

**Citizens' Perceptions of Police Practice:
An Exploration of Causes**

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Abstract

Both the reality of police behavior and perceptions of their behavior are important concerns in American law enforcement. Past research has shown that race or ethnicity is a strong predictor of perceptions of police actions, with Blacks, and to a lesser degree, other minorities having more negative views than Whites. Little research, however, has attempted to assess the effects of actual personal encounters with police on persons' perceptions. The present study, a survey of U.S., New Jersey residents, assessed the relationships between race/ethnicity, gender, education level, police as family members, and political alignment with reports of actual encounters with police and their opinions about police. Results showed very strong effects of race/ethnicity on frequency of negative (but not positive) interactions with police and opinions about police; positive interactions associated with political stance; and level of education associated with negative opinions despite a lack of actual personal negative interactions. Although causal directions cannot be definitively established, the results are consistent with three likely effects: A: Being Black leads to more negative interactions with police, hence less-positive opinions. B: Political conservatism leads to reports of more positive encounters. C: Greater education leads to a poorer opinion of police, perhaps due to peer influences.

“When any part of the American family does not feel like it is being treated fairly, that’s a problem for all of us.” - President Barack Obama

Every effective government must have a police force to protect the peace and to ensure compliance with its laws (Chapman, 2011). Police officers within the US have been granted extraordinary powers to stop, search, arrest, and use deadly physical force in order to protect the peace and enforce the laws of this great nation (Alalehto & Larsson, 2016). Americans recognize the police as the governmentally appointed authority that protects their safety and security (Ortmeier & Meese, 2009) and that it has the power to use force to compel compliance with the law and to ensure public safety (Vera-Sanchez & Rosenbaum, 2011; Wu, Son, & Triplett, 2009). Studies on citizens' perceptions of the police have found that Americans generally have positive perceptions of the police and of their ability to prevent crime and ensure public safety (Reiman & Leighton, 2010).

Regardless of citizens' perceptions of the police it is accepted within policing and law enforcement that police use of force and the killing of an individual regardless of their race/ethnicity is the most serious activity a police officer will ever engage in (Smith, 2003), and that the current law of the land, according to the Supreme Court of the United States in *Tennessee v. Garner* (1985) and *Graham v. Conner* (1989), is that the taking of a life and the use of any degree of force by a police officer must be justified and objectively reasonable. In addition, citizens generally expect police to utilize procedural justice (be treated with respect, allowed an opportunity to explain the issue, officers perform justly and are responsive to the citizens' concerns) when interacting with them (Weitzer & Tuch, 2005).

According to Waddington (2010), it is imperative of the police to earn the trust of its citizens and for citizens to have a positive perception of the police in order to maintain public safety within a community (Barrick et al., 2014). In addition, Hawdon (2008) asserted citizen perception of police legitimacy is also a

critical component of a positive relationship between the community and the police. The perceptions citizens have of the police are associated with perceptions of police legitimacy. If citizens perceive that the police have acted fairly their views of the police become more positive (Mazerolle, Antrobus, Bennet, & Tyler, 2013). This article will focus on the perceptions citizens have of the police based upon citizens' individual and collective realities.

