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# National Police Research Platform



## Police Supervision: A 360-Degree View of Eight Police Departments

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### Introduction

Supervisors make important contributions to the capacity of an organization to achieve its goals through specific activities. The supervisor's function has traditionally been command and control, but supervisors are also expected to form and sustain viable work units with members who are personally committed to the organization and its goals. Supervisors are then a key to accountability, performance, and vitality in contemporary organizations. In this report we offer three perspectives on police supervisors: from the chiefs, who bear overall responsibility for supervision in the department; from the subordinates, who are in a good position to offer a judgment of the quality of supervision they receive; and from the supervisors themselves.

This report addresses the following questions regarding the supervision of sworn personnel:

- How do police chiefs assess the state of first-line supervision in their departments?
- How do subordinates assess the quality of police supervision they are receiving, and what accounts for variation in their evaluations?
- To what extent do police supervisors identify with the department and its values and support management's goals?
- What types of goals receive the highest priority from police supervisors?

### Methods

The National Police Research Platform administered a survey on police supervision to officers in eight police departments. These departments were regionally dispersed around the United States and varied considerably in size, from fewer than 20 to several thousand sworn. Police agency identities are indicated by a unique number assigned to each. Agencies 2, 3, and 7 had fewer than 25 full-time sworn and were considered to be "small." Agencies 13, 17 and 27 had 100 to 500

## The National Police Research Platform

The National Police Research Platform was developed as a vehicle to continuously advance our knowledge of police organizations and their employees and to provide regular and timely feedback to police agencies and policy makers nationwide. In doing so, the Platform is expected to advance both the science of policing and evidence-based learning organizations. This project was supported by Award No. 2008-DN-BX-0005 awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication/program/exhibition are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.

sworn and were considered “medium” in size. Agencies 22 and 24 had several thousand sworn and were considered “large.” The survey was delivered online, taking about 10 minutes to complete. Table 1 shows the number of survey responses received in each department, distinguishing the rank of police officer from that of supervisor.

**Table 1. Survey responses by department**

Department	Police officers	Supervisors	Total
2	11	1	12
3	6	3	9
7	11	9	20
13	14	4	18
17	20	14	34
27	115	46	161
22	227	118	345
24	199	104	303
Total	603	299	902

The Platform Project also administered an in-depth interview to the chief of each department. Six of the eight interviews had been completed at the time of this report. The interview took 1.5 to 2 hours to complete. One of the interview questions focused on the quality and needs of first-line supervision in the department.

### **First-line Supervisors: A View from the Top**

Because this project focused substantial resources on first-line supervision, we asked the chiefs to assess whether they were getting what they needed from their sergeants and whether there were any areas in which they wanted to see a change in the way supervisors carry out their responsibilities. The chiefs’ comments help put survey responses into a broader perspective.

Only one of the six chiefs indicated in unqualified terms that the department’s sergeants were uniformly “very good,” although another indicated that the majority were “very good-to-exceptional.” Others ranged from describing their situation as “challenging” to “not totally satisfactory” to referring to sergeants as “the weak link.” Three expressed special concern about new sergeants’ difficulties in transitioning from a rank-and-file perspective to one of first-line management, and one was frustrated by his inability to get veteran sergeants to embrace change. Not only were the chiefs concerned about new sergeants working to promote management priorities, but they were also concerned about getting new sergeants to engage in more effective and open communication with subordinates.

We take these comments to reaffirm what we have gathered from the limited research literature on police supervision and from our own observations. Police supervision is a critical element for agency leaders trying to shape and guide departments. With that in mind, we turn to the results of a survey that allowed us to gather insights on how *subordinates* viewed their supervisors – not just first-line supervisors, but all the way up the chain of command.

### **Subordinates Rating their Supervisor: A View from Below**

Survey respondents were asked, “Overall, how would you rate your supervisor on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 would be a ‘very poor supervisor’ and 10 would be an ‘excellent supervisor?’” The distribution was heavily skewed toward positive assessments (Figure 1). Assuming that a score midway between 5 and 6 defines a midpoint between the low (very poor) and high (excellent) end points, the figure shows that nearly seven in 10 respondents gave their supervisors scores above the midpoint. Overall, most subordinates evaluated their bosses quite positively, and 40 percent of the respondents gave their supervisors a score of 9 or 10.

