



CHANGES IN POLICE-COMMUNITY RELATIONS POST FERGUSON

By Thomas J. Lemmer

During the 1950s and 60s, television actor Jack Webb's character Sergeant Joe Friday regularly reminded fictional victims and witnesses that he was interested in "just the facts." While the real-life members of the policing profession seek to focus on the facts, they know that the facts exist within an environment where reality both forms and is formed by perceptions. The actions of a single police officer in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9, 2014 became the subject of extensive national news media coverage. Even though both the St. Louis County district attorney and the United States Department of Justice subsequently concluded that the officer's actions on that day were lawful, in the days and months that followed, activists and many in the media advanced a false narrative that the officer had "gunned down" a minority teen who was surrendering with his "hands up." While each year there are many millions of noncontroversial and even positive police-citizen encounters, over the next 18 months, the media coverage of the Ferguson incident was intermixed with a larger narrative that alleged such incidents were proof of widespread police bias toward minorities. The "hands up, don't shoot" protest chant was repeated in many cities thousands of times, and both the perceptions and the reality of police-community relations were altered far beyond the city limits of Ferguson, a community of only 21,200 residents.

Survey of ILACP Members:

A comprehensive 65-question survey was conducted with Illinois Association of Chiefs of Police members in December 2015. Of the 782 association members active in law enforcement during the study period, 204 completed the survey. The response rate corresponded to a statistically significant sample at a 95% confidence level. The survey sought to both: (1) gauge the extent of change in police-community relations post Ferguson; and (2) identify the strategies agencies had utilized in the months since August 2014 to strengthen police-community relations locally.

Perceptions Prior to August 2014:

Member perceptions of police-community relations nationally prior to August 2014 were largely positive; 55.9% rated the overall police community relationship nationally as somewhat to very strong; 63.2% rated the community's confidence in the ability of the police to reduce crime as somewhat to very strong; and 58.3% rated the community's confidence that the police utilize force appropriately as somewhat to very strong. When considering the strength of their local police-community relationships, the members were even more positive. Overall, 93.6% rated the relationship in their own jurisdiction as somewhat to very strong; 92.2% rated the community's confidence in the ability of the police to reduce crime as somewhat to very strong; and 90.7% rated

the community's confidence that the police utilize force appropriately as somewhat to very strong.

Perceptions Since August 2014:

As anticipated, the members reported that since August 2014 there was a significant and negative shift in their perceptions of police-community relations nationally. Relative to the overall relationship nationally, there was a 39.2 percentage point drop in the number of respondents who rated the relationship as being somewhat to very strong. Additionally, nearly two-thirds of the members (63.7%) rated the overall national post-Ferguson police-community relationship as somewhat to very weak. Furthermore, 51.0% rated the community's confidence in the ability of the police nationally to reduce crime as somewhat to very weak; and 69.1% rated the community's confidence that the police utilize force appropriately as somewhat to very weak. Moreover, the negative view of news media coverage of the police worsened sharply; 94.6% rated the overall national news media coverage of the police generally as somewhat to very negative; and 87.3% of the survey respondents rated the national news media coverage of the use of force by the police as somewhat to very inaccurate.

For the months since August 2014, 81.9% of the respondents rated overall community relations in their local jurisdiction as somewhat to very strong. Similarly, 80.4% rated the community's confidence in the ability of the police to reduce crime as somewhat to very strong; and 69.1% rated the community's confidence that the police utilize force appropriately as somewhat to very strong. However, relative to local relations overall, as compared to prior to August 2014, there was an 11.8 percentage point drop in the number of respondents who rated the strength of the relationship as somewhat to very strong. Additionally, the percentage of respondents who rated local police-community relations as somewhat to very weak rose by 7.4 points. Furthermore, relative to perceptions regarding community confidence in the ability of the police to reduce crime, there was also an 11.8 percentage point drop (see Figure 1). Additionally, community confidence in the appropriateness of the use of force by police dropped 21.6 points. These drops coincided with a 14.7 point drop in the percentage of respondents who rated their local news media coverage of the police as somewhat to very positive, and a 15.7 point drop in the percentage of respondents who rated their local media coverage of the use of force by the police as somewhat to very accurate.

