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POLICE ROLES IN THE INNER CITY

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## ABSTRACT

The objective of this research was to test the congruences between police and inner-city residents' perception of police roles. The empirical referents for the study included a random sample of police and residents from a large metropolitan area. The resident sample was comprised of 100 black respondents. The police sample included 100 white male officers. A questionnaire was administered as part of an in-service training program in a municipal police department. Area probability samples were drawn from four census tracts which comprised the predominately black neighborhood; blocks and household members were randomly selected for interviewing. The findings of the study indicate that police and black residents express similar views on the ideal roles that police should play in inner-city neighborhoods. However, police and residents place different emphasis on the real world roles of police officers in the black community. Police tended to view themselves in the roles of protector and enforcer, while residents viewed the police as functioning in the roles of apprehension and prevention. Overall, the police expressed approval of the direct action strategies for improving the safety and security of inner-city areas. Black residents emphasized the community-based action strategies as means of improving neighborhood safety.



POLICE ROLES IN THE INNER CITY:  
PERCEPTIONS OF POLICE AND BLACK COMMUNITY RESIDENTS

Introduction

The role of the police officer in urban America is a complex problem which has received much attention over the past few years. The policeman's perception of his position in society and his skill in executing congruent behavior patterns, coupled with the understanding of the expectations of interacting audiences (e.g., inner-city residents), are central parameters of role-playing. Role in this study is defined in terms of the rights or duties, or normatively approved patterns of behavior for occupants of a given group. Role expectations may vary with police and residents (Rokeach et al., 1971). This paper explored the role of policemen in inner-city neighborhoods. The paper focused on two major areas: (1) perception of the "ideal" and "real" roles of police officers as viewed by police and black community residents, and (2) police and resident evaluation of action strategies for improving inner city neighborhoods safety.

Issues Surrounding Police Roles

Society creates contrasting roles for the police. That is, many aspects of the police's function are mutually contradictory and, thus, place the police officer attempting to carry out his roles in a serious dilemma (Niederhoffer, 1967; National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968; Germann, 1970; Garmire, 1972; Sterling, 1972; National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals, 1973; Goldstein, 1977).

Police responsibilities are broad and encompass more than a concern with criminal behavior. The police are expected to assume direct responsibility for maintaining law and order and the law and in doing so protect the life and property of citizens. Performance of police work is sometimes viewed as synonymous with force. Coffey et al. (1974) assert that police operate under the basic philosophy that it is their obligation to "enforce" the law and to use the necessary force to deal with given situations.

In the maintenance of law and order the police must attain two basic objectives: namely, prevention of crimes, detention and apprehension of criminals (Brandstatter, 1971; Hahn, 1971; Radelet, 1977). Quite often the order maintenance function of the police defines his role in terms of sub-professional who exercise wide discretion in life and death matters (Wilson, 1968; Kuykendall, 1970; Webster, 1973). Maintenance of law and order also involves a partnership between police and community residents; neglect by either group could fragment both groups into isolated enclaves unable to communicate with each other (Earle, 1972). Police in urban areas are a focal point of conflict during periods of social change (Bopp, 1972). Divergent perceptions and attitudes are at the heart of police-community relations. As a result, problems of such relationships are essentially a matter of conflicting role perceptions and role expectations which lead to dissonance between the community and the police. The police, especially those working in urban settings, are facing an uphill fight in their battle to win the public confidence (Hahn, 1971; Monboisse, 1971; Goldstein, 1977).

A major source of strain in urban areas result from the aspirations of minority and lower-income groups as they press for equality in the distribution of social, economic and political resources. Challenges to the "status quo" continually place police (e.g., who are maintainers of the establishment)

and inner-city residents in confrontation. Radelet (1977) asserts that race is not the decisive factor in current inner-city police controversy. Throughout history the urban poor has disliked and distrusted the police and the feeling has been reciprocated. Community residents and police often find themselves misunderstood, mistreated, and maligned. Under such circumstances it is no small wonder that antagonisms develop to such a point that distrust and dissatisfaction on both sides take the place of some logical thinking and conduct (Kuykendall, 1970; Fink and Seally, 1974; Goldstein, 1977; Radelet, 1977).

