



Attitudes towards Police in Canada: A Study of Perceptions of University Students in a Western Canadian City

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Abstract

Criminal justice institutions and the policies that guide them can be strongly influenced by public attitudes. This paper examines perceptions of the police held by a sample of university students in a Western Canadian city. Results revealed that respondents held moderately positive attitudes toward the police. Multiple ordinary least-squares regression analysis revealed that socio-economic status, location of residence, personal safety, criminal victimization, contact with the police, and police harassment or mistreatment experience were found to be significantly associated with respondents' evaluation of the police.

Keywords: Satisfaction with police; police-community relations; Canada.

Introduction

Criminal justice institutions and the policies that guide them can be strongly influenced by public attitudes (Halsey & White, 2008; Roberts & Hastings, 2007). Due primarily to the reactive nature of police work, the police as a public institution rely more heavily on the support and co-operation of the public to achieve success in the performance of their duties than other criminal justice agencies. Police agencies across Canada have adopted community policing as the basis of law enforcement policy since the early 1990s. Such a policy promotes the building of collaborative relationships between the police and community residents to enhance community safety, crime prevention, and quality of life at the neighbourhood level (Chacko & Nancoo, 1993; Griffiths, Parent, & Whitelaw, 2001; Leighton, 1991; Murphy, 1993).

A vital component of the relationship between a police service and the community, as noted by Tyler (2004), is police legitimacy. This refers to the belief that the police are entitled to call upon the public to comply with the law and help combat crime and that the public have an obligation to engage in co-operative behaviour. There is ample empirical evidence showing that individuals who trust the police are more willing to provide crime-related information, to co-operate with police during an involuntary contact, to call when they require assistance, and to serve as a witness in court proceedings (Brown & Benedict 2002; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997; Skogan & Frydl, 2004;

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Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Tyler 2004). Public confidence in critical institutions such as the police can also help promote social cohesion (Roberts & Hough, 2005). As well, studies have shown that individuals who perceive unfairness or bias in the criminal justice system are more likely to justify their engagement in unlawful activities (Sherman, 1993; Tyler 2005).

Review of the Literature

A review of the literature demonstrates that the Canadian public held relatively favourable views of the police (Brillon, Louis-Guerin, & Lamarche, 1984; Griffiths & Winfree, 1982; Hylton, Matonovich, Varro, Thakker, & Broad, 1979; Klein, Webb, & DiSanto, 1978; Koenig, 1980; Moore, 1985; O'Connor, 2008; Tufts, 2000; Yarmey & Rashid, 1983). This is not surprising as Roberts (2004) points out that the police have a mandate (i.e., protection of society) that is generally consistent with the perspective of the public. As well, another mundane explanation of the high public approval rating of the police is associated with their high visibility in the community. Specifically, police officers are usually seen by the general public performing “some useful function” such as directing traffic at the scene of an accident.

Previous research examining equality rights and racial discrimination issues has also explored minorities' attitudes toward the police (Cao, 2011; Chow, 1996; Jayewardene & Talbot, 1990; Spraggett & Chow, 1992). A few studies have investigated the relations between the police and minority communities (Chan & Hagan, 1982; Chow, 2002, 1994, 1991; Chu & Song, 2008; Wortley, 1996). These limited studies revealed the major concerns among members of minority groups, including the under-representation of visible minorities in police agencies, unfair treatment of minorities by the police, as well as injustice and racial bias in law enforcement practices.

