PERCEPTIONS OF COMMUNITY POLICING IN A SMALL TOWN†

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ABSTRACT: *Much of the information regarding community policing is based upon research conducted in large urban areas. In contrast, this article utilizes survey data to examine resident perceptions of community-policing practices in a small southern town. Low response rates from minority citizens, along with the negative impressions reported by minority participants, point to race as a major concern. Black respondents are less willing to trust the police, express greater dissatisfaction with the police, and grade the police significantly lower than do white participants. Interestingly, community-policing measures do not appear to enhance perceptions of the police. Suggestions for future research are offered.*

INTRODUCTION

Community policing continues to be a popular strategy in both metropolitan and non-metropolitan jurisdictions. Such forces as media coverage of reduced crime rates, publicized success of community policing, federal and state funding initiatives to stimulate community-policing strategies, public relations, and public education efforts are powering the movement (Maguire, Kuhns, Uchida, & Cox, 1997). Strategies that place officers outside their vehicles, walking the beat, utilizing bike patrols, promoting citizen-police academies, and implementing other service-oriented policing initiatives are indicators that

the community-oriented policing movement is changing law enforce-
ment in larger and smaller jurisdictions across the nation. Until re-
cently, most studies of community policing had taken place in large,
urban communities. But, as a greater number of smaller jurisdictions
implement community-oriented policing strategies, interest in con-
ducting research in these hitherto neglected sites is gaining attention
(McDonald, Wood, & Pflug, 1996; Thurman & McGarrell, 1997;
Weisheit, Falcone, & Wells, 1996; Williams, 1998).

This paper examines citizen perceptions of community policing in a
small southern town. The study explores the relationship of commu-
nity-oriented policing indicators with feelings of safety, level of trust in
the police, and an overall indicator of satisfaction with the agency and
its community-policing strategy. Since the research site is a small-sized
town, it provides an opportunity to see how community-policing works
outside a large, urban environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is evidence that crime outside metropolitan areas is not sim-
ply urban crime on a smaller scale and that urban community-policing
strategies are not isomorphic with rural communities and small-town
life (Krannich, Greider, & Little, 1985; McGarrell & Thurman, 1994;
Thurman & McGarrell, 1997). Since community policing was intro-
duced in large jurisdictions for urban police agencies to decentralize
and create neighborhood-based social control strategies, it might seem
that community policing would be hard to transfer to rural communities
where foot patrol, bicycle patrol, and the creation of substations would
be impractical or superfluous. Many small-town police chiefs wonder
what all the fuss is about community policing. In their minds, commu-
nity policing is what they have always practiced in these smaller juris-
dictions (Zhao & Thurman, 1997). The now popular community-
policing movement suggests that large departments want to emulate
their non-metropolitan counterparts, while small-town police officers
want to see more action and make more arrests. "It seems as if Joe
Friday of Dragnet and Andy Taylor of Mayberry RFD each think the
other has it better" (Cordner & Scarborough, 1997, p. 9).

There are key differences in crime and crime control that make
community policing a distinctive practice in smaller towns. Rural cul-
ture and rural life are not simple ideas to conceptualize, measure, or
plug into administrative directives concerning community policing.
However, it is essential to the study of small-town crime and social jus-
tice that academics, practitioners, and law enforcement administrators
understand what rural means. "Research on rural crime has uniformly

reflected several misguided assumptions about rural life and social con-
trol that seem especially problematic" (Weisheit et al., 1996, p. 147).
Three mistaken premises underlie this thinking. First, the "magnitude
assumption" presumes that social control varies in *quantity*, but not
quality. Second, the "homogeneity assumption" operates on the mis-
placed notion that what is true of *one* particular rural community is true
of *all* rural communities. Finally, the "implicit definition assumption" is
that "rural" is a simple and easily understood concept. Everyone
knows what the term means and it needs little elaboration in studies of
rural crime (Weitsheit et al., 1996, pp. 147-148).