Prior research suggests that an individual's characteristics and disorder in their community help to inform citizens' perceptions of the police (e.g., Rader, Cossman, & Porter 2012). Race, ethnicity (Lurigio, Greenleaf, & Flexon, 2009), political ideology (Hasisi, 2008), education, and socioeconomic status are each important variables in explaining citizens' perceptions of the police (Lurigio et al., 2009). Research findings assert that Blacks¹ have consistently held less favorable perceptions of the police than Whites (e.g., Vogel, 2011), due to past (Porter, 2016) and continuing perception by Blacks that police officers discriminate, disrespect, and engage in higher uses of objectively unreasonable and excessive force against Blacks (Brunson, 2007; Chapman, 2011). Blacks also tend to believe that police utilize aggressive policing procedures associated with order-maintenance (Gau & Brunson, 2010) almost exclusively within Black and socioeconomically depressed communities. These aggressive procedures include "stop-and-frisk," broken window-theory type policing, and police militarization, which disproportionately target Blacks for punitive sanctions (Said, 2016; Salter, 2014). Negative perceptions Blacks have of the police have resulted in Blacks having an unwillingness to assist the police in matters relating to crime (Chapman, 2011; Henderson, Ortiz, Sugie, & Miller, 2006), thus harming law enforcement's ability to investigate and prevent crime (Spalek, 2010). The negative views Blacks have of the police are shaped by both their individual and vicarious experiences (Brunson, 2007) of police excessive use of force (Hyland, Langton, & Davis, 2015), racial profiling (Morrow, White, & Fradella, 2017), and/or other deviant police activities (White & Fradella, 2016).

Although race or ethnicity appears to be the most important demographic factor related to perceptions of police, other variables have been studied as well. Younger individuals view police officers less favorably than their older counterparts (e.g., Prall, 2013). A number of studies have also found that political orientation or party affiliation is related to opinions about police. For example, Brown (2017) reported on the results of a Pew Research Center survey showing that 79% of Republicans, but only 53% of Democrats, rated police as doing an excellent or good job at protecting people from crime. Differences were even greater when the question was whether police treat racial and ethnic groups equally (78% vs. 26%, respectively).

The educational level of citizens appears to have a more complex relationship with opinions on police. Lai and Zhao (2013) argued that past research shows no relationship between educational attainment and attitudes toward the police. Salvatore, Markowitz, and Kelly (2013) concluded that older research had found no relationship, but that more recent studies have found that those with lower levels of education have less favorable attitudes toward police than the better educated. In contrast, Braga, Winship, Tyler, Fagan, and Meares (2014) found the opposite.

Presumably, perceptions are based to some extent on reality. When police engage in activities such as discriminatory policing, intimidation, racial profiling, and excessive force these activities undermine the perception of procedural justice and trust citizens have in the police and may cause citizens to no longer view the police as a legitimate governmental authority (e.g., White & Fradella, 2016). According to Schafer, Huebner, and Bynum (2003), an individual's direct personal interactions with the police have a major impact on their perceptions of the police when controlling for all other variables. In addition, research has shown the frequency of interactions with the police is not as important as the context of the police-citizen encounter as perceived by the citizen. If the police-citizen encounter was negative even once, citizens are more likely to have a negative perception of the police. However, if a citizen had a positive police-citizen encounter there is

¹ The term "Black" will be used throughout this article when appropriate rather than "African American," since there is a large number of individuals who present as black or brown from the Caribbean, Africa, and Central or South America and other geographical locations that do not identify themselves as African Americans.

no direct evidence that the citizen will have a positive perception of the police (Schafer et al., 2003). This may be due to social expectations that interactions among people are generally positive, so negative ones are more salient and have greater impact (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001).

Especially since the Black Lives Matter movement began in 2013, a great deal of attention both in news media and in academic research has been paid to this issue. The attention has been focused almost entirely on extreme incidents, especially the shooting of unarmed Black men (Thomas, 2019). Social media and news agencies are often blamed for the lack of trust Blacks and other segments of the community have regarding police officers (Dowler & Zawilski, 2007; Reiner, Livingston, & Allen, 2002), as a result of the manner social media and news agencies control, create and disseminate information involving police interacting with Blacks or while functioning within minority or socioeconomically depressed communities (Chermack, 1995). The media as an institution of social control often sensationalizes the deviant acts of a relatively small number of police officers (Johnson, 2007), which result in misconceptions and misrepresentations of facts becoming legitimized in the minds of media consumers (Greek, 1994). A number of high-profile racial cases such as those of Rodney King, Sean Bell, Abner Louima, Oscar Grant, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, Tamir Rice, and countless other unarmed Black men that have been killed by the police have received local or national coverage. But also, perceptions may arise from sources other than second-hand or news media reports of exceptional cases. These may include actual first-hand experiences with police, which have received much less attention by researchers and commentators than media reports.

