



Measuring Public Attitudes towards the Police: Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Given that there is currently no common approach used across Canada to measure public attitudes towards the police, the objective of this study was to develop an empirically-informed small subset of items that can be used by Canadian police services for this purpose. We recommend a standardized, comprehensive and validated set of 12 ‘core’ survey items to measure public attitudes towards the police. Police services across Canada can use them to capture public opinion in a way that is comparable between jurisdictions and track change over time. We also recommend a supplementary set of measures of socio-demographics, police-citizen contact, victimization experience, perceived safety and perceived disorder.

To identify our recommendations, we analysed data from an online survey of 2,527 Canadians — a quota sample of 500 Calgary area residents, 501 Ottawa area residents, 500 rural region residents, 526 Halifax Regional Municipality residents, and 500 French-speaking residents — that fielded 50 measures of public attitudes, experience and intentions. We used latent variable modelling to (1) assess measurement properties, (2) estimate the factors that predict public attitudes, (3) test a popular explanatory framework for understanding police-citizen relations (procedural justice theory), and (4) assess which measures work best on their own.

Our assessment of the measurement properties suggests that key constructs – procedural justice, engagement, distributive justice, effectiveness, legitimacy, and willingness to cooperate – are empirically distinct. It made little difference whether the survey was completed in French or in English. In both cases the indicators have good scaling properties.

Our analysis of the demographic predictors of the various different attitudes towards the police indicates three things. First, public attitudes were more positive among older people and among people with a relatively high income. Second, females perceived the police as more legitimate and were more willing to cooperate with the police, on average, than males. Third, people who identified primarily with being South Asian and Black tended to have more positive and more negative attitudes towards the police, respectively, than those who identified primarily with being White. Generally speaking, there was little difference between the expressed attitudes of self-identified White respondents and those who identified primarily with being Chinese or those who were grouped into the ‘other’ category.

Assessment of victim and perceived safety predictors showed that victims tended to be less positive about the police than non-victims (adjusting for other factors); that people who felt safe in their neighbourhood were more positive (on average) than people who did not feel safe; and that people who saw their neighbourhood as disorderly were less positive (on average) than people who saw their neighbourhood as orderly. The statistical effects of income shrank towards zero when victimisation, perceived safety and perceived disorder were included in the statistical models. This suggests that, compared to high-income individuals, low-income individuals are more likely to be victims, feel unsafe and perceive disorder around them and that it is this that accounts for the difference in views by income.

Procedural justice theory seems to work well in the current context. We found that procedural justice (treating people with respect and dignity, making decisions in fair, transparent and accountable ways, and allowing people voice) and legitimacy (right to power and authority to govern) explained a good deal of variation in people’s willingness to cooperate with the police. Consistent with existing research from the United States (US), United Kingdom (UK) and Australia, this suggests that acting in procedurally just ways helps to generate the legitimacy that sustains and strengthens the ability of legal authorities to elicit public compliance and cooperation. There was, however, a novel finding in the current Canadian context. Bounded authority – the belief that the police respect the limits of their rightful authority – was less important in the current sample than it seems to be in the US and UK. What was more important was the belief that the police understand and respond to the needs of the local community. It seems, on this basis, that the police may be perceived as legitimate not only when they show that they wield their authority in fair and just ways, but also when they engage with the local community.

On the basis of our findings, we recommend the following 12 core survey items to measure attitudes towards the police:

Procedural Justice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The police make decisions based on facts.



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The police treat people with respect.
Distributive Justice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The police provide the same quality of service to all citizens.
Community Engagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The police are dealing with the things that matter to people in this community.
Bounded Authority
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> About how often would you say that the police in your neighbourhood exceed their authority?
Effectiveness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Responding quickly to calls for assistance? Resolving crimes where violence is involved?
Legitimacy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I feel a moral duty to follow police orders. I generally support how the police usually act.
Willingness to Cooperate
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I would help the police if asked.
Overall Trust and Confidence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Taking everything into account, how good a job do you think the police in this area are doing? Taking everything into account, how good a job do you think the police in this country are doing?

Our findings of this project can be extrapolated to policy makers, researchers and police services that may use these questions on future surveys measuring attitudes towards the police in Canada. The contract value of this project is \$22,600.