While police are involved in protection of life and property, crime prevention, apprehension, and enforcement of laws, they are also involved in non-criminal, emergency and social service functions (Webster, 1973). Fleek and Newnam (1969) have estimated that some fifty percent of the cases for public assistance in urban areas involve family crises or other complaints of an interpersonal nature.

Many inner-city residents of high crime areas see a need for the extension of publically supported social services in their neighborhoods. Residents demand, or support demands, for more drug rehabilitation programs, mental health facilities, child guidance centers, and organized recreational programs for their neighborhoods. Residents argue that inroads can be made against the high incidence of crime by the extension and intensification of social and human resources services (Lewis, 1973:184). In short, residents see traditional policing functions coupled with the more community oriented strategies as useful in improving their high crime neighborhoods.

#### Method

The empirical referents for this study included a random sample of police and community residents from a large metropolitan area. The police sample

included 100 white males. The resident sample was comprised of 100 black respondents; and of the 100 black respondents, 51 were males and 49 were females. Thus, data used in the study are from a sample of 200 respondents.

A questionnaire was administered as part of an in-service training program in a large Southwestern municipal police department during the summer of 1977. Data from the resident sample was obtained from respondents who resided in a predominantly black urban neighborhood. Area probability samples were drawn from four census tracts which comprised the neighborhood. Neighborhood selection was based on the need to have differing socioeconomic strata from the black population, while the blocks and households within the blocks were randomly chosen.

Demographic information included age, education, and income. Respondents indicated their age as of last birthday; this was coded into three categories : ranging from 26 years or less to over 36 years of age. Education was obtained by asking respondents the number of years of education they had completed; this was coded into four categories ranging from eight years or less (grade school) to college graduate. Income was determined by asking for the family's yearly income; respondents chose from among four categories ranging from under \$5,000 to \$15,000 and over.

Respondents' perceptions of police roles was analytically divided into two categories: namely, "ideal" and "real" roles of police. Thus, two separate items were included in the instrument to measure ideal and actual police roles. The question which assessed the ideal roles is as follows: There are some roles that are commonly assigned to police in society.....Which one of the following items comes closest to your perception of the role that police officers should play in the black community: (1) protection of life and property, (2) prevention of crime, (3) enforcement of laws, (4) public service, and (5) apprehension of criminals.



The introduction to the question assessing the "real" roles of police was worded similarly: .... Which one of the following items comes closest to describing the actual role that police officers play in the black community: (1) protection of life and property, (2) prevention of crime, (3) enforcement of laws, (4) public service, and (5) apprehension of criminals.

Crime control strategy refers to the alternative plans of action that may be taken in improving neighborhood safety and security. Action strategies in this study were divided into two categories: direct police action and community-based action. Both the direct and community-based action strategies were measured by two five-item Likert-type scales. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they felt the plans of action are effective or ineffective in making their neighborhood safe. The internal inconsistency coefficients for the Direct Action Scale and Community-Based Action Scale were .89 and .87, respectively.

### Findings

Police in American society have taken on a number of diverse roles and functions. These roles may differ across states, cities, and neighborhoods. In this study, data were collected to ascertain the degree of congruence between the roles of police as perceived by police officers and black residents. Perceived roles were grouped into two categories: namely, real and ideal.

