

# Police Perceptions and Responses to Changing Community Relationships Post Ferguson

Thomas J. Lemmer

## Abstract

*In policing, perhaps more than in any other profession, a focus on identifiable facts is a consistently sought after objective. However, the facts exist within a context where reality both helps to form and is formed by perceptions. While two extensive investigations, including one conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice, concluded that the actions on August 9, 2014, of a single police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, were lawful, many activists and the media advanced a false narrative that the officer had “gunned down” a minority teen who was surrendering with his “hands up.” In the months that followed, the “hands up, don’t shoot” chant was repeated many thousands of times, altering both perceptions and the reality of the police–community relations far beyond the city limits of Ferguson, a community of only 21,200 residents. A comprehensive survey of Illinois Association of Chiefs of Police members conducted in December 2015 disclosed that not only were perceptions of police–community relations nationally impacted, but so too were the perceptions of local police–community relations. However, the survey data also clearly indicated that those agencies with the highest levels of active community engagement were more likely to be optimistic about improving police–community relations going forward.*

## Introduction

Since 2014, in the wake of intense national media coverage of a small number of high-profile and contentious officer-involved use-of-force incidents, community perceptions of police legitimacy and community support for the police have been negatively impacted. This worsening of police–community relationships stands in contrast to the general improvement such relationships attained through the national expansion of community policing efforts that began in the 1980s. Anecdotal evidence via the national news media suggests that beginning with the August 2014 incident in Ferguson, Missouri, the strains on community support for the police have been widespread, and there has been a “Ferguson effect” on police–community relationships in a great many communities across the country (Lemmer, 2015). Furthermore, the weakened support within

the community has been associated with increased apprehension among police officers to engage in proactive policing initiatives (Linderman, 2015; Schmidt & Apuzzo, 2015).

In response to this changing dynamic, the initial actions of individual police executives proceeded without the benefit of knowing how other agencies beyond their immediate area had responded, and without any indication as to which responses other agencies viewed as providing positive benefits toward improved police–community relationships. Through a comprehensive survey of Illinois Association of Chiefs of Police (ILACP) members, perceptions relative to police–community relations post Ferguson and going forward were measured. Additionally, by examining those perceptions in comparison to post-Ferguson agency response efforts, the value of active community engagement by the police going forward was evident.

## Survey Results—Perceptions of Community Support

A comprehensive survey with 65 questions was prepared, which included (1) ten questions focusing on prior to August 2014—five gauging police–community relations nationally and five locally; (2) a repeated series of ten questions for the months since August 2014; (3) two future expectations questions regarding the strength of police–community relations going forward; and (4) questions seeking to gauge the extent of agency policy development and modification activities, internal agency training efforts, the level of guidance and technical assistance received, agency resource needs, and, most notably, the nature and extent of community outreach efforts by the police. A total of 204 of the 782 ILACP members active in law enforcement during the study period completed the survey between December 9 and 15, 2015. The response rate corresponded to a statically significant sample of those members at a 95% confidence level with an error rate of 5.9%.

## Perceptions Prior to August 2014

Respondents indicated that prior to August 2014, perceptions relative to the strength of police–community relations nationally 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 and enhance public safety as somewhat to very strong; and 58.3% rated the community’s confidence that the police utilize force appropriately as somewhat to very strong. However, respondents reported that even prior to August 2014, there were issues with the national news media coverage of the police: 51.5% rated the overall national news media coverage of the police generally as somewhat to very negative; and 57.4% rated the national news media coverage of the use of force by the police as somewhat to very inaccurate (see Table 1).

