POLICE SERVICES IN ALBANY: CITIZENS' VIEWS

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Points of view in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the City of Albany or the Albany Police Department.

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Introduction

Citizens' satisfaction with police services forms one of the 'bottom lines' for any American police agency. Citizens are, in a sense, customers of the police, and the social value of police services turns to some degree on citizens' assessments of service quality. But because police services are not delivered through market mechanisms, citizens' valuations are not measured by what they willingly pay as the service is rendered.[1] Instead, police executives and city officials must rely on other information about whether and to what degree the services that are provided by police are meeting citizens' expectations.

One well-established method of obtaining such information is to survey citizens about their assessments of and experiences with the police.[2] In 2001, under a contract with the Albany Police Department (APD), the Hindelang Criminal Justice Research Center conducted a survey of Albany residents. The survey addressed residents' assessments of the quality of police services and their perceptions of public safety problems in their neighborhoods. In this report, we summarize city-wide survey results concerning residents' assessments of police services, including residents' overall satisfaction with police services in their neighborhoods, their assessments of police services along several specific dimensions of service delivery, and for those who had contact with the Albany police during the twelve months preceding the survey, their satisfaction with police service in their contacts. Future reports will summarize results concerning citizen satisfaction in each APD patrol zone, and concerning residents' perceptions of public safety problems in their neighborhoods.

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[1] The analogy between police agencies and private sector firms has important limitations. Writing about the application of "total quality management" (or TQM) to policing, Larry Hoover observes that "the issue of definition of customer satisfaction for police agencies is far from a simple one"; see Larry T. Hoover, "Translating Total Quality Management From the Private Sector to Policing," in Larry T. Hoover (ed.), *Quantifying Quality in Policing* (Washington: Police Executive Research Forum, 1996). The analogy has another limitation also: citizens are not only consumers of police services but also "co-producers" of public safety, in that they contribute to public safety both independently (e.g., by taking steps to reduce their risk of victimization, and by intervening directly to curb disorderly or even illegal behavior) and in conjunction with the police (e.g., by providing information, or through collective crime prevention efforts). See, e.g., Gordon P. Whitaker, "Coproduction: Citizen Participation in Service Delivery," *Public Administration Review* 40 (1980): 240-246.

[2] Generally, see Kenneth Webb and Harry P. Hatry, *Obtaining Citizen Feedback: The Application of Citizen Surveys to Local Governments* (Washington: Urban Institute, 1973), and with respect to the police particularly see Bureau of Justice Assistance, *A Police Guide to Surveying Citizens and Their Environment* (Washington: Author, 1993), Deborah Weisel, *Conducting Community Surveys: A Practical Guide for Law Enforcement Agencies* (Washington: U.S. Department of Justice, 1999), and Robert H. Langworthy (ed.), *Measuring What Matters: Proceedings from the Policing Research Institute Meetings* (Washington: National Institute of Justice, 1999).

Survey Methodology

We surveyed randomly selected households in Albany by phone, between July 2, 2001, and October 4, 2001. One adult in each household was interviewed, if s/he consented to the interview. We sampled households from each of the 1,924 blocks in the city on which we found at least one residential phone number in a reverse phone directory. The number of households per block ranged from 1 to over 200, although the number was less than 20 on 80% of the blocks; we sampled one household from every block and a second household from blocks with 20 or more households. We conducted interviews with 962 respondents, who represented 866 (45%) of the blocks; 900 of the interviews were completed to the end of the interview schedule, and those 900 respondents represent 826 blocks. (Interviews with 35 additional respondents, who were later determined to live outside of Albany, have been excluded from the analysis.) Because households selected from smaller blocks had a higher probability of selection for the survey, the respondents are weighted in order to make the sample representative of the population.

With currently available 2000 census data, we can evaluate the representativeness of the sample only in terms of age, race, ethnicity, and home ownership. The age distribution of survey respondents closely parallels that of the population: the median or typical age is nearly the same in the sample as in the (adult) population, and the proportion of senior citizens is nearly identical. Equal proportions of the households in the sample and the population reported having members who are under 18 years of age. To some degrees, however, the sample overrepresents whites and home owners and underrepresents African-Americans, Hispanics, and renters. These discrepancies must be considered in interpreting city-wide results for phenomena that vary across these socio-demographic categories, which we note as relevant below.

Residents' Views of the Police

Residents' Satisfaction with the Police

As Figure 1 shows, more than three fourths of Albany residents are satisfied overall with the quality of police services in their neighborhoods; of those who expressed an opinion, nearly 80% are satisfied. This estimate is accurate within a margin of +/- 2.7%.

