PERCEPTIONS OF POLICE AND SAFETY IN A SMALL TOWN

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This study examines how perceptions of police affect feelings of safety in the community. Using a community survey from a nonmetropolitan area, this study investigates predictors of confidence in police and whether confidence decreases concern with safety. Findings indicate confidence in police is influenced predominantly by impressions that crime has decreased in the community or by having a positive encounter with police. In turn, confidence in police significantly increases feeling safe. These findings suggest that fear of crime can be reduced through positive interactions between police and community residents. Thus, in addition to effectively enforcing the law, efforts to develop good community relations are important for police in smaller town settings, just as for urban police.

Keywords: *fear of crime; perceptions of police; police-community relations; attitudes toward police; rural police*

Police departments face many new challenges in American society. Although crime rates are currently at their lowest point since 1978 (Uniform Crime Reports, 2000, p. 6), significant percentages of the population indicate that they are afraid to walk at night in areas near their own homes (Gallup, 1997), and crime is considered by most of the country to be

a "serious social problem" (Ferraro, 1995, p. 2). In addition, police departments face greater scrutiny than ever before with regular reports of corruption (Cohen, 1998; K. Johnson, 1998; Sterngold, 2000; Witkin, 1995) and police brutality or misuse of force (Fyfe, 1988; Morrow, 1991; Roane, 2000). These challenges make it increasingly important to understand the impact of police on local communities.

Since the 1960s, many researchers have attempted to examine the relationship between citizens and local police. Although some studies have focused on the factors that influence the nature of police encounters with citizens (Black & Reiss, 1970; Lundman, Sykes, & Clark, 1978; Piliavin & Briar, 1964; Smith & Visher, 1981), many others have examined the attitudes of citizens toward police (Albrecht & Green, 1977; Boggs & Galliher, 1975; Parker, Onyekwuluje, & Murty, 1995; Peek, Lowe, & Alston, 1981; Sampson & Bartusch, 1999; Stoutland, 2001; Tuch & Weitzer, 1997; Weitzer & Tuch, 1999).

Although the literature on citizen attitudes toward police is fairly extensive, there are two main limitations. First, the majority of past studies have focused on very specific populations. In particular, urban samples of African Americans or comparisons between groups of urban Caucasians and African Americans dominate the literature. Second, the literature on fear of crime and perceptions of community safety, which is arguably an important measure of confidence in police, has largely focused on broader contextual issues such as media influence (Heath & Gilbert, 1996; P. Williams & Dickinson, 1993), the social organizational patterns in the neighborhood (Scott, 2001), or past victimization (Baba & Austin, 1989; Keane, 1995). Such studies have not examined how perceptions of the police may influence feelings of safety in the community.

This study addresses the lack of attention to community-level relationships by examining feelings of safety within a small midwestern community, a largely overlooked and informative context for assessing the impact of police-citizen interaction. We hypothesize that positive perceptions of the police, in the form of confidence in the local police force's ability to enforce laws and solve or prevent crimes, will increase citizens' perception of their town as a safe place.

PERCEPTIONS OF POLICE

Inner cities and urban areas more generally have been assumed to have poor relations between citizens and police. Possibly because of this

assumption, a great number of studies of attitudes toward police have been conducted in urban areas (Borrero, 2001; Parker et al., 1995; Sampson & Bartusch, 1999; Stoutland, 2001; Weitzer, 2000). In a review of studies on police-community relations, D. Johnson and Gregory (1971) described the urban police as being "perceived as soldiers of a White occupation army in a bitterly hostile country" (p. 95). Even though studies do often find that citizens in these areas have relatively negative perceptions of the police, there are also findings of some positive views. For example, Stoutland (2001) found that residents in high-crime Boston neighborhoods report feeling that the police do not show them respect or share their same priorities but do believe that the police are competent and dependable.

Another reason that urban areas have been the target of a great deal of this research is that such locations are likely to have greater social problems, such as poverty and high crime rates, which may contribute to negative attitudes toward police. Several studies have specifically examined the role that the immediate community environment plays in producing negative attitudes toward police. One consistent finding is that high crime rates produce more negative attitudes toward police (Parker et al., 1995; Priest & Carter, 1999). One proposed explanation of this negative assessment of the police is partly due to the fact that "citizens of high-crime neighborhoods are more likely to view themselves and the police as natural adversaries" (Parker et al., 1995, p. 406).