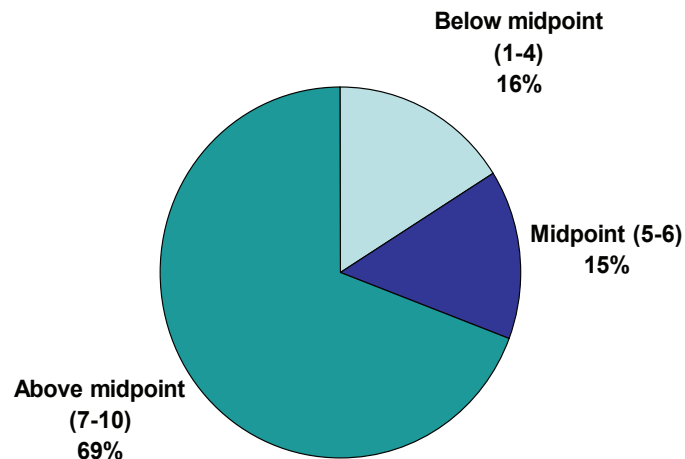
What are the circumstances under which subordinates tend to give their supervisors higher evaluations? We considered several possible sources of influence that have been examined in the literature on evaluating the performance of leaders<sup>1</sup>: respondents’ personal characteristics (gender and race), respondents’ professional characteristics (education, rank, and years of experience),

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1 Bernard M. Bass, *Bass and Stogdill’s Handbook of Leadership: Theory, Research and Managerial Applications* (New York: Free Press, 1990).

attitude toward the police organization, and assessments of supervisory style. Respondents' orientation to the organization was measured using a scale composed of various items indicating the strength of the person's attachment to the department and its values.<sup>2</sup> We consider two aspects of supervisory style, both derived from the theoretical and empirical literature on leadership style.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 1. Distribution of subordinates' ratings of supervisors**



One measure of supervisory style taps into the respondent's view of the "directiveness" of the supervisor: whether the supervisor gave too much or too little direction to subordinates. Another measure of style pertained to the supervisor's involvement in human relations behaviors – actions that develop and support the individual and make the work environment more desirable.<sup>4</sup>

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2 Four items were used in an additive scale that gave more points to the extent that the respondent agreed and fewer points to the extent that they disagreed: (a) I know the department's values and incorporate them into my daily work, (b) I feel a strong sense of belonging to this department, (c) In general, I support the direction that top management is taking this organization, and (4) If I had the chance to change departments at the same rate of pay, I would (reverse coded).

3 Bass, ch. 23; M. E. Doyle and M. K. Smith, *Born and Bred? Leadership, Heart and Informal Education*, (London: YMCA George Williams College/The Rank Foundation, 1990), ch. 1; *Classical Leadership infed*. [http://www.infed.org/leadership/traditional\\_leadership.htm](http://www.infed.org/leadership/traditional_leadership.htm).

