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What is trust and confidence in the police?

Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)

Original citation:

Jackson, Jonathan and Bradford, Ben (2010) *What is trust and confidence in the police?*

[Policing: a journal of policy and practice](#), 4 (3). pp. 241-248. ISSN 1752-4512

DOI: [10.1093/police/paq020](https://doi.org/10.1093/police/paq020)

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Available in LSE Research Online: October 2012

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Title: What is Trust and Confidence in the Police?

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Running Head: What is Trust and Confidence in the Police?

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In press at: *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice*

What is Trust and Confidence in the Police?

Abstract

One of the first actions of the new Home Secretary was to scrap public confidence as the single performance indicator of policing in England and Wales. But public trust and confidence will remain important to policing policy and practice. Trust and confidence can (a) encourage active citizen participation in priority setting and the running of local services, (b) make public bodies more locally accountable and responsive, and (c) secure public cooperation with the police and compliance with the law. Analysing survey data from London we find that overall 'public confidence' condenses a range of complex and inter-related judgements concerning the trustworthiness of the police. We argue that confidence summarises a motive-based trust that is rooted in a social alignment between the police and the community. This social alignment is founded upon public assessments of the ability of the police to be a 'civic guardian' who secures public respect and embodies community values (Loader & Mulcahy, 2003). By demonstrating their trustworthiness to the public, the police can strengthen their social connection with citizens, and thus encourage more active civic engagement in domains of security and policing.

Key words: Public confidence in policing; PSA23

Word count (total, including footnotes and abstract): 4,038 (3,869 without footnotes)

Changes in performance target regimes have raised the profile of public trust and confidence in policing in England and Wales to a level not seen since the early 1980s. Until very recently the police worked against the statutory performance indicator derived from the British Crime Survey (BCS) – “*Percentage of people who agree that the police and local councils are dealing with the anti-social behaviour and crime issues that matter in their area.*” Police forces were tasked by the British Government to increase the proportion of local residents who felt confident that their local police (and council) were dealing with the things that matter in the local community.

The positioning of public confidence as the paramount performance indicator for police has now been abandoned. At the time of writing the new government’s policies regarding police performance – and how to measure it – appear to be in a state of flux. But the underlying shift away from micro-managing police and towards placing public opinion central to policing seems set to continue (Home Office 2008). The Home Secretary may have stated that the ‘fight against crime’ is the only target the police should work to. Yet, there is a strong emphasis within the new government on (a) making public bodies more locally accountable and responsive, and (b) encouraging active citizen participation in priority setting and indeed the running of local services.

While the situation remains fluid, one possible outcome might be that more localised performance targets and measures will emerge, perhaps set by local forces or even the putative elected police commissioners. Such local targets will attempt to capture what is important to people living in individual police force areas. But on what bases do the public judge the performance of the police? Are aspects of effectiveness (catching criminals, responding in emergencies) paramount, or does the public place greater importance on procedural fairness (treating citizens with fairness and dignity, giving ‘voice’ and providing information) or community engagement (understanding and responding to the needs of the community)? And on what basis might cooperation and participation be encouraged?

In this paper we discuss what confidence in policing means and we assess how it is empirically measured. Comparing the PSA23 performance indicator (as the latest example of a single indicator of confidence) with prior measures of public trust in the police, we argue that such summary questions are useful single measures of overall public confidence in policing. But more nuanced viewpoints are vital if we are to properly understand public opinion and work toward greater citizen involvement in the policies and practise of policing. ‘Global’ confidence in policing – however measured – is rooted in quite specific public assessments of police fairness and shared values/priorities. To improve global confidence in the police, the police must focus first on how they treat members of the public, and second on how they engage and align themselves with the specific problems that face the community (cf. Myhill & Quinton, this volume).