President Obama (2014, pg. 5) noted that “when any part of the American family does not feel like it is being treated fairly, that’s a problem for all of us. It’s not just a problem for some. It’s not just a problem for a particular community or a particular demographic. It means that we are not as strong as a country as we can be. And when applied to the criminal justice system, it means we’re not as effective in fighting crime as we could be.” This statement properly frames the perceptions many citizens have of the police, inasmuch as, in order for effective policing to take place within the US, citizen perceptions of the police must be addressed so as to remove the identified barriers to effective policing (Brunson, 2007) and police departments must deliver effective policing (equitable, fair, accountable, and legitimate) services to not just some communities, but all communities (Meares & Neyroud, 2015). The purpose of this research was to investigate the factors which contribute to citizen perceptions of police and to determine if citizen perceptions of police use of force against Blacks are based on racial/ethnic color lines or other factors. It will seek to offer insights as to whether demographic factors and/or personal experience with police might influence perceptions.

Method

Survey

The Citizen Perceptions of Police Survey was designed and field-tested by the author, based upon a review of research by Cox and Falkenbert (1987) and Decker (1981) regarding attitudes toward police. At the beginning of the survey, questions on demographics (gender, race/ethnicity, educational attainment, and state of residence) were asked. Age and household income were responded to in ranges rather than in exact values to help ensure anonymity. In addition, information was obtained on political alignment, political affiliations, employment, and self or family service as a member of a police force. The main questions asked for respondents’ contacts with the police and perceptions of the police. Additional questions on use of force and factors influencing perceptions were included but will not be addressed in this article.

The 30 main questions on the survey included 10 requesting actual numbers of times the respondent had experienced an interaction, either positive or negative, with police. This included such questions as “Approximately how many times have you had a face to face interaction with a police officer as an offender or suspect (this includes being stopped by the police) within the last 5 years?” and “Approximately how many times within the past 5 years have you volunteered your time to your local police department?” Nine questions addressed specific opinions or experiences, such as, “What degree of confidence if any, do you have that

police departments will properly investigate citizen complaints of police misconduct (excessive force, racial profiling, improper searches, false arrest, etc.)?” (with answer categories of: *Very confident*, *Slightly confident*, *Not sure*, *Little confidence*, and *No confidence*), and “Have you within the last 5 years personally observed a police officer use unnecessary/ excessive force?” (answer categories: *Yes* or *No*). A final section of 11 questions asked participants to respond on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from *Strongly disagree* to *Strongly agree* on statements such as: “Police officers are friendly,” and “Police officers care about my community.”

For purposes of the present report, questions were grouped into the following six categories:

Positive Interactions: Face-to-face positive experiences, including as victim or complainant; wrote a complementary letter, etc. Because the numbers of reported experiences varied so widely, results were Z-scored, then summed. This has the effect of giving each question equal weight, rather than being dominated by a few questions describing common experiences.

Negative Interactions: Face-to-face negative interactions: as a suspect, arrests, close family member arrests, etc. (Z-scored, then summed).

General perception of police officers (1 question).

Belief that police treat all racial/ethnic groups equally (1 question).

Confidence that complaints will be properly investigated (1 question) (Shown below as “Low confidence,” as a higher score indicates less confidence).

Positive Opinion: Sum of the 11 questions responded to on the Likert scale. (Four participants failed to answer any of these questions, so *N* for this variable is 71.)

Procedure

The survey was posted on SurveyMonkey®. The author developed a recruitment poster with a link to the survey and posted it on various social media platforms, with requests for respondents to do likewise (snowball sampling). In addition, advertisements were posted in various institutions of higher education and transportation hubs throughout Florida, New Jersey, New York . Although respondents from a wide range of locations participated, for the present purposes only responses from residents of New Jersey will be reported, so as to restrict one source of extraneous variation in responses. Copies of the survey are available from the author. All responses were anonymous. Prior approval for the research was obtained from the University’s IRB.

Results

The 75 respondents who reported their state of residence being New Jersey included a wide range of demographic characteristics. Approximately half (38, or 51%) were males, with 36 (48%) females, and one (1.3%) reporting being transgender. For race/ethnicity, 51 (68%) reported being White, with 17 (23%) reporting Black, and 7 (9%) Hispanic or Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. No respondents chose categories indicating that they were of mixed race/ethnicity. Participants were asked to report if they or other members of their immediate family were police officers; 19 (25%) reported this. For other demographic data (see table 1). For analyses including gender, the transgender person was dropped; for those including political positions, “other” and “none” respondents were dropped.

Table 1. *Demographic Data of Respondents*

Variable	Value	Fre- quency	Percent
Age group			
	18-24	1	1.3
	25-34	12	16.0
	35-44	19	25.3
	45-54	28	37.3
	55-64	12	16.0
	65+	3	4.0
	Total	75	100.0
Highest level of education			
	HS degree or equivalent	10	13.3
	Some college but no degree	11	14.7
	Associate degree (e.g. AA, AS)	9	12.0
	Bachelor degree (e.g. BA, BS)	28	37.3
	Master's degree (e.g. MA, MS, MEd)	13	17.3
	Profess. degree (e.g. MD, DDS, DVM)	2	2.7
	Doctorate (e.g. PhD, EdD)	2	2.7
	Total	75	100.0
Employment status			
	Employed FT (40+ hours/week)	53	70.7
	Employed PT (up to 39 hours/week)	6	8.0
	Unemployed, currently looking	5	6.7
	Unemployed, not currently looking	1	1.3
	Student - Not Employed	1	1.3
	Student - Employed PT	2	2.7
	Retired	3	4.0
	Homemaker	1	1.3
	Self-employed	3	4.0
	Total	75	100.0
Household income			
	Under \$15,000	3	4.0
	Between \$15,000 and \$29,999	2	2.7
	Between \$30,000 and \$49,999	4	5.3
	Between \$50,000 and \$74,999	12	16.0
	Between \$75,000 and \$99,999	14	18.7
	Between \$100,000 and \$150,000	19	25.3
	Over \$150,000	21	28.0
	Total	75	100.0

Political alignment

Very Liberal	9	12.0
Liberal	16	21.3
Somewhat Liberal	12	16.0
Somewhat conservative	12	16.0
Conservative	12	16.0
Very Conservative	1	1.3
Other	6	8.0
None	7	9.3
Total	75	100.0

Political party affiliation

Democratic party	34	45.3
Independent	7	9.3
Republican party	17	22.7
Other	2	2.7
None	15	20.0
Total	75	100.0

Importantly, the demographic variables, used as predictors in this study, were virtually unrelated to each other. Except for a relationship between political alignment and affiliation ($r = .71, N = 52, p < .001$) and between level of education and conservatism ($r = -.37, N = 62, p < .01$), interrelationships among predictors did not approach significance. This is important as it means that, with these exceptions, relationships between predictors and reports of interactions with and opinions of police were independent of each other. In particular, race/ethnicity of the participants or whether they had a police officer in their family was unrelated to all other predictor variables, including political affiliations.

Questions on experience with and opinions about police were condensed as described above. In addition, three key questions were included in themselves. Not surprisingly, these variables were highly intercorrelated, (see Table 2). One unexpected result was that there was essentially no relationship ($r = .03, ns$) between positive and negative interactions. That is, persons who reported many positive interactions with police reported about the same degree of negative interactions as did those with few positive interactions.

