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Strategies of Evaluating Police Performance

Abstract

Police in this country have never been immune from public criticism. But during the past decade negative reaction has increased markedly, both in intensity and in frequency of expression. Chronic grievances—corruption, strained relations with minority groups, ineffectualness in combating crime—have resurfaced (some would say they were never submerged), and new concerns over the growth of unions and politicization of police forces have arisen. While the police still enjoy a great deal of popular support, there are indications that, at least in certain segments of the population, a reevaluation of their image may be taking place.

Disciplines

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STRATEGIES OF EVALUATING POLICE PERFORMANCE

Frank J. Furstenberg, Jr.

Police in this country have never been immune from public criticism. But during the past decade negative reaction has increased markedly, both in intensity and in frequency of expression. Chronic grievances—corruption, strained relations with minority groups, ineffectualness in combating crime—have resurfaced (some would say they were never submerged), and new concerns over the growth of unions and politicization of police forces have arisen. While the police still enjoy a great deal of popular support, there are indications that, at least in certain segments of the population, a reevaluation of their image may be taking place.

Those who have pointed out problems in police interaction with the public have not been, on the whole, especially creative in proposing corrective solutions. Often they have engaged in the fantasy that ameliorative action would follow automatically once the complaints were aired. The police, for their part, have been generally unresponsive to the constructive proposals which have been put forth, probably in the hope that if only they could wait it out, public clamor would subside.

Perhaps, then, it is time to think of strategies for breaking this stalemate.

One relatively simple strategy would be to develop more sophisticated means of evaluating and monitoring police performance. Although evaluative procedures are not usually regarded as solutions, they can, in fact, serve as an institutionalized impetus for change. For example, devising a method by which police performance could be assessed regularly might have these consequences:

1. By taking periodic readings on the effectiveness of the police, it could be established whether the performance of a particular department was improving or deteriorating. Much of the energy now devoted to debating this question would then be redirected to more productive uses.
2. It would be possible, if the same measurements were applied in a number of cities, to determine the quality of a department relative to other police organizations. Both the police and public would have an established standard for comparison.
3. This standard could promote healthy competition between cities as well as within a given department; performance at the district, precinct, or even sub-precinct level could be compared.
4. Assuming that the evaluative measures were broad ones, the public would be the most likely beneficiary of this kind of competition. Departments and subunits within a department would be vying to improve their standing in the eyes of the profession and of the public.
5. A side benefit of implementing this proposal would be that the impact of innovative programs could be easily assessed; baseline data on a number of different dependent variables would be available to those attempting to evaluate new approaches.

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Thus monitoring police performance on a continuous basis would simultaneously promote organizational change and facilitate the measurement of such change if and when it occurs. Just as stockholders (and managers) can follow the progress of their company, so too would citizens be able to observe the performance of their police department.

The standard now in use which most closely resembles the proposed "balance sheet" is the Uniform Crime Statistics, developed some years ago by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. This measure is inadequate as a way of evaluating police performance for several reasons. First, it is a crude measure of the volume of crime; at worst, it grossly distorts the level of criminal activity. It is probably unnecessary to discuss once again why officially collected statistics do not serve as accurate indicators of the rate of crime. Suffice it to say that they assume full and accurate reporting by the public and recording by the police, conditions which are not currently and probably never could be satisfied. Even if such statistics were reliable, we would not want to use them as the sole measure for evaluating police performance. Crime statistics, while undoubtedly important, do not reveal information about other major aspects of police operation—the quality of service, the nature of police-community contacts, the susceptibility of officers to corruption, the morale of the force, and the efficiency with which public funds are expended, among others. A good argument can even be made that these other measures of police performance provide a better indicator of the quality of police departments than do crime statistics. Few criminologists believe that police efficiency is nearly as important in determining crime rate as are demographic factors, such as level of income, age structure and degree of urbanization in a given locality. (President's Commission, 1968) Police, even when efficient, have only limited control over the volume of crime in a community. This being the case, it is difficult to justify relying on rates of victimization as the only, or perhaps even the central measure of police performance. A complete balance sheet must certainly include a measure of the rate of crime, perhaps as indicated by victim reports in household surveys. However, the rate of victimization might be most useful as a component in other indicators of police effectiveness, such as determining the ratio of people who report crimes when they are victimized.

Undoubtedly, there will be some disagreement among both social scientists and police over just which items should be included in the package of measures to assess police performance. Just as certainly, professionals will not completely agree, at least at the onset of the endeavor, about how the indicators should be constructed. Rather than try to answer these questions at once, it may be more useful as a first step to devise a variety of individual measures and try them out before proceeding further. That is the approach which I have followed and which is described in this paper.

MEASURING THE QUALITY OF POLICE SERVICE

In 1970, while spending a year at the National Institute of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice, I became interested in the possibility of measuring the quality of police service through the use of consumer surveys. In collaboration with a colleague at the Institute, Charles Wellford, a study was designed to test the feasibility of this idea.

