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Measuring the Performance of the Police: The Perspective of the Public

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INTRODUCTION

Police undertake a broad range of duties. Other than the traditionally-assigned tasks of pursuing, arresting and charging criminals, preventing crime from occurring, and dealing with traffic-related offences and accidents, police are further expected to resolve various conflicts in their communities, reduce or prevent social disorder, and construct and maintain community relations. It is important to understand that the measurement of police performance is a complicated task that has multiple dimensions. There is no single measure that will be even remotely close to measuring the performance of police in all their tasks.

Both direct and indirect measures need to be accounted for when attempting to measure police performance. Direct measures of police performance commonly used include crime rates, number of arrests and fines issued, clearance rates, and call-for-service response time. Some indirect measures of police performance include public opinion surveys, direct observations of social behaviour, situational studies and independent testing.

STUDY AIMS

The aim of this project is to review and critically assess the current survey methods used to measure police performance in common law jurisdictions. Specifically, an emphasis is placed on the questions that are asked on different public opinion and community surveys in Canada and internationally, with the ultimate goal of recommending better approaches to conducting such surveys. Other police performance measures, such as operational metrics, are also touched upon, albeit to a lesser extent.

METHODS

A comprehensive and systematic literature review of published research of Canadian, as well as international literature in the field of police performance measurement through surveys, was conducted. Surveys on all levels of geography – national, provincial, or municipal – were considered for review. Particular attention was paid to analytical research that looked into the actual questions asked on surveys, their meaning and whether they measure what they are supposed to measure. Analysis focused on public views of the police, and a considerable part of the present paper addresses the issue of satisfaction, trust, and confidence in the police.

RESULTS

The measurement of police performance through public opinion polling is of two types: 1) general questions on satisfaction with police; and 2) specific questions on police performance. The general questions on satisfaction with police asked on surveys are supposed to be the simplest and quickest way to measure the overall level of satisfaction of citizens with their police service. These questions provide a quick indicator for the overall support for police among the citizens; carry implications for the support police receive from the public in accomplishing their mandate; and infer whether the decrease in the perceived legitimacy or effectiveness of the police could potentially lead to non-compliance with the authority of the police and increased crime rates.

However, generalized questions on satisfaction with police tend to be too general to tease out specific information on what it is that citizens favour about their police services. Similarly, it is impossible to tease out the reasons explaining why the citizens are unhappy with their police. Other methodological issues associated with generalized questions include unstandardized, inconsistent, and at times poor choice of wording on questions and response categories, which make comparisons across time (i.e., from one year to another) and place (i.e., among jurisdictions) impossible. There seems to be confusion when it comes to the meaning of terms “favourable views of,” “confidence in,” and “trust of” the police; these terms tend to be used interchangeably on surveys, when in fact these terms measure different public sentiments.

When it comes to specific questions on police performance, there are many examples of the types of questions that are being asked of police in contemporary public opinion surveys in Canada and the Western World. Unfortunately, these questions are used in a more or less arbitrary manner without being properly tested for validity and reliability. Ground work on the meaning of the questions, whether they measure what they are supposed to measure (reliability), and how well do they measure it (validity), is largely absent in the literature.

There are three notable studies that attempt to conceptualize and test specific measures of police performance measured through public opinion polling: 1) Maguire and Johnson (2010) in the U.S. who derived questions from theoretical constructs and tested them against Mastrofski’s six dimensions of policing as a service industry; 2) Coleman (2012) in Canada who consulted policing stakeholders in order to derive and test the factors that may constitute police performance; and 3) Jackson et al. (2011) in Europe who derived, tested and implemented European indicators of trust in judicial systems.

In Canada, only one national survey administered by Statistics Canada every five years (General Social Survey, Victimization cycle) asks six questions on police performance. This constitutes the only source of public opinion of police performance metrics that are comparable across time and place in Canada. The majority of Canadian municipal police services commission their own annual or bi-annual public opinion community surveys that include numerous general and specific police performance questions. However, the questions tend to be unstandardized and inconsistent, with varying response category, thereby making them incomparable across time and place, and of little analytic value.

DISCUSSION

The terms “favourable views of,” “satisfaction with,” “confidence,” and “trust” are not synonyms when it comes to measuring the level of public’s satisfaction with their police. They all measure different realms of satisfaction and should not be used interchangeably. “Trust” is the strongest term among all available. It should be used in questions on satisfaction with police whenever possible.

If police services want to improve the measurement of public satisfaction with their services, more research into either testing the existing questions or creating new standardized questions is required. A project similar to the creation of European indicators of trust in justice (Jackson et al, 2011) that involves discussion among experts, proper testing and re-testing of measures of police performance is one example. In the absence of valid, reliable and standardized indicators police services and policy makers will continue to ask different, sometimes vague questions that are not comparable across place and time. Such inconsistent measurement of police performance runs the risk of miscalculating the performance of police services, the policing policies and practices they apply, potentially leading to inefficient and ineffective policing.

SUMMARY

More research into either testing the existing questions or creating new standardized questions is required to improve the measurement of public satisfaction with the services provided by the police in Canada. Once created, it would be beneficial for police services to use these measures so that the measurement of their performance is standardized and thus is comparable across time and place.

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