Although many studies indicate some consistent influences on perceptions of police, several findings demonstrate that not all urban neighborhoods are alike in their attitudes toward police. For example, Weitzer (2000) compared three very diverse Washington D.C. neighborhoods. This study found that the Black middle-class neighborhood had significantly different assessments of police than neighborhoods consisting of middle-class Whites or lower-class Blacks. Such findings imply that different elements related to the context or environment of the neighborhood may be an important predictor of attitudes toward the police.

One very important consideration in studies of police-citizen interactions and attitudes is the racial composition of the neighborhood. Since the 1960s, one of the most consistent findings is that race is a stronger predictor of attitudes than most other demographic characteristics such as sex, age, or socioeconomic status (for a review, see Peek et al., 1981, p. 362). These studies have consistently found that African Americans report less favorable attitudes toward police than Whites (Block, 1971; Gamson & McEvoy,

1970; Hadar & Snortum, 1975; Halim & Stiles, 2001; Hindelang, 1974; Jacob, 1972; Parker et al., 1995; Peek et al., 1981).

However, several studies have found that various contextual factors moderate the effect of race on attitudes. For example, Sampson and Bartusch (1999) found that controlling for the level of economic disadvantage in the neighborhood of residence produced similar attitudes among Caucasian and African American groups. In addition, a variety of demographic and contextual variables have been found to affect attitudes toward police within racial groups. For example, Boggs and Galliher (1975) compared attitudes of African Americans from a household population with a "street population" within one urban police district. These street respondents were 20- to 40-year-old men who had lived in three or more places in the past year and had held no steady job within the past year (Boggs & Galliher, 1975, p. 395). Although both samples reported dissatisfaction with the police, the street respondents were significantly more likely to hold negative views of police service than the household sample. In other studies comparing groups of African Americans, attitudes toward the police have been found to be affected by socioeconomic status (Parker et al., 1995; Peek et al., 1981), neighborhood crime rates (Parker et al., 1995), age (Boggs & Galliher, 1975; Gamson & McEvoy, 1970), sex (Peek et al., 1981), the type of initiation of police contacts (Boggs & Galliher, 1975), and recent publicized events of police brutality (Tuch & Weitzer, 1997).

These studies have contributed to our understanding of what influences perceptions of police in urban settings, but very few studies have examined citizen perceptions in nonurban areas. This type of urban ethnocentrism in research (Weisheit, 1993) ignores the fact that what may be true in urban areas may not generalize to other types of communities. As a whole, the literature on perceptions of police has ignored the possibility that citizens in nonmetropolitan areas may be influenced by different concerns than their urban counterparts. One exception is a study by Albrecht and Green (1977), who compared rural and nonrural areas in Utah. Their findings indicated that urban poor and minority groups have the least favorable attitudes, whereas rural and urban middle-class respondents have the most positive views of the police. However, the urban area in this study encompassed a population of only 70,000, with only about 11% of the population being either Black or Mexican American. Therefore, this "urban" sample was much smaller and had fewer minorities than most studies of attitudes toward police in urban settings. However, the implication that rural community

members hold more positive attitudes toward police necessitates further research on nonurban settings.

PERCEPTIONS OF SAFETY

Fear of crime has been a topic of research for more than 30 years, but recent scholarship has questioned the ways studies have conceptualized fear. Scott (2001) reviewed this conflict and argued that there is a definite "lack of consensus among scholars of what fear of crime actually means" (p. 30). Examinations of studies of fear reveal that this literature has primarily measured feelings of safety from risk of personal victimization. The most typically used measures do not ask about fear of specific crimes or the likelihood of actual victimization, although they claim they are measuring fear of crime. Some studies have measured perceived crime risk through questions designed to indicate how likely the respondents feel that they will be victimized by a specific type of crime within a given time (Ferraro, 1995; LaGrange & Supancic, 1992). Most commonly, studies have used variations of questions from the National Crime Survey (NCS) or the General Social Survey (GSS) that ask respondents how safe they feel in their neighborhoods or whether there are areas near their home that they consider unsafe at night.

Because the current study is most interested in how perceptions of police influence respondents' assessments of their community safety, measures such as those from the NCS and GSS are examined. However, the literature employing a wide variety of measures of fear and safety is reviewed to determine how past studies may inform the current research.

