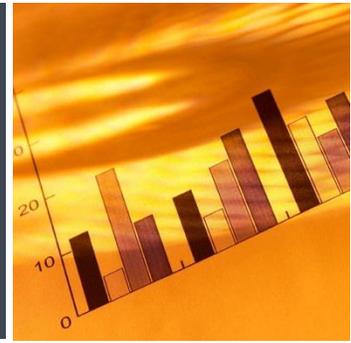


RESEARCH SUMMARY

Measuring Public Attitudes towards the Police – Technical Report



2019-S001

www.publicsafety.gc.ca

BUILDING A SAFE AND RESILIENT CANADA

Background

Few doubt the importance of what the public thinks about the police. From a normative perspective, the public deserve a police force they believe they can trust to fulfil its various functions in an effective, fair and just way. The public deserve a police force that is moral, just and appropriate – that has the legitimate right to exercise power and enforce the law.

From a practical perspective, police rely on active public support and cooperation. Most crimes come to the attention of the police when members of the public report them. If the public do not trust the police, they are unlikely to cooperate with the police by reporting crimes or aiding police investigations. Likewise, if people do not believe that the police have the right to exercise power, they are unlikely to accept decisions and comply with officer orders.

Currently, there is no common approach across Canada to measure public attitudes towards the police. The objective of this study was to develop empirically-informed indicators that can be used by Canadian police services for this purpose. This report is part of a larger project led by Public Safety Canada and Halifax Regional Police, in consultation with the policing community, to establish evidence-based indicators as a common data standard in Canada.

Method

The data used for this project were collected by Corporate Research Associates in a 10-minute online survey exercise led by Halifax Regional Police with support from Calgary Police Service and Ottawa Police Service. The authors of the report analyzed data related to 2,527 quota-sampled Canadians (500 Calgary residents, 501 Ottawa area residents, 500 rural region residents, 526 Halifax Regional Municipality residents, and 500 French-speaking residents). The demographic

questions were presented to respondents at the outset of the survey. These were followed by the attitudinal questions, which were randomized by theme and within each theme. The survey fielded approximately 50 measures of key constructs. Four stages of analyses were undertaken including confirmatory factor analyses (CFA), regression analyses, structural equation modelling (SEM), and “substitutability analysis” (a method developed by the authors to inform their recommendations for a subset of indicators). The recommended indicators are also based on conceptual and practical considerations.

Key Findings

The CFAs suggest that key constructs – procedural justice, engagement, distributive justice, effectiveness, legitimacy, and willingness to cooperate – are empirically distinct. The indicators have good scaling properties regardless of whether the survey was completed in French or in English or by respondents residing in rural versus urban areas across Canada.

The authors found that procedural justice (treating people with respect and dignity, making decisions in fair, transparent and accountable ways, and allowing people voice) and legitimacy (right to power and authority to govern) explained a good deal of variation in people’s willingness to cooperate with the police. Consistent with existing research from the United States (US), United Kingdom (UK) and Australia, this suggests that acting in procedurally just ways helps to generate the legitimacy that sustains and strengthens the ability of legal authorities to elicit public compliance and cooperation. The belief that the police respect the limits of their rightful authority was less important than it seems to be in the US and UK. What was more important was the belief that the police understand and respond to the needs of the local community. It seems, on this basis, that the police may

be perceived as legitimate not only when they show that they wield their authority in fair and just ways, but also when they engage with the local community.

Public attitudes were more positive among older people and among people with a relatively high income. Females perceived the police as more legitimate, on average, than males, and were more willing to cooperate with the police than males. People who identified primarily with being South Asian and Black tended to have more positive attitudes and more negative attitudes towards the police, respectively, than those who identified primarily with being White.

Assessment of victim and perceived safety predictors showed that victims tended to be less positive about the police than non-victims; that people who felt safe in their neighbourhood were more positive than people who did not feel safe; and that people who saw their neighbourhood as disorderly were less positive than people who saw their neighbourhood as orderly. Compared to high-income individual, low-income individuals were more likely to be victims, feel unsafe, and perceive disorder around them.

The authors recommend the following 12 questions for measuring attitudes towards the police in Canada:

1. When you think about [insert police service], to what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:
 - a. The police make decisions based on facts.
 - b. The police treat people with respect.
 - c. The police provide the same quality of service to all citizens.
 - d. The police are dealing with the things that matter to people in this community.
 - e. I feel a moral duty to follow police orders.
 - f. I generally support how the police usually act.
 - g. I would help the police if asked.
2. About how often would you say that the police in your neighbourhood exceed their authority?
3. In general, to what extent do you agree that the [insert police service] [is/are] effective at:
 - a. Resolving crimes where violence is involved?
 - b. Responding quickly to calls for assistance?
4. Taking everything into account, how good a job do you think the police in this area are doing?

5. Taking everything into account, how good a job do you think the police in this country are doing?

The authors also recommended that surveys include items that are not included in the core list of indicators that can be used to help explain variations in Canadians' attitudes towards the police (e.g., contact with police, victimization, demographics).

Implications

For access to the complete survey tool, including item response scales, or to obtain a copy of the full technical report (Jackson and Bradford, 2019), please contact the Research Division at Public Safety Canada ([contact information](#) provided below). A report summarizing the broader project will also be published on the Public Safety Canada website (Giacomantonio et al., forthcoming).

Police services across Canada using this standardized approach would capture public opinion in a way that is comparable between jurisdictions and can track changes in these attitudes over time.

Sources

Jackson, J., & Bradford, B. (2019). *Measuring public attitudes towards the police*. Ottawa, Canada: Public Safety Canada.

Giacomantonio, C., Mugford, R., Maslov, A., & Lawrence, A. (forthcoming). *Developing a common data standard for measuring attitudes toward the police in Canada*. Ottawa, Canada: Public Safety Canada.

For more information on research at the Community Safety and Countering Crime Branch, Public Safety Canada, to get a copy of the full research report, or to be placed on our distribution list, please contact:

Research Division, Public Safety Canada
340 Laurier Avenue West
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0P8
PS.CSCCBResearch-RechercheSSCRC.SP@canada.ca

Research Summaries are produced for the Community Safety and Countering Crime Branch, Public Safety Canada. The summary herein reflects interpretations of the report authors' findings and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Public Safety Canada.