It has been well-documented that younger people tend to evaluate the police more negatively than older groups of people (Gannon, 2005; Friedman, Lurigio, Greenleaf, & Albertson, 2004; Hurst & Frank, 2000; Murphy & Worrall, 1999; Taylor, Turner, Esbensen, & Winfree, 2001; Nofziger & Williams, 2005; Schafer, Huebner, & Bynum, 2003; Weitzer & Tuch, 2005; Zalaf & Wood, 2005). Young people's perceptions of the police have been found to be shaped by both contextual factors and individual characteristics. With respect to socio-demographic variables, race or ethnicity has received considerable research attention (Brunson & Miller, 2006; Hurst, Frank, & Browning, 2000; Hurst & Frank, 2000; Janeksela, 1999; Jones-Brown, 2000; Leiber, Nalla, & Farnsworth, 1998; Solis, Portillos, & Brunson, 2009; Sullivan, Dunham, & Alpert, 1987; Taylor, Turner, Esbensen, & Winfree, 2001). Although most prior research has revealed that minorities hold less favourable views of the police, several studies have reported more positive attitudes of minorities than white youth (Brown & Benedict, 2002; Sims, Hooper, & Peterson, 2002). Research findings on the effect of gender on young peoples' attitudes are not consistent (Brown & Benedict, 2002; Cao, Frank, & Cullen, 1996; Hurst & Frank, 2000; Taylor, Turner, Esbensen, & Winfree, 2001). Studies reporting positive attitudes toward the police of young females were considered to be connected to favourable discretionary decision-making by police with regard to young women, resulting in lenient outcomes and non-confrontational encounters with the police by females (Cao, Frank, & Cullen, 1996; Taylor, Turner, Esbensen, & Winfree, 2001). Furthermore, earlier studies have underscored the significance of fear of crime (Sims, Hooper, & Peterson, 2002; William, 1999) and neighbourhood characteristics (Reisig &

Parks, 2000; Taylor, Turner, Esbensen, & Winfree, 2001), indicating that more negative attitudes toward the police were held by individuals who had exhibited higher levels of fear of crime and who had experienced criminal victimizations. As well, the quality of the contacts young people have had with the police (i.e., actual or vicarious contact such as learning about other people's positive or negative encounter with the police) have been found to be related to less favourable attitudes (Brunson & Miller, 2006; Hurst, 2007; Hurst & Frank, 2000; Janeksela, 1999; Jones-Brown, 2000).

There exists a gap in the Canadian literature on police-youth relations. Very scant research attention has been devoted to exploring young people's attitudes toward the police. Wright and Peglar (1981) explored senior high school students' attitudes toward the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in a municipality in British Columbia using an experimental design and demonstrated that a systematic effort to create more positive attitudes toward the police was somewhat effective, particularly when the program included in-depth follow-up work and experiential activities. Using a sample of 1,667 students attending both private and public schools in Metro Toronto and Kitchener-Waterloo in Ontario, Amoroso and Ware (1983) revealed that the respondents were fairly positive in their attitudes toward the police. A more recent survey of 262 adolescents' perceptions of the police conducted by Chow (2011) in Saskatchewan concluded that the adolescent respondents held only marginally positive attitudes toward the local police. Additionally, the 1999 and 2004 General Social Surveys undertaken by Statistics Canada consistently demonstrated that younger Canadians were less likely to assess their local police in positive terms (Gannon, 2005; O'Connor, 2008; Statistics Canada, 2005a; Tufts, 2000).

It is of pivotal importance to examine the relation between the police and young people in light of the frequent and often negative contacts that young people have with the police. Young people's active lifestyles tend to attract considerable proactive police intervention (Crawford, 2009; Hopkins, 1994; Loader, 1996). They have a greater propensity to engage in behaviour which challenges and confronts the established structures and agencies of authority (Hartless, Ditton, Nair, & Philips, 1995; Radford, Hamilton, & Jarman, 2005). In fact, youth and young adults commit a disproportionate amount of crime in Canada. In 2009, for instance, age-specific rates for individuals accused of crime were highest among those aged 15-22, with the peak age at 17 (Dauvergne & Turner, 2010).

Moreover, the high victimization rate among young people suggests that they are more likely to come into contact with the police. According to Statistics Canada (2005a), 20% of violent crime victims were children and youth under 18 years of age in 2003. These violent crimes include sexual and physical assaults as well as other incidents involving violence or the threat of violence (e.g., extortion, robbery, and uttering threats). Although young people constituted nearly 21% of the Canadian population, 60% of sexual assaults reported to police involved a child or youth under 18 years of age. As well, youth were victims of 21% of physical assaults and 17% of other crimes involving violence or the threat of violence reported to police. The 2004 General Social Survey (GSS) further revealed that the risk of self-reported violent victimization was highest among young people aged 15 to 24 (Statistics Canada, 2005b). Their rate of violent victimization was almost twenty times higher than the rate for seniors (Statistics Canada 2007). Individuals aged 15 to 34 were also significantly more likely to be victims of multiple incidents of violent victimization than people in other age groups (Perreault, Sauve, & Burns, 2009).

