

GHETTO ASSESSMENTS OF POLICE PROTECTION AND AUTHORITY

HARLAN HAHN *University of California, Riverside*

In recent years, police conduct has rapidly emerged as a major social and political issue. Although both the nature and the outcome of this controversy have important consequences for law and society, its most immediate effects have been evident in changing public attitudes toward police activities. Policemen have become the targets of growing and frequently irreconcilable popular demands both for the maintenance of "law and order" and for the elimination of "police brutality." Law enforcement agencies, therefore, have seemed to encounter a mounting crisis of public confidence in police practices.

Although the effects of mounting public concern about crime and police protection probably have been most evident among whites (President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice, 1967: 144-149; Ennis, 1967; Feagin, 1970), a desire for increased police protection has also emerged among black Americans. In fact, black attitudes toward police practices have appeared to reflect a perplexing enigma. While many black citizens have complained about harsh or brutal police behavior, they also have expressed intense criticism of a lack of police protection. In part, this apparent dilemma may have been prompted by modern police policies such as "preventive patrolling" that have provoked numerous abrasive encounters between policemen and the residents of areas with high crime rates, while diverting police manpower from the investigation of the many minor offenses that plague ghetto neighborhoods (Hahn and Feagin, 1970).

Perhaps even more important than the sources of this paradox, however, are its consequences. Pervasive hostility toward police practices in urban ghettos may reflect a growing distrust both of police officers and of the entire legal process. Furthermore, black perceptions of major inequalities in the protection offered by law enforcement officers might be related to a lack of confidence in the police. Ghetto appraisals of police protection, therefore, may have an important impact upon the willingness of persons to cooperate with police officers.

Although the existence of widespread antagonism toward policemen in black urban ghettos has been documented by numerous studies (Kraft, 1966; Raine, 1967; McCord and Howard, 1968; Campbell and Schuman, 1968; Bayley and Mendelsohn, 1969), relatively little attention has been devoted to the effects of those attitudes upon perceptions of the legal system or upon local confidence in police officers. In addition, few efforts have been made to assess ghetto attitudes toward police protection or to study the association between the perceived impartiality of police protection and public cooperation or support for law enforcement practices. The purposes of this research, therefore, were to examine ghetto attitudes toward both police officers and other aspects of the legal system, to investigate their assessments of the equality of police protection, and to explore the impact of those sentiments upon the willingness of residents to assist law enforcement officers.

APPRAISALS OF LAW ENFORCEMENT IN THE DETROIT GHETTO

Data for this study were gathered in a modified quota sample survey of 270 black residents of the Twelfth Street ghetto in Detroit.¹ The survey was conducted shortly after one of the nation's most destructive riots had erupted in this neighborhood in the summer of 1967. As an area that had demonstrated its resistance to police control by exploding in serious violence, the views of this community could not be regarded as representative of the sentiments of Americans—or even of black Americans—generally. Yet, as the riots also indicated, the willingness to defy police authority seemed to make the attitudes of those ghetto residents of major significance in the study of law and society.

As might have been anticipated, the results of this survey disclosed extensive local animosity toward police behavior. Ninety-two percent of the black residents of this ghetto, for example, denied that "all laws are enforced equally." Similarly, 81 percent believed that Detroit policemen "treat some groups better than others" rather than treating "all people the same." Moreover, 78 percent stated that, before the riots, policemen were "mainly interested in trying to keep things quiet" rather than "in trying to help the people in this neighborhood." Perhaps the most striking fact revealed by the survey, however, was that 81 percent of the ghetto residents reported hearing "stories that some policemen were involved in taking things or in burning stores" during the riots. Although definitive

evidence of police complicity in illegal acts such as looting or arson was difficult to discover or to evaluate, rumors about such incidents apparently were widely circulated and believed in the neighborhood after the violence had subsided. The predominant attitudes of ghetto residents before the riots apparently provided few bases of public confidence in police officers, and the actions of policemen during the disorders may have done little to increase local respect for law enforcement activities. In fact, when the responses to four items² concerning police practices prior to the riots were combined in an index of police treatment, it was found that 179, or 81 percent, of the 222 respondents who answered all the questions failed to express *any* favorable assessments of police behavior. As a result, police officers may have encountered serious resistance in their efforts to reimpose police authority upon the neighborhood in the aftermath of the riots.

Perhaps even more importantly, however, the overwhelming criticism of law enforcement that flourished in this ghetto also apparently extended to other facets of the legal system. More than 86 percent of the respondents rejected the belief that "most of the laws on the books are fair to all people." Perceptions of legal inequality were not confined to the behavior of police officers, but they seemed to encompass assessments of the law itself. Persons who accepted a conventional faith in the impartiality of the law and its administration formed a small and nearly imperceptible minority in the ghetto. An overwhelming proportion of the residents seemingly were convinced that injustice pervaded the entire legal system (Hahn, 1969).