When considering the strength of police–community relationships within their own

**Table 1. Police Perceptions of Community Relations Prior to August 2014 (n = 204)**

Police Perceptions of	Rating	Locally		Nationally	
		No.	Percent	No.	Percent
Overall police–community relations					
	Somewhat to very strong	191	93.6	114	55.9
	Somewhat to very weak	6	2.9	29	14.2
Community confidence in the ability of the police to reduce crime and enhance public safety					
	Somewhat to very strong	188	92.2	129	63.2
	Somewhat to very weak	5	2.5	30	14.7
Community confidence that the police utilize force appropriately					
	Somewhat to very strong	185	90.7	119	58.3
	Somewhat to very weak	5	2.5	30	14.7
Overall news media coverage of the police generally					
	Somewhat to very positive	121	59.3	44	21.6
	Somewhat to very negative	18	8.8	105	51.5
News media coverage of the use of force by the police					
	Somewhat to very accurate	115	56.4	34	16.7
	Somewhat to very inaccurate	30	14.7	117	57.4

jurisdictions, respondents were far more positive. Relative to the strength of local police-community relationships 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 and enhance public safety as somewhat to very strong; and 90.7% rated the community's confidence that the police utilize force appropriately as somewhat to very strong. Furthermore, while more than half of the respondents saw the national media coverage negatively, prior to August 2014, such was not the case locally: 59.3% rated the overall local news media coverage of the police generally as somewhat to very positive; and 56.4% rated the local news media coverage of the use of force by the police as somewhat to very accurate (see Table 1).

### **Perceptions Since August 2014**

As anticipated, respondents reported that since August 2014, there was a significant and negative shift in their perceptions of police-community relations nationally. Relative to police perceptions of the overall relationship nationally, there was a 39.2 point percentage drop in the number of respondents who rated the relationship as being somewhat to very strong. Additionally, nearly two thirds of the respondents (63.7%) rated the overall post-Ferguson police community relationship nationally as somewhat to very weak. This weakened view overall also was reflected in respondent perceptions of significantly reduced levels of community confidence nationally relative to the public safety mission of policing as well as the appropriateness of the use of force by the police: 51.0% rated the community's confidence in the ability of the police to reduce crime and enhance public safety 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 in an apparent reaction to the "hands up, don't shoot" narrative, 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 (see Table 2).

As with their perceptions for the time period prior to August 2014, as compared to the national view, in the months since August 2014, respondents were more positive about police-community relations locally; 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 and enhance public safety 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, the negative nature of media coverage did emerge at the local level as well. For the period since August 2014, less than half of the respondents (44.6%) rated local news media coverage of the police generally as somewhat to very positive; and less than half (40.7%) rated the local news media coverage of the use of force by the police as somewhat to very accurate (see Table 2).

### **Acknowledging the Local Impact and Significance of These Changing Perceptions**

While ILACP members were far more positive about the strength of their local police-community relations both prior to and after August 2014, local relations were adversely impacted by the negative nature of the post-Ferguson national discussion. Relative to police perceptions of the overall relationship locally within their own jurisdictions, there was a 11.8 point percentage 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

**Table 2. Police Perceptions of Community Relations Since August 2014 (n = 204)**

Police Perceptions of	Rating	Locally		Nationally	
		No.	Percent	No.	Percent
Overall police–community relations					
	Somewhat to very strong	167	82.0	34	16.7
	Somewhat to very weak	21	10.3	130	63.7
Community confidence in the ability of the police to reduce crime and enhance public safety					
	Somewhat to very strong	164	80.4	30	14.7
	Somewhat to very weak	13	6.4	104	51.0
Community confidence that the police utilize force appropriately					
	Somewhat to very strong	141	69.1	14	6.9
	Somewhat to very weak	16	7.8	141	69.1
Overall news media coverage of the police generally					
	Somewhat to very positive	91	44.6	3	1.5
	Somewhat to very negative	50	24.5	193	94.6
News media coverage of the use of force by the police					
	Somewhat to very accurate	83	40.7	4	2.0
	Somewhat to very inaccurate	47	23.0	178	87.3

by 7.4 points. Furthermore, there were negative impacts on their perceptions relating to the strength of (1) community confidence in the ability of the police to reduce crime and enhance public safety, down 11.8 points; and (2) community confidence in the appropriateness of the use of force by police, down 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 (see Table 3).

The survey responses indicate that there were statistically significant correlations between the perceptions of police–community relations overall and the critical issue of community confidence in the appropriateness of the use of force by the police both locally and nationally. The since-August 2014 correlations between these two variables were strong: locally at the 0.743 level ( $p < 0.01$ ) and nationally at the 0.713 level ( $p < 0.01$ ).

