

BY ROD GOULD, ICMA-CM, AND ASHLEY TRIM

TAKING THE PULSE ON POLICE

How to cost effectively track residents' level of trust

Local government managers and police chiefs are increasingly focused on building trust between residents and their police officers so that all groups feel fairly and justly treated and are invested in maintaining public safety. This is essential for the integrity of the criminal justice system and the health of local representative democracy.

Communities with law enforcement agencies, whether in-house or under contract, should track the level of trust in police by their communities just as they measure crime trends. But how can this be done efficiently and economically? Few of the 18,000 police agencies in the United States have the resources to conduct sophisticated surveys of residents' attitudes toward their police.

Public confidence in police has historically been higher than most institutions but is still far from desirable. According to a Gallup poll in June 2017, only 57 percent of Americans expressed confidence in their local police. This masks a growing divide, however, as more people of color, lower income, and younger age indicate falling levels of trust in police. Only 30 percent of African Americans, 45 percent of Hispanics, and 44 percent of people between 18 and 34 years of age are confident in police.¹ For many people, perceptions become their reality.

This trend is in spite of the fact that crime levels across the country have fallen in recent decades and police departments in general are better staffed, trained, and equipped. Most police departments collect a great deal of information on crime and calls for service and regularly publish this data.

Need for Continuous Review

Information on public attitudes toward the police is much harder to come

by. Yet, a major finding of the 2015 President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing is that the public cares as much about how police interact with them as they care about crime and arrest rates.²

Leonard Matarese, managing partner, Center for Public Safety Management, advises police departments to continuously review their relationships with the communities that they serve, with a commitment to just and fair policing. As more law enforcement agencies embrace different forms of public engagement, this routine assessment helps pinpoint where and how to better engage with those groups who tend not to trust the local police. This is anything but straightforward though.

Many local governments conduct resident surveys of community perceptions of local government services, including law enforcement. While only the largest and best-funded local agencies can afford to conduct regular and comprehensive surveys of resident attitudes toward police, it is possible for medium and small cities to collect data routinely about trust and confidence in local policing—whether by the police department or the sheriff under a contract for service—by adding targeted questions to general public surveys.

Bryan Godbe of Godbe Research and Richard Bernard of FM3Research have been conducting resident satisfaction research surveys for decades. They recommend that officials be clear about their goals and use methodologically sound techniques for sampling public attitudes toward police.

Such surveys may include phone polling using landlines and cellphones and e-mail to voter files, with extra efforts to involve underrepresented populations.

Simply placing a survey on the agency's website, though, will be unlikely to provide statistically accurate data.

The same goes for mail surveys, which are tough to make representative of the whole community, but they still can provide useful information.

If a locality cannot afford to use a professional adviser, then perhaps the local university can assist with more scientific surveying as part of a class project. Or consider getting a group of contiguous cities to share in the cost of a regional or sub-regional survey on attitudes toward police.

Questions to Consider

Here are three questions that might be included in a resident survey:

- What do you think is the most serious public safety problem facing the residents of [insert city name]?
- Overall, how would you rate the job performance of the police officers (or sheriff's deputies)? Would you rate them as excellent, good, just fair, or poor?
- How much would you say you trust the police officers (sheriff's deputies) to protect you and your family? Would you say you trust them a great deal, somewhat, not too much, or not at all?

The survey might also ask participants to listen to some words and phrases—examples listed below. After hearing each one, they can indicate if it applies to the police officers or sheriff's department employees who work their community. If it does apply, the participants can then be asked: "Does it apply strongly or just somewhat?"

- Respond quickly to emergency calls?
- Effective in curbing local crime?
- Make community relations a priority?
- Treat people professionally regardless of race or ethnicity?
- Treat people professionally regardless of gender?

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The council still has a formal role of reviewing and adopting the budget, while a majority of the work (70 percent) is preparing plans, overseeing functions, and more—essentially making sure the plane is journey ready.

The 10,000-foot altitude is projects. Most of this—80/20—is staff work, and the council role is formal approval of contracts exceeding the village administrator’s authority; in Downers Grove that is \$15,000.

Most often, these contracts show up on a consent agenda and get passed in a single motion. This is day-to-day work, and council value added here is negligible.

Then, of course, the tarmac looms and the plane is on the ground. At this level, the council really is about

engagement with the community and the staff. They become ambassadors for the organization and the linkage with the community.

Called day-to-day work in the graphic, this is the inverse of the 50,000-foot level, with 90 percent of the responsibility falling to the staff.

Elected Officials Play Critical Role

The old saw about a picture being worth a thousand words absolutely applies here. This *PM* department is roughly limited to 750 words, and it has taken most of them to describe the 8.5 x 14-inch graphic that in a few minutes of perusal easily captures the interplay between the elected officials and the professional staff in Downers Grove.

As Mike pointed out, “[Downers Grove Village Manager] Dave Fieldman will use this concept to remind the elected officials of how critical they are in our journey. While we have a great staff, our work really only matters if we are moving in the direction the council has set. This depiction is easy to grasp and affirming to all parties in the governance process.”

One of the great things about ICMA members is how generous they are with each other. I appreciate Mike giving me permission to write about and use his graphic. **PM**



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- Treat people professionally regardless of age?
- Treat people professionally regardless of sexual orientation?
- Committed to helping citizens of City X?
- Treat homeless people with respect?
- Are trustworthy?
- Are impartial?
- Are proactive in preventing crime?
- Give the public a voice?
- Enforce traffic safety laws?
- Able to reach out to and work with young people?
- Able to work with those suffering with health issues?
- Are approachable to residents?

The survey could then test resident satisfaction with local government efforts to communicate through mail, Internet, and other means, answering such questions as these:

Would you say you are very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied with the police department’s (sheriff’s) efforts to communicate with you?

If you interacted directly with a

police officer (sheriff’s deputy) in the past 12 months, did he or she:

- Treat you with respect?
- Listen carefully to your point of view?
- Remain impartial?
- Earn your trust?

Data Enhance Engagement Efforts

Clearly, there are more questions that could easily be appended into an existing satisfaction survey. The point is to choose those that are most relevant and to track changes in responses over time.

Most scientific surveys obtain demographic and locational data on participants. Mining the data for differences in responses by neighborhood, gender, age, and race/ethnicity will also yield important information. It will help the police department customize its resident outreach and engagement efforts for greatest effect.

Like all government-funded survey reports, the results of these questions should be made fully public and accessible to all. Even better is to discuss them publicly at a council or board

meeting and consider developing a departmental goal or action plan.

It is essential to undertake public engagement for police services to build trust and confidence for a better civil society. Systematically monitoring public attitudes toward law enforcement can be daunting for smaller agencies.

By incorporating specific questions regarding trust and confidence into existing satisfaction surveys, those agencies can gain critical information from which to plan and act. **PM**

ENDNOTES AND RESOURCES

- 1 *Gallup News*, July 10, 2017, “Confidence in Police Back at Historic Average” poll involved 1,009 adults in 50 states; <http://news.gallup.com/poll/213869/confidence-police-back-historical-average.aspx>.
- 2 *Final Report of the President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing*, May 2015, page 5.



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