The massive distrust of both the law and police practices expressed by ghetto residents also seemed to reflect basic doubts about the integrity of the legal process as well as of police officers. While 89 percent of the respondents were convinced that "most Detroit policemen" did not display total honesty in the performance of their duties, 88 percent also believed that "most of the judges in local courts break the rules for personal gain or favors." The sentiments of residents of the Twelfth Street neighborhood, therefore, appeared to reflect some serious reservations about the legitimacy of legal conduct and law enforcement procedures. Most ghetto residents seemed to endorse the position that inequality characterized police treatment of local residents, the law, and the moral behavior of police officers and judges. The prevailing attitudes

of persons living in this area may have failed to provide a solid foundation of essential public support for the functions of law enforcement agencies and of the legal system.

The extensive lack of public respect for the police and legal processes disclosed by the survey, however, did not seem to imply major disapproval of the protection of individual rights embodied in the law. To examine their attitudes toward the legal guarantees that are usually afforded criminal defendants, the respondents were asked to evaluate five civil liberties that might be granted suspects who are arrested by the police. Those rights included four basic legal principles such as (a) "talking to a lawyer before being questioned by the police"; (b) "proper food and a good place to sleep in jail"; (c) "posting bond low enough so that a person can be bailed out of jail"; and (d) "a quick and fair trial" as well as one rule; (e) "refusing to have one's name printed in the newspapers," a right that is not commonly accepted by the courts. In each case, the respondents were asked "whether the rule should always be applied, whether it should be applied *except* in troubled times,³ or whether it should be limited somewhat even in normal times." In reply, no more than 16 percent of the respondents (who responded in this manner to the question concerning bail) were willing to limit the existing rights of criminal defendants during "normal times," and fewer than eight percent (on the issue of "a quick and fair trial") approved of restricting those rights in emergencies such as the civil disorders.

Despite the devastating effects of the violence upon many ghetto residents, few were willing to sacrifice established civil liberties for the sake for restoring order and tranquility in the neighborhood. Although the responses to all five items satisfied the conditions of a cumulative scale (with a coefficient of scalability of .65), only 76 persons, or 31 percent, of the 244 respondents who answered all five questions were willing to limit any of those rights—including the rule that is not formally recognized by law—either in normal times or during periods of social upheaval or disruption. Many ghetto residents seemed to express a lack of trust in the legal and law enforcement functions that form the basis of "the rule of law," but large segments of the population retained a strong faith in the fundamental principles that govern the process of adjudicating guilt or innocence in the society. The strong criticisms voiced in this neighborhood, therefore, may have reflected a prevalent belief that legal institutions and law enforcement agencies were not meet-

ing essential standards of impartiality and legality rather than a basic repudiation of the values that form the foundations of the legal system.

Although most ghetto residents apparently felt that the actual conduct of police officers and the legal process has failed to satisfy abstract requirements of equality and fairness, respect for policemen also may have been based upon specific police practices that have a direct impact upon the community. Among the law enforcement duties that might have a pronounced and personal effect upon the public, perhaps few have been of greater importance than the services offered by police departments in providing protection for lives and property. As a principal means of gaining public support for law enforcement functions, assessments of police protection seemed to form a crucial measure of public confidence in the police. To examine ghetto perceptions of the impartiality of police protection, respondents were asked to evaluate the amount of protection, received by four matched pairs of groups in the neighborhood including homeowners and renters, the owners of small and large stores, white and black homeowners, and young adults or older people. The responses to those questions are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1: PERCEIVED INEQUITIES IN THE POLICE PROTECTION PROVIDED SELECTED GROUPS IN THE DETROIT GHETTO

Groups	<i>Inequities in Police Protection</i>			
	<i>Protection Equal</i>	<i>A Great Deal of Inequity</i>	<i>Some Inequity</i>	<i>Not Much Inequity</i>
Homeowners versus renters	65%	13%	13%	9%
White versus black homeowners	40	43	12	5
Owners of small stores versus owners of large stores	45	32	19	4
Younger people versus older persons	66	11	14	9

Apparently, most ghetto residents tended to regard inequities in the provision of police protection primarily in racial terms. While slightly more than half of the respondents believed that there were appreciable differences in the police protection accorded white and black homeowners, less than one-third perceived comparable discrepancies in the protection received by homeowners or renters in general. By introducing a crude means of controlling socioeconomic characteristics,

those two questions were designed to elicit a comparative appraisal of the extent to which unequal police protection was viewed as reflecting racial discrimination. Although lower-class urban neighborhoods perhaps have been traditionally plagued by insufficient police protection, most residents of this ghetto seemed to believe that differential protection was based upon racial considerations rather than upon attributes denoting social or economic distinctions. In addition, however, the respondents apparently felt that black residents of the community were not the only groups that failed to receive equitable protection from police officers. Sizable proportions—ranging from more than one-half in the case of small storeowners to approximately one-third regarding renters and young people, respectively—also stated that other groups were not granted impartial police protection.