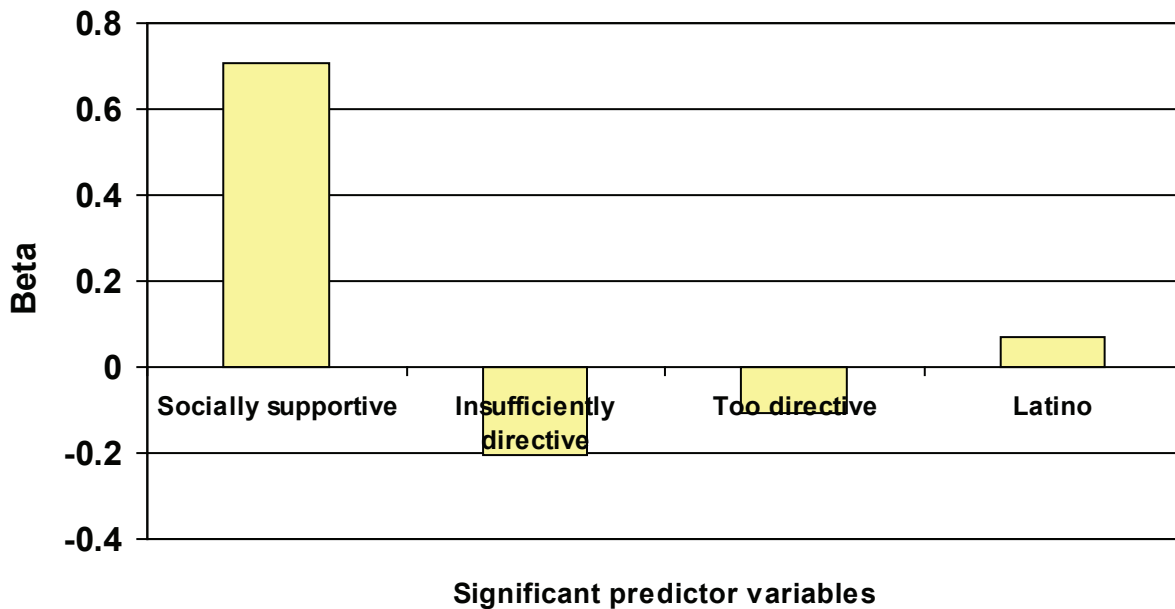
4 Officers were asked how often their current supervisor behaves in each of the following ways (rarely or never, sometimes, often, or always): (a) Attempts to achieve group consensus on important issues, (b) Encourages people to think creatively, (c), Trusts me to make important decisions, (d) Is supportive of employees when things get tough, and (e) Listens to employees concerns. Don't know and not applicable responses were excluded.

We characterize supervisors rated high on this dimension as more “socially supportive” of their subordinates. In addition, we controlled for the police agency, to take into account any effects on ratings that might be unique to that organization.

Figure 2 displays the results of an analysis that allows us to compare the strength of the predictive capacity of the variables described above. The figure shows only those that were statistically significant, meaning that there was a likelihood of less than five out of 100 that the observed effect was due to chance. The “Beta” statistic indicates the predictive strength of each variable. A bar in the positive region of the chart indicates a direct relationship between the indicated characteristic and the rating. A bar in the negative region indicates a relationship in the opposite direction. The longer the bar, the stronger the effect.

We found that only one of our measures of the respondents’ personal or professional characteristics bore a significant relationship with their evaluation of their supervisor. The following variables showed neither large nor statistically significant effects: respondents’ gender, supervisory rank (sergeant or higher), or years of police experience. For example, once all these factors were taken into account, there was not a statistically significant difference between rank-and-file officers and officers of supervisory rank in how they assessed their bosses. The one exception fell into the race category, with Latino officers being significantly more positive about their supervisors when compared to whites, while the other racial groups (Blacks and other race categories) showed no statistically distinguishable differences from whites. The Latino effect was not particularly strong, however. Taking all other variables’ effects into account, Latino respondents on average scored their supervisors about .5 points higher than their white counterparts on the 10-point supervisor rating scale. We considered the possibility that the Latino effect was concentrated in one of our departments, which accounted for more than half of the Latino officers in our sample. However, the effect was not concentrated in that department. The effect was distributed more or less across departments.

Figure 2. Predictor variable strength of influence on overall evaluation of supervisor



By far, the strongest relationships were found between subordinates' assessments of supervisory style and ratings. Supervisor directiveness was compared to supervisor supportiveness. Officers were asked to indicate whether their supervisor provided too much direction, not enough direction, or the right amount of direction. Directiveness is a popular measure of supervisory style in leadership and management research. It is widely recognized that one size does not fit all with directiveness. It depends upon the skill and motivation of the individual employee. Thus, this question provides insight into the degree to which, from the rater's perspective, the supervisor fits the degree of direction to his or her employees. The regression analysis shows that, when compared to raters who said that their supervisors provided the right amount of direction, those who gave too much and those who gave too little were significantly inclined to give supervisors a lower rating. On average, those who said that their supervisors gave too much direction rated their supervisor .7 point lower than those who said that their supervisors gave the right amount of direction. Those who said their supervisors gave too little direction were even more critical, on average giving a rating 1.4 points below those who said their supervisors gave the right amount. Inasmuch as police officers are often thought to be protective of their discretion, it is notable that subordinates' desire for direction from their boss is greater than the desire for less.