Given that young people constitute a sizable proportion of the population subject to police contacts and arrests, and that little research has been conducted to explore the attitudes young people hold toward the police in Canada, this paper fills a gap in the research literature on police-public relations. The paper examines attitudes toward the police and satisfaction with the overall performance of the police among university students in Regina, a medium-sized city² which reported the highest crime severity index³ among the 33 Canadian metropolitan areas in 2008 and 2009 (Dauvergne & Turner, 2010; Statistics Canada, 2009). The influence of respondents' attitudes toward judicial punishment, property crime victimization experience, violent crime victimization experience, contact with the police, personal safety, police mistreatment or harassment experience, and socio-demographic variables on satisfaction with police performance will be investigated.

Method

Sample and procedures

The data used for present inquiry were collected as part of a larger study that was undertaken to explore academic honesty, campus life, and perceptions of the criminal justice system among university students in Regina during the academic year 2007-08 (Chow, Hage, & Jurdi, 2010). The University of Regina had a total enrolment of 8,726 full-time and 3,421 part-time students at the time of the study (University of Regina, 2008). Using a convenience sample, a total of 321 undergraduate students at the University of Regina took part in a self-administered questionnaire survey. With the cooperation of the faculty members in the Department of Sociology and Social Studies, questionnaires were distributed to various Sociology and Social Studies classes. Students completed the survey during class time. All prospective participants were informed, both in writing and verbally, that participation was voluntary and that return of their completed survey would serve as consent to participate. The survey took about 20 minutes to complete and no incentive was provided. Although the participants were recruited from Sociology and Social Studies classes, students were registered with various faculties and schools, including Administration, Arts, Education, Engineering, Fine Arts, Human Justice, Journalism, Kinesiology, Science, and Social Work. Approval for the survey was obtained from the Research Ethics Boards of the University of Regina.

Data analysis

Descriptive and inferential analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. The internal consistency of all scales used was assessed by Cronbach's alpha reliability test. A multiple ordinary least-squares (OLS) regression model was constructed to identify the major determinants of respondents' satisfaction with the police.

² According to Statistics Canada (2011), the Regina Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) had a population of 215,138 on July 1, 2010, up 4,754 from the previous year. Net international migration was responsible for the largest proportion of the growth in this CMA.

³ The Police-reported Crime Severity Index (PRCSI) was officially introduced in 2009. Unlike the traditional police-reported crime rate which measures changes in the volume of crime, it tracks changes in the severity of police-reported crime. More specifically, each type of offence is assigned a weight derived from actual sentences handed down by courts in all provinces and territories. More serious crimes are assigned higher weights, less serious offences lower weights. As a result, when all crimes are included, more serious offences have a greater impact on changes in the index (Statistics Canada, 2009).

Sample characteristics

The sample comprised 101 (31.9%) male and 216 (68.1%) female students with a mean age of 21.16 years ($SD = 4.45$). Caucasian students ($n = 270$, 85.4%) and Canadian citizens ($n = 307$, 96.8%) constituted an overwhelming majority of the sample. A sizable proportion of the respondents were registered with the Faculties of Arts ($n = 177$, 55.3%), Social Work ($n = 42$, 13.1%), Administration ($n = 36$, 11.3%), Education ($n = 21$, 6.6%), and Science ($n = 19$, 5.9%). With respect to marital status, most were single or never married ($n = 267$, 84.2%). Slightly more than half of the sample ($n = 181$, 52.8%) reported an annual family income of over \$ 60,000. As regards location of residence, about one-tenth ($n = 37$, 11.7%) lived in university residences.