#### Ideal Versus Real Police Roles

The data in Table 1 indicate that the police and black residents expressed similar views on the ideal roles that officers should play in inner-city neighborhoods. Specifically, two of every five officers (43%) and black residents (45%) interviewed indicated that police should function primarily in the role of "protector" of life and property. One of every four officers indicated that the ideal role of police should be "enforcer" (e.g., enforce-

ment of laws); twenty percent of the neighborhood respondents surveyed viewed the ideal role of police as enforcer. A small percentage of officers (13%) and residents (8%) viewed the ideal police role as "public servant." Finally, criminal apprehension was seen as an ideal police role by some 5 percent of the respondents (e.g., police and residents) interviewed.

(Table 1 about here)

Overall, police and residents expressed somewhat similar views on the roles that officers should direct their attention in the inner-city. The largest concentration of responses in "ideal" police roles centered around protection of life/property and enforcement of laws. Over two thirds of the police (68%) and residents (63%) surveyed gave the above responses. These data suggest that there is a degree of congruence in the way that police officers and black residents view the ideal role of police in inner-city neighborhoods.

Respondents were also requested to express their feelings on the actual roles that police play in real world situations. There appears to be a slight difference in the way police perceive the ideal and real roles in the performance of their duties. However, the residents exhibited a marked difference in their perceptions of what police should be doing and what functions that police were actually performing. That is, two of every three police officers surveyed indicated that the job of police entailed either protection of life and property or enforcement of laws (over 18 percent of the officers also indicated these two functions as ideal police roles).

Residents, on the other hand, appear to have a somewhat different orientation of the ideal and actual functions or roles of police within neighborhoods. While nearly one half (45%) of the residents felt that police should

act as a protector, only thirteen percent indicated that police were carrying out this function in their neighborhoods. Black residents tended to see the police's real-world function in the area of apprehension: over 47 percent of the residents viewed apprehension of criminals as the primary activity that police were involved in the inner-city neighborhoods. However, only four percent of the residents expressed apprehension as an ideal police function. A small percentage (3%) of the residents viewed the police as public servants; just over 14 percent of the police saw themselves as public servants.

The above data seem to suggest that there are few discrepancies between the way police perceive their ideal and real-world functions in inner-city areas. However, black residents tend to view the ideal police roles as different from the actual performance of police duties. The black respondents expect police to assume the role of protector, but tend to view police functioning in the role of apprehension. No doubt these differences in expectations and emphasis contribute to the alienation and distance between police and the black community residents.

Table 2 presents the perceived role differences of residents according to age, income, and educational background. Examination of these data shows that apprehension is perceived to be a major function of police among the various age groups. Role perceptions among residents varied slightly with age, income, and educational levels. Younger residents were somewhat more likely to view police as enforcer than the older residents. Lower-income residents and residents with an education less than high school were more likely to view the police operating in their neighborhood as "protector" and "preventer" when compared with more affluent and better educated residents.

(Table 2 about here)

Perception of actual police roles also varied somewhat with the age and income levels of police officers. These data are presented in Table 3. Specifically, a larger proportion of younger police officers (e.g., less than 26 years old) viewed their function more as apprehension when compared with their older counterparts. When comparing the police officers who saw themselves as protector, officers who had incomes less than \$15,000 (61%) were more likely to view themselves in this role than the officers who had incomes of \$15,000 or above (39%).

(Table 3 about here)

#### Direct Police Action Versus Community Based Action

Respondents were also requested to give their opinions on the various strategies that have been employed in improving the safety and security of inner-city residents. Two major strategies were identified in this study: namely, direct police action and community-based action. Data on these two areas are presented in Table 4.

(Table 4 about here)

Data in Table 4 indicate that police vis-a-vis community residents were more likely to view direct action strategies as somewhat more effective. Specifically, a larger proportion of police viewed direct action such as strict law enforcement, longer sentences, more police, and better training of police as effective means of improving safety than the residents surveyed. Although the residents were somewhat less enthusiastic than police about the utility of the above strategies, one of every two residents interviewed agreed that

direct action measures were effective. Police were not receptive to the idea of mandatory handgun registration as a step to improve neighborhood safety; two of every ten police officers surveyed indicated that mandatory handgun registration was an effective measure in making inner-city neighborhoods safe. On the other hand, mandatory handgun registration was viewed as an effective strategy by over half the black respondents surveyed. Overall, the above data seem to indicate that black community residents share a more favorable attitude toward mandatory handgun registration than the police officers.