Expectations Going Forward:

Local police agencies cannot directly impact the national police-community relationship, and improving relations is work that must occur at the local level. Within the survey, the final two closed-ended

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questions allowed the respondents to record their expectations going forward over the next 18 months relative to police-community relations at the national and local levels. Reflecting the policing-is-a-local-issue reality, and the inability of local departments to control events elsewhere in the nation, the respondents were less pessimistic about the future and far more confident about the prospects for improvement locally. Not only did far fewer respondents indicate that they expected the local relationship to worsen going forward, 48.9% nationally and 10.3% locally; more respondents expected improvements in the relationship with the community going forward locally (39.1%), as compared to nationally (24.7%).

Utilizing cross tabulation of the survey data between the respondent's future expectations locally to the survey's response and resource questions, six response approaches for improving local police-community relations were examined. These response areas consisted of: (1) policy and procedure changes, (2) training of agency personnel, (3) guidance and technical assistance, (4) conducting informational sessions on key policing topics, (5) regular collaboration and coordination with key community groups, and (6) specific community engagement efforts.

Half of the survey respondents answering the response efforts questions indicated: (a) their agencies had made at least one policy or procedure modification, (b) their agencies engaged in ten or more of the 40 possible training efforts surveyed, and (c) a rating of nine or higher on a scale of 20 possible points relative to the extent of helpfulness from the guidance and technical assistance received by their agencies. The respondents comprising this grouping accounted for 58.8% of the respondents that expected local police-community relations to improve in the months ahead.

However, the response efforts with the greatest association to optimism regarding the future of police-community relations involved direct community outreach. Of the survey respondents answering the response efforts questions, 60.3% indicated their agencies: (a) conducted at least one informational session; (b) regularly coordinated with key community groups, and the level of collaboration with these groups was rated as being 17 or higher on a scale of 35 possible points; and (c) conducted specific engagement efforts that rated eight or higher on a scale of 16 possible points. The respondents falling within this combined grouping accounted for 75.0% of the respondents who expected local police-community relations to improve going forward.

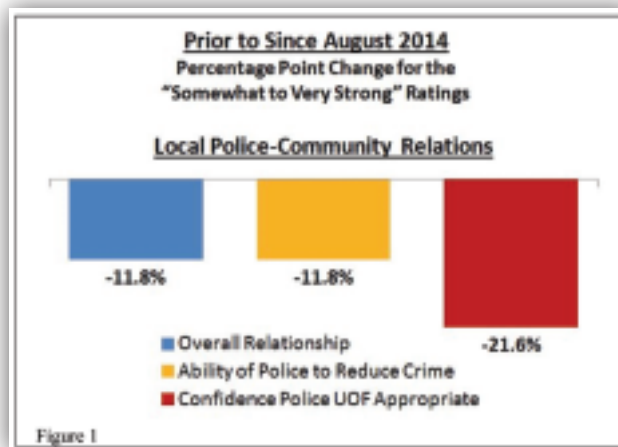
Recommendations:

First, federal, state and local officials, as well as local colleges and universities, should take note that the respondents have expressed concerns about unmet training needs. Regarding the need for additional resources in order to strengthen police-community relations, only the need for more sworn personnel (52.8%) rated higher, with 40.6% of the respondents having identified a need for assistance in providing

mental health/crisis intervention team (CIT) training, and 37.1% having identified the need for additional use of force de-escalation training.

Second, given the association with media coverage to the downturn in police-community relations in the months since August 2014, a greater use of informational sessions with the media would likely be beneficial. Only 16.5% of the respondents reported their agency conducted information sessions with the news media on the use of force model. Even fewer respondents reported sessions with the media covering the dangers inherent when citizens resist arrest (12.3%) and the "Terry Stop" authority of the police (11.2%).

Third and most importantly, building safer and stronger communities is fundamentally an effort built upon trust and through active partnerships between individual local police departments and the communities they serve. The survey data provides strong evidence that those respondents who reported higher levels of direct outreach efforts with the community were far more confident about the strength of their local police-community relationships going forward. As such, maintaining sustained community outreach is the core recommendation that can be drawn from the analysis of the survey data. ■



About the Author

Thomas Lemmer is a police commander with more than 30 years' experience in public safety positions, including 20 years of advanced law enforcement supervisory and managerial experience. He has extensive gang enforcement and juvenile crime intervention expertise. He has served in ethnically diverse and predominately minority communities, as well as with special service populations within college, military, public housing, and public transportation settings. He holds a master's degree from Loyola University Chicago, and he is a graduate of Northwestern University's School of Police Staff and Command. He has seven years' experience as a criminal justice undergraduate instructor with Loyola University, and he is an experienced in-service police trainer. He is an active member of the Illinois Association of Chiefs of Police, the International Association of Chiefs of Police, and the Police Executive Research Forum.

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