Similarly, statistically significant correlations were found relative to respondent assessments of the strength of police–community relations overall and of the community’s confidence in the ability of the police to reduce crime. The since-August 2014 correlations between these two variables were strong nationally at the 0.734 level ( $p < 0.01$ ), and even stronger locally at the 0.821 level ( $p < 0.01$ ). As such, the survey results indicate two important factors: (1) not only can fluctuations in the level of confidence the community has in the appropriateness of the use of force by police impact the strength of police–community relations overall, but also (2) a downturn in confidence overall reduces the level of community confidence relative to the ability of the police to meet their core mission of reducing crime and enhancing public safety.

### Expectations Going Forward

Since August 2014, national events—or more accurately, local events across the country

**Table 3. Change in Police Perceptions of Community Relations Prior to/Since August 2014  
(n = 204)**

Police Perceptions of	Rating	Locally		Nationally	
		No.	Percent	No.	Percent
Overall police–community relations					
	Somewhat to very strong	-24	-11.8	-80	-39.2
	Somewhat to very weak	15	7.35	101	49.5
Community confidence in the ability of the police to reduce crime and enhance public safety					
	Somewhat to very strong	-24	-11.8	-99	-48.5
	Somewhat to very weak	8	3.92	74	36.3
Community confidence that the police utilize force appropriately					
	Somewhat to very strong	-44	-21.6	-105	-51.5
	Somewhat to very weak	11	5.4	111	54.4
Overall news media coverage of the police generally					
	Somewhat to very positive	-30	-14.7	-41	-20.1
	Somewhat to very negative	32	15.7	88	43.1
News media coverage of the use of force by the police					
	Somewhat to very accurate	-32	-15.7	-30	-14.7
	Somewhat to very inaccurate	17	8.34	61	29.9

connected by national news coverage—have contributed to a weakening of local police–community relationships. However, as observed by criminologist Art Lurigio, “like politics, all policing is local” (Schaper, 2013). As such, local police agencies cannot directly impact the national relationship. Improving police–community relations is work that must occur at the local level. In the survey, the final two close-ended questions allowed the respondents to record their expectations going forward over the next 18 months relative to the police–community relationship at the local and national 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, 10.3% locally and 48.9% nationally, 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 respondents’ future expectations locally to the survey’s response and resource questions, the six response approaches for improving local police–community relations were examined.

### **Survey Results—Overview of Post-August 2014 Agency Responses**

Beyond capturing general perceptions for the prior to and post August 2014 time periods, the respondents provided key agency response information since August 2014. The survey covered six agency response areas: (1) policy and procedure, (2) training of agency personnel, (3) guidance and technical assistance, (4) informational sessions, (5) general coordination and collaboration with the community, and (6) specific community engagement with key groups and institutions.

## Response Area 1: Policy and Procedure

Police agencies must ensure that their policy and procedures meet their agency's needs relative to its mission in a manner that fully complies with all legal mandates, fosters acceptance and compliance among its members, and is consistent with the expectations of the community. Additionally, as noted in the after-action report prepared by the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) in September 2015 following the civil unrest that occurred in Baltimore during April and May 2015, agencies must not only have the correct policies, it is critical that their policies are properly organized and easily accessible to the agency's members (Wexler, 2015).

Since August 2014, 61.3% of the respondents ( $n = 204$ ) reported changes in at least one of the following topic areas: deadly force, 33.3%; non-deadly force, 27.9%; "Terry Stops" and stop and frisk authority, 27.9%; fine only and petty offense enforcement, 17.7%; First Amendment and protest activities, 9.8%; crowd control, 10.3%; the use of police body cameras, 18.6%; and citizen complaints of police misconduct, 12.8%. Relative to these policy changes, 20.3% of the changes involved restricting officer discretion, and 56.8% of the changes involved expanding supervisory or management oversight. Of respondents who did not indicate any policy or procedural changes in the eight key policy areas since August 2014, 30.4% expected local police-community relations to improve going forward. Of respondents who indicated that their agency changed policy or procedures in at least one of the eight topic areas, 43.2% expected the local police-community relationship to improve over the next 18 months, and just 12.7% expected the local relationship to worsen.

