

Getting Residents' Feedback and Participation

NIJ Research in Progress Seminar, "Defending the Community: Results of a Citizen Survey on Coproduction and Community Policing," Cheryl Maxson, Karen Hennigan, and David Sloane, grant number 96-IJ-CX-0069, available on videotape from NCJRS (NCJ 193404).

Citizen participation has become an important element of community policing, and police agencies continue to look for feedback on the effectiveness of community policing programs and input on

better ways to work with neighborhood residents to control crime.

Researchers have some helpful ideas about how police can get that information from residents.

With the support of the Los Angeles Police Department, Cheryl Maxson of the University of California-Irvine and Karen Hennigan and David Sloane of the University of Southern California are studying citizen participation. They

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are examining some of the obstacles to and opportunities for successful police-community partnerships.

Their findings can help other police departments and their research partners devise better ways to collect and analyze systematic information to improve their working relationships with residents.

Mail Surveys Work Better Than Telephone Surveys

The Los Angeles research team carried out experiments to test the effectiveness of mailed surveys versus random-dialing telephone surveys. They concluded that self-administered mail surveys, with rigorous followup of nonrespondents, were more effective in capturing community residents' attitudes and experiences on sensitive crime and policing issues. They also determined that the length of mail surveys was not a significant factor. That means departments can use mail surveys to gather more detailed feedback than previously thought possible if they use careful survey procedures.

The surveys were mailed to residents in four police divisions of Los Angeles between October 1997 and March 1998. The areas were selected for their demographic diversity and included poor and wealthy neighborhoods; stable and transitional residents; minority, immigrant, and white communities; and some of the highest and lowest property and violent crime rates in Los Angeles.

The overall response rate to the survey was 57 percent, with some variation among areas.

Why Do Residents Help the Police?

Researchers analyzed the surveys to determine why residents participate in crime control activities. Citizen participation was defined as volunteering at the station, attending crime and safety meetings, and talking with police officers on patrol. The researchers concluded that community participation was influenced by residents' recognition of disorder in their neighborhoods, their connections with their neighbors, and their trust in the police.

Disorder and social cohesion. The more disorder there was in a community, the greater the level of citizen participation. However, although individuals in disordered communities were willing to participate, they faced obstacles because of low social cohesion among neighbors and less willingness to intervene for the common good. Despite success in involving residents with the police in highly disordered areas, these issues limited the effectiveness of community-police crime control efforts.

Sociability. Citizens who engaged in friendly interactions with their neighbors were more likely to relate well with the police. Sociability is an important characteristic connecting police and community residents, and it is significantly related to citizen participation. The researchers suggest that police identify sociable residents of a neighborhood and build networks to include them as one means of developing stronger police-citizen relationships that then produce safer neighborhoods.

Trust in and contact with police. Data revealed a positive two-way relationship between trust in the police and participation in local crime control activities: the more trust the respondents had in the

police, the more they participated in such activities, and the more they participated, the more trust they gained. Informal contacts with police at events like community meetings were shown to contribute to positive opinions about the job the police were doing in the community and to help build trust and enhance cooperation among residents in working with police to produce safe neighborhoods.

Age and other respondent characteristics. Citizen participation increased with age from 18 to 65, but then it declined. Residents' level of education and income, ethnicity, and size of household did not impact the rate of participation. Rather, it was neighbors' willingness to act for each other and to trust in one another along with the police department's commitment to interact informally with residents that propelled community participation.

For more information

- Hennigan, Karen, Cheryl Maxson, David Sloane, and Molly Ranney, "Community Views on Crime and Policing: Survey Mode Effects on Bias in Community Surveys," *Justice Quarterly* 19(3) (September 2002): 565–587.
- Maxson, Cheryl, Karen Hennigan, and David Sloane, *Factors That Influence Public Opinion of the Police*, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, 2003 (NCJ 197925).
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