



Developing a Core Set of Public Opinion Indicators for Policing

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Source Article

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Take Home Messages

- There is a need for a common approach for constructing and implementing public opinion surveys on policing across different jurisdictions. This standardization would facilitate more accurate comparisons and tracking of public attitudes over time.
- The authors of the source article developed a cost-effective survey instrument by identifying 13 core indicators to measure public attitudes toward law enforcement. This streamlined set of measures captures key factors such as procedural justice, perceived legitimacy, and willingness to cooperate with police, making it practical for police departments to use in different regions and at various scales (e.g., municipal, provincial, federal).
- The findings underscore the importance of police focusing on fair processes and interpersonal treatment to foster public trust and willingness to cooperate, rather than solely emphasizing strength and deterrence.

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Why did the researchers conduct the study?

Police departments and government agencies often conduct public opinion surveys to gauge public attitudes toward law enforcement. These survey results can be used to inform and assess policing policies and practices. However, the current evidence base is weakened when there is no standardized approach for constructing and implementing these surveys. In Canada, most policing jurisdictions use survey indicators that differ from those in other areas.¹ This inconsistency hinders proper comparisons across jurisdictions and tracking changes in public attitudes over time. The goal of the [source article](#) was to lay the foundations for a more standardized survey approach so that future survey data can be collected that are comparable across regions and over time.

How did the researchers conduct the study?

An initial consultation process began by asking a panel of experts—four international academic experts with expertise in public attitude surveying and four police service representatives from Canada—to identify the most important questions to include in such surveys.² This process produced around 100 questions, which were then reduced to 50. These 50 questions were included in an online survey that was distributed to 2,527 Canadians, targeting a minimum of 500 respondents from each of the following groups: Halifax Regional Municipality residents, Calgary area residents, Ottawa area residents, residents from rural areas across Canada, and those indicating that French is their first language.

Based on an analysis of the resulting survey responses, 13 questions were selected to replace the full 50-item set, which would allow the survey to be completed in a timely manner. These 13 questions were selected based on various analyses that were conducted to

determine which questions could, on their own, be used to measure key factors, like perceptions of procedural justice, police legitimacy, and willingness to cooperate with law enforcement officers (see below for definitions of these factors).

What did the researchers find?

First, the authors of the [source article](#) identified multiple survey items that reflected a set of core underlying factors that would allow public attitudes to be assessed in a standardized fashion. These core factors include:

- ***bounded authority*** (the extent to which people believe the police respect the limits of their authority);
- ***procedural justice*** (the extent to which people believe that police interact with, and make decisions about citizens in a fair manner);
- ***community engagement*** (the extent to which people believe police listen to, understand, and act on the concerns of the communities they serve);
- ***distributive justice*** (the extent to which people believe that police resources are allocated across social groups in a fair manner);
- ***effectiveness*** (the extent to which people perceive the police as effective in preventing and investigating crime);
- ***legitimacy*** (the extent to which people believe the police have the right to have power and authority over citizens); and
- ***willingness to cooperate*** (the extent to which people are willing to engage with the police; e.g., to report crimes or share information).

The authors also determined the best single measure for each factor and identified a set of 13 core indicators of public attitudes toward the police. These indicators can be found in the Appendix to the [source article](#).

Second, the authors of the [source article](#) found evidence for procedural justice theory, which suggests that “legitimacy operates as part of a ‘virtuous circle’, whereby appropriate police behaviour encourages people to ‘self-regulate’ (i.e., act in a pro-social manner), which then reduces the need for coercive forms of social control by the police, which further enhances perceptions of police legitimacy.”³ Based on the survey results, perceptions of procedural justice emerged as the key predictor of whether people viewed the police as legitimate, although community engagement also played a role. Additionally, perception of police legitimacy was found to be the primary predictor of people’s willingness to cooperate with the police.



How can the police use these findings?

The authors of the [source article](#) provided a limited list of survey questions that can be used by police services to reliably measure a broad set of core factors related to public attitudes towards the police and to do so in a streamlined, cost-effective manner. This approach would enable Canadian police services and researchers to generate comparative data between jurisdictions at a national level while also aligning with international public opinion data where appropriate. Such an approach allows for meaningful benchmarking and the comparison of different police organizations against one another and over time.

The authors also found evidence supporting a procedural justice perspective on cooperation with the police. This perspective stands in contrast to other views of public cooperation with the police, which emphasize crime-fighting and risk reduction. According to that view, if people are more willing to assist a police service they see as effective in deterring crime, protecting communities, and exerting authority, then the police must demonstrate their crime-fighting abilities to the public. Yet, the findings of the [source article](#) showed that (1) procedural justice was a stronger predictor of legitimacy than perceptions of police effectiveness and (2) legitimacy was the strongest predictor of public cooperation with the police. These findings support a perspective on public cooperation that prioritizes legitimacy and fair processes in police-citizen interactions. If people are more willing to help the police when they perceive them as moral, just, and appropriate, then the police should focus on the rightful exercise of power and authority, mainly through fair interpersonal treatment and decision-making.

References

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