One baseline against which this figure can be compared is formed by a twelve-city survey conducted in 1998 by the Census Bureau.[3] The twelve cities were Chicago, Kansas City, Knoxville, Los Angeles, Madison, New York, San Diego, Savannah, Spokane, Tucson, and Washington, DC. In those cities, the percent satisfied "with the police who serve their neighborhood" ranged from 78 (in Washington) to 97 (in Madison). The percentage

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[3] Steven K. Smith, Greg W. Steadman, Todd D. Minton, and Meg Townsend, *Criminal Victimization and Perceptions of Community Safety in 12 Cities, 1998* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics and Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 1999). The wording of the item in that survey, and especially the response categories, were somewhat different than the item used here, and it would be ill-advised to draw comparisons of the percent very satisfied or very dissatisfied, but the comparisons made above are safe to make.

satisfied in eight of the twelve cities was between 84 and 89 percent; each of the sample estimates is subject to a margin of error that is quite similar to that of the Albany survey. The direct comparison of Albany with any of these other cities could be misleading, because the cities differ in a number of respects that bear on citizens' satisfaction with the police, including the composition of their populations, the health of their economies, their histories of police-community relations, and so forth. Hence we might safely say that the proportion of Albany residents who are satisfied with the police services in their neighborhood is high in absolute terms, and it is within the range found in other cities, albeit toward the lower end of that range.
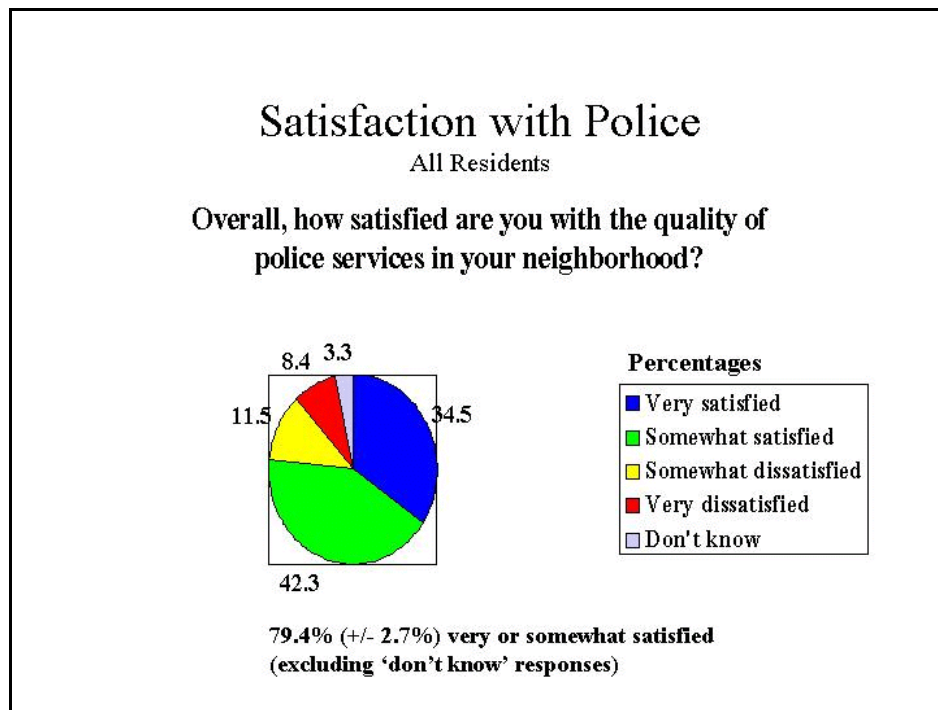
Satisfaction with Police
All Residents

Overall, how satisfied are you with the quality of police services in your neighborhood?

8.4 3.3

11.5

34.5

42.3

Percentages
- Very satisfied
- Somewhat satisfied
- Somewhat dissatisfied
- Very dissatisfied
- Don't know

79.4% (+/- 2.7%) very or somewhat satisfied (excluding 'don't know' responses)

Figure 1

Residents' satisfaction with police in their neighborhoods can also be assessed along several specific dimensions of service delivery. Following the Chicago Community Policing Evaluation Consortium, from whose survey instruments we borrowed a number of survey items, we examine three dimensions of police services.[4] The first is police performance, which encompasses:
•   how good a job the police are doing keeping order on the streets and sidewalks;
•   how good a job the police are doing preventing crime; and

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[4] Chicago Community Policing Evaluation Consortium, *Community Policing in Chicago, Year Seven: An Interim Report* (Chicago: Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, 2000).

- how good a job the police are doing helping people out after they have been victims of crime.

Figure 2 shows the percentages of residents with more favorable views (shaded green and blue), less favorable views (shaded yellow), and unfavorable views (with negative numbers, shaded red) of police performance. The percentages of residents who give police the higher marks of "good" or "very good" range from 29% (helping victims) to 53% (keeping order), with a margin of error between 3 and 3.3%. Some residents (15% to 43%) profess not to know how good a job the police are doing in each of these respects, and they are excluded from the bars (and thus the percentages do not sum to 100). Of those who have an opinion, half to three fifths believe that police are doing a good or very good job, and fairly small proportions–15% to 18%–believe that police are doing a poor job.