## Response Area 2: Training of Agency Personnel

Training is a critical task for police agencies and one that, when ignored, can have both

significant financial and human costs. The U.S. Conference of Mayors Working Group on strengthening police-community relations highlighted the need for training that goes beyond covering police procedures and focused upon the role of the police in a democracy and constitutional policing; fosters community engagement and the treatment of all citizens with dignity and respect; concentrates on preventing the use of unnecessary force; provides instruction on how to de-escalate incidents, minimizing the need for force; addresses the strategies needed to effectively interact with the mentally ill; and includes trainers from outside the law enforcement profession (Cochran, 2015, p. 3). The survey respondents were asked whether their agency conducted training in ten key areas: (1) deadly force, (2) non-deadly force, (3) "Terry Stops," (4) officer discretion in fine only and petty offense enforcement, (5) de-escalation and conflict resolution, (6) police legitimacy and procedural justice, (7) First Amendment activities and protests, (8) crowd control, (9) the use of body cameras, and (10) mental health and crisis intervention team (CIT) approaches. For each topic, respondents were asked to identify which of four key training methods were used: (1) roll call topic, (2) a refresher bulletin, (3) computer training, and/or (4) classroom training.

Since August 2014, only 8.0% of the respondents indicated that their agency had not conducted deadly force training, with 68.0% reporting classroom training on this topic. Similarly, only 10.2% of the respondents indicated that their agency had not conducted non-deadly force training. However, 30.5% of respondents reported no de-escalation or conflict resolution training had been conducted; 30.5% reported no mental health or CIT training; and 54.0% reported no police legitimacy or procedural justice training. Interestingly, while the use of police body cameras was a topic nationally, only about one third (32.2%) of survey respondents reported that their

agency had conducted training on the use of police body cameras.

Respondents also indicated that there were significant unmet training needs. Relative to whether additional resources were needed to improve police–community relationships, the respondents were allowed to identify up to three areas of need or indicate that no additional resources were needed. Only the need for funding for additional officers, at 52.6% ( $n = 175$ ), surpassed the frequency at which two key training needs were identified. The need for additional mental health and CIT training was cited by 40.6% of the respondents, and 37.1% of the respondents indicated a need for additional de-escalation training.

### **Response Area 3: Guidance and Technical Assistance**

The U.S. Conference of Mayors Working Group reported that the city government as a whole should be engaged in the efforts to build trust for the police within the community. Additionally, the working group also reported that “the federal government has a key role in support of these efforts with both financial and technical resources” (Cochran, 2015, pp. 2, 6). The level of guidance on community expectations that the respondents reported receiving from the following key institutions indicated dissatisfaction in this area of support ( $n = 174$ ): (1) local elected officials of whom 26.7% of the respondents indicated the guidance they received was “far too little” or “too little,” and only 14.5% indicated the guidance was “very helpful”; (2) the county prosecutor’s office of whom 34.9% of respondents indicated the guidance received was “far too little” or “too little,” and only 16.3% indicated the guidance was “very helpful”; (3) the Illinois General Assembly of whom 52.3% of the respondents indicated the guidance received was “far too little” or “too little,” and only 2.9% indicated the guidance was “very helpful”; (4) the U.S. Justice Department of whom 43.0% of the respondents indicated the guidance received was “far too little” or

“too little,” and only 6.4% indicated the guidance was “very helpful”; and (5) the U.S. Congress of whom 50.3% of the respondents indicated the guidance received was “far too little” or “too little,” and only 0.6% indicated the guidance was “very helpful.”

Overall, the respondents ( $n = 174$ ) reported greater satisfaction with the level of technical assistance received from the following five sources: (1) ILACP, which received the highest combined positive rating (ranging from “adequate” to “very helpful”) of 81.5% of the respondents; (2) the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), which received a combined positive rating from 75.9% of respondents; (3) the PERF, which received a combined positive rating from 55.2% of respondents; (4) the Illinois Law Enforcement Training and Standards Board (ILETSB) received a combined positive rating from 54.0% of the respondents; and (5) local colleges and universities, which received the fewest number of combined positive ratings from the respondents, just 25.9%. Additionally, local colleges and universities were the only technical assistance providers with a greater number of combined negative ratings (34.5%) from the respondents as compared to the number of positive ratings for this resource grouping.