Measures of key variables

Perceptions of the police An 8-item scale⁴ was employed to measure respondents' assessment of specific areas of police work. Respondents were asked to express their degree of agreement or disagreement with the following eight statements on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strong disagree) to 5 (strongly agree): (a) The police will only use lawful means to combat crime; (b) The police do a good job of stopping crime; (c) The police spend most of their time going after people who commit petty crimes and ignore most of the bad things going on; (d) The police are more likely to use physical force against minority people than Whites; (e) The police are more likely to use physical force against aboriginal people than Whites; (f) Police always respond promptly when called; (g) Officers are usually fair; and (h) Officers are usually courteous.

Overall satisfaction with the police. A single item was used to measure respondents' overall satisfaction with the police. Respondents were asked to express their degree of satisfaction with the overall performance of the local police using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied).

Major Findings

Perceptions of the police

The descriptive statistics for the eight items used to measure respondents' perceptions of the police are presented in Table 1. The mean values for these eight items ranged between 2.61 and 3.22, reflecting respondents' moderately positive attitudes toward the police. Regarding police integrity and demeanour, 45.4% ($n = 145$) of the respondents indicated that the police would only use lawful means to combat crime. Less than half of the sample stated that officers were usually fair ($n = 139$, 43.7%) or courteous ($n = 155$, 48.7%).

Concerning the extent to which respondents considered the police were doing a good job in performing various duties, slightly more than two-fifths of the respondents ($n = 140$, 43.9%) indicated that the police were doing a good job of stopping crime. A relatively small proportion of the respondents ($n = 71$, 22.2%) considered the police to be doing a good job at responding promptly when called. About one in three respondents ($n = 101$, 31.6%) thought that the police spent most of their time going after people who had committed petty crimes and ignored most of the bad things going on.

⁴ It should be noted that the coding for items c, d, and e had been reversed prior to the calculation of the mean values so that a high score would reflect a more positive perception of the police. This 8-item scale was found to be internally consistent, with a Cronbach's reliability coefficient of .79.

With respect to the two items that were used to measure police treatment of minorities, approximately half of the respondents stated that the police would be more likely to use physical force against minority people than Whites ($n = 157$, 49.4%) and slightly more than half of the respondents indicated that the police would be more likely to use physical force against aboriginal people than Whites ($n = 168$, 52.6%).

Table 1: Perceptions of the local police

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly agree	M	SD
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)		
a. The police will only use lawful means to combat crime.	16 (5.0)	62 (19.4)	96 (30.1)	127 (39.8)	18 (5.6)	3.22	.987
b. The police do a good job of stopping crime.	15 (4.7)	63 (19.7)	101 (31.7)	133 (41.7)	7 (2.2)	3.17	.930
c. The police spend most of their time going after people who commit petty crimes and ignore most of the bad things going on.	14 (4.4)	97 (30.4)	107 (33.5)	77 (24.1)	24 (7.5)	3.00	1.013
d. The police are more likely to use physical force against minority people than Whites.	29 (9.1)	55 (17.3)	77 (24.2)	111 (34.9)	46 (14.5)	2.72	1.179
e. The police are more likely to use physical force against aboriginal people than Whites.	27 (8.5)	53 (16.6)	71 (22.3)	114 (35.7)	54 (16.9)	2.64	1.189
f. Police always respond promptly when called.	43 (13.5)	113 (35.4)	92 (28.8)	69 (21.6)	2 (.6)	2.61	.991
g. Officers are usually fair.	14 (4.4)	71 (22.3)	94 (29.6)	131 (41.2)	8 (2.5)	3.15	.944
h. Officers are usually courteous.	23 (7.2)	61 (19.2)	79 (24.8)	141 (44.3)	14 (4.4)	3.19	1.032

Satisfaction with the overall performance of the police

Respondents expressed their degree of satisfaction with the overall performance of the Regina Police Service on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied). The results show that slightly more than two-fifths were either satisfied ($n =$

118, 37.3%) or very satisfied ($n = 10$, 3.2%) with the overall performance of the local police. About one-tenth ($n = 35$, 11.1%) of the respondents expressed their dissatisfaction. Nearly half of the respondents ($n = 153$, 48.4%) made use of the “uncertain” category.