By far the strongest effect, however, was observed with a multi-item scale that indicated the frequency with which supervisors were said by the respondent to give support to subordinates. This was a 15-point, multi-item scale. Moving one point up the scale on average produced a .4 point increase in the 10-point overall supervisor rating score. Thus, a difference of eight points on the social support scale (approximately half of that scale's range) yielded a three-point increase in the officer's overall rating of his or her supervisor (30 percent of that scale's range). Using an appropriate statistic to compare these supervisory style variables, we found that a supportive supervisory style exhibited an effect approximately three to six times stronger than the directiveness scales. The message is simple: more than anything else we measured, subordinates would like to see greater supportiveness from their supervisors. This is consistent with other surveys of police officers and executives, indicating a preference for supportive leadership.<sup>5</sup>

The inclusion of the respondent's department identity as a control variable added very little to the explanatory power of the model. Most of our capacity to predict a supervisor's rating came from what we know about the perspective of the subordinates. Overall, what subordinates in this sample wanted most from their supervisors was somewhat more direction and considerably more support.

### **What Supervisors Say About Themselves**

*How Attached Are Supervisors to their Department?* Supervisors are expected to serve as leaders who work as a team to guide the organization in the desired direction. Most top police leaders want a cadre of supervisors who identify with the department and its values, and who are supportive of top management's goals. We asked police supervisors (sergeant and above) and police-rank officers four questions that measured their attachment to their department, incorporating these into a four-point scale ranging from low attachment to high attachment (see footnote 4).

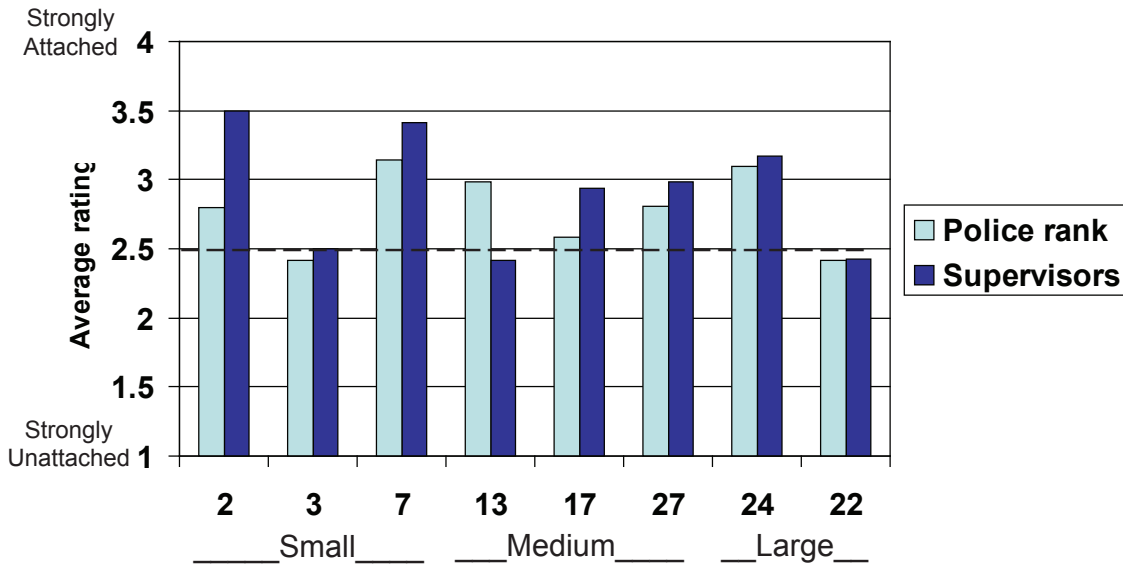
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5 Joseph A. Schafer, "Effective Leaders and Leadership in Policing: Traits, Assessment, Development, and Expansion." *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies and Management* 33(4):644-663 (2010).