Figure 2

The second dimension of police service is police responsiveness, including:
- how responsive the police are to community concerns in the neighborhood;
- how good a job the police are doing working together with residents in the neighborhood to solve local problems; and
- how good a job the police are doing dealing with the problems that really concern people in the neighborhood.

Figure 3 shows the percentages of residents with more favorable views (shaded green and blue) and less favorable or unfavorable views (shaded yellow and red, respectively) of police responsiveness. (The response options for the item on responsiveness to community

concerns–very responsive, somewhat responsive, etc.–differed from those of the other items, and thus they appear in the chart with a hatch pattern.) Over 70% of residents believe that the police are very or somewhat responsive to community concerns in the neighborhood, while 17% do not know (and are not shown in the bar chart), and 12% believe that the police are very or somewhat unresponsive. Slightly more than half believe that the police are doing a good or very good job dealing with problems that concern residents of the neighborhood, and only 8% think that the police are doing a poor job; 14% do not know (and are excluded from the bar chart). Slightly less than two fifths of residents believe that police are doing a good or very good job in working together with residents to solve local problems, while almost one third do not know how good a job police are doing in this respect; 13% believe that the police are doing a poor job. Overall, then, small proportions of residents give the police poor marks for responsiveness, and about half or more assess police responsiveness positively.
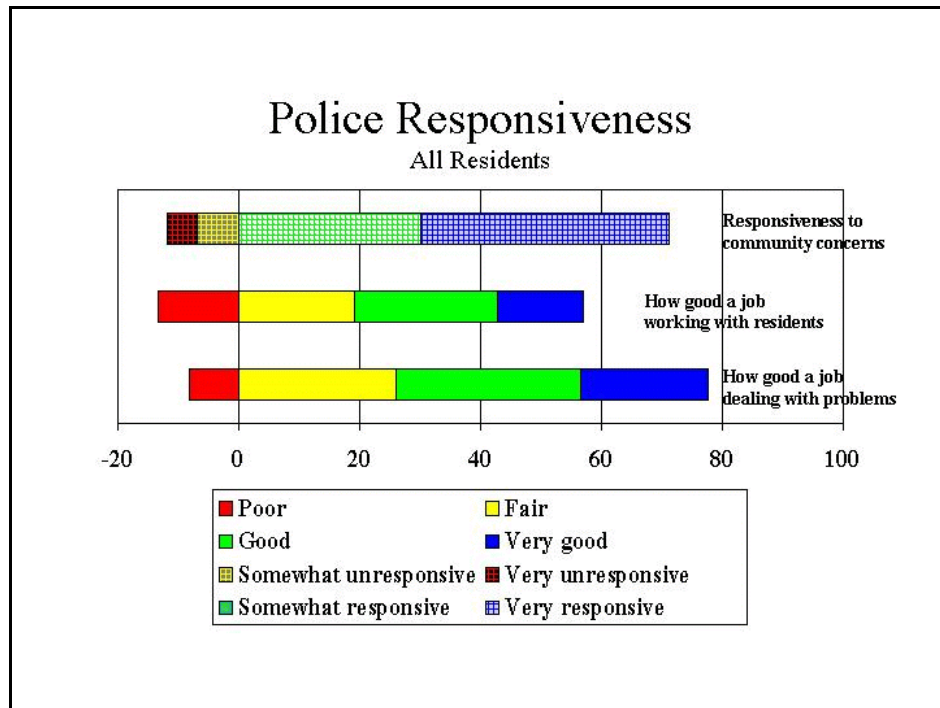

Figure 3

The third dimension is police demeanor, which encompasses
•   how polite the police are when dealing with people in the neighborhood;
•   how concerned the police are when dealing with people's problems in the neighborhood;
•   how helpful the police are when dealing with people in the neighborhood; and
•   how fair the police are when dealing with people in the neighborhood.
Figure 4 shows the percentages of residents with favorable views (with positive numbers shaded green and blue) and the percentages with unfavorable views (with negative numbers

shaded yellow and red) of police demeanor. Most residents believe that police are very or somewhat fair, helpful, concerned, and polite when dealing with people in their neighborhoods. The percentages (which do not sum to 100 because "don't know" responses are excluded) range from 65% to 73%, with a margin of error between 3 and 3.3%. Small proportions of residents–7 to 13 percent–rated police demeanor negatively.
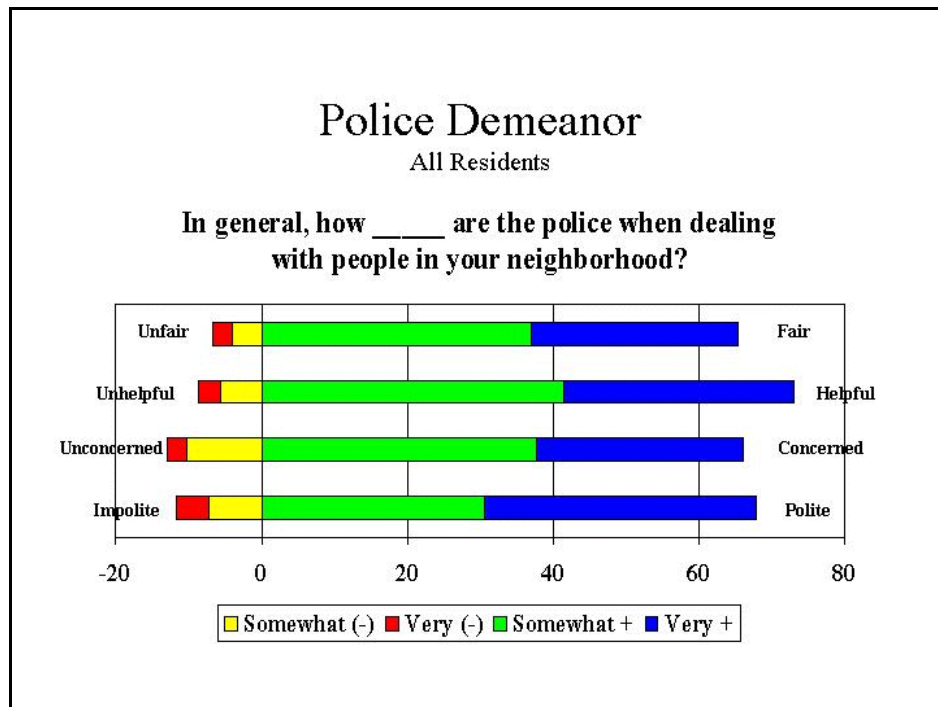

Figure 4

It appears, then, that residents are largely satisfied with the delivery of police services in their neighborhoods. Additional (albeit only preliminary) analysis indicates that satisfaction varies with residents' age, income, education, length of residence, home ownership, and race. Age is positively associated with satisfaction–that is, the older one is, the more satisfied with the police one tends to be–as is income and education. Length of residence is inversely associated with satisfaction–that is, the longer that one has lived at one's current residence, the less satisfied one is with the police. Home owners are, on average, less satisfied, and citizens who are neither white nor African-American are more satisfied with the police. (African-Americans are neither more nor less satisfied than whites are, when other socio-demographic factors are statistically controlled.) These differences will be explored more deeply when we examine variation in citizens' assessments of police across patrol zones. But none of these differences is so large in magnitude that the overrepresentation or underrepresentation of any socio-demographic group in the sample is likely to have substantially biased the city-wide estimate of satisfaction among Albany residents.

Further analysis also suggests that residents' satisfaction with the police is associated with the perceived level of disorder in their neighborhoods. In particular, people who perceive higher levels of social disorder in their neighborhood (e.g., groups hanging out, public drinking, drug dealing) are less satisfied, and people who perceive higher levels of physical disorder (e.g., abandoned cars, graffiti, vacant lots) are less satisfied. Remarkably, people who perceive crime (robberies, attacks, break-ins) as more of a problem are *not* less satisfied with the police. We might infer, then, that while citizens hold police responsible for reducing and controlling disorder, they do not hold the police responsible for controlling crime. We might also infer that residents' evaluations of police are influenced not only–and perhaps not primarily–by overt police practices, but also by the neighborhood environments in which they reside. One clear implication of this is that the quality of police services can be enhanced, in citizens' eyes, by successful police efforts to address problems of disorder in Albany's neighborhoods.

Perceptions of Problems with Police

Public perceptions of police practices, such as stopping suspicious people or cars, and police abuses, such as excessive force, are typically at the crux of problems of police-community relations. Perceptions of these phenomena, even apart from the actual incidence of abuse or misconduct, can give rise to tension between the community and the police. Figure 5 shows the percentages of residents who perceive as a problem:
• police corruption;
• police use of excessive force;
• police being too tough on the people they stop; and
• police stopping too many people.
For each issue, most residents do not perceive a problem with the Albany police (some said that they did not know, and they are not included in the bar chart). No more than one fifth of the residents saw any one of these as either some problem or a big problem; the percentages range from 11 to 18, with a margin of error between 2 and 2.5%. Of those who believe that excessive force is a problem, 41% said that it was verbal abuse only, while 59% said that it was (also or instead) physical abuse.

These perceptions are fairly strongly interrelated: people who perceive one of these problems tend to perceive others. Three fourths believe that none of these are problems (or profess not to know). Of those who see at least one of these as a problem, 44% see three or all four as problems. We note also that these perceptions are strongly associated with race: African-Americans and other racial or ethnic minorities are (independent of the effect of other socio-demographic characteristics) much more likely to perceive these behaviors as problems in their neighborhoods. To the extent that the sample underrepresents these groups, therefore, these sample statistics to some degree underestimate the proportions of Albany residents who perceive these issues as problems.
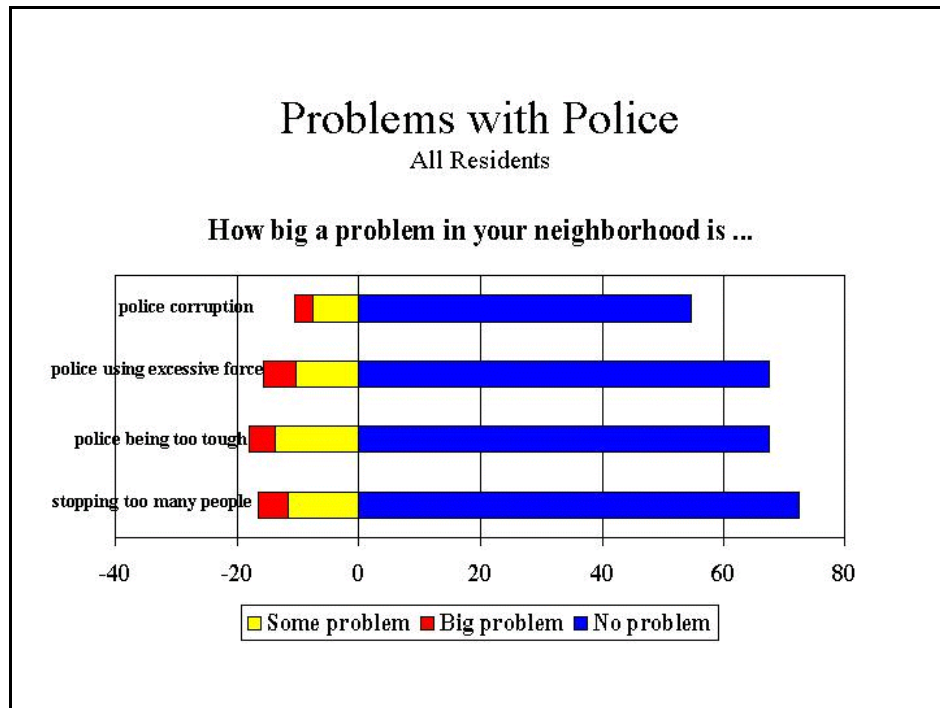
Figure 5

Contacts with the Albany Police

As Figure 6 illustrates, slightly less than half of all residents reported having had contact with the Albany police during the twelve months preceding the survey, either in calling for assistance by the police or in being stopped by the police. Forty percent had called for assistance, and fifteen percent had been stopped (some had both called and been stopped).

Assistance Calls

More than three fourths of those who called for assistance were very or somewhat satisfied with how their problem was handled in their most recent contact with the police; see Figure 7. (The margin of error in this estimate is +/- 4.9%, somewhat larger than that of estimates reported above, because the subsample of residents who called for assistance is smaller.)
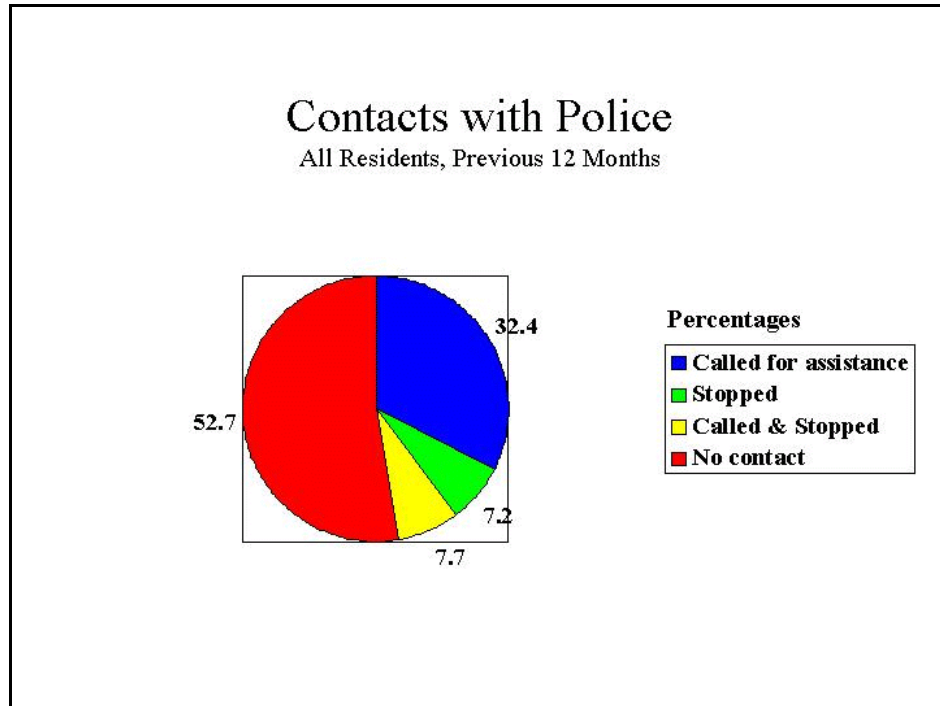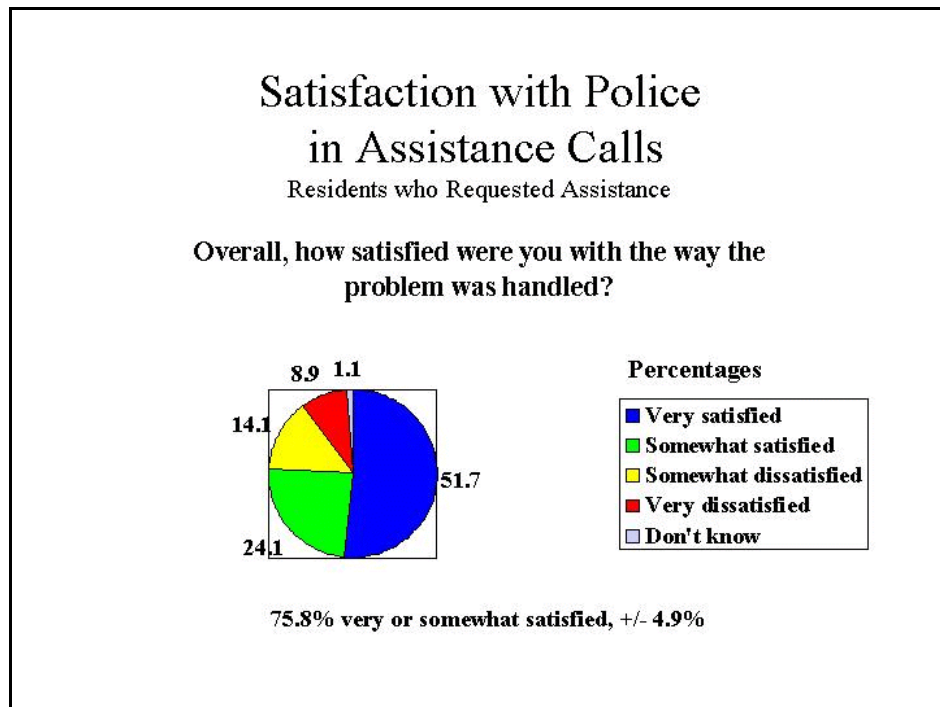
Figure 6

Figure 7

Dissecting further the views of those who had called for assistance, in terms of more specific dimensions of police service (see Figure 8), it is clear that most assessed the performance of the police favorably, with respect to whether the police:
•   took care of the problem;
•   were very or somewhat polite;
•   were very or somewhat helpful;
•   explained what action they would take in response; and
•   paid careful attention to what they had to say.
On each of these dimensions, 70% or more evaluated the contact with the police positively.
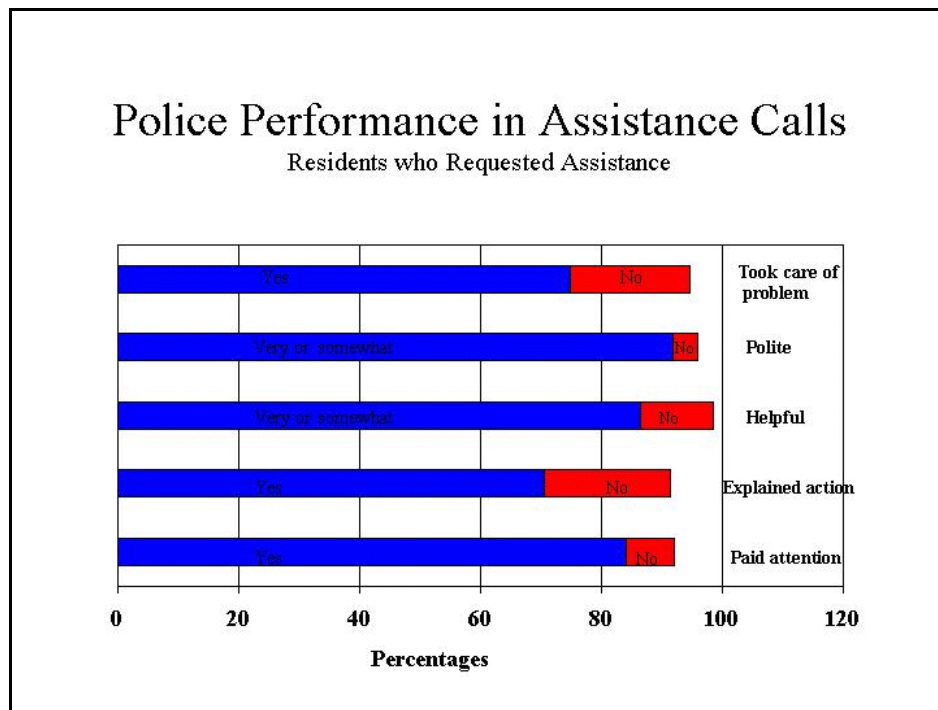

Figure 8

Stops

Figure 9 shows that almost three fourths of those who were stopped were very or somewhat satisfied with the way they were treated by the police in their most recent stop. (The margin of error in this estimate is +/- 7.3%, larger than that of estimates reported above, because the subsample of residents who were stopped by the police is much smaller.) This is really quite remarkable, in view of the common assumption that the people who are stopped by the police have a negative experience and assess the experience unfavorably. It is, however, quite consistent with previous research, which has also shown that substantial majorities of those who are stopped by the police are satisfied with how they are treated by

the police.[5] But we note also that those who were dissatisfied tended to be *very* dissatisfied, and not merely somewhat dissatisfied.
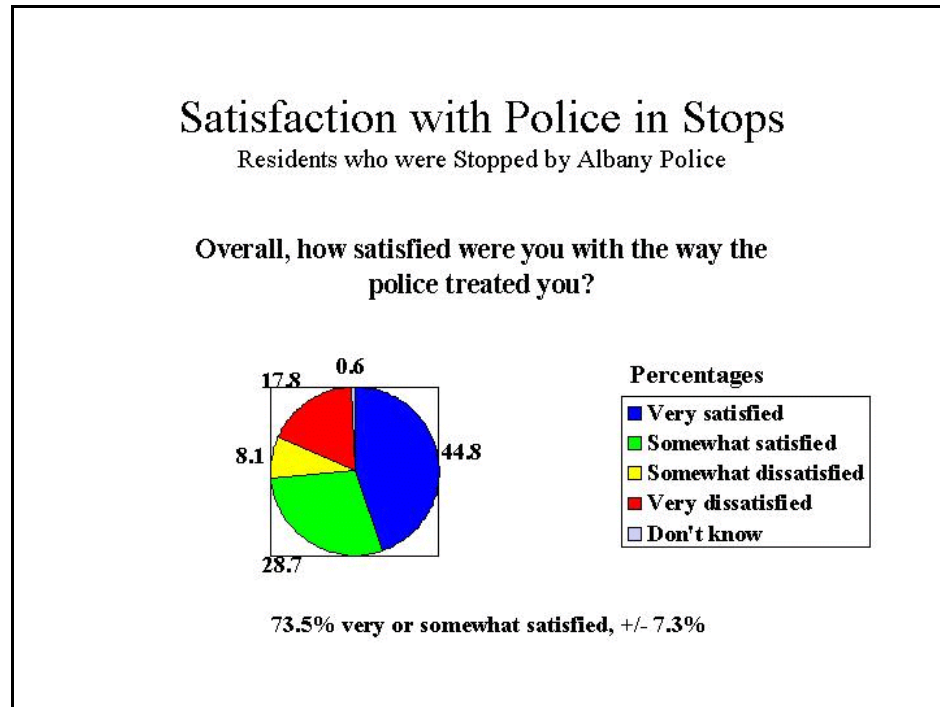

Figure 9

Of those who were stopped (see Figure 10), most assessed the performance of the police favorably, with respect to whether the police:
- were very or somewhat polite;
- were very or somewhat fair;
- explained the reasons for the stop;
- explained what action they would take[6]; and

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[5] We found comparably high levels of satisfaction among Indianapolis and St. Petersburg residents who had been stopped by police, based on survey data collected in 1996-1997, and also among residents of the St. Louis, Rochester, and Tampa-St. Petersburg metropolitan areas who had been stopped by the police, based on survey data collected in 1977; see Robert E. Worden and Shelagh E. Catlin, "Field Stops: Police-Citizen Interactions and Citizen Perceptions" (presented at the Annual Meeting of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences, 2001). Also see Patrick A. Langan, Lawrence A. Greenfeld, Steven K. Smith, Matthew R. Durose, and David J. Levin, *Contacts between Police and the Public: Findings from the 1999 National Survey* (Washington: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2001), who found that among all U.S. residents who had been involved in traffic stops with the police and surveyed in 1999, 84% felt that they had been stopped for a legitimate reason and 90% felt that the police had behaved properly during the stop.

[6] Note that with respect to 20% of the stops, respondents indicated that no action was necessary, and they are not shown in the bar for "explained action."

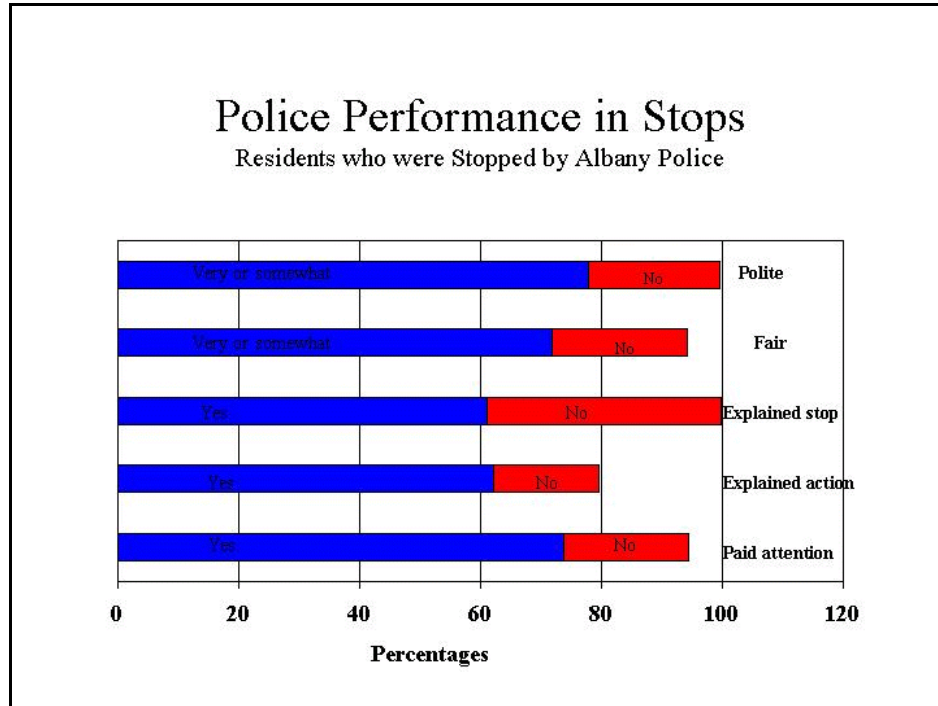•   paid careful attention to what they had to say.

Figure 10

Citizens' overall satisfaction with their treatment by the police when they are stopped is strongly associated with their assessments of these dimensions of police-citizen interaction, which of course suggests that their subjective experiences are to some degree shaped by what the police do (and do not do) during these encounters. Moreover, this also suggests that proactive patrol strategies that provide for high levels of police-initiated contact with citizens need not erode police-community relations, so long as the citizens are treated by police with respect and consideration.

Summary and Conclusions

The 2001 survey of Albany residents reveals fairly high levels of satisfaction with police services in Albany. The proportion of Albany residents who are satisfied overall with the police services in their neighborhood–nearly 80%–is high in absolute terms, and it is within the range found in other cities. Citizens' assessments of more specific dimensions of police service also tend to be positive. Two thirds to three fourths favorably evaluate the demeanor of police–how fair, helpful, concerned, and polite the police are when dealing with residents, while small proportions evaluate police demeanor unfavorably. Half to three fifths of those with an opinion have positive views of the performance of the police–in keeping order on the streets, preventing crime, and helping victims, while fairly small

proportions believe that police are doing a poor job in these respects. About half or more assess police responsiveness positively, and small proportions of residents give the police poor marks for responsiveness. Most residents do not perceive police corruption, police use of excessive force, or police stops as problems in their neighborhoods, although one tenth of residents (and perhaps more) perceive all or most of these as at least some problem in their neighborhoods.

Furthermore, residents who have recently had direct contact with the police also tend to be satisfied with police service. More than three fourths of those who called for assistance were very or somewhat satisfied with how their problem was handled, and 70% or more evaluated their interaction with the police positively. Almost three fourths of those who were stopped were very or somewhat satisfied with the way they were treated by the police in their most recent stop, and most assessed the interaction with the police–with respect to whether the police were polite, fair, and so forth–positively. One can see in the survey results systematic evidence that police services in Albany are for the most part meeting residents' expectations, even while one might see room for improvement.

We might add, with respect to prospective improvements, that citizens' perceptions of the police change slowly. The public's attitudes toward the police are fairly stable, and as we have seen, they are influenced not only by their experiences with the police but also by the conditions of the neighborhoods in which they reside. Previous research suggests that citizens' satisfaction with the police influence their subjective experiences with the police (when they call for assistance, or are stopped by the police) as much as or more than their subjective experiences influence their overall satisfaction: citizens with positive attitudes toward the police tend to evaluate their experiences with the police favorably, while citizens with negative attitudes toward the police tend to evaluate their experiences with the police unfavorably.[7] Hence we might expect that any improvements in the objective character of police-citizen contacts will yield only small increases in citizen satisfaction with the police and only in time. Previous research and the results summarized here also suggest, however, that citizen satisfaction with police services turns to some extent on citizens' perceptions of conditions for which they hold the police at least partly responsible, namely the level of social and physical disorder in their neighborhoods. While the amelioration of such conditions is by no means simple or straightforward, efforts to do so–and to form partnerships with residents toward these ends–appear likely to increase levels of citizen satisfaction with the police.

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[7] Steven G. Brandl, James Frank, Robert E. Worden, and Timothy S. Bynum, "Global and Specific Attitudes toward the Police: Disentangling the Relationship," *Justice Quarterly* (1994): 119-134.