Studies on fear of crime and feelings of safety have focused on a variety of predictors, including the impact of media representations of crime (Heath & Gilbert, 1996; P. Williams & Dickinson, 1993) and past criminal victimization (Baba & Austin, 1989; Keane, 1995). Neighborhood disorder or general neighborhood environment has also been a regular focus of research on fear of crime (Ackah, 2000; Akers, La Greca, Sellers, & Cochran, 1987; Baba & Austin, 1989; Burby & Rohe, 1989; Chiricos, Hogan, & Gertz, 1997; Lee & Ulmer, 2000; Will & McGrath, 1995; Wilson-Doenges, 2000).

During the 1970s, the main thrust of this work looked at fear of crime as a response to having directly experienced criminal events (Lewis & Salem, 1986, p. 6). It was assumed that those who lived in high crime areas, or who had past experience with criminal victimization, would express high levels

of fear about crime. Studies have found that perceived risk of victimization is correlated with official measures of crime in an area (Ferraro, 1995, p. 49). In comparison with those who had not been actual victims of crime, Craig (2000, p. 109) found that elderly respondents who had been victims reported being more fearful of further victimization and also reported lower feelings of safety in their community. However, several studies (Boggs, 1971; Conklin, 1971; Hindelang, 1974) actually found that such past experience was not directly related to fear of criminal victimization. Therefore, other explanations of assessments of risk and fear are needed.

One area of exploration has been to examine the impact of the level of disorganization in a neighborhood on feelings of fear and safety. If the community is not able to exert sufficient control over members, feelings of safety are likely to diminish. Lewis and Salem (1986, p. 99) found that fears of crime increased when "local residents are no longer sure that the behavior of their neighbors will conform" to agreed on acceptable standards of behavior. Minor indications of lack of order in an area, such as noisy neighbors, deteriorated buildings, or trash on the streets, can be seen as a sign that more serious violations of norms are possible (Scott, 2001, p. 46). Although studies on community disorganization have been largely conducted in inner city areas, the relationship between feelings of safety and perceptions of neighbors as trustworthy has also been found in rural areas (Mullen & Donnermeyer, 1985).

From these studies, it is clear that the community environment has a substantial impact on a variety of measures of crime- and victimization-related concerns. One important element of the community is whether the area studied is urban or rural. Several studies in the 1970s compared rates of fear of crime in urban and rural areas and found that rural areas had lower levels of fear. However, more recent studies have produced mixed results (see Weisheit, Falcone, & Wells, 1999, pp. 37-38 for review). In addition, a substantial portion of studies in rural areas is limited to groups that are perceived as particularly vulnerable, such as the elderly (Craig, 2000; Meithe & Lee, 1984; Mullen & Donnermeyer, 1985).

The literature on fear of crime and perceptions of safety provides an extensive list of studies on how the public views crime. However, these studies have largely neglected the impact of citizen perceptions of the local police on feelings of community safety. The very few studies that have included measures of attitudes toward police have been based on Black urban samples (Scott, 2001), have focused only on negative images of police and victimization fears (Baumer, 1985), or have evaluated how

changes in police policy affect fear of crime (Skogan, 1994). These studies fail to consider how confidence in police can affect citizens' feelings of safety in their community.

The lack of research on perceptions of police and perceptions of safety in nonurban settings ignores the fact that a substantial portion of the population lives in such communities. Nearly one quarter of the U.S. population resides in rural areas (Bachman, 1992), and 88% of the incorporated communities and townships in the U.S. have fewer than 10,000 residents (Weisheit & Wells, 1996). In addition, the experiences of crime in these types of areas remain substantially different from urban settings. In spite of data indicating a convergence of self-reported juvenile participation in crime, urban juveniles are still more likely than their rural counterparts to be arrested (L. Williams, 2001), and official crime rates remain significantly higher in urban areas (Uniform Crime Reports, 2000). However, due to the concentration of research in inner city and metropolitan areas, we know almost nothing about perceptions of safety or attitudes toward police in rural and small town populations. The current study addresses this lack in the literature by examining the impact of respondents' perceptions of the police on feelings of safety in a small town in the midwestern United States.

DATA AND METHODS

THE COMMUNITY

The community under investigation in this study is distinct in many ways from samples used by most studies of attitudes toward police or perceptions of safety. The primary difference is that this sample is drawn from a county that consists of 14 small towns or hamlets. According to the 2000 U.S. census, the total population of this county is less than 63,000 and is 84.8% White. The largest minority group is African Americans, who make up only 6.9% of the entire county. These data are fairly consistent with the state figures of 86.1% White and only 5.8% Black but significantly different from national data indicating that only 75.1% of the population is White and more than 12% is Black.