Over half the police officers and two thirds of the residents surveyed felt that activities such as education, counselling and employment programs, and police-community relations were effective community-based strategies. Recruitment of blacks into the police force was another community-based strategy in which residents accepted to a larger degree than the police. Black representation on the police force was viewed as an effective community-based action strategy by sixty-six percent of the residents, and forty-four percent of the police. The data point to the idea that black residents view representation of other blacks on the police force as a meaningful step in improving the safety of their neighborhoods.

A sizeable proportion of residents emphasized inadequate recreational facilities as a factor in the neighborhood problem (e.g., especially youth crime). Three of every four residents indicated that improving the recreational facilities in their area was an effective community based strategy; one third of the police held a similar belief about the importance of recreational facilities on neighborhood safety.

Police and residents expressed mixed feelings on the effectiveness of direct action and community-based strategies. The data seem to suggest that police tend to accept the direct methods, while residents accept the more

community-oriented (indirect) action strategies as effective strategies for improving inner-city safety.

### Conclusions

The data analyzed herein corroborate the widely held notion that perception of police roles vary across population groups (e.g., police officers : versus black residents). They reveal, however, that black residents and police officers express similar views on the ideal role that police should play in inner-city neighborhoods. These findings also lend support to the notion of convergence in ideal role function of police for the two groups. Thus, it seems that inner-city residents and police officers share common views on the ideal roles and functions of police in inner-city neighborhoods.

On the other hand, there is compelling evidence which shows that police and residents place different emphases on the actual roles (e.g., real-world functions) that police play in inner-city neighborhoods. Police officers tended to view themselves operating in inner-city neighborhoods as "protector" and "enforcer"; residents viewed the actual police roles as apprehension of criminals and prevention of crime.

Perceptions of actual (real) police roles also varied within the police and resident groups surveyed. That is, lower-income and the less educated residents were more likely to view police as "protector" and "preventer" than their more affluent and better educated counterparts. Younger black residents were somewhat more likely to see police as enforcer than their older counterparts. When analyzing the way police officers saw themselves operating in inner-city areas, a larger proportion of younger officers than older police officers viewed their role in inner-city neighborhoods as apprehension.

Police and residents differed in their support for the various strategies to improve the safety of inner-city neighborhoods. Specifically, a larger proportion of police viewed the direct - action strategies (e.g., strict law enforcement, longer sentences, more police and better trained police) as effective measures in improving neighborhood safety. Residents were somewhat less enthusiastic about the above strategies than police. However, nearly one of every two residents interviewed indicated that they believed direct police action strategies to be effective.

Residents and police also differed in their views on mandatory handgun registration. For the most part, police officers were not receptive to the idea of mandatory handgun registration as a strategy to improve inner-city neighborhoods. Black residents, on the other hand, supported mandatory handgun registrations. The subject of handgun registration is complex and make evaluation of a single thesis problematical. However, this contrast on views between police and residents may center around cultural and ideological differences. To some individuals, mandatory handgun registration may be viewed as an infringement upon one's right to "bear arms" or the right to protect one's home and property. Conversely, handgun registration may also be viewed as a step to make it more difficult for individuals to obtain guns (e.g., "Saturday night specials") which may be used on family members, friends and neighbors.

Black residents seem to place a great deal of confidence in the community-based action strategies as effective measures for improving inner-city safety; police officers also expressed some support for the indirect strategies. Over half the police officers and two-thirds of the black residents surveyed indicated that activities such as education, counseling and employment programs, and other police-community relations efforts are effective measures of fighting crimes in inner-city areas.