Key determinants of satisfaction with the police

Multiple ordinary least-squares regression was used to explore the major factors contributing to students’ satisfaction with the overall performance of the police. A total of eleven predictor variables were included in the model.

Criminal victimization was based on whether or not respondents had been victim of a property crime (i.e., theft of personal or household property, motor vehicle/parts theft, vandalism, break and enter) or violent crime (i.e., assault, sexual assault, and robbery) in the past 12 months prior to the survey. Nearly one-third of the respondents ($n = 102$, 32.3%) reported having been a victim of property crime and relatively few respondents ($n = 25$, 7.9%) indicated having been a victim of violent crime. An additive score was created based on respondents’ property crime (1 = yes; 0 = no) and violent crime (1 = yes; 0 = no) victimization experiences in the past twelve months.

Contact with the police was based on respondents’ degree of satisfaction with the experience of their most recent official contacts with the police in either emergency or non-emergency situations measured on a 5-point scale (1 = very dissatisfied to 5 = very satisfied). About one-quarter of the respondents had no prior contacts with the police. Among those who reported such an experience, while less than half of the respondents expressed their satisfaction with their experiences ($n = 117$, 48.4%), slightly more than one-third registered their dissatisfaction ($n = 81$, 33.5%). It should also be noted that nearly one-fifth ($n = 44$, 18.2%) made use of the “uncertain” category. This variable was subsequently recoded as a dichotomous variable (1 = satisfied or very satisfied; 0 = dissatisfied or very dissatisfied).

Police harassment or mistreatment was a dichotomous variable (1 = yes; 0 = no) based on whether or not respondents had been mistreated or harassed by the police. About one-tenth of the respondents ($n = 37$, 11.7%) claimed that they had experienced police mistreatment or harassment.

Personal safety was based on respondents’ degree of agreement with the following two statements concerning personal safety using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strong disagree) to 5 (strongly agree): (1) I feel safe walking alone in my neighbourhood after dark ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.35$) and (2) I feel safe being home alone in the evening or at night ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.13$). Results indicate that slightly more than half of the sample ($n = 173$, 54.2%) felt safe walking alone in their neighbourhoods after dark and about three-quarters ($n = 243$, 76.2%) felt safe being home alone in the evening or at night. A composite score adding the values of these two variables ($M = 7.08$, $SD = 2.18$) was computed. This 2-item scale was found to be internally consistent, with a Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient of .70.

Attitude toward judicial punishment was a single item measure ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.08$) based on respondents’ degree of agreement with the statement “Punishment in Canada is lenient” measured on a 5-point scale (1 = strong disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

With respect to *socio-demographic variables*, sex (1 = male, 0 = female), ethnic background (1 = Caucasian; 0 = other), location of residence (1 = on campus; 0 = other), and religion (1 = religion; 0 = no religion) were dichotomous variables. Age was a continuous variable measured in years ($M = 21.16$, $SD = 4.45$). Socio-economic status

(SES) was a continuous variable ($M = 3.71$, $SD = .789$) measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (low) to 5 (high).

The multiple OLS regression model, as shown in Table 2, was found to be significant ($F(11, 309) = 9.681$, $p < .001$), accounting for 23.0% of the variation. Socio-economic status, ($\beta = .110$, $p < .05$), location of residence ($\beta = -.124$, $p < .05$), personal safety ($\beta = .137$, $p < .05$), criminal victimization ($\beta = -.124$, $p < .05$), contact with the police ($\beta = .355$, $p < .001$), and police harassment or mistreatment experience ($\beta = -.145$, $p < .001$) were found to be associated with respondents' evaluation of the police. More specifically, students who indicated a higher socio-economic status, lived off campus, expressed satisfaction with personal safety, reported no criminal victimization experience, expressed satisfaction with their contacts with the police, and indicated no police harassment or mistreatment experience were found to rate police performance more favourably.

