exploring factors that influence satisfaction with the police. The research suggests that satisfaction is shaped by demographic variables, neighborhood crime conditions, and

experiences with the police—whether first hand or indirect. Race was not found to directly determine level of satisfaction. Instead, researchers concluded that race, due to its correlation with other demographic variables, neighborhood crime rates, and experiences with police, was an indirect influence on the level of satisfaction with the police.

Although community members' views about the police may be stubbornly resistant to change, police officers and policymakers should appreciate that treating individuals respectfully and professionally during each encounter can establish, build, and maintain crucial support for the police within the community.

The Importance of Quality Treatment

When people form opinions of the police based on their interactions, they tend to focus on the process more than the outcome. Impressions of police encounters are influenced by the demeanor as well as the actions of the officer. People pay close attention to the “neutrality of decision making, respectful and polite interpersonal treatment, and ... opportunities for input into decisions,” noted Tom Tyler of New York University.² Researchers often refer to this as a person's sense of “procedural justice.”

People base their impressions of the police on their own personal experiences and on secondhand reports of police encounters. However, because most Americans do not directly interact with the police in any given year, they are forming their opinions on the basis of word-of-mouth accounts from others.

Early studies of satisfaction with police showed that a person's unpleasant experiences had a greater impact than pleasant experiences.³ Newer studies, however, have found that pleasant experiences have a greater influence than researchers originally thought.⁴ As illustrated by the Flatbush officer's experience described at the beginning of this article, positive experiences with the police can have a ripple effect throughout the community.

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The implication: Every encounter—both pleasant and unpleasant—with the public can greatly affect the community's level of satisfaction with the police.

It also appears that people bring different expectations to their encounters with the police, depending upon whether those encounters are police- or citizen-initiated. In the past, it was widely assumed that police-initiated encounters had the greatest impact on citizen attitudes.⁵ But NIJ-funded research at the University of Illinois at Chicago contradicts that belief. Instead, researchers found that negative encounters have a greater tendency to erode satisfaction with the police when they are citizen-initiated.⁶ This finding raises the possibility that individuals' unmet expectations of how the police could or should have assisted them during an encounter may be as influential in forming opinions as the experience itself, regardless of whether citizens or police initiate the contact.

Race and the Context of Neighborhoods

Trust and confidence in the police, however, are built on more than police encounters. Recent NIJ studies also explored the role of race in the formation of opinions about the police.

Although the data show that Caucasians hold the police in higher regard than African Americans or Hispanics, race was not found to directly influence how people form opinions about police. In fact, when researchers controlled for factors such as the level of neighborhood crime, the reported quality of police-citizen encounters, and other demographic variables, such as age, income, and education, the effects of race disappeared

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entirely or were substantially reduced. Researchers concluded that race affects satisfaction with the police indirectly and in conjunction with other factors, including the level of crime within one’s neighborhood.⁷

People in low-crime neighborhoods tend to credit police officers with securing and maintaining low crime rates. As a result, perceptions of the police in those neighborhoods are mostly positive. In neighborhoods with higher crime rates—where racial and ethnic minorities are disproportionately represented—the level of community satisfaction with police is substantially lower. These findings illustrate that, in addition to unpleasant police encounters, individuals’ dissatisfaction with crime rates in their community can negatively affect their view of police.⁸

The Impact of Attitudes on Perceptions of Police

Some would argue that satisfaction with law enforcement is a dynamic concept, evolving with each citizen’s interaction with the police. But recent research challenges that contention. Attitudes toward the police appear to be relatively stable, and people’s preexisting views shape their perceptions of future encounters. Researchers at the University of Illinois–Chicago found that residents’ initial attitudes toward the police played a critical role in determining their judgments of subsequent experiences and in the formation of future attitudes toward police.⁹

The challenge for law enforcement officers is to treat each encounter—whether with a suspect, witness, or complainant—as if it is that person’s first contact with police. If he or she believes that the officer was fair and professional, then that person is more likely to have positive impressions of future encounters with police. Making this effort with each and every interaction is an important investment in building goodwill within the community.

Steps to Enhancing a Positive Public Image

Public consent and support of law enforcement are two of the most critical tools on a police officer’s “belt.” People who believe that the police are performing their duties with professionalism and integrity are more likely to obey laws and support the system by acting as witnesses, for example.¹⁰

NIJ’s continuing research into the determinants of satisfaction, trust, and confidence in the police reveals that attitudes toward the police are shaped by a combination of demographic variables, neighborhood conditions, direct and vicarious police citizen encounters, and prior attitudes. The police cannot control some of these factors; others, however, are a direct consequence of an individual officer’s actions and demeanor. Therefore, officers should focus their efforts where they can have the most direct impact: in each day-to-day interaction with the public.

The first step in building good relations with the community is to understand and respond to the expectations of people across a range of possible police encounters. Departments might also consider tracking the level of satisfaction through community surveys. This feedback could be used to design police training and intervention programs. In the end, NIJ’s research illustrates that it behooves our Nation’s police officers to pay close attention to developing what might be called their “bedside manner.”¹¹

For More Information

This article is primarily based on several studies funded by NIJ. The principal investigators published their findings in *Police Quarterly* 8 (3) (September 2005), available at <http://pqx.sagepub.com/content/vol8/issue3>. The articles are:

- Miller, J., R.C. Davis, N.J. Henderson, J. Markovic, and C. Ortiz, "Measuring Influences on Public Opinion of the Police Using Time-Series Data: Results of a Pilot Study."
 - Rosenbaum, D.P., A.M. Schuck, S.K. Costello, D.F. Hawkins, and M.K. Ring, "Attitudes Toward the Police: The Effects of Direct and Vicarious Experience."
 - Skogan, W.G., "Citizen Satisfaction With Police Encounters."
 - Tyler, T.R., "Policing in Black and White: Ethnic Group Differences in Trust and Confidence in the Police."
 - Weitzer, R. and S.A. Tuch, "Determinants of Public Satisfaction With the Police."
2. Tyler, T.R., "Policing in Black and White: Ethnic Group Differences in Trust and Confidence in the Police," *Police Quarterly* 8 (3) (September 2005): 339, available at <http://pqx.sagepub.com/content/vol8/issue3>.
 3. Skogan, W.G., "Asymmetry in the Impact of Encounters With Police," *Policing & Society* 16 (2) (2006): 99.
 4. Rosenbaum, D.P., A.M. Schuck, S.K. Costello, D.F. Hawkins, and M.K. Ring, "Attitudes Toward the Police: The Effects of Direct and Vicarious Experience," *Police Quarterly* 8 (3) (September 2005): 360, available at <http://pqx.sagepub.com/content/vol8/issue3>.
 5. *Ibid.*, 359.
 6. *Ibid.*
 7. Weitzer, R., and S.A. Tuch, "Determinants of Public Satisfaction With the Police," *Police Quarterly* 8 (3) (September 2005): 292; and Skogan, W.G., "Citizen Satisfaction With Police Encounters," *Police Quarterly* 8 (3) (September 2005): 316. Both articles available at <http://pqx.sagepub.com/content/vol8/issue3>.
 8. Weitzer and Tuch, "Determinants of Public Satisfaction," 292.
 9. Rosenbaum et al., "Attitudes Toward the Police," 343.
 10. Tyler, "Policing in Black and White," 333.
 11. Skogan, "Citizen Satisfaction," 310.

Notes

1. Conversation between the author and a New York City police officer assigned to the Flatbush neighborhood, April 2004.