In addition, this county has a high rate of renter-occupied housing units (only 47.2% owner-occupied and 52.8% renter-occupied), compared to 69.2% of the households in the state and 66.2% nationally being owner-occupied. Other indicators of economic well-being also indicate that this

county is somewhat lower than state and national figures. The median income of this county is slightly less than $34,000 compared to nearly $36,500 for the state and $37,000 nationally. The poverty rate in the county is also slightly higher than the national rate (14.1% vs. 13.3%), even though the state as a whole only has a poverty rate of 10.9%. However, somewhat contrary to these indicators, this county has a higher percent of college graduates than either the state or nation (16.7%, 12.3%, and 11.5%, respectively).

One reason for the unique demographic nature of the county is the presence of a state university located in the county seat. The university serves just less than 22,000 students, more than 18,000 of whom are classified as undergraduates. The majority of these students, more than 91%, come from within the state, but only 18.9% originated from within the host county (Fact Book, 2001). The presence of the university most likely influences not only the percentages of renters and college graduates but also the age distribution of the area. The median age of the county is 23.9, but only 18.8% of the population is younger than 18, compared to 26.5% younger than 18 in the state (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). A common pattern for university students is that they move into the county during their college years and then move away after graduation. Therefore, the high percentage of the county that is made up of university students influences the average age of the county. In this case, 37.5% of the entire county is within the 15- to 24-year-old categories, the ages that are most likely to include college students.

The data for this study were collected as part of a county citizen survey conducted in October 2001 as part of an accrediting process for the local county police department. A total of 301 telephone interviews were completed with two different randomized samples, one of the general population of county residents and one of university students (see L. Williams & Schwery, 2002 for detailed description of collection methods).

The sample mirrors the larger community in many ways. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the sample by key demographic variables. First of all, the percentage of minorities is low, with 78.1% of the sample being White and the largest minority group, Black, only representing 6.6% of the sample. In addition, the sample is very young, with 51.5% reporting that they fall into the lowest age category of 18 to 29. Therefore, this sample is overwhelmingly young and White. Likely due to the youth of the sample, a significant portion also rent their place of residence (50.5%).

TABLE 1.   Demographic Characteristics of Sample

	Frequency	*Percentage*[a]
Sex		
Male	122	40.5
Female	164	54.5
Race		
White	235	78.1
Black	20	6.6
Hispanic	12	4.0
Asian	5	1.3
Other	13	4.3
Age		
18-29	155	51.5
30-39	38	12.6
40-49	30	10.0
50-59	18	6.0
60-69	20	6.6
70-plus	31	10.3
Rent		
No	134	44.5
Yes	152	50.5

a. The total *N* of the sample is 301. Percentages do not total to 100 due to missing data.

DEPENDENT AND CONTROL VARIABLES

Perceptions of police. Perceptions about the police were measured with items designed to indicate the level of confidence that the respondents have in the police. Respondents were asked how well they thought the local police were able to solve and prevent crimes and how well the police would be able to respond to a major crisis (see Table 2 for description of dependent variables). Overall, respondents reported a high level of confidence in the police. For the three items asking about police ability to solve and prevent crime, from 61% to nearly 77% of respondents reported that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the local police. There was slightly less confidence in police ability to handle a major crisis, with only 23.6% indicating the top two levels of confidence and an additional 36.9% indicating that they believed the local police would do "somewhat well" in handling a major crisis.

These four items were combined in a factor analysis to create a standardized weighted scale of overall confidence in police. This scale has an alpha of .7257 and a range of 5.517. Due to the listed option of "no opinion" on the survey, a number of cases are coded as missing for the individual items of

TABLE 2.   Items and Relevant Statistics for Dependent Variables

Confidence in Police[a]	Factor Loading	% Top Two Responses
Solving crimes (finding and arresting perpetrators)	.761	61.2
Working with the community to prevent crime	.820	76.7
Deterring crime by being a visible presence (patrolling, etc.)	.711	73.1
How well do you think the __PD is prepared to handle a major crisis?	.690	23.6

Scale Alpha = .7257
$N = 195$, Range = 5.517

Perception of Safety[b]		% Indicating They Feel Safe
In general, do you feel safe in your community?		91.0
Is there a specific area in your community where you do not feel safe?		72.4