    Non-metropolitan communities are increasingly diverse as homo-
geneity wanes with the suburbanization of border zones or suburbs and
small towns in counties adjacent to metropolitan areas. While only
20% of Americans live in rural areas and just 10% of rural residents
work in agriculture, some of the fastest-growing census tracts are those
adjacent to rural counties (Weisheit & Kernes, 1997). Worn-out notions
of farmers and farmhouses, intimate extended kinship networks, and
lifelong residence complicate the task of conceptualizing and studying
small-town crime. There is a world of difference between the bur-
geoning housing developments that replace fields formerly in produc-
tion with suburbs in the rural counties adjacent to metropolitan
development and the poverty-laden isolated villages that lie far from
the next metropolitan area. To presume that rural means the same
thing in both of these settings is absolutely wrong.

    The high concentration of racial minority groups in areas such as
the present study site impacts the study of community policing. As
Snipp (1996) pointed out, race is arguably the most divisive social force
in rural and small-town life. Perceptual differences between White and
African-American members living in the same locale is a significant
community-relations concern for law enforcement across the nation.
Coulter (1988) noted that African Americans are less likely than
Whites to contact governmental agencies because they do not believe it
will result in a positive outcome.

    There is also the historical legacy of racism and discrimination that
persists today in a more covert manner and clouds the African-Ameri-
can interaction with community institutions (Chambliss, 1994; Murty,
Roebuck, & Smith 1990). The "underclass" model of service delivery,
as applied to community policing in smaller jurisdictions, is also rele-
vant to whether residents perceive the police as community partners
and whether they trust the police to operate in good faith. Austin and
Dodge (1992) found that African-American perceptions of the police
and local government are enmeshed in memories of past discrimination
and distrust, as well as current doubts and fears.

Given this context, community policing as practiced in smaller towns should benefit from the intimacy and presumption of shared values that many outsiders equate with the positive aspects of small-town life. But, social class and racial boundaries are found in communities everywhere, regardless of size. In addition, African-American perceptions of law enforcement continue to be an important factor in studies which attempt to document the impact of community policing. For example, Williams (1998) reported that a lack of citizen participation, especially among African Americans, and a sense of apathy mixed with contempt emerged in focus-group discussions of community policing in the small city he investigated. Grine's (1994) finding that fear of the police and worries over retribution from drug dealers and thugs keep people from making contact with the authorities continues to receive confirmation (Walsh, Vito, Tewksbury, & Wilson, 2000; Williams, 1998). Imagine the impact of such fear in smaller communities where there is greater familiarity and more direct contact between the police and residents. Community-policing initiatives have much to overcome, even in rural jurisdictions, where minority populations distrust the police and remain skeptical about the value of partnering with the authorities.

Community policing in smaller jurisdictions has been subject to the application of faulty assumptions about homogeneity, shared values, and dominant cultural systems. The perception of support for the police, efficacy, and crime prevention is affected not only by problematic assumptions, but also by subcultural differences embedded in race and social class dynamics across the variety of rural communities that characterize non-metropolitan America today. As a result, there remains a need to investigate these communities very closely.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The purpose of this study is to broaden the understanding of community policing from the perspective of small-town residents. The data analysis was shared with city officials who intend to use the results to improve the delivery of police services to local citizens. As a result, the present study examines the issue of citizen trust in the police and perceived safety in relation to measures of community policing, sociodemographic characteristics, and the overall rating of the police department.

The Research Site

Thomasville, Georgia, the county seat of Thomas County, is a small town of approximately 20,000 residents. It is located 230 miles south of Atlanta, bordering Leon County, Florida, and just 30 minutes north of

Tallahassee, the Florida capital. Agribusiness, tourism, and light indus-
try form the core of its diverse economy. Two Thomasville businesses
are listed on the New York Stock Exchange. Slightly more than half
(53%) the city population is African American, while rural Thomas
County has a majority White population. Median household income is
$27,509, just 81% of the median figure for Georgia (U.S. Bureau of the
Census, 1990).