There were several reasons for selecting the quality of police service as the first item to develop. It is a much neglected aspect in discussions of police performance; indeed, few departments at present make any systematic effort to measure how well policemen perform when they answer service calls. Requests for assistance include reports of victimization, but the majority of calls received by the police are precipitated by more mundane concerns—locating stray pets, removing parked cars, transporting sick people to a hospital. The police tend to regard such activities as distraction from their real work, however, studies have indicated that in fact these maintenance tasks consume much of the police officers' time. (Cumming *et. al.*, 1965).

In the early stages of planning the project, we discovered that the Baltimore Police Department conducted what they termed a "quality control check" of responses to citizens who requested service from the police. With the department's cooperation, we decided to build on the procedure which had already been employed by the Baltimore police.

Their method was to interview a selected sample of citizens who had called the police to request service. As interviewers, they used members of their own Inspectional Services Unit. Interviews were conducted without the benefit of a structured protocol, though customarily

the same questions were asked of each respondent. Inquiries focused on the event which prompted the call and the citizen's satisfaction with police response. The survey had been conducted four times a year with approximately 250 respondents in each wave. Records of previous surveys were a little difficult to evaluate since the police did not use an interview schedule or sample in any systematic fashion. However, it appears that the public was extremely satisfied with police service; less than one per cent of the callers complained about the way their calls were handled.

The department felt that it would be useful to standardize the procedure, thus improving on reliability and validity. We made only three changes. One was to develop a systematic sampling design, stratifying the sample by type of call and selecting callers proportionately from each of the nine police districts. Secondly, a short interview schedule was devised, containing information on the events leading up to the request for service, the respondent's account of what happened after the police were called, and an evaluation of the service provided by the police. And thirdly, in addition to the regular team of police interviewers, a group of civilian interviewers was trained by a survey research organization. Half of the interviews were assigned to the police and half to the civilians, thus making it possible to judge the effect of the type of interviewer on the results obtained.

THE FINDINGS

Limited space makes a detailed description of the results of the study impossible. In the remaining part of the paper I shall briefly highlight some of the major findings. For a more complete discussion of the results, the reader may refer to a previous paper on the project. (Furstenberg and Wellford, 1971)

FIELDWORK RESULTS

Although the police interviewers encountered fewer respondents who refused to cooperate, refusals were also uncommon among citizens interviewed by the civilian field staff. Over-all, the civilians managed to obtain a higher rate of complete interviews—69 per cent as compared to 56 per cent. This differential appeared partly because the civilian interviewers were able to make more interview attempts than were the police and partly because the time lapse between respondents' calls to police and interview assignments was shorter for the civilians. However, these methodological differences do not fully explain why civilians were more successful in obtaining completed interviews. Upon further analysis we discovered that the police had encountered more difficulty locating black respondents, a fact that accounted almost entirely for the remaining differential. Unlike the civilians, who were matched for race, the police team was entirely white. Whether black police interviewers would have had as much success as black civilians is a question that must be reserved for further investigation.

CONTACTING THE POLICE

Previous survey research on reports of victimization suggest that a surprisingly high proportion of individuals do not recall offenses which prompted calls to the police, even those which were relatively serious in nature (Biderman, 1967). About a fifth of the respondents could not remember until prompted the incidents for which they had called the police, and the majority had forgotten the exact date of the call. However, there appeared to be no problem in recollecting the ensuing contact with the police. Future efforts of this type should nonetheless attempt to interview callers within a week or two of the time the incident is reported rather than delay the interview for two or three months, as was the case in this study.

The respondents were asked to describe the process of calling the police. The most frequent pattern of reaching the police was by the special police number, however, only two-fifths of the respondents had made use of the number. White callers were significantly more likely to have used the special number or to have dialed the regular police number. Blacks, on the other hand, typically requested assistance from the operator in placing a call.

Blacks also reported more often that they had not placed the call immediately. Over a fourth of the black respondents waited for more than ten minutes before placing the call, as compared to less than a fifth of the whites. Interestingly, police-interviewed respondents were significantly more likely to report that they placed their call immediately, indicating

that they were reluctant to admit delay to the police.

Very few respondents said that they had difficulty reaching the police; again, however, civilian-interviewed respondents were more likely to register a complaint.

When asked what they were told after contacting the police, the majority reported being informed that a car would be sent immediately. Over 85 per cent of the police-interviewed respondents reported that they were told a car would arrive immediately, while less than three-fourths of the respondents interviewed by civilians gave this response. Regardless of the interviewer, blacks more often reported having been given the impression that there would be an immediate response to their call. These disparities cannot be attributed to differences in types of complaints made, as the groups did not significantly differ in the type of incident which led to the call.

The respondents' descriptions of their experiences when the police arrived show fewer differences, but again patterns among the various groupings are evident. Civilian-interviewed respondents were slightly more likely to report that the police did not respond to the call quickly enough, and blacks consistently reported a slower response. It should be added that most of the respondents (89 per cent) were satisfied that the response time was adequate despite the reported differences.

About two-thirds of the respondents said that they spent less than fifteen minutes with the police after they arrived. Civilian-interviewed respondents again were slightly more likely to report briefer contact. No racial differences were evident on this item.