Combined Safety Measure[c]	Frequency	Percentage
Unsafe	78	25.9
Safe	223	74.1

a. For the first three items, the respondents were given the following instructions: "The following questions concern your satisfaction with the __PD's performance with respect to law enforcement matters. For each category, please indicate whether you feel very satisfied, satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, very dissatisfied, or have no opinion." Coding: 4 = *very satisfied*, 3 = *satisfied*, 2 = *somewhat dissatisfied*, 1 = *very dissatisfied*, and no opinion coded as missing data. For the item addressing a crisis situation, the coding was as follows: 4 = *extremely well*, 3 = *very well*, 2 = *somewhat well*, and 1 = *not well at all*.
b. Safety was coded 0 if the respondent reported feeling unsafe to either of the following questions and 1 otherwise.
c. Mean = .741, $N = 301$.

confidence and therefore for the combined measure. A total of 195 cases have complete data for the measure of confidence in police.

Perceptions of safety. The second key dependent variable of this study is how safe the respondents feel in their community (see Table 2). Two items were designed to measure respondents' perceptions of community safety. One measure was included to represent an overall assessment of safety, and a second was designed to determine whether there are any specific locations where the respondent does not feel safe. These two items are similar to those used by the GSS and Gallup Polls to assess fear and safety perceptions in the general population.

Overall, this sample indicates that they perceive their community to be safe. A total of only 16 respondents reported that they did not feel safe in the community. However, 72 reported that there was a specific area in their

community where they did not feel safe. Only a very small percentage, a total of 10 respondents or 3.3% of the entire sample, indicated very low feelings of safety by responding that they felt there were unsafe areas and that they did not feel safe in the community. For the purposes of these analyses, the measure of perceived safety was coded as 0 if respondents reported feeling unsafe in the community in general or if they indicated that there was a specific place where they did not feel safe and coded as 1 if they did not fit these limitations. A total of 78 respondents, representing 25.9% of the sample, indicated at least some concern for their safety in the community.

Control variables. In addition to standard demographic controls, such as age, race, sex, and rent, these analyses also included a number of control variables that have been found to be predictors of either perceptions of police or safety in past studies. Specifically, past direct victimization has been shown to consistently affect levels of fear or perceptions of safety. Therefore, we included in the analyses a measure asking whether the person had been a victim of crime in the past year. A total of 38 respondents, 12.6% of the sample, reported having been a victim in the past year. Another type of variable that could impact perceptions of safety is the assessment of whether crime is increasing or decreasing. A total of 117 respondents (38.9%) reported that they felt that crime has decreased in the community over the past year. Therefore, although direct victimization is low, the majority of the sample does not feel that crime is decreasing.

In predictions of satisfaction or perceptions of police, one very consistent finding is that having contact with police can substantially alter respondents' views. Therefore, several items were included in the analysis to assess the impact of having contact with police and, for those who did have contact, the quality of the contact. A total of 139 respondents had personal contact with a local police officer within the past year. For those who reported such contact, three items were used to assess whether this contact was positive or negative. Respondents were asked whether the officer seemed willing to help in the situation, if he or she was able to provide guidance or a solution to the situation, and if he or she was polite and courteous. These three items were combined into an additive scale indicating increasing positive experience with police. The mean for this item (2.43 in a scale from 0 to 3) indicated that most of the respondents who had interacted with the police felt that these experiences were positive.

FINDINGS

Past studies have determined that perceptions of police are consistently different between different groups, particularly Black and non-Black populations. The literature on safety also indicates that older respondents and women report higher levels of fear of general victimization or personal crime (Lewis & Salem, 1986; Scott, 2001). To determine whether perceptions of police or safety vary by groups in our sample, both variables were examined for the four major demographic characteristics of sex, race, age, and whether the person rents as a rough proxy for class. Because this sample includes a large percentage of young people, we compare the youngest age category to the rest of the population. ANOVA statistics are provided in Table 3. Two sets of analyses are presented. The first considers mean differences in the full sample, and the second limits the sample to those who had contact with the police. Based on past research, it is expected that these two samples may have different perceptions of police and community safety.