Table 2 Unstandardized and standardized ordinary least-squares regression coefficients for Effects of socio-demographic and background variables on satisfaction with the police

	b	β
01. Sex	-.04	-.026
02. Age	-.011	-.067
03. Socio-economic status	.104	.110 *
04. Ethnic background	-.129	-.064
05. Location of residence	-.286	-.124 *
06. Religion	-.050	.028
07. Personal safety	-.047	.137*
08. Criminal victimization	-.186	-.142 **
09. Contact with the police	.542	.355***
10. Police harassment or mistreatment	-.335	-.145 **
11. Attitude toward judicial punishment	-.041	.060
(Constant)	2.736	
F	9.681 ***	
R ²	.256	
Adjusted R ²	.230	
N	321	

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

Discussion

Drawing on data collected from a survey of undergraduate students in a western Canadian city, this paper explores the perceptions among young adults of the police and factors that contributed to the variation in their satisfaction with the police. The study incorporated a range of explanatory variables to explain students' perceptions, including attitudes toward judicial punishment, criminal victimization experience, personal safety, contact with the police, and police harassment or mistreatment experience. The OLS regression analysis confirmed the importance other studies have attributed to a range of socio-demographic and situational characteristics in shaping individuals' attitudes toward the police in Regina.

First of all, this analysis reveals that students from a higher SES background were more satisfied with the overall performance of the police. This finding corroborates earlier studies showing that persons in the lower socio-economic tiers tend to hold more negative attitudes toward the police (Huang & Vaughn, 1996; Zevitz & Rettammel, 1990). The more favourable attitudes held by individuals from a higher SES background may be associated with their greater perceived need for police protection.

Location of residence emerges as another significant predictor. Students who lived off campus tended to hold more favourable assessment of police activity. This finding is consistent with previous research which has underscored the importance of neighbourhood-level differences that accounted for variation in perceptions of the police (Kusow, Wilson, & Martin, 1997; Son, Tsang, & Rome, 1997; Reisig & Giacomazzi, 1998; Sampson & Bartusch, 1998; Weitzer, 1999; Reisig & Parks, 2000; Jesilow & Meyer, 2001).

Research has revealed that public attitudes toward the police are connected to how safe individuals feel in their community (Hawdon, Ryan, & Griffin, 2003; Scheider, Rowell, & Bezdikian, 2003; Sims, Hooper, & Peterson, 2002; Williams & Nofziger, 2003). This analysis lends credence to the vitality of perceived personal safety on positive evaluation of police performance. This is not surprising as earlier studies have demonstrated that individuals who perceived higher levels of safety or lower levels of fear of crime viewed the police more positively (Spratt & Doob, 2009, 1997). Notably, there is recent evidence showing that individuals' fear of crime does not drive public confidence in policing (Jackson, Bradford, Hohl, & Farrall, 2009). It is believed that both fear and confidence are rooted in public assessment of non-criminal aspects of their neighbourhood. Community residents actually look to the police to defend community norms and values, especially when those norms and values are considered to be declining (Jackson, Bradford, Hohl, & Farrall, 2009; Jackson & Sunshine, 2007). Nevertheless, the fear of crime can result in serious curtailment of everyday activities, lost opportunity, and a reduction in the quality of life (Johnson, 1996).

The link between criminal victimization and negative assessment of the police has been well-documented (Brandl, Frank, Worden, & Bynum, 1994; Frank, Brandl, Cullen, & Stichman, 1996; Kusow, Wilson, & Martin, 1997; Priest and Carter, 1999; Ren, Cao, Lovrich, & Gaffney, 2005). The present analysis has shown that individuals who had been a victim of a violent or property crime in the twelve-month period prior to the survey reported a lower level of satisfaction with the police. It has been suggested that crime victim's dissatisfaction with the police usually stems less from actual outcomes, but more from the manner and style of the encounter (Fitzgerald, Hough, Joseph, & Qureshi, 2002; Weitzer & Tuch, 2005).