Figure 3 shows the average scores for each department. As department size increases, the differences between the rank and file and their supervisors tend to diminish, due undoubtedly to the instability of estimates from the smaller sample sizes of smaller departments. For the three largest departments, the differences are quite modest.

**Figure 3. Attachment to the officer’s police department**



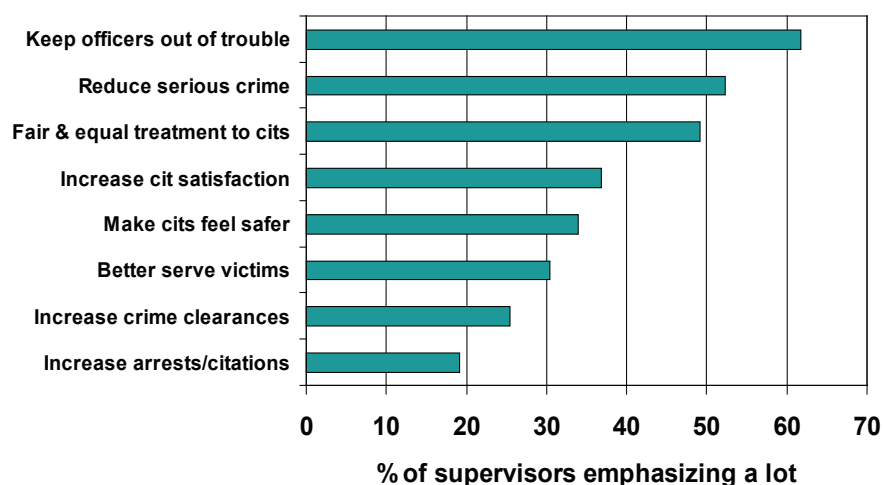
In five of the eight departments supervisors scored on average well above the rank and file in attachment to the department, which is to be expected in most organizations. They also scored well above the midpoint of the scale (dashed line) in those departments. There was no obvious pattern as to the relationship of department size to supervisors’ attachment to the department.

We also considered whether in medium- and large-size departments a stronger correlation might be manifested if we disaggregated supervisory ranks into sergeant, lieutenant, and captain and above. Pooling all of the medium and large departments showed that there was virtually no relationship between rank and attachment to the department (no figure shown), due perhaps in large part to the large number of officers in the sample who come from the three largest agencies.

One pattern that emerges from these data occurs at the department level. With a few exceptions (agencies 2 and 13), supervisors and rank and file officers express a similar commitment to their department. In other words, they are more similar than dissimilar in their views, suggesting that they are on the same page.

*What Are the Performance Priorities of Supervisors?* In a police department, work units may order priorities differently, and supervisors of similar units may vary in what they emphasize. We gave supervisors a list of goals that supervisors sometimes pursue and asked them to indicate how much emphasis they placed on each goal for their work unit over the previous three months. Figure 4 shows what portion of supervisors working in field operations units indicated “a lot” of emphasis (compared to a moderate amount, a little, and did not emphasize). The most frequently mentioned high-emphasis goal was keeping their officers out of trouble (62 percent). A slight majority indicated that they gave a lot of emphasis to reducing serious crime. And almost half (49 percent) indicated that they emphasized ensuring fair and equal treatment to all citizens. Citizen-service goals ranked in the middle, with 30 to 37 percent giving a lot of emphasis to increasing citizen satisfaction, making citizens feel safer, and providing better service to crime victims. Perhaps surprising to some, traditional enforcement-oriented goals of increasing arrests and crime clearances ranked lowest (19 to 25 percent). On average, the agency they worked for was not a strong or significant predictor of how much respondents emphasized each of these goals.<sup>6</sup> In general, models that employed the various supervisor characteristics to predict how much emphasis supervisors placed on each of these goals were not powerful. The implication is that supervisors’ emphasis on goals for the unit has more to do with their unit’s specific circumstances than personal or organizational characteristics.