The Thomasville Police Department (TPD) invited the authors to
assess the department's community-policing performance. City leaders
were interested in determining whether residents perceived the commu-
nity-oriented policing strategy, implemented a decade ago, as worth
continuing.

Data Collection

A self-administered survey was distributed to the community by
mail and by Internet in May of 1999. City officials provided the address
list, labor, and postage for the mail distribution of the survey to approx-
imately 10,000 households. In addition, the survey was posted on the
city's website to increase citizen awareness and response. The city owns
the local telecommunications systems, and it makes television and In-
ternet connections available to residents for a fee. Citizens returned
2,287 completed questionnaires to the researchers, with over 600 being
relayed electronically on the city website. A third survey, not examined
here, was distributed to all sworn TPD officers who returned 43 of 60
questionnaires (72%). A description of the citizen returns is presented
in Table 1.

The survey respondents differ from the general population in sev-
eral ways. Respondents were overwhelmingly older Whites, with
higher than average income, and much higher educational attainment.
The most striking difference is the low African-American response rate.
As the literature suggests, this observation is emblematic of a larger,
national research trend. Whites are more likely to respond to surveys
in general and to surveys about law enforcement in particular than are
African Americans (Grine, 1994; Williams, 1998). Social class indica-
tors, such as average household income and head of the household edu-
cational level, are also factors that account for a disparity in survey
responses by race.

The main objective of the current study is to capture data regard-
ing residents' perceptions of the local police department. Three indica-
tors were of primary interest. They included respondents' self-reported
level of trust in the local police department, feelings of safety within
their neighborhood, and a global measure of satisfaction with the

TABLE 1
Population (*N* = 10,000) and Study Group (*n* = 2,287) Characteristics

Characteristic	Population	Study Group	Characteristic	Population	Study Group
Race:			Sex:		
White	47%	83%	Male	45%	49%
African-American	53	15	Female	55	51
Other	0	2			
Age:			Education:		
Under 18	27%	1%	LT High School	35%	5%
18-34	22	15	High School	30	19
35-54	23	43	Some College	17	32
55+	26	41	College +	18	45
Income:			Length of Residence:		
LT $10,000	28%	7%	0-3 Years	NA	19%
$10-24,999	30	15	3-10 Years	NA	31
$25-49,999	27	33	10+ Years	NA	51
$50,000+	16	45			

agency. Trust was measured on a ten-point scale, extending from com-
plete distrust (1) to complete trust (10). Safety scores were also mea-
sured on a ten-point scale, where a score of 1 reflected "Never Feel
Safe" and a 10 indicated "Always Feel Safe." The overall agency as-
sessment used the traditional grading scale where "A" represented
"Excellent" and a grade of "F" meant "Failure."

　　Independent variables include respondent sociodemographic char-
acteristics (race, age, gender, income, education, and length of resi-
dency) and a set of community-policing measures. These items include
frequency of sighting officers on bike patrol, being able to recall the
name of the police chief and any officers, frequency of interactions with
police, willingness to report a crime, estimate of crime trends in their
neighborhood, and victimization status.

RESULTS

　　Table 2 presents the zero-order correlation matrix. A test of signif-
icance was not used because of the large sample size. The three depen-
dent variables are highly, but not perfectly, correlated with each other.
In other words, respondents who trust the police give them a higher
performance grade and people who feel safe in their community rate
the police more favorably. Older residents are more trusting of the po-
lice. Interestingly, familiarity with bike patrol dampens citizen assess-
ments. People who say they would call the police if they saw a crime
give higher assessments, while respondents who think crime is on the

rise issue poorer marks to the police. Being a crime victim also detracts from the ratings.