There were also major differences in the amount of police protection that respondents ascribed to various groups. Most ghetto residents apparently felt that the greatest discrepancies in police protection were shaped by racial characteristics and by the size of business establishments. As might have been expected, for each of the paired comparisons, persons tended to attribute enhanced police protection to groups that reflected greater social status or esteem. Less than three percent of the respondents said that increased police protection was afforded renters, small storeowners, black homeowners, or young people, respectively. From the perspective of this black community, therefore, the principal advantages of police protection accrued to relatively prosperous or affluent businessmen and to white residents of the city. The findings seemed to parallel the results of an earlier survey conducted by Reiss (1968:41) which suggested that persons tend to perceive differential police treatment primarily as a benefit conferred upon relatively prestigious groups rather than as a limitation directed at low status segments of the population.

Perhaps most strikingly, however, responses assessing the police protection received by the four pairs of groups tended to conform to the patterns of a Guttman-type scale with a coefficient of scalability of .65. Evaluations of differential police protection seemed to represent a broad spectrum of attitudes toward police behavior rather than unique responses to specific characteristics. As a result, responses to all four paired comparisons were compiled in a general index of perceived inequities in police protection.

PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN THE POLICE

Although appraisals of the impartiality of police practices and protection may have a major impact upon the foundations of popular support for the police, perhaps the most critical measure of public confidence in police officers might be derived from an investigation of their willingness to assist policemen in circumstances where public cooperation is essential to the performance of law enforcement duties. To examine the willingness of ghetto residents to cooperate with police functions, respondents were presented with a list of five hypothetical incidents including a traffic accident ("You see an automobile accident in which no one is hurt, but the cars are badly smashed up"); a robbery ("You see someone take money from a store"); a neighborhood brawl ("You see several people fighting in the neighborhood"); a personal injury ("You see a person who looks like he has been hurt pretty badly"); and an apparent case of "police brutality" ("You see a policeman beating up someone from the neighborhood"). In reaction to each event, the respondents were asked if they would "ignore it and walk away, wait around to see what happens, call the police, or go to other people for help." Responses to each of the five incidents are recorded in Table 2.

TABLE 2: RESPONSES TO FIVE HYPOTHETICAL INCIDENTS IN THE DETROIT GHETTO

Event	Response			
	Call the Police	Ignore It or Wait Around	Go to Others for Help	Don't Know
Traffic Accident	37%	54%	5%	4%
Robbery	46	43	3	8
Neighborhood Fight	57	37	2	4
Personal Injury	79	3	14	4
Police Brutality	44	13	27	16

Extensive criticism of police conduct in this neighborhood may have tended to spawn public resistance to police intervention in local incidents. While a majority of the ghetto residents stated that they would summon the police to aid an injured person or to quell a neighborhood disturbance, large proportions indicated that they were not prepared to request police assistance in circumstances that are required by law, such as the auto accident, or that are closely related to law enforcement responsibilities, such as the robbery or the alleged case of police brutality. More respondents apparently were motivated to ask policemen to provide services in the neighborhood by pre-

venting or alleviating physical harm than were motivated to inform the police about a motor vehicle accident that did not entail personal injury or even to report a crime or an apparent instance of police brutality.

Although each of the incidents seemed to elicit intriguing differences in the reactions of ghetto residents, responses to all five events also appeared to reflect a general measure of the willingness of persons to assist police officers in fulfilling their duties. As a result, replies to all the items were again combined in an index of public cooperation with the police by distinguishing between reactions that revealed a disposition to summon the police and those that implied either a passive response to the incident or a desire to seek assistance from some other source. The coefficient of scalability for this index was .64. Responses to the questions were dichotomized between low cooperation with the police, or a willingness to call a policeman in two or less of the hypothetical situations, and a high propensity to summon the police in three or more of the circumstances.