TABLE 2. CORRELATIONS AMONG REPORTS OF EXPERIENCE WITH AND OPINIONS ABOUT POLICE (N=75)

	Positive interactions	Negative interactions	Perception of police officers in general	Believe police treat racial/ethnic groups equally	Low confidence complaints properly investigated
Negative interactions	.03				
Perception of police officers in general	.53***	-.25*			
Believe police treat racial/ethnic groups equally	.36***	-.32**	.61***		
Low confidence complaints properly investigated	-.27*	.27*	-.58***	-.63***	
Positive opinions (N= 71)	.32**	-.30*	.67***	.82***	-.78***

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, all 2-tailed.

Comparisons between predictors and experience with/perception of police. As described above, the study included eight predictors: gender, whether or not there was a police officer in the family (both dichotomous); age, level of education, household income, political alignment, political affiliation (all treated as interval scales), and race/ethnicity (in three nominally-scaled groups: White, Black, and Other). There were six intervally-scaled outcome measures: positive interactions with police, negative interactions with police, general perception of police officers, belief that police treat racial/ethnic groups equally, low confidence that complaints are properly investigated, and positive opinions of police.

The dichotomous predictors of gender and whether or not the respondent had a police officer in the family (or was one himself/herself) were compared to the six outcome measures by *t*-tests. Of the 12 tests, none was significant. That is, gender and having a police family member made no difference at all to respondents' experience with/opinions of police.

The five interval predictors were compared to the outcome measures by correlation coefficients (see Table 3).

Table 3. *Correlations Between Predictors and Outcome Measures (Experience With and Opinions of Police)*

Predictor	Outcome measure						
	Positive interactions	Negative interactions	Perception of police officers in general	Believe police treat racial/ethnic groups equally	Low confidence complaints properly investigated	Positive opinions	
Age group	<i>r</i> = .21 <i>N</i> = 75	-.12 75	.19 75	.15 75	-.22 75	.22 71	
Highest level of education	<i>r</i> = -.20 <i>N</i> = 75	-.04 75	-.26* 75	-.30** 75	.39*** 75	-.33** 71	
Household income	<i>r</i> = .20 <i>N</i> = 75	.12 75	.10 75	-.03 75	.11 75	.09 71	
Political alignment	<i>r</i> = .38** <i>N</i> = 62	.06 62	.37** 62	.49*** 62	-.42*** 62	.40** 58	
Political party affiliation	<i>r</i> = .35** <i>N</i> = 58	-.20 58	.54*** 58	.54*** 58	-.41*** 58	.37** 54	

* *p* < .05, ** *p* < .01, *** *p* < .001, all 2-tailed.

Finally, and of greatest importance for this study, the outcome measures were compared across the three race/ethnic groups by one-way ANOVAs (see Table 4).

Table 4. *Comparisons of Outcome Measures (Experience With and Opinions of Police) Across Racial/Ethnic Groups*

		<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i> of difference
Positive interactions	Black	17	-.19	3.42	0.78
	White	51	.27	3.85	
	Other	7	-1.52	1.60	
Negative interactions	Black	17	2.37	4.07	7.60***
	White	51	-.96	2.77	
	Other	7	1.25	3.71	
Perception of police officers in general	Black	17	3.41	1.28	0.85
	White	51	3.86	1.22	
	Other	7	3.71	1.25	
Believe police treat racial/ethnic grps equally	Black	17	1.59	.87	9.48***
	White	51	3.27	1.54	
	Other	7	2.43	1.40	
Low confid complaints properly investigated	Black	17	3.59	1.06	6.22**
	White	51	2.39	1.25	
	Other	7	3.14	1.68	
Positive opinions	Black	16	36.69	6.75	8.33***
	White	48	47.94	10.48	
	Other	7	44.43	7.74	

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, all 2-tailed.