**Figure 4. Emphasis field operations supervisors placed on goals**



<sup>6</sup> Only four of 64 cross-organizational comparisons produced a statistically significant effect, controlling for the effects of a variety of officer-level characteristics.

## Conclusion

Our 360-degree examination of police supervision offers a preliminary but intriguing set of insights into this key organization function. First, chiefs uniformly agree that first-line supervision is a critical component of successful organization performance and change. They vary somewhat in their assessment of how well first-line supervision is performed in their agencies, although most see considerable room for improvement and find that effort challenging.

Second, there are some interesting patterns in how subordinates rate their supervisors. Police subordinates tended to give their immediate superior relatively high ratings, 40 percent giving their bosses the highest or second-highest possible scores. This certainly belies any attempt to portray police at any hierarchical level as typically disgruntled with their (immediate) boss. By far the most powerful predictor of how high subordinates rated their supervisor was how frequently the supervisor was perceived to engage in supportive actions for his or her subordinates. Whether the supervisor was seen to offer too much or too little direction was also a significant factor, albeit not nearly as strong. Finally, Latino officers were significantly more likely to evaluate their supervisors more positively, although the effect was modest. We were unable to provide an empirical explanation for this finding, which deserves further inquiry in future research.

Third, when considering the views of supervisors themselves, we found variation between departments in average level of attachment to the organization, but no clear relationship with department size. In five of the eight departments, supervisors tended to be more attached than the rank-and-file officers, but the degree of difference diminished substantially as department (and sample) size increased. In fact, there appears to be some within-agency similarity between supervisors and rank-and-file officers in terms of their attachment to the organization, suggesting some hierarchical compatibility.

Fourth, the most commonly emphasized goal for supervisors of field operations units was to keep officers from getting into trouble, followed by reducing serious crime and ensuring fair and equal treatment to all citizens. Given the immense power our society entrusts to the police and the increasing scrutiny under which police officers and their departments find themselves, it is not surprising that keeping officers out of trouble ranks as the number one supervisor emphasis. Crime

reduction and fair/equal treatment represent an interesting focus on both outcomes and process. Goals much less frequently pursued with “a lot” of emphasis were the traditional enforcement ones of making more arrests and crime clearances. Our survey findings are interesting when juxtaposed with a recent survey of participants in the FBI’s National Academy.<sup>7</sup> This highly selective sample of police leaders (averaging nearly 20 years of police experience), ranked achieving key tasks, goals, and mission highest as indicators of leader efficacy, while low complaints against subordinates was among the lowest. Possibly what supervisors emphasize most as a goal is not necessarily what they feel is most important in gathering evidence of a leader’s effectiveness. This disjuncture deserves further research.

Over all, one of the remarkable features of our observations on supervision is the absence of large and easily explained cross-department differences. Although we did observe differences across the eight departments (and some within-agency similarity in attachment-to-the-department scores), they tended to be more modest in scope than the National Police Research Platform has observed on other topics, and the explanation for departmental differences is not so obvious. Of course, a much larger sample of departments, especially smaller agencies, would establish with much greater confidence the generalizability of this pattern.

In general, organizations where supervisors enjoy the confidence of their subordinates tend to perform better than those where they do not. The powerful effect of social relations-oriented leadership in the views of police subordinates in this sample is consistent with a large body of research on leadership and management in general.<sup>8</sup> Thus, it may be fruitful for these departments to seek ways to bolster the abilities and inclinations of their supervisors to provide such social support by examining the department’s efforts at recruitment and selection of officers, training, and performance appraisal. Of course, the study also shows that providing more task-oriented direction was a significant, though far less strong, influence on subordinates’ ratings of their boss. Finding ways to enhance this aspect of police supervision will also have payoffs in these departments.

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7 Schafer, p. 652.

8 Bass, pp. 480-482.