### **Response Area 4: Informational Sessions**

Informational sessions, which are generally single event or specific incident-based approaches, were the first of three types of direct community outreach efforts examined. These sessions can be utilized by police departments to increase the knowledge and understanding of others outside the agency regarding key department procedures and processes. Informational sessions on core topics can also be helpful in the effort to eliminate misunderstandings and help build community trust. Respondents were asked whether their agency conducted sessions on four key topics: (1) the use-of-force (UOF) model, (2) stop and frisk authority, (3) the dangers

of noncompliance and resisting arrest, and (4) the process for citizen complaints regarding police misconduct. The respondents also were asked whether these sessions were conducted with the general public, school youth, elected officials, news media, or other groups.

Relative to this outreach approach, since August 2014, overall, 60.1% of the respondents ( $n = 188$ ) reported conducting at least one informational session with the general public, local elected officials, school youth, and/or the news media. Regarding the general public, one third (33.0%) of respondents reported sessions covering stop and frisk authority as well as the process for citizens to make complaints regarding the police (32.8%). More than one quarter of the respondents reported sessions with the general public covering the UOF model (26.6%), and the dangers of noncooperation and resisting arrest (28.9%). Regarding sessions conducted with local elected officials, just under one quarter of the respondents reported sessions covering the UOF model (24.5%), stop and frisk authority (23.9%), and the citizen complaint process (23.1%). Only one fifth of the respondents reported sessions with school youth covering stop and frisk authority (21.8%) and the dangers of noncooperation and resisting arrest (19.3%). Given the extent to which negative and inaccurate media coverage was an issue, informational sessions with the news media were less frequent than might have been expected. Only 16.5% of the respondents reported sessions on the UOF model, 12.3% on the dangers of resisting arrest, and 11.2% on the stop and frisk authority of the police.

### **Response Area 5: General Coordination and Collaboration with the Community**

As identified in the January 2015 report from the U.S. Conference of Mayors' Working Group on strengthening police-community relations in America's cities, "Police should work to establish trusting relationships with community residents that can be the foundation for working together in times of crisis"

(Cochran, 2015, p. 4). The outreach efforts in the area go beyond basic informational sessions. Survey respondents were asked to indicate the level of their agency's collaboration with seven key groups: (1) block clubs, (2) business and civic groups, (3) faith-based organizations, (4) mental health providers, (5) park districts, (6) schools, and (7) social service providers. For each of these groups, respondents were asked to indicate where the collaboration was "none" (0 points), "very low" (1 point), "low" (2 points), "moderate" (3 points), "high" (4 points), or "very high" (5 points). As there were seven types of groups and as many as five points per group on the rating scale, the maximum rating from a single respondent was 35 points. Additionally, for these groups, respondents also were asked to identify the level of frequency of coordination, with options ranging from "infrequent," which was referenced as "only after an incident"; "sporadic," which was referenced as "having no regular pattern"; or "regular," which included daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, and annual response options.

Of respondents who indicated collaboration responses totaling 0 to 16 points, 26.9% expected the local police-community relationship to improve over the next 18 months. However, of respondents who indicated responses totaling 17 to 34 points (no responses totaled the maximum 35 points), more than half (53.1%) of the respondents expected an improved local police-community relationship going forward—nearly double. Additionally, just 4.9% of the respondents falling within the 17 to 34 point range expected future local police-community relations to worsen. Of the respondents who indicated that the frequency of coordination with these groups was no more than "infrequent" or "sporadic," just 16.7% expected local police-community relations to improve going forward. Conversely, of those who indicated some level of regular coordination with at least one group, 44.3% expected the relationship to improve over the next 18 months—more than two and a half times higher. Furthermore,



only 9.0% of the respondents who reported their agencies “regularly” coordinated with at least one community group expected a worsened police–community relationship going forward.

### **Response Area 6: Specific Engagement with Key Community Groups and Institutions**

As noted at the IACP’s October 2014 summit on police–community relations, “there is no ‘end game’ in developing relationships with the community” (Yousry, 2015, p. 11), meaning that such efforts must be ongoing. Yet, in times of tensions, even police departments with ongoing efforts may seek to place increased focus on key community groups and institutions. For the period since August 2014, the respondents reported on specific agency engagement with eight key community groups and institutions ( $n = 192$ ): (1) community policing or problem-solving meetings with the general public relative to local crime, with 81.2% of the respondents reporting such efforts, of which 25.7% reported new or enhanced efforts in this area; (2) conducting outreach meetings with a minority population focus, reported by 57.8% of the respondents, of which 15.6% were new or enhanced efforts; (3) conducting meetings with a youth focus, reported by 75.4% of the respondents, of which 20.1% were new or enhanced efforts; (4) participation in relationship building programs at schools, which at 84.4% was the most frequently reported approach by respondents and which also included the highest percentage (27.1%) of new or enhanced efforts; (5) participating in activities with faith-based organizations, reported by 67.7% of the respondents, of which 19.3% were new or enhanced efforts; (6) participating in activities with business and civic groups, reported by 79.3% of the respondents, of which 17.6% were new or enhanced initiatives; (7) participating in forums conducted by local elected officials, reported by 70.3% of the respondents, of which 15.1% were new or enhanced efforts; and (8) participating in forums conducted

by local colleges, universities, or Civil Rights organizations, with just 45.0% of the respondents reporting such engagement, the least frequently reported approach, and of which only 14.1% were new or enhanced efforts, which was also the lowest level reported.

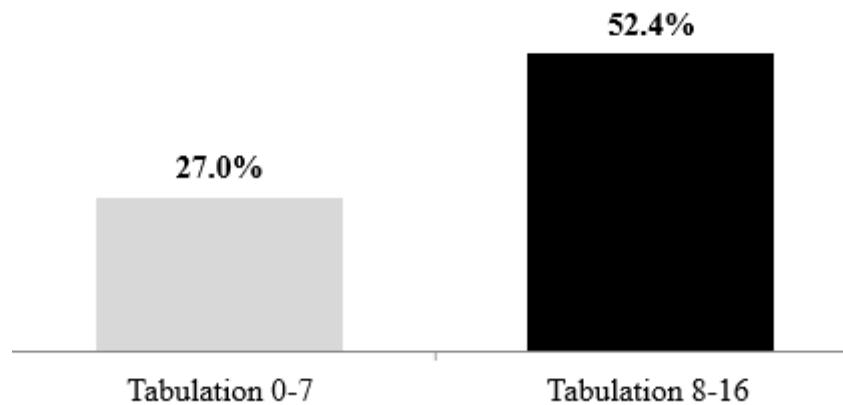
In analyzing these community engagement responses further, a tabulation scale was prepared with (1) responses that indicated continuation of existing efforts receiving 1 point; (2) responses that indicated enhancement or initiation of new efforts in the area receiving 2 points, and (3) responses that the agency did not engage in any such efforts in this area receiving 0 points.

With eight community group types, the maximum possible score under the scale was 16 points. Of the respondents who indicated responses totaling 0 to 7 points, just 27.0% expected the local police–community relationship to improve over the next 18 months. Of respondents who indicated responses totaling 8 to 16 points, more than half (52.4%) expected improved local police–community relationships going forward—nearly double (see Figure 1). Furthermore, just 4.8% of the respondents falling within the 8 to 16 point range expected future local police–community relations to worsen.

### **Discussion**

The extensive survey of ILACP members active in law enforcement during the study period, and then the corresponding in-depth analysis of that data, determined that the respondents perceived that police–community relations had weakened significantly in the months following August 2014, the month in which a highly controversial police-involved shooting occurred in Ferguson, Missouri. While in the months prior to August 2014, 55.9% of the survey respondents rated the strength of police–community relations nationally as somewhat or very strong, the percentage of respondents

**Figure 1. Percentage of Respondents Expecting Police–Community Relations to Improve Going Forward by Number of Specific Engagement Efforts**



who continued to believe the relationship was strong dropped by 39.2 points, and nearly two thirds (63.7%) rated the strength of the national relationship since August 2014 as somewhat weak or very weak.

The survey data also support the anecdotal assumptions that this weakening was associated with extensive media coverage of the Ferguson and other high-profile officer-involved shooting incidents. Respondent perceptions of the overall strength of police–community relations were found to have a statistically significant correlation to their perceptions of community confidence in the appropriateness of the use of force by the police. The since-August 2014 correlations between these two variables were strong relative to the national relationship at the 0.734 level ( $p < 0.01$ ), and even stronger relative to local relationships at the 0.821 level ( $p < 0.01$ ). Such was the case even though the number of controversial police-involved incidents highlighted in the media paled in comparison to the millions of noncontroversial police–citizen encounters that occur across the nation annually. However, even in relative small numbers, and even if media accounts of the facts of the actual incidents were less than fully accurate or engaged in sensationalized coverage, community reactions to such

incidents were influenced by community perceptions. The anti-police protests in Ferguson and elsewhere in the country were about more than the specific facts of the Ferguson incident (Casselmann, 2014).

For the months prior to August 2014, the survey data indicate the respondents (93.6%) overwhelmingly reported that police–community relations in their jurisdictions were somewhat strong or very strong. However, as observed by Chief James Brown of Topeka, Kansas, “When issues happen elsewhere in the United States in policing, it affects the capital city of Kansas” (Wexler, 2016, p. 38) and other jurisdictions across the country. While few police departments in Illinois directly experienced a recent high-profile and/or controversial officer-involved incident, the survey data did indicate local impact within Illinois from controversial officer-involved incidents elsewhere. For the months since August 2014, the percentage of respondents rating their local police–community relations as somewhat to very strong dropped 11.8 points, and the percentage of respondents rating their local relations as somewhat or very weak rose by 7.4 points. Adding further significance to the impact on local police–community relations since August 2014, there were clear drops in the percentage of respondents reporting

strong community confidence locally in (1) the appropriateness of the use of force by the police, down 21.6 points; and (2) the ability of the police to reduce crime and enhance public safety, down 11.8 points.

It bears noting that 48.9% of the respondents expected the overall national police-community relationship to worsen in the months ahead, and just 24.7% expected the national relationship to improve. At a July 2015 national conference on police-community relations, Reverend Tony Lee of Hillcrest Heights, Maryland noted, "With the 24-hour news cycle, so much of what you see is negative, which often causes people in the community to forget a lot of the positive strides that we make." He cautioned police and community leaders not to allow what has happened nationally "to override the good work we have done in our local community" (Wexler, 2016, pp. 26-27). As the national relationship is in reality an amalgam of the various local relationships across the country, strengthening the national relationship can only be accomplished through the strengthening of local police-community relationships. On this point, the survey provides some reason for optimism as only 10.3% of the respondents expected their local police-community relations to worsen in the months ahead, and 39.1% expected their local relationships to improve.

### **Conclusions on Improving Police-Community Relations**

As part of the analysis, six potential agency response areas post-August 2014 were examined: (1) department policy and procedure modifications, (2) training of agency personnel, (3) the acquisition of guidance and technical assistance from key institutions, (4) utilization of informational sessions on key policing topics, (5) general collaboration and coordination with key community groups, and (6) specific community engagement efforts.

### **Response Areas 1, 2, and 3**

Without question, under Response Area 1, police executives must ensure that the written policies and procedures of their agencies meet the established legal standards, but they must also ensure that these policies and procedures are consistent with community expectations and safeguard both officer and public safety. Second, under Response Area 2, the training of agency personnel is essential for ensuring that actual agency practices and officer performance are not only consistent with the law, department policy, and community expectations, but also enhances both officer and public safety. Furthermore, in reaching these critical agency capacities through Response Area 3, agency leaders can benefit from seeking guidance on community expectations of police-community relations from key public officials when such guidance is available, as well as gain technical support from key professional institutions and academic researchers.

In examining Response Areas 1, 2, and 3 in comparison to the expectations of the respondents relative to police-community relations going forward, the extent of participation did correspond to the level of optimism going forward. Of the respondents who answered the questions regarding all six agency response approaches since August 2014 ( $n = 174$ ), half (50.0%) indicated lower participation levels: (1) their agencies had not made any policy or procedure modifications, (2) their agencies undertook fewer than ten of the 40 possible training efforts surveyed, and (3) a rating of eight or lower relative to the extent of helpfulness of the guidance and technical assistance received by their agencies. These respondents accounted for 66.7% of the respondents who expected local police-community relations to worsen in the months ahead. Conversely, the other half of respondents indicated higher participation levels relative to Response Areas 1, 2, and 3, and they were more optimistic about the future strength of local police-community

relations. These respondents indicated that (1) their agencies had made at least one policy or procedure modification, (2) their agencies engaged in ten or more of the 40 possible training efforts surveyed, and (3) a rating of nine or higher was given relative to the extent of helpfulness of the guidance and technical assistance received by their agencies. The respondents in this grouping accounted for 58.8% of the respondents who expected local police–community relations to improve in the months ahead.

### **Response Areas 4, 5, and 6**

The use of informational sessions, general collaboration and coordination with key community groups, and specific community engagement efforts by the police were found to be critical strategies in the effort to improve local police–community relations. Of the respondents who answered the questions examining all six agency response areas ( $n = 174$ ), 39.7% indicated a lower level of utilization of these response approaches: (1) their agency did not conduct any informational sessions; (2) their agency did not or only infrequently or sporadically coordinated with key community groups, and the level of collaboration by their agency with these groups was rated as being 16 or less on a scale of 35 possible points; and (3) their agency engaged in specific community engagement efforts that rated seven or less on a scale of 16 possible points. The respondents in this grouping were far less optimistic about the future of local police–community relations, and they comprised 72.2% of the respondents who anticipated local police–community relations to worsen in the months ahead.

Conversely, the respondents who indicated higher participation levels relative to Response Areas 4, 5, and 6, were far more optimistic about the future strength of local police–community relations. These respondents indicated that since August 2014, their agencies (1) conducted at least one informational session; (2) 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 (3) engaged in 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, local, state, and federal 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 to strengthen police–community relations, only the need for more sworn personnel (52.8%) rated higher among respondents—40.6% of the respondents identified the need for assistance in providing mental health/CIT training, and 37.1% identified the need for additional UOF 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 UOF model. Even fewer respondents reported sessions with the media covering the dangers inherent when citizens resist arrest (12.3%) and in the “Terry Stop” authority of the police (11.2%). On this point, an insight offered by Lou Waters, the vice-mayor of Oro Valley, Arizona, bears noting: “The news media must be included in building community trust” (Wexler, 2016, p. 69). The advice is of enhanced relevance given that, prior to becoming a city official, Waters was among the founding members of CNN’s original cable television news team, which helped to spark the 24-hour news cycle.

Third, and most importantly, the survey analysis indicated that respondent confidence for the future of local police–community relations was positively associated with the extent to which the respondents reported their agency had participated in six key response efforts. All six response approaches were of some benefit. Response Areas 1, 2, and 3, concerning policy and procedure, training of agency personnel, and guidance and technical assistance, were important approaches in providing agencies with a necessary foundation. Response Areas 4, 5, and 6 were found to be the approaches that allowed for greater respondent confidence in the ability of agencies to build improved police–community relations beyond a basic foundation. These three key approaches consisted of the use of informational sessions on potentially controversial policing topics, regular collaboration and coordination with key groups within the community, and specific community engagement efforts. Fundamentally, building safer and stronger communities is an effort built upon trust and an active partnership between individual local police departments and the communities they serve. The survey data provide 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, the sustained implementation of these strategies is the core recommendation that local police executives can draw from this study.

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- Thomas J. Lemmer** is a commander with a major Midwestern law enforcement agency. He has more than 30 years of experience in

public safety positions, including 20 years of advanced law enforcement supervisory and managerial experience. Lemmer has extensive gang enforcement and juvenile crime intervention expertise. He has served in ethnically diverse and predominantly 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. Lemmer has seven years of experience as a Criminal Justice undergraduate instructor with Loyola University and is an experienced inservice 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.

*Contact Information*

Thomas J. Lemmer  
thomas.lemmer@comcast.net