Most callers felt the police had communicated adequately about what they intended to do. Among the third who felt that the police had not explained their plan of action, there were no differences by race or interview type. Nearly half the respondents indicated that the police had not followed up their call. Respondents interviewed by civilians were somewhat less likely to report that follow-up action was taken. Despite the absence of a follow-up in many instances, most respondents felt that the police had done everything possible to handle their complaint. Only 14 per cent felt that additional action should have been taken. Once again responses are linked to the type of interviewer. While 19 per cent of the civilian-interviewed respondents felt that the police should have taken further action, only 7 per cent of the citizens interviewed by the police gave this response.

Over-all, then, most respondents reported little difficulty contacting the police and felt their complaints were handled competently. However, blacks were more critical in some respects of the police response, and respondents of both races interviewed by the civilian field staff had more complaints with the way calls were handled. These patterns become even more pronounced when we examine the general ratings of police service provided by the respondents.

SATISFACTION WITH POLICE SERVICE

The interview contained several items measuring respondents' over-all evaluation of service received. Regardless of the measure to which we refer, the outcome is much the same. The great majority of respondents were pleased with police response to calls. Most respondents ranked police high on courtesy, understanding, capability and concern. When these four items were combined into a single index, three-fourths of the citizens assigned the highest possible rating to the police. This figure corresponds to the pattern of responses on the general rating of satisfaction: 75 per cent felt very satisfied and only 12 per cent indicated a low level of satisfaction with the service provided.

DETERMINANTS OF SATISFACTION

While the over-all level of satisfaction is high, it is instructive to explore the sources of variation within the sample. Analysis of the data revealed that specific factors were related to the level of satisfaction. Each of these will be discussed in turn.

A certain amount of variation is due to the interviewing circumstances. If the interview was administered by a police officer, respondents were more hesitant to voice dissatisfac-

tion. The type of interviewer made only a slight difference for whites; however, among blacks, the effect of the interviewer was sizeable. Over three-fourths of the blacks interviewed by the police reported that they were very satisfied as compared to 55 per cent of civilian-interviewed blacks. Thus, if civilians had conducted all the interviewing, the over-all rate of satisfaction would be significantly lower.

In general, regardless of who administered the interview, blacks were less satisfied with police performance. In the previous report of the study, a detailed analysis was made to understand why blacks were less satisfied. At least part of the reason, it seems, is that blacks have a generally lower opinion of the police and this view carries over to the specific evaluation of police service.

Only a limited amount of demographic information was collected on the respondent. However, no demographic characteristic, other than racial difference, was associated with satisfaction. Age and sex, for example, were unrelated to respondents' evaluation of police performance. We did detect a great deal of variation in the level of satisfaction in the nine districts. Undoubtedly, some of the disparity is due to the racial composition of different districts. It may also reflect social class differences, a factor not measured in this survey. However, it is not unlikely that the differences in the level of satisfaction by locality also reveal that police service was not uniform throughout the city of Baltimore.

Holding constant race and interviewer type, there was a strong association between the respondent's report of how the police responded to his complaint and his quality rating of the service he received. Thus we discovered that satisfaction was significantly lower for all groupings when:

- (1) The police took more than ten minutes to answer the call.
- (2) The police spent less than 15 minutes with the caller.
- (3) The police did not explain what they were doing or would do after they arrived.
- (4) The police did not contact the citizen to report on follow-up action.

Predictably, too, there was a high correlation between respondents' ratings of police courtesy and understanding and their judgment of the quality of service provided. Over-all, the service delivered proved far more important than race or interviewer type in influencing the respondents' quality ratings.

DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

The significance of this research derives less from specific findings than from the general conclusion that it is both feasible and productive to use consumer surveys to evaluate the quality of police service. Our results suggest that this technique works best in the hands of a research group not directly identified with the police department; there appear to be few problems in carrying out the research when such a strategy is employed. Citizens are willing to respond, and they have definite impressions of the service received, especially when the time lapse between the incident and the evaluative interview is not lengthy.

Although the level of satisfaction with police service is high, it is somewhat inflated by the use of police interviewers. Were the interviewers all civilians, a less skewed distribution in responses would occur. Furthermore, there is reason to believe that the variation is considerable when the sample is subdivided into relevant groupings. The race of the respondent, for example, appeared to be an important factor in the rating given. There is reason to suspect also that evaluation of service varied considerably according to the respondents' residence. We were also able to show that a minority of respondents received what they regarded as inadequate service. And when service was poor, evaluations were almost invariably low. While the police generally do a good job of responding to calls for service, there are obvious areas which might be improved upon, such as providing follow-up to the initial contact.

If this research is to be of more than just passing interest, it must be extended in several directions. First, it would be useful to institute the survey on a regular basis in several departments. This would make it possible to draw the comparisons referred to earlier in the paper. Second, the impact of measuring the service should be examined. Does it, in fact, upgrade the quality of police service? Finally, other measures for evaluating police service must be devised. Our study touches on an important but admittedly limited area of police performance. As other measures are developed, the prospects of introducing and assessing change in police behavior will be further enhanced.

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