TABLE 2
Correlation Matrix (*n* = 1,901)

		X₂	X₃	X₄	X₅	X₆	X₇	X₈	X₉	X₁₀	X₁₁	X₁₂	X₁₃	Y₁	Y₂	Y₃
X₁	Race	−08	−11	−34	−18	02	−06	−02	05	00	−22	−05	−02	−27	−15	−23
X₂	Age		−09	−04	−03	34	10	27	−01	13	08	00	−02	19	02	12
X₃	Gender			−23	−11	−06	02	−14	−05	12	−06	03	−04	−07	−10	−05
X₄	Income				48	06	−01	13	05	−10	13	−06	12	14	17	10
X₅	Education					−08	01	03	05	−12	15	01	11	09	14	08
X₆	Residency						01	30	11	−01	06	08	13	02	−06	−01
X₇	Bike Patrol							−03	−08	22	00	16	05	−13	−13	−20
X₈	Name Chief								26	−20	06	02	10	04	03	07
X₉	Name Officer									−32	09	−01	07	05	06	06
X₁₀	Interaction										−05	03	−16	01	−03	−04
X₁₁	Rept. Crime											−03	01	32	18	24
X₁₂	Est. Crime												14	−22	−36	−26
X₁₃	Victim													−15	−18	−18
Y₁	Trust														53	75
Y₂	Safety															54
Y₃	Grade															

Coding: Race (0 = White, 1 = Other); Age (1 = LT 18, 2 = 18-34, 3 = 35-54, 4 = 55+); Gender (0 = Male, 1 = Female); Income (1 = LT $10,000, 2 = $10-24,999. 3 = $25-49,999, 4 = $50,000+); Education (1 = LT HS, 2 = HS Degree, 3 = Technical School Degree, 4 = Some College, 5 = College Degree, 6 = Graduate School); Residency (1 = 0-3 Years, 2 = 4-10 Years, 3 = 10+ Years); Bike Patrol (0 = Never Seen, 1 = Sometimes Seen, 2 = Often Seen); Name Chief (0 = No, 1 = Yes); Name Officer (0 = No, 1 = Yes); Interaction with Police in Past Year (0 = None, 1 = 1-2 Times, 2 = Few Times, 3 = Often); Report Crime if a Witness (0 = No, 1 = Yes); Estimate of Crime in Neighborhood (1 = Lessening, 2 = Same, 3 = Increasing); Victim (0 = No, 1 = Yes); Trust in TPD (1-10 scale ranging from Complete Distrust to Complete Trust); Safety (1-10 scale ranging from Never Feel Safe to Always Feel Safe); Grade given to TPD (4 = A, 3 = B, 2 = C, 1 = D, F = 0).

Table 3 presents the three regression models. African Americans and crime victims issue lower assessments on all three measures. Interestingly, bike patrol sightings, considered to be a staple of community policing, exerts a consistently negative effect in all three equations. People who are inclined to notify the police if they witness a crime are more supportive, while those respondents who think crime is on the rise harbor doubts about the police. A spillover effect is evident. Respondents who give high marks on trust and safety are more likely to grade police efforts more positively.

DISCUSSION

Given the general characteristics of the respondents (white, older, and middle-class), it is not surprising that this "law and order" constitu-

TABLE 3
OLS Regression Model Examining Trust, Safety, and Grade for Local Police Department

	Trust			Safety			Grade		
Predictor	b	SE	β	b	SE	β	b	SE	β
Race	−1.377	.154	−.206*	−0.530	.132	−.094*	−0.125	.049	−.045*
Age	0.511	.078	.155*	0.081	.067	.029	−0.014	.024	−.010
Gender	0.071	.108	.015	−0.068	.092	−.017	0.014	.033	.007
Income	0.172	.070	.064*	0.325	.060	.143*	−0.046	.022	−.041*
Education	0.009	.046	.005	0.045	.039	.028	0.006	.014	.007
Residency	−0.051	.073	−.016	−0.129	.063	−.049*	−0.029	.023	−.023
Bike Patrol	−0.354	.070	−.112*	−0.200	.060	−.074*	−0.090	.022	−.069*
Name Chief	−0.023	.118	−.005	0.198	.101	.048	0.091	.037	.045*
Name Officer	0.343	.111	.070*	0.195	.095	.047*	0.024	.034	.012
Interaction	0.096	.059	.038	0.008	.050	.004	−0.017	.018	−.016
Rept. Crime	1.915	.170	.249*	0.893	.146	.137*	−0.003	.054	−.001
Est. Crime	−0.892	.089	−.217*	−1.169	.076	−.336*	−0.077	.029	−.046*
Victim	−0.614	.107	−.125*	−0.616	.092	−.149*	−0.083	.034	−.041*
Trust							0.248	.009	.607*
Safety							0.088	.010	.180*
Adjusted R^2		.27			.24			.60	