There were very strong effects (1 *SD* or more) of race/ethnicity in negative interactions, belief that police treat racial/ethnic groups differently, in opinion as to whether complaints are properly investigated, and in positive opinions. In each case, the differences were such that Black respondents had the most negative views, and Whites the most positive, with Other ethnicities in between. Interestingly, there were no significant differences among the racial/ethnic groups in positive interactions with police or in perception of police officers in general.

Discussion

The sample was reasonably representative of New Jersey residents. According to the US Census Bureau (2018), 55.1% of New Jersey residents consider themselves “White alone, not Hispanic or Latino.” The sample was somewhat better educated than the New Jersey population (38.1% with a bachelor’s degree or higher; US Census Bureau, 2018) and with somewhat higher median household income (\$80,088 in 2017; Department of Numbers, 2018).

Positive and negative interactions were essentially unrelated, but each was strongly related in opposite directions to other variables. This raises the question of whether there was something unusual in the distributions of those two variables, e.g., a curvilinear relationship. Although both distributions were positively skewed (reflecting that most respondents reported few interactions of either type), their relationship was indeed clearly random.

Results can be summarized as follows. Positive interactions were strongly associated with a conservative political stance but not at all with any other characteristic, including race/ethnicity. In contrast, negative interactions were associated *only* with race/ethnicity. A high level of education was consistently associated with negative perceptions/opinions.

This complex pattern of results can be summarized as possibly reflecting three distinct causal paths.

A: Being Black (or, to a lesser extent, being a member of another minority group) leads to more negative interactions with police, hence less-positive opinions. The first causal link can be asserted with confidence, since it seems highly unlikely that negative interactions with police would lead to a change in racial/ethnic identity. The second is speculative, but it seems somewhat stronger than the reverse; while it is possible that a negative opinion of police would lead to more negative encounters, it would seem at least as likely to have the reverse effect. That is, a distrust of police could inappropriately motivate a Black and/or minority citizen to avoid negative encounters, by not engaging in everyday activities than non-Blacks and non-minorities engage in almost daily without fear of negative encounters with the police.

B: Being politically conservative, regardless of age, gender, income, or race/ethnicity, leads a person to report more positive encounters with police. These encounters have in common a pro-active element: complementing officers or volunteering to work with them, or even being willing to report being victimized. Again, the causal connection could possibly be in the other direction: Happening to engage positively with police could move one toward a more conservative political orientation, but this seems less likely.

C: Greater education, regardless of age, gender, income, or race/ethnicity, leads to a poorer opinion of police. This occurs despite the lack of any connection between education and either positive or negative actual experience. This might be attributed to peer influences: being around better educated persons who hold negative opinions may cause one to adopt those opinions as one’s own. This might be a self-reinforcing cycle, perpetuating a negative opinion among the better-educated even in the absence of negative personal experience. Again, this study cannot definitively establish the direction of causality, but it seems highly unlikely that it would work in the opposite direction: having a negative opinion of police causes a person to strive for a higher level of education.

This limited study did not allow for a full exploration of other possible causal paths. For example, it may be that some personality trait may lead a person to be both conservative and inclined to trust and think positively of police, or another trait might lead a person to both seek higher education and tend to be suspicious of police. It is hoped that future research may be able to shed light on such possible effects.

The present research confirms the often-demonstrated finding that minority members, especially Blacks, have a more negative view of police actions than do Whites. These need to be distinguished from

reports of positive interactions and positive perceptions of police officers in general. That is, Blacks in this survey seemed to share Americans' generally positive opinions of police in the abstract. However, their evaluations are much more negative than Whites' when judging police as to whether they treat racial/ethnic groups equally, will investigate complaints properly, or on a number of specific, concrete behaviors. This distinction between general, abstract opinions and specific behaviors should receive greater attention in research. The results also suggest that the negative opinions of police may be due to some persons having had more negative interactions with police. This suggests that police departments that want to improve relations with minorities, and thus the effectiveness of their policing efforts, may find positive outreach efforts relatively ineffective, and that it may be better to focus on reducing the number of negative interactions these groups experience.

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