

UC Santa Barbara

Popular Press

Title

"Survey Gives UCSB, Santa Barbara Police High Marks"

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5cp6n8fm>

Authors

Anderson, Michelle Chernikoff
Giles, Howrd

Publication Date

2006-12-06

Op-Ed by Michelle Chernikoff Anderson & Howard Giles
Published in the *Santa Barbara News-Press* on 13 Feb. 2005

When a community gives a person the awesome power to use force in upholding the law, what is it that matters most to the diverse members of that community? What do people value in their police?

At both his retirement party in 2004 and the too-soon-to-follow funeral of UC Santa Barbara's long time Chief of Police, John L. MacPherson Jr., known so fondly to many of us as "Mac," a recurring theme emerged from the range of speakers who took to the microphone. That very same theme emerged from the range of speakers surveyed by UC Santa Barbara's Center on Police Practices and Community (COPPAC) in both the city of Santa Barbara and on the UCSB campus.

Over 2000 civilians were surveyed using three different surveys between the spring of 2002 and January 2004. Students knocked on every third door in all six police beats of the city of Santa Barbara with a survey (in English) evaluating perceptions of the Santa Barbara Police Department (SBPD). A web survey was given to randomly selected UCSB students (all students are given university email addresses and access) regarding their perceptions of the university police (UCSB-PD). Finally, a survey, in Spanish, was administered by three Santa Barbara priests holding Spanish services, to evaluate congregants' perceptions of the SBPD.

These surveys and their results were not large scale, heavily funded studies. Rather, they were preliminary studies resulting from the hard work of many dedicated volunteers. While the sampling methods were far from perfect, we were fortunate in that the demographics of our samples seemed to fairly well represent the communities served by the respective police departments. In each case, the chiefs asked COPPAC to let them and their staff know what their respective communities thought of them: where improvements could be made, what was being done right, etc.

The surveys were performed with two goals in mind: first, to suggest to policing scholars, law enforcement and community members, areas for further consideration and analysis in addressing policing issues; and second, to look for patterns that might emerge across the various communities. Interestingly, the same patterns that emerged as statistically significant across our surveys in Santa Barbara have emerged in our surveys abroad. Most heartening, however, is that this same pattern was echoed time and again in the anecdotes shared by members of the community remembering Chief MacPherson: the importance of communicating respect and concern for the needs of community members, one person at a time.

In general, our results were similar to what other researchers have found elsewhere regarding police ratings and racial and gender differences. That is, most residents of Santa Barbara rate the SBPD, and students view the UCSB-PD, as well above average, with Caucasians giving higher ratings of police than other racial groups. For example, on a scale of 1 (“very poor”) to 4 (“neutral”) to 7 (“excellent”), residents of Santa Barbara (interviewed in English) rated the SBPD at 4.88. Residents of Santa Barbara (interviewed in Spanish) also rated the SBPD above average, but their rating, of 4.63, was significantly (statistically) lower than that of the residents surveyed in English. Similarly, Caucasian UCSB students rated their satisfaction with the UCSB-PD at 4.44, while students of all other races were significantly less satisfied but still above average, at 4.14. (Because of the relatively low number of individuals in any one racial or ethnic group, other than Caucasian, for statistical analyses, it was necessary to combine the Latino(a)/Chicano(a), African American/Black, Asian American/Pacific Islander and “Other” races into one group).

As is frequently the case in other jurisdictions as well, females tended to give the police significantly higher ratings than males. For example, while both ratings were above average, females at UCSB rated the UCSB-PD at 4.70, whereas males gave a significantly lower rating of 4.38.

We know from both our surveys and the work of other policing researchers that the majority of civilian complaints of police conduct cite communication style, for example “lack of respect,” or “poor demeanor,” as the basis of the complaint -- even more so than whether or not the particular outcome (e.g. warning, citation, arrest) was negative. Conversely, when we asked what, if anything, deserved praise in the police departments, communicating attitudes of respect was most commonly cited.

Despite the demographic differences mentioned above, when all variables were considered simultaneously, demographics such as age, education, income, race and gender had a minor to insignificant effect on rating the police, while officers’ communication style (“how well do you think police officers listen to people, take their views into account, and want to understand their needs and unique situations?”) had by far the largest effect on police ratings.

These findings are bolstered by our results from administering our surveys around the world, including in Russia, Guam, Taiwan, China and South Africa. These surveys have also shown the tremendous importance of accommodative communication in affecting civilians’ perceptions of law enforcement.

Why should we care what civilians think of law enforcement and what determines this? In a free society, the police cannot be effective without the consent and cooperation of the community. From the standpoint of the civilian: as taxpayers, the police are your employees, here to serve you. If you need assistance, you need a police force you can trust to respect your needs or you may not seek help

when it could be most effective. From the standpoint of the law enforcement officer: a community that rates you well is a community that is more apt to cooperate with your orders, a community more likely to step forward when you request witness accounts, and a community less likely to resist your authority where there is a justifiable need to assert it. In short, communication is key to a well respected, trusted and thus legitimate police force, and a well respected, trusted, legitimate police force enhances the safety of all community members: victims, suspects, bystanders and officers.

Perhaps, then, it should come as no surprise that the praise for a police chief so respected by his community revolved around his ability to so respectfully and effectively communicate.

For example, acting UCSB Police Chief, Bill Bean, stated that "Mac will always be remembered for his compassion and consideration for others. He loved people and conversed easily with everyone he came in contact with."

Cheri Gurse spoke at the remembrance hour preceding the funeral, recalling her work on behalf of survivors and potential victims as the first director of the UCSB Women's Center Rape Prevention Education Program. Her remarks praised his sensitivity, caring and respect.

Mac's staff members also spoke of their chief's respect for the needs and concerns of his officers – particularly respecting their family needs.

In addition, UC Riverside Police Chief Hank Rosenfeld, in his comments at the remembrance hour, spoke of Mac demonstrating the importance of good communication skills in a situation other officers feared might cause a riot. "And he goes into the line of people and starts talking to people and I see there's not a riot. All I see is this helmet bobbing around. I learned some important people skills from Mac."

Even when he had to be firm, his professionalism and respectfulness were paramount. Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs, Michael Young, recalled a time when he crossed a line with Mac. "I remember thinking that I had just gotten the nicest, sweetest, gentlest, most thorough, professional, and effective 'butt-whupping' I had ever had-- and likely would ever receive."

As both Mac and our research have demonstrated, good communication is key to good law enforcement. The preliminary findings of our research are by no means a panacea for all police – community issues. This summary is merely to suggest that further exploration of the role of communication in law enforcement is warranted. Perhaps we can learn of situations in which it may reduce the need for force. What's more, where force is necessary, perhaps communication theory and techniques will be key to the safety of all involved.

From its inception, Mac was a strong supporter of the mission of COPPAC – forming collaborations amongst academics, law enforcement, and the community to enhance knowledge and theory on police -- community issues and to thus empower the community, policy makers and law enforcement to develop laws, policies and practices based solidly in research. It is through open communication with law enforcement and the community that we, as scholars, seek to ask better research questions so that we can provide you with the ability to make decisions based solidly in research.

We welcome your thoughts and the cooperativeness of those in law enforcement, some close and some far from Santa Barbara, some on patrol and some behind a desk, who have embraced our commitment to “researching today for a safer tomorrow.”

To learn more about COPPAC, including access to the survey instruments and results of these and other studies, visit www.coppac.ucsb.edu.

Michelle Chernikoff Anderson, JD and Howie Giles, PhD DSc are the Directors of UCSB's Center on Police Practices and Community (COPPAC) and can be reached at mca@coppac.ucsb.edu.