* Denotes statistical significance at the .05 level.

ency trusts the police and rates the department highly. The majority of the respondents feel good about what the police are doing to keep neighborhoods safe. Less than half the respondents said they had been victimized while living in Thomasville. The majority of these episodes were property offenses. Victimization, and especially whether victims called the police to report their victimization, make a difference in the grades issued. Victims who are less satisfied with the police response are less likely to give higher grades to the police. Thus, failure to protect becomes a key ingredient in citizen assessments.

   Race also makes a critical difference in respondent evaluations. African Americans rate the agency almost one letter grade lower than Whites (a "C" versus a "B"). Minority members are less inclined to trust the police, feel more vulnerable in their neighborhood, and are less likely to report a crime to the police. The overrepresentation of Whites in the study group, despite the fact that the majority of local residents are African Americans, underscores the significance of race and police performance.

   Two anomalies surface from these data. First, the frequency of bike patrol sightings is inversely related to the grade respondents assign to the department. Most experts view bike patrol as a way to encourage more positive police-civilian interactions. It may be that

Thomasville residents interpret bike patrols as a harsh law enforcement response rather than as a community service effort. It may be that bike patrols are deployed to the more crime-ridden areas and the resulting police-citizen contacts tend to be more confrontational. If this is the case, then the agency may need to undertake a more conscious effort to establish an open dialogue between officers and the citizenry. Residents may construe the sudden appearance of bike patrol officers, who scour the neighborhood, make several arrests, and then disappear as more of a temporary, combative tool than a long-lasting partnership.

A second odd, but intriguing, finding is the lack of fit between the community-policing measures and the levels of trust, safety, and overall grade. Supposedly, one benefit that emanates from embracing a community-policing philosophy is a greater faith in the police. Such is not the case with this data set. The community-policing measures contribute nothing to the variation explained in the dependent variables. This lack of impact may hint that professing to embrace a community-policing philosophy and the actual implementation of the same requires constant vigilance and ongoing demonstration.

Using the Internet to gather data is a rather new technique. While the current paper does not address the mode of return, there may be differences between respondents who replied by the Internet and participants who used surface mail. Similarly, citizen familiarity with computer usage may afford the local police department with another way to reach members of the community.

Future research directions that flow from this study include greater attention to data collection among underrepresented minority groups, comparisons across different sized jurisdictions, and further examination of the confounding lack of relationship found here between community-policing indicators and the dependent variables. Much more work must be done prior to data collection to obtain a more representative sampling of African Americans. For example, informational campaigns in schools, churches, and community centers, rallies at recreational events, and extended media coverage might help to ensure increased minority participation rates. As the literature confirms, rural and small-town life cover a lot of ground and diversity in terms of population size, demographic composition, and contextual factors like metropolitan adjacency and economic situation. Case studies, one by one, are hardly generalizable. Comparative studies that replicate community-policing research under a variety of conditions will help provide more answers to the questions raised in this paper.

CONCLUSION

Community-policing research must continue to address the salient differences between larger and smaller jurisdictions. Low response rates from minority citizens, along with the negative impressions reported by minority participants, point to race as a major concern. Apparently, living in a small town does not mitigate this experience. More work lies ahead to unpack the less favorable perceptions of minority members within the context of a satisfied majority population.

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