All four demographic variables of age, sex, race, and "rent" vary significantly for the measure of confidence in police but not for feelings of safety in the full sample. The mean level of confidence in police for the youngest group was –.195 and .206 for all other ages. Hence, the youngest group has a mean confidence in police that is .401 standard deviation lower than the rest of the population. Another group that is a substantial portion of this sample is renters. Renting is closely associated with age, but it also could be seen as a proxy for socioeconomic status because those who are unable to afford their own homes must rent. In this sample, those who own their own house have significantly higher confidence in the police. Homeowners' mean confidence is .374 standard deviation higher than those who rent. Another group with higher confidence in the police is females. Males in this sample have a mean confidence of only –.206, whereas female mean confidence is .139. The final demographic variable that is considered in this analysis is the race of the respondent. Although only 15 respondents in the full sample are Black, they do have a significantly lower mean confidence then the rest of the sample (–.679 compared to .056 for non-Black). Collectively, these analyses indicate that there is lower confidence in police among the younger, Black, male population who are renters.

Substantially different findings are produced when examining only those who have had contact with the police in the past year. In these analyses, the only mean difference that retains significance is for the comparison

TABLE 3.   ANOVA Statistics for Demographic Characteristics on Confidence in Police and Feelings of Safety

| | Full Sample | | | | | | | | | |
| | Confidence in Police | | | | | Feelings of Safety | | | | |
Variable	N	Mean	SD	Mean Squared	F	N	Mean	SD	Mean Squared	F
Male	81	−.206	.913	5.571	5.633*	122	.779	.417	.562	2.844
Female	111	.139	1.049			164	.689	.464		
Young	100	−.195	1.020	7.841	8.129**	155	.716	.452	.196	1.015
Other age	95	.206	.941			146	.767	.424		
Own	95	.209	.876	6.769	7.161**	134	.746	.437	.091	.456
Rent	98	−.165	1.057			152	.710	.455		
Non-Black	180	.056	.929	7.489	7.749**	281	.744	.437	.036	.185
Black	15	−.679	1.511			20	.700	.470		

| | With Contact | | | | | | | | | |
| | Confidence in Police | | | | | Feelings of Safety | | | | |
Variable	N	Mean	SD	Mean Squared	F	N	Mean	SD	Mean Squared	F
Male	43	−.324	.991	1.363	1.151	69	.754	.434	.543	2.553
Female	46	−.076	1.171			70	.629	.487		
Young	48	−.332	.917	7.927	1.636	77	.701	.461	.019	.090
Other age	41	−.037	1.210			62	.677	.471		
Own	37	−.085	.792	.548	.466	58	.690	.467	.001	.001
Rent	51	−.245	1.253			80	.687	.466		
Non-Black	78	−.092	.952	6.832	6.094*	125	.696	.462	.036	.164
Black	11	−.934	1.666			14	.643	.497		

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

of Blacks to non-Blacks. A total of 11 Black respondents remain in the analysis from the 15 who had complete data for the measure of police confidence. This indicates that there is a high level of contact with police for the Black respondents in the full sample because only 4 of the respondents were eliminated from the second sample. Black respondents who have had contact with the police have a mean confidence in police of −.934, nearly one full standard deviation below the non-Black mean of −.092. This is also lower than the mean for the Black respondents in the full sample, indicating that having contact with the police actually lowers confidence among the Black population.

Table 4 provides the correlation coefficients for the items used in the following analyses. Two tables are provided to again represent the full sample and the subsample of those who had contact with police in the past year. For

TABLE 4. Correlation Coefficients Between Study Variables

	Full Sample							
	Age	Black	Female	Rent	Victim	Less Crm	Contact	Perc Pol
Black	−.124*							
Female	.213***	−.068						
Rent	−.648***	.250***	−.157**					
Victim	.099	−.176**	.101	−.031				
LessCrm	.074	.002	.015	.004	.144*			
Contact	−.114	.119*	−.132*	.087	−.274***	−.182**		
PercPol	.271***	−.196**	.170*	−.190**	.213**	.356***	−.172*	
PercSafe	.068	−.025	−.100	−.040	.086	.150*	−.092	.164*

	With Contact							
	Age	Black	Female	Rent	Victim	Less Crm	Pos Cont	Perc Pol
Black	−.223**							
Female	.137	−.050						
Rent	−.645***	.275***	−.088					
Victim	.042	−.164	.060	.011				
LessCrm	.046	−.049	.085	.048	.104			
PosCont	.164	−.165	.010	−.163	.232**	.286***		
PercPol	.179	−.256*	.114	−.073	.284**	.400***	.651***	
PercSafe	−.020	−.020	−.035	−.135	.125	.125	.145*	.151

Note: LessCrm = less crime; PercPol = perceptions of police; PosCont = positive contact; PercSafe = perceptions of safety.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

the full sample, perceptions of the police are significantly correlated to all the variables in the analysis. The highest associations with feelings of confidence in the police are between age and feeling that there is less crime in the community than a year ago. The measure of perceptions of safety, in contrast, is only significantly correlated with two items, feeling that there is less crime in the community and perceptions of police.