In sum, the data in this study lend some support to the idea that police and residents view the police's performance from different perspectives. There seems to be a consensus on the ideal roles that police should play in society. However, the issue of role is clouded when police actually perform in real-world situations. In this case, differences in perceived roles by residents and police may create misunderstanding, hostility, and conflict within inner-city neighborhoods. Special efforts to expose these differences (e.g., Police-community relations seminars) may prove useful in providing a better understanding of this complex problem.





Table 1. Resident and Police Perceptions of Police Roles (Percents)

Role Type	% Suggesting Ideal Role		% Suggesting Real Role	
	Police	Resident	Police	Resident
Protection of Life and Property	43	45	33	13
Prevention of Crime	14	18	11	18
Enforcement of Laws	25	20	30	16
Public Service	13	8	14	3
Apprehension of Criminals	4	5	12	47
Don't Know	1	4	0	3
Percentage Totals	100	100	100	100
Total (N)	(100)	(100)	(100)	(100)

Table 2. Socioeconomic Characteristics of Residents and Perceptions of  
Real Police Roles (Percents)

Socioeconomic Characteristics	Perceived Roles (Percents)					
	Total	Protection	Prevention	Enforcement	Public Service	Apprehension
Age						
Less than 26 years	29	23	28	44	0	28
26 - 35 years	36	31	28	31	67	40
36 years or older	35	46	44	25	33	32
(N)	(97)	(13)	(18)	(16)	(3)	(47)
Income						
Less than \$ 5,000	32	46	35	33	0	30
5,000 - 9,999	28	18	35	40	100	20
10,000 - 14,999	24	27	18	20	0	27
15,000 or more	16	9	12	7	0	23
(N)	(89)	(11)	(17)	(15)	(2)	(44)
Education						
Grade School	26	46	35	0	67	21
High School	31	23	41	47	0	28
Some College	29	8	24	54	0	32
College Graduate	14	23	0	0	33	19
(N)	(96)	(13)	(17)	(16)	(3)	(47)

Table 3. Socioeconomic Charactersitics of Police and Perceptions  
of Real Police Roles (Percents)

Socioeconomic Characteristics	Perceived Roles (Percents)					
	Total	Protection	Prevention	Enforcement	Public Service	Apprehension
Age						
Less than 26 years	32	21	36	37	29	50
26 - 35 years	52	61	36	50	64	33
35 years or older	16	18	28	13	7	17
(N)	(100)	(33)	(11)	(30)	(14)	(12)
Income						
Less than \$10,000	3	3	0	3	7	0
10,000 - 14,999	41	58	27	30	39	42
15,000 or more	56	39	73	67	54	58
(N)	(99)	(33)	(11)	(30)	(13)	(12)
Education						
High School	27	36	27	23	14	25
Some College	61	49	64	67	64	75
College Graduate	12	15	9	10	22	0
(N)	(100)	(33)	(11)	(30)	(14)	(12)

Table 4. Identification of Effective Strategies\* For  
Improving The Safety and Security In The Black Community  
by Police and Black Resident Samples, in Percent

Crime Control Strategy Items	% Suggesting Effective Strategy	
	Police Sample	Resident Sample
<u>Direct Police Action</u>		
Strict Enforcement of Laws that are in the books	67%	54%
Larger sentences for habitual criminals	92%	59%
More police to patrol high crime neighborhoods	82%	57%
Better trained and equipped police force	83%	65%
Mandatory registration of all handguns	20%	51%
<u>Community Based Action</u>		
Improve police community relations	55%	69%
Education and/or counseling programs for youths/adults	62%	70%
Reduce black unemployment and under- employment	52%	67%
Increase black representation on police force	44%	66%
Improved recreational facilities in the black community	34%	76%

\*Responses to crime control strategies included the categories "very effective", "somewhat effective," and "not effective." The first two categories, very effective and somewhat effective, were collapsed to form a single effective classification; percentages in the above table are based on this collapsed category.

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