As previous research has demonstrated that positive contact with the police improves the ratings of the police (Borrero, 2001; Brandt & Markus, 2000; Cheurprakopkit, 2000; Chow, 2002; Correia, Reisig, & Lovrich, 1996; Hinds, 2007; Hurst, Frank, & Browning, 2000; Jesilow, Meyer, & Namazzi, 1995; Reisig & Parks, 2000; Ren, Cao, Lovrich, & Gaffney, 2005; Schafer, Raudenbush, & Earls, 2003; Skogan, 2005, 2006; Smith, Graham, & Adams, 1991; Tufts, 2000; Worrall, 1999), it is not surprising to find that respondents who described the experience of their most recent official contact with the police in either emergency or non-emergency situation as satisfactory were significantly more likely to give high approval ratings of police performance. In fact, there is also empirical evidence showing an association between negative vicarious experiences with the police and unfavourable attitudes toward the police (Schuck, Rosenbaum, & Hawkins, 2008). Finally, respondents who reported police mistreatment or harassment experience were found to be less satisfied with the police (Chow, 2008).

Conclusion

The present analysis adds to the growing research literature on public evaluation of the police, focusing on a segment of the Canadian population (i.e., university students) that has received little prior research attention on this issue. These findings have policy and practical implications for individuals (e.g., law enforcement officers, community workers, and social workers) and agencies (e.g., governmental agencies, educational institutions, and community organizations,) working with young people.

Participants in this study were found to hold moderately favourable attitudes toward the police; however, continued efforts should be made to improve police activity toward this group of individuals. Specifically, it is crucial to reduce adversarial interaction and increase positive contacts between younger citizens and police. Negative contacts could be reduced by avoiding overly aggressive enforcement and by treating young people with respect and fairness, whereas positive contacts could be cultivated through community policing programs. As noted by Nofziger & William (2005), increasing the positive experiences that community members have with the local police will not only improve the image of the police in the community, but also serves to decrease residents' fear of crime.

In light of the recent influx of minority immigrants to this western Canadian city and the sizable proportion of respondents who expressed concerns about police treatment of minorities and aboriginal residents, the provision of fair, equal, and non-discriminatory treatment of these community members should be a high priority for the local police force.

This study also highlights the significance of strengthening services for crime victims. Experiencing a crime can have a debilitating impact on victims. Previous studies (Payne & Gainey, 2007; Van Dijk, 2001) have demonstrated that victims' unfavourable assessments of the police are due essentially to police officers' failure to prevent the crime and perception of officers' treatment with complete indifference. As police officers are usually a victim's first contact with the criminal justice system following the commission of a crime, police personnel need to undergo the necessary training (e.g., crisis intervention counselling) in order to be able to provide crime victims with professional, supportive, and timely assistance to lessen the impact of crime and trauma.

There are limitations to this study that need to be mentioned. As this investigation was carried out on a convenience sample of students at only one university in a western

Canadian city, the findings should be interpreted with caution. The reliance on cross-sectional data precludes interpretation of causality. To account for these limitations, it would be worthwhile to adopt a longitudinal design to further substantiate the causal relationships among the study variables. As well, although respondents' satisfaction with last contact with police in either emergency or non-emergency situation was found to be significantly related to with their evaluations of the police, the present study did not explore whether the contact was of a voluntary (i.e., contacts initiated by the respondents such as requesting police service or reporting victimization) or involuntary (i.e., contacts initiated by the police such as being arrested or receiving a traffic ticket) nature. It would surely be useful to explore the impact of the nature and frequency of contacts on citizens' perceptions of the police. Given the importance of vicarious experiences with the police as a vital source of information on police conduct and behaviour, these experiences also deserve research attention.

Additionally, future research should investigate post-secondary student populations in other geographical locations. Additional exploration of variation across types of both students (e.g., minority students) and institutions (i.e., college vs. university) would be informative. Last, but not least, in-depth interviews or focus groups should also be conducted to identify obstacles that hinder the cultivation of positive police-community relations and to explore factors that contribute to post-secondary students' development of attitudes toward police officers.

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