Two other correlations that are important, given past research, is that being Black and having had contact with the police are both negatively associated with confidence in police. These findings appear consistent with past research indicating that African Americans have the least favorable attitudes toward police. Studies have also found that if the contact is initiated by the police, the perceptions about the police are more negative (Cheurprakobkit, 2000). Because there is not a clear indication in this study of who initiated police contact, looking at the assessment of the quality of

TABLE 5.   OLS Regression Effects on Confidence in Police: Full Sample and Limited Sample of those Reporting Contact with Police

	Model 1: Full Sample			Model 2: With Contact	
	b	Standard β		b	Standard β
Age	.010	.079	Age	.072	.103
Black	-.447	-.123	Black	-.678*	-.194*
Female	.184	.091	Female	.211	.093
Rent	.033	.017	Rent	.272	.118
Victim	.310	.108	Victim	.190	.074
LessCrm	.699***	.348**	LessCrm	.409	.179
Contact	-.101	-.050	PosCont	.566***	.522***
F	6.998***		F	9.548 ***	
Adjusted R^2	.200		Adjusted R^2	.444	
N	169		N	76	

$*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.$

the contact for those who interacted with the police in the past year is important in determining the impact that such contact may have on confidence in police.

Among those who did have contact with police, many similar items to the full sample are significantly correlated. Being Black remains correlated negatively with perceptions of confidence in police, but having had positive contact is very highly and positively correlated with confidence in police. Therefore, the content of the contact, not just contact itself, must be examined. In addition, having had positive experiences during contact with the police is the only item that is significantly correlated with perceptions of safety.

To determine how various demographics and experiences influence perceptions of the local police, two separate OLS regressions were conducted (See Table 5). The first model uses the full sample and includes controls for demographic characteristics, whether the person had been a victim of crime in the past year, their perception of current rates of crime, and whether they had contact with the police in the past year. The second model limits the sample to those who had contact with the police to determine whether the quality of this contact helps to predict perceptions of the police.

In Model 1, only one item, believing that there is less crime now than 1 year ago, significantly predicts perceptions of the police. Those respondents who think that there is less crime have more positive views of the police. However, having had direct contact with police or having been a

victim of crime did not significantly mediate these perceptions. In addition, unlike many past studies, being Black did not significantly affect perceptions. However, the lack of statistical significance may well be due to the small number of African Americans in the sample. The coefficient for the effect of being Black is in the expected direction, with Blacks reporting lower confidence in police. The overall fit of this model is modest, with an adjusted R^2 of .200.

The model fit increases substantially when the sample is limited to only those who had contact with police in the past year. In this case the adjusted R^2 reaches .444. According to this model, being Black and the quality of the contact both predict confidence in police. Being Black decreases confidence by .678 standard deviation, and having had a positive experience with the police increases confidence by .566 standard deviation (unstandardized coefficients). These results indicate that the context of the contact with police, more than simply having contact, has an important influence on how the public views the police.

Logistic regression is used to model the effect of confidence in police on feeling safe in the community, a dichotomous dependent variable. In this case, logistic regression is especially useful because the primary question asks whether confidence in police determines whether a citizen feels safe. The key demographic variables as well as the measures related to police contact were included in these models as controls. Again, two separate models were run, one for the full sample and one for the sample who had contact with the police. The results of these analyses are displayed in Table 6.

For the full sample, perceptions of the police positively and significantly predict feelings of safety, even when controlling for all the other key variables. Specifically, an increase in one standard deviation in confidence in police increases the likelihood that the respondent feels safe by 1.5 times. Therefore, the key hypothesis in this study is supported. The perceptions that the community holds about the police do have a direct impact on feelings of safety. This relationship is found even when controlling for key predictors of feelings of safety such as age and race.

The predicted relationship between confidence in police and feelings of safety is not supported for the analysis that is limited to those who had contact with the police over the past year. In this analysis, none of the variables in the model are significant. However, the key variables of having had a positive experience with the police and having confidence in the police are both in the expected direction of increasing the likelihood of feeling safe. It is

TABLE 6.   Logistic Regressions on Perceptions of Safety: Controlling for Demographic Characteristics

	Model 1: Full Sample Exp. (B)		Model 2: With Contact Exp. (B)
Age	1.091	Age	.965
Black	1.153	Black	1.236
Female	.534	Female	.542
Rent	.870	Rent	.913
Contact	.869	PosCont	1.345
PercPol	1.517**	PercPol	1.251
Model χ^2	10.600*	Model χ^2	5.744
N	188	N	86

$*p < .05. **p < .01.$

expected that with a slightly larger sample size, these relationships may have reached a level of statistical significance.