In part, public reluctance to contact police officers may have been related to a pervasive climate of hostility and distrust toward law enforcement practices in this neighborhood. Although the association between the indices of police treatment and of public cooperation with the police was not statistically significant, ghetto residents who expressed some approval of police behavior were somewhat more likely to indicate a willingness to assist the police than those who were highly critical. Whereas only 48 percent of the respondents who failed to give any favorable responses to the questions comprising the index of police treatment scored high on cooperation with the police, two-thirds of those who gave at least one pro-police response were ranked as highly cooperative with law enforcement officers. Relatively abstract appraisals of police conduct, therefore, were slightly related to the measure of public cooperation with policemen.

As a form of activity that may have a direct effect upon public support for law enforcement activities, however, assessments of police protection might be more closely related to the willingness of persons to assist police officers in discharging their responsibilities. Table 3 reports the association between perceived inequities in police protection⁴ and the general measure of public cooperation with policemen as well as the responses to two incidents that seemed to represent major law enforcement functions.

TABLE 3: PERCEIVED INEQUITIES IN POLICE PROTECTION AND PUBLIC COOPERATION WITH THE POLICE IN THE DETROIT GHETTO

<i>Public Cooperation with the Police</i>	<i>Perceived Inequities in Police Protection</i>		<i>Public Cooperation with the Police</i>	<i>Perceived Inequities in Police Protection</i>	
	<i>High</i>	<i>Low</i>		<i>High</i>	<i>Low</i>
Robbery:^b					
Call the Police	43%	54%	Ignore It or Wait Around	23	9
Ignore It or Wait Around	53	44	Go to Others for Help	43	20
Go to Others for Help	6	2	(n)	(104)	(97)
(n)	(108)	(108)	Index of Cooperation With Police^a		
Police Brutality:^a					
Call the Police	34%	71%	Low	54%	32%
			High	46	68
			(n)	(98)	(94)

^a Chi-square significant at the .01 level.

^b Chi-square not significant.

Ghetto perceptions of unequal police protection appeared to be highly related to public cooperation with law enforcement officers. In general, persons who saw relatively few inequities in the police protection afforded various segments of the community were more likely to contact the police not only in general but also in response to specific events such as a robbery or an apparent case of police brutality. Although the association between the index of perceived inequities in police protection and reactions to the robbery was not statistically significant, most respondents who ranked low on this index stated that they would call the police while a majority of those who revealed high scores indicated that they would not request police assistance. The belief that policemen provided relatively impartial protection, therefore, seemed to be related to increased willingness to cooperate with law enforcement officers in the performance of their duties.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The development of public respect for police practices in predominantly black communities apparently has emerged as one of the most critical problems facing law enforcement agencies. The results of this survey, conducted in an area that had experienced a serious riot, indicated that major segments of the neighborhood lacked a basic confidence in the equality of legal processes, law enforcement activities, and police protection. Moreover, large proportions of the ghetto residents displayed a reluctance to contact law enforcement officers in circumstances that appeared to require police intervention. Policemen, therefore, seemed to confront formidable obstacles in their

efforts to gain the public support in urban ghettos that might be essential to the achievement of their goals.

Yet, as the data also indicated, perceptions of police protection seemed to be closely related to public cooperation with the police. Persons who regarded police protection as relatively impartial indicated that they would be more willing to contact or assist law enforcement officers than those who perceived major inequities in the protection afforded various groups in the community. In addition, the strong support for civil liberties expressed by ghetto residents appeared to indicate that their criticisms of law enforcement practices did not represent a fundamental rejection of major premises of the legal system.

The results of this study also appear to suggest some interesting policy implications for improving popular support of law enforcement operations in ghetto neighborhoods. Initially, the growth of public confidence in police conduct might be increased by eliminating major inequities in police procedures both in the treatment of local residents and in the allocation of police resources. As a function that has a direct and significant impact upon black as well as white citizens, the granting of equal police protection to all members of the community may constitute a crucial means of gaining public trust in law enforcement officers. Although this action might entail a reduction in the advantages conferred upon some segment of society as well as improvements in the protection afforded other groups, its eventual effects might include an expansion of popular respect for policemen among those persons who have been most hostile and resistant to police authority.

Additionally, police departments might devote growing attention to community service activities. As the results of this survey indicated, people may be more willing to seek police assistance in circumstances involving physical injury or disorders than in situations that entail evident law enforcement problems. The provision of services that offer direct and tangible personal benefits, therefore, could form another important means of promoting public confidence in police officers. Although some evidence (Cumming, et al., 1965; Bercal, 1970) indicates that policemen may presently spend the largest share of their time on community service work, many police officers tend to deprecate this job as an unwarranted intrusion upon their primary mission of controlling crime. An increased emphasis upