Introduction to Community Surveys in Law Enforcement

"Community policing, recognizing that police rarely can solve public safety problems alone, encourages interactive partnerships with relevant stakeholders. The range of potential partners is large, and these partnerships can be used to accomplish the two interrelated goals of developing solutions to problems through collaborative problem solving and improving public trust. The public should play a role in prioritizing and addressing public safety problems."

- U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services

As suggested by the quote above, policing is an inherently community-oriented activity that requires ongoing communication with the public to identify problems and implement solutions. Law enforcement agencies often have several formal mechanisms for incoming communication from the public (e.g., 911, non-emergency numbers, online complaint forms) and outgoing messages to the public (e.g., press releases, news briefings, website, Facebook, Twitter). Informal mechanisms for communication are also common (e.g., public meetings, "coffee with the chief", "meet & greet" visits by patrol officers). Many agencies have added another option to their communication arsenal: community surveys. In the 2013 Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics survey (LEMAS), 31.6% of local police departments, "Utilized information from a survey of local residents about crime, fear of crime, or satisfaction with law enforcement." This includes nearly one-half (49.2%) of all agencies with 100 or more sworn officers. [1]

Benefits of Community Surveys

Community surveys have several benefits when it comes to soliciting information from the public. The first benefit is that you can design a community survey to collect very specific types of information from local residents. This information can be incredibly helpful in strategic planning, but also has value for assessing past performance. Some the more common topics assessed include:

- **Confidence in the police** (e.g., "Can the police in this area be relied upon to be there when you need them?")

- **Police performance** (e.g., "How are the police doing at preventing crime in your neighborhood?")

- **Police legitimacy** (e.g., "Should you trust the decisions made by the police, even if you think they are wrong?")

- **Satisfaction with police contacts** (e.g., "Were you treated fairly by the officer who stopped you?")

- **Racial/ethnic differences in attitudes towards the police** (e.g., "Do you think the officer treated you differently because of your race, ethnicity, age, or gender?")

- **Awareness of police services** (e.g., "Have you participated in the police department's Citizen's Academy program?")

- **Collaboration in crime control efforts** (e.g., "Are you willing to participate in a neighborhood meeting to address crime in your area?")

- **Victimization & exposure to crime** (e.g., "Has anyone stolen something from you, your car, or your residence in the past 12 months?")

- **Social & physical disorder** (e.g., "In the past 30 days, how many times have you seen people camping in public locations?")

- **Fear of crime & perceived safety** (e.g., "How safe do you feel walking alone at night in your neighborhood?")

The second benefit of community surveys is that you may be able to hear from a more representative sample of your community. Formal public meetings sponsored by the police often draw many of the same people time after time. While the information shared by this group can be quite valid and important for agencies, their opinions may or may not be characteristic of the community as a whole. The same holds true for people who participate in informal meetings (e.g., "coffee with the chief", "meet and greets") and those who file complaints about officers through official channels. Community surveys can address this by attempting to contact a representative sample of the community or, in smaller jurisdictions, by offering the survey opportunity to all households.

Surveys conducted by mail or online are an efficient strategy for soliciting input from the community. While in-person meetings with residents are probably ideal with regard to establishing rapport and trust, the resources and time needed to meet with a large and representative sample of the community may be considerable in larger jurisdictions. Surveys can be conducted on a limited budget and over a relatively short time-frame, and the scientific basis of survey research is not terribly complicated. Concepts like sampling (i.e., how do you

pick the households or people to survey), representativeness (i.e., does you sample look like the city as a whole), and response rate (i.e., proportion of people sent the survey that actually filled it out and returned it) are easily understood with a little study.

Finally, one of the lesser discussed benefits of community surveys is that people in the community often appreciate it when the police ask for their input. Many of the people we have surveyed over the years for different projects have asked for more communication with and from their local police department. Here are some examples that illustrate this point (see below):

The survey asked what the local police department could do to improve relations with the community.

- *"Work more within the neighborhood communities, and provide information for those who may be unable to attend meetings or get information online*."

- *"Include a Police Department one-page newsletter in the monthly water bill that, among other suitable topics, speaks to monthly enforcement activities, citizen outreach, etc."*

- *"This survey, for example, soliciting feedback from the community is very encouraging*."

- *"Surveys like this are great, more information on where to provide feedback and/or concerns*."

- *"Giving the public a vehicle to provide feedback to the police department like I'm doing now*."

Community Survey Toolkit

The goal of this toolkit is to provide law enforcement agencies with entry-level guidance on conducting community surveys. This includes tips for designing surveys, developing survey questions, and analyzing data. We also demonstrate how to use surveys in Problem-Oriented Policing projects (POP; Goldstein, 1979) and several real community surveys are available as further examples. Along the way, we provide references for those who are interested in learning more about designing and implementing community surveys. This includes some of the more technical issues related to sampling, different survey strategies (e.g., in-person vs. telephone vs. mailed vs. online), data analysis, and statistics. Readers interested in these topics should consult the references listed below:

Topics Covered

- [Tips for Designing Surveys](#)
- [Survey Questions and Data Analysis](#)

- Tips for Writing Survey Questions
- POP Survey Demonstration
- Examples of Community Surveys

Additional Resources

- Bureau of Justice Assistance (1993). *A police guide to surveying citizens and their environment* (Monograph NCJ 143709). US Department of Justice, Washington, DC.

- Goldstein, H. (1979). *Improving policing: A problem-oriented approach*. Crime & Delinquency, 25(2), 236–258.

- Skogan, W. G. (2014). *Using community surveys to study policing*. In The Oxford Handbook of Police and Policing (p. 449). Oxford University Press.

- Weisel, D. L. (1999). *Conducting community surveys: A practical guide for law enforcement agencies*. Bureau of Justice Assistance, US Department of Justice, Washington, DC.