CONCLUSION

Police departments across the United States have faced many challenges over the past four decades. Changes in our economy, schools and families, as well as waves of intense racial conflict, have complicated the role of the police in our society. Police officers are not just enforcers of law but also serve as educators to children, liaisons between the citizenry and the state, and role models and neighbors in the community. Due to the increasing complexity of policing, understanding how the police are viewed in their communities and how these perceptions impact citizens' views of crime is essential.

By examining the connections between public confidence in police and feelings of safety, this article provides insights that can be useful to informing police policy. First, especially within smaller communities, it appears that the quality of the interaction between officers and citizens, not simply contact, has a significant impact on confidence in police. Although quality of contact is expected to be important in all interactions, it may be that both positive and negative interaction with police in small communities becomes especially salient. In nonurban settings, where informal ties are much closer, such involvement may have a greater impact than in urban communities. Even small changes in interaction characteristics may affect overall perceptions. For example, ensuring that police focus on being "polite" in

every encounter with citizens may improve perceptions of police being helpful, whether or not they are actually successful in solving the problem. Such perceptions are very important because having confidence in the local police also substantially improves the perceptions of how safe the community is, regardless of whether the citizens have ever had contact with the police. Therefore, improving confidence in the local police is one way of ultimately improving the sense of safety within the community.

The overwhelming trend in this study is that the public have a great deal of confidence in the police and do feel safe in their community. There are several possible interpretations of this finding. First, it is possible that the police in this community are doing a very good job and that this confidence is earned. It is also possible that citizens feel safe because of the relatively low crime rates in this community. This community has a crime index of 56% that of the national average (Chamber of Commerce, 2002). Therefore, this area is relatively free of the crime problems that plague metropolitan areas of the country.

A third possibility is related to the timing of this survey. This survey was conducted between October 13, 2001 and October 26, 2001, just following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. In this time period, so soon after the September 11 events, there was a high level of nationalism across the country and a great deal of emphasis on the heroic efforts of firefighters and police in New York City. This sense of the nation pulling together to support each other in times of crisis may have generated higher scores on confidence than would have existed prior to September 11. However, it is interesting to note that the lowest levels of confidence were reported for the question asking how well the local police could handle a major crisis. This item was specifically added to the survey after the September 11 events. In spite of the response categories being skewed to indicate confidence in police (only one category allowed the respondent to have a choice of indicating the police would not handle a crisis well), the respondents were more cautious about indicating that the local police would respond "extremely" or "very" well to a major crisis. This could indicate that the community is confident in their police department's ability to handle everyday problems and crimes but that a crisis on the scale of September 11 may be perceived as beyond the capabilities of this small-town police department.

Although this study finds a high level of confidence in police and perceptions of community safety, it does suggest that police departments have an opportunity to improve relations with specific groups. In particular,

relations between African Americans and police should be a key focus. Although there were very few African Americans in this sample, there were significant differences between Blacks and non-Blacks in mean levels of confidence in police. Furthermore, Blacks who had recent contact with police were also significantly less likely to indicate that they had confidence in police. Future research should determine variations in how police officers respond to African Americans in ways that could be modified to improve the quality of contact between these groups, even in relatively small and nonurban populations.

The other key group that should be studied further is the younger population. Because the university plays a key role in this town and because students are a substantial portion of the population, the fact that young people report lower confidence in police may be an indicator that the police department needs to redouble their efforts to generate a more positive relationship with this population.

The importance of how special populations, such as a university, may impact perceptions of police and safety in a community needs to be further explored. Studying how such groups respond to the police can suggest new forms of community involvement or sensitivity training to police departments in such communities.

This study has contributed to understanding how confidence in police is related to perceptions of safety and suggests that communities need to continue efforts to enhance interactions between police and citizens. Increasing the positive experiences that citizens have with local police will not only improve the image of police in the community but also serves to decrease fear of crime. If community members feel more confident of their safety in the community, this may increase involvement in neighborhood activities, thus serving to improve the level of trust and organization within the area and ultimately decreasing further problems of crime.

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