MEASURING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN POLICING

The Government’s 2008-2011 Public Service Agreements (PSA) set out the framework in which the recently scrapped measure of confidence operated. The PSA23 agreement aimed to ‘make communities safer,’ with Priority Activity 3 stipulating to ‘Tackle the crime, disorder and antisocial behaviour issues of greatest importance in each locality, increasing public confidence in the local agencies involved in dealing with these issues.’ PSA23 encouraged local agencies and partnerships to address the priorities determined by local debate and to promote a police force that is sensitive and responsive to a broad range of citizens’ needs.

Previous performance management regimes included measures of public opinion that focused primarily on the views of users of police services and people from communities with problematic relationships with the police. But the new arrangement heralded a shift to the general population. Whatever new regime emerges, it seems probable that forces will continue be judged against the views of all those they serve, including individuals who have little experience, knowledge or awareness of actual police activities. Yet, such an emphasis may not be as unreasonable as it first might sound. The police exist to serve all citizens equally: one section of the public should not have a higher stake in or claim to judgments about the police. Active citizen participation in the running of a public service as important as

the police requires, by definition, input from as wide a range of people as possible. Just as importantly, research evidence increasingly finds robust associations between trust and confidence and the readiness of public to involve, cooperate and defer to officers (Tyler & Fagan 2008; Bradford & Jackson 2010a). Since any individual could find themselves in a situation where they might need or be able to help the police for some reason, the opinions of all citizens are relevant.

Yet, if police performance is to be measured by public opinion surveys, the key questions needs to be 'fit for purpose.' Does, for example, the PSA23 confidence question allow survey respondents to accurately summarize their views? Or is it 'contaminated' by opinions about the local council? Is the likely complexity of people's viewpoints straight-jacketed by single item formats? And are responses to such questions linked to more concrete views about the police, for example ideas about how effective or fair it is? If the answers to these questions are 'no', this would seriously undermine the usefulness – and indeed fairness – of single confidence measures. Such a finding would have major implications for the new system which is yet to emerge, and which, it might be hoped, may well rely on research findings to shape policing policy and practice.

PSA23 and single indicators of public confidence in policing

The two performance indicators for Priority Activity 3 in PSA23 were measures of public perceptions of anti-social behaviour and a single measure of public confidence in 'local service providers.' We address here only the 'PSA23 confidence' measure, which seems to invite respondents to provide some form of 'job-rating' of the police and to some extent the local council. The full wording is:

- It is the responsibility of the police and local council working in partnership to deal with anti-social behaviour and crime in your local area. How much would you agree or disagree that the police and local council are dealing with the anti-social behaviour and crimes issue that matter in this area? [Strongly agree, tend to agree, neither agree nor disagree, tend to disagree, and strongly disagree]

In order to investigate how people might be answering the question, we draw upon data from the Metropolitan Police Public Attitudes Survey (PAS). The PAS is a large-scale, face-to-face, representative sample survey of Londoners (running annually), which asks respondents both the PSA23 and BCS question. Importantly, the survey also probes for public views about how effective they think the police are across a range of activities, as well as public trust in police fairness and community engagement.

Table 1 near here

Table 1 suggests that the PSA23 'global' confidence measure generates public evaluations of the police more than the local council. Shown are the overall frequencies for (a) the PSA23 confidence measure, (b) a follow-up question that asks 'in terms of dealing with anti-social behaviour and crime issues in this area, how would you rate the performance of the police?', and (c) a second follow-up question that ask 'in terms of dealing with anti-social behaviour and crime issues in this area, how would you rate the performance of the local council?'. The most important findings are at the top and bottom ends of the scales. Combining 'strongly agree' and 'tend to agree,' 52 per cent of respondents agreed to some degree that police and local councils were dealing with the issues that mattered, while 51 per cent rated the performance of their local police as excellent or good, compared with 37 per cent who gave their local council this rating. Similarly, 13 per cent disagreed with the first statement, while 12 per cent gave the police a 'poor' or 'very poor' rating, compared with 24 per cent who did the same for the council.

Further light can be shed by comparing the PSA23 question with the standard 'local police are doing a good job' measure. Having greater face validity, this is a 'tried and tested' standard. Inspecting the data, there appears to be a considerable amount of agreement

between the old and new measures (see Table 2). Collapsing each item into three levels, around two-fifths of the sample believed that both (a) the local police were doing an excellent/good job and (b) that the police and their partners were dealing with the things that mattered in their community. Just under a fifth thought that their local police were doing a fair job and ‘neither agreed nor disagreed’ that the police and their partners were dealing with the things that matter in their community. Points of strong disagreement were rare. Only 1 per cent of the sample thought that their local police were doing a poor or very poor job and that the police and their partners were dealing with the things that mattered in their community. Less than one in twenty thought that their local police were doing an excellent or good job and that the police and their partners were not dealing with the things that mattered in their community.¹

Table 2 near here

This suggests that the PSA23 measure generates public evaluations of the police that are similar to those produced by the classic ‘are the local police doing a good job?’ survey question. The PSA23 confidence measure and the ‘good-job’ measure are rather similar, albeit not functionally equivalent.

The relationship between ‘confidence in policing’ and ‘trust in the police’

‘To say we trust you means we believe you have the right intentions toward us and that you are competent to do what we trust you to do.’ (Hardin, 2006: 17).

Thus far we have addressed public confidence in policing, as measured using single survey questions. We have referred to this as overall or ‘global’ confidence. But, we contend, the public engage in quite sophisticated inferences about the trustworthiness of the police. Public sensibilities towards the police are fraught with issues of authority, social order and security (Loader & Mulcahy, 2003). A trustworthy police force is seen by the public to be effective, to be fair, and to have shared values, interests and a strong commitment to the local community (Tyler & Huo, 2002; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Jackson & Sunshine, 2007; Jackson & Bradford, 2009). Trust extends beyond narrow public assessments that police perform their duties effectively and efficiently to include: a sense that the police understand the needs of the community; that they treat people fairly and with dignity; that they give them information; and that they allow members of the community a voice to highlight local problems.

So how exactly does overall confidence – as measured by the PSA23 confidence indicator – summarise public trust in the police? We analysed the relationship between overall confidence judgments (the PSA23 confidence target as well as the ‘good-job’ measures) and three dimensions of trust: effectiveness (technical competence, e.g. to tackle drug dealing), fairness (procedural fairness, e.g. to treat people with respect) and community engagement (shared values, e.g. to listen to the concerns of local people).² If the summary questions do indeed tap into more subtle and precise assessments of the police, then we should find a strong association between overall confidence and some or all of the different dimensions of trust.

¹ Another way to investigate the extent of similarity between the two questions is to compare and contrast their socio-demographic and attitudinal correlates. We found some variation. While some socio-demographic and experiential factors had almost identical associations with the two measures, other important characteristics – such as ethnicity, social class and victim status – had varying relationships (for more details see Bradford & Jackson, 2010b). However, the substantive differences were rather small.

² We treat these different dimensions of trust as ‘latent’ variables measured by a set of observed indicators – that is, survey questions. For example, we assess the level of trust that people hold in police effectiveness by using their answers to a series of questions about how effective police are across a number of tasks to ‘build up’ a picture of their underlying assessment of its efficacy (see Stanko & Bradford 2009).

Using data from the 2008/2009 PAS we tested a series of statistical models that specified ‘trust and confidence’ in a number of different ways – as one ‘thing’ (spanning overall confidence and trust in police effectiveness, fairness and community engagement) and as a number of separate ‘things’ (for example, overall confidence, trust in police effectiveness, trust in police fairness and trust in police community engagement). Full details of the methodology and results can be found in Bradford & Jackson (2010b)

The models that specified trust and confidence as just one ‘thing’ fitted the data poorly. That is to say, public ideas about the police do not constitute one homogenous mass. At the bare minimum, therefore, we need to distinguish between trust in police effectiveness (technical competence) on the one hand, and trust in police fairness and engagement on the other. However in all the models tested overall confidence and trust in police fairness and engagement were highly correlated.³ We can conclude that overall confidence measures are very closely related to active assessments of police behaviour that relates to personal treatment (particularly fairness) and engagement with the community.

We can also build up to a more complex model of trust and confidence in the police (Figure 1). Tom Tyler’s work on motive-based trust (Lind & Tyler 1988; Tyler 2006; Tyler & Huo 2002) suggests that members of the public generate a sense of the character and motives of the police which strongly influences their trust judgements. Such motive-based trust turns on whether the police are seen as having the best interests of the community at heart. It is premised on the idea that the parties involved have shared social bonds which make it possible for the one to imagine, understand and influence the interests of the other. From this perspective, trust in the police becomes a moral connection between citizens and legal authorities: a sense that the police are working on behalf of the community to deliver order, to defend norms and values, and secure a sense of justice which represents the rights and dignity of citizens.

Figure 1 near here

We tested a model in which trust in police effectiveness and fairness each predict trust in police engagement (which we see as a British version of motive-based trust that turns on whether the police are seen to represent the interests of the community and share their values, goals and priorities). Then, overall confidence in policing (measured by the PSA23 indicator and the local/London good-job ratings) is predicted by each of the three aspects of trust.

The findings are unequivocal (see Bradford & Jackson, 2010b, for more details): it is the experience and perception of procedural fairness that fosters in people feelings of motive-based trust in – and shared group membership with – the authority concerned. Fairness encourages the idea that citizens and the police are ‘on the same side,’ and by treating people justly and equitably, police communicate to citizens that they are valued members of the social group that the police represent (Tyler, 2006; Tyler & Blader, 2000) and that the police are active and accessible community authorities (Jackson & Sunshine, 2007). By contrast, unfair treatment communicates division, social denigration and exclusion – thus fostering an ‘us and them’ situation. Finally, overall confidence was predicted most strongly by trust in police engagement and shared values. But given the extremely strong relationship between fairness and engagement, we conclude that overall confidence is rooted in perceived fairness and that the effect of perceived fairness can work (or might be channelled) through motive-based trust.

CONCLUSIONS

We have assessed in this paper the survey question (included in both the BCS and PAS) that asks its respondents whether they agree or disagree that the *‘police and local councils are*

³ Although there is evidence that aggregate levels of trust in fairness, community engagement and overall confidence may react differently to police communication and other activities (Hohl *et al.*, 2010).

dealing with the anti-social behaviour and crime issues that matter in their area. Answers to the PSA23 measure seem to draw on the same underlying ideas and orientations as do answers to the question which concerns only the police. On the basis of the evidence presented here, at least, use of the PSA23 measure did not appear to place the police at any major disadvantage compared with the older question. The widespread fears that accompanied its introduction may well have been mis-founded.

Naturally, the abandonment of the PSA23 target means that such concerns have in effect been answered. But the analysis presented above underlines a more fundamental point. Single item questions such as the PSA23 measure and the old 'good-job' question can act as useful methodological tools that condense a wide range of opinions into an easily digestible nugget. If the objective is to know at a high level what public perceptions of the police are in a particular area (or indeed nationally), then asking people a question similar to those discussed here is a useful place to start.

But deeper concerns remain. How can the public be expected to have extensive knowledge of the crime problem, the activities of the police, and the impact of police activities on crime and disorder? Can we expect people to judge the performance of the police in these terms? Surely public perceptions of the police will be stereotypical and rather one-dimensional.

On the contrary, people may have rather subtle views that are rooted in complex notions of trust and closely linked to the position of the police in British social, cultural and political life. Individuals can, and do, make nuanced and considered judgements about the police. Existing work suggests that both the old and new indicators tap most strongly into trust in police fairness and shared values/interests. The findings presented here are consistent not only with other work based on the PAS (see for example Bradford and Jackson 2010a), but also recent analysis of the BCS (Myhill & Beak 2008) and the US-based work of Tyler and colleagues (Tyler 2006; Tyler & Huo 2002). It may be that procedural fairness generates motive-based trust and a sense of shared group membership, encouraging the idea that citizens and the police are 'on the same side' and that the police are 'civic guardians' that secure public respect and embody or protect community values (Loader & Mulcahy, 2003: 79-89).

The evidence presented here has some important policy implications. Recall that the stated aim of PSA23 was to improve public confidence in policing by dealing with the crimes, disorder and ASB issues that were important to local people. It thus appeared to prioritise effectiveness over other aspects of police behaviour. This is certainly an emphasis that the new government seems to share. On this account, the demonstration of effectiveness in the fight against crime should be sufficient to generate public approval and support for the police. Yet, it is the procedural fairness of the police and a sense of motive-based trust that are consistently found to be most important to people. This may create a tension between the intention of government policy (narrowly interpreted), what forces might *think* they need to do to in response to policy-setting, and what might be the best ways to actually generate public cooperation and 'buy-in' to the way policing services are provided (and even what might, in the long run, reduce crime). For example, improving the quality of police-public interactions and re-engaging as a visible and accessible presence in the community are, on the face of it, some way removed from narrowly instrumental 'thief-taking'.

We might take heart, however, from some of the stronger claims of Tyler's procedural justice model. If people perceive the police to be procedurally fair, and if they trust their motives in behaving the way that they do, all current evidence suggests they are not only more likely to actively cooperate by reporting crime, cooperating in investigations, providing witness evidence, even intervening in situations of low-level deviance and incivility. They are also more likely to defer to officer's instructions and obey the laws that the police in many ways still embody. In the long run, the fight against crime might be more efficiently, more cost-effectively, and certainly more ethically served by treating the public with fairness, dignity and respect than by instigating another 'crack-down' on crime (Hough *et al.*, this volume).

Overall, then, the public seem to see the job of the police as not just dealing with crime, but as rooted also in the defence of civility and community, in treating people fairly and with dignity, and in being aligned and responsive to local needs and issues. Properly understood, the effectiveness of the police – in the public’s mind at least – may be revealed not only in the way the police deal with crime, but also by officers being there for victims, treating people fairly, and providing a visible and accessible source of moral authority (Jackson & Sunshine, 2007; Myhill & Quinton, this volume). If the police demonstrate to citizens of diverse communities that they are effective, fair and aligned with local interests, then this not only makes the police more directly accountable. It also strengthens the moral connection between people and their police, thus encouraging greater civic participation and more active public engagement in domains of security, policing and the regulation of social and community life.

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Acknowledgements

Many thanks to comments from two anonymous reviewers and the guest editors of this special edition. We are also grateful to Betsy Stanley (aka Betsy Stanko) for her continuing generosity with sharing data and discussing ideas and findings.

Tables

Table 1. Overall confidence in the local police (and council)
Percentages

	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree
The police and local council are dealing with the anti-social behaviour and crime issues that matter in this area? ¹	6	46	35	11	2
	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor	Very poor
In terms of dealing with anti-social behaviour and crime issues in this area, how would you rate the performance of the police ? ²	3	48	37	10	2
In terms of dealing with anti-social behaviour and crime issues in this area, how would you rate the performance of the local council ? ³	2	35	40	20	4

Source: Weighted data from the first quarter of the 2009/2010 London Metropolitan Police Safer Neighbourhoods Survey. Total $n = 5,120$.

1. 1,089 (21.3%) missing

2. 1,151 (22.5%) missing

3. 1,789 (34.9%) missing

Table 2. PSA23 confidence and local police ‘good-job’ measures
Percentages

		The police and local council are dealing with the anti-social behaviour and crime issues that matter in this area?			Total
		Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	
Taking everything into account, how good a job do you think the police in this area are doing? ¹	Excellent or good	39	15	4	58
	Fair	12	17	5	34
	Poor or very poor	1	2	5	8

Source: Weighted data from the first quarter of the 2009/2010 London Metropolitan Police Safer Neighbourhoods Survey.

Valid $n = 3,898$.

1. Gamma .597; Kappa .308

Figure

Figure 1. Trust and confidence in the police

