

## Community policing strategies need to take into account police and residents' different perceptions of neighborhood crime.

*Do police officers and residents have different perceptions of crime and cohesion in urban neighborhoods? In new research, **Rachel E. Stein** and **Candace Griffith** find resident observations of neighborhood measures are relatively consistent across three urban neighborhoods in a Midwestern city. Police perceptions of their relationship with residents and the close-knit structure of the community, however, are more positive in the primarily white neighborhood that has an active crime prevention program. The results suggest that what officers see on the “surface” of the neighborhood is driving overall perceptions, while underlying problems are secondary. Differences between resident and police perceptions can influence the success of crime prevention strategies employed in community policing.*



The successful implementation of community policing programs is dependent on police and residents understanding the needs in their communities. The trend of community policing programs in the U.S. represents a move away from the traditional centralized police force, toward a proactive strategy to curb crime. Community policing programs focus on building relationships among community members and between the neighborhood residents and police officers. The goal is for police officers to work with members of the community to identify problems and work together to solve these problems. The networks and community cohesion that results serve to lower the incidence of crime in the neighborhood.

The crime prevention strategies associated with community policing would be most useful in high crime neighborhoods, but residents in these areas are the most resistant to such programs. Residents in high crime areas generally distrust the police and do not see the benefit of community programs. Neighborhood residents are likely to consider the programs implemented by police departments ineffective to control crime problems in the community. One reason for this is that residents' perceptions of the neighborhoods are grounded in their everyday **lived experience**, while the viewpoint of police officers is characterized as that of an outsider.

Our research is the first to explore residents' perceptions of the neighborhood and perceptions of police officers across three neighborhoods in a Midwestern city—Mountain Top, Shoreline, and Saints Village, where we surveyed 267 residents and over 35 police officers. The three neighborhoods are classified as high crime and highly disordered neighborhoods. They are relatively similar across population demographics; however, Shoreline is the only neighborhood with a majority white population as compared to a more heterogeneous population in Mountain Top and Saints Village. The goal of our descriptive analysis is to identify patterns across neighborhoods and recognize differences in the perceptions of residents and police officers.

Residents' perceptions are what we would expect in high crime neighborhoods. Residents report moderate levels of neighborhood cohesion and moderate levels of fear of crime across all three neighborhoods. The majority of residents report crime is a problem in their community. We find a larger proportion of people who live in Saints Village consider crime to be a problem as compared to the other two neighborhoods. This is not unexpected, as Saints Village is most at risk of crime and disorder according to the demographic characteristics of the population. The community members have a low median income, a high rate of unemployment, and a large proportion of the neighborhood is comprised of renters—representing a transient population. The population in Saints Village also has a high percentage of males and a large proportion of adolescents. All of these characteristics are indicative of high crime areas.



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We might expect police perceptions of the neighborhoods to reflect the same pattern, identifying Saints Village as the most problematic crime-ridden area. This, however, is not what we find. The police officers report Saints Village and Mountain Top share similar characteristics. The majority of officers identify both of these neighborhoods as high crime areas characterized by poor relationships between police officers and residents. In contrast to resident perceptions, the Shoreline neighborhood is unique according to the police surveys. In fact, officers report residents in Shoreline represent the most cohesive community. Over half of the officers also report they feel respected and have a good rapport with the residents in Shoreline.

In efforts to explain the pattern in police responses, we first turn to the demographic composition of the neighborhoods. All of the neighborhoods in this study are characterized as high crime and high disorder areas; however, Shoreline is the only neighborhood in this study with a majority of white residents. The effect of race on neighborhood crime is often linked to elements of inequality or neighborhood disorganization, but the [perception](#) of a causal link between race and crime still stands. The police perceptions of Mountain Top and Saints Village as unsafe and characterized by poor relationships between police and residents suggest race might be a factor.

Another unique feature of Shoreline is this neighborhood was the only community with an active federally funded crime prevention program in place at the time of data collection. The presence of the program can contribute to the positive perceptions held by police officers. Residents in neighborhoods with crime prevention programs are more likely to be supportive of the police. This is especially true in communities where whites compose a [greater proportion of the population](#), as in Shoreline. This reflects the greater number of officers who indicate that they have a positive relationship with residents; however, it is important to note that the program does not reduce residents' perceptions of problems in the neighborhood.

Successful crime prevention strategies can only be implemented when police officers and residents work together to identify problems in the neighborhood. Police officers need to move beyond their outsider perspective of the neighborhood to understand the underlying needs of the community. A training program that [incorporates multicultural awareness](#) represents an effective strategy for officers to recognize different perspectives of neighborhood residents. This type of training can also help the officers establish the legitimacy of the police force in the community. Legitimacy is the first step for police to take the lead and help residents who view crime as a big problem and have high levels of fear of crime mobilize to community action.

*This article is based on the paper, ['Resident and Police Perceptions of the Neighborhood'](#) in *Criminal Justice Policy Review*.*

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Rachel E. Stein is an Associate Professor of Sociology at West Virginia University. Her research is focused on opportunities that lead to crime and victimization. She has published several research articles using hierarchical linear models to explore cross-national multilevel opportunities of victimization; her recent work explores neighborhood crime and fear of crime using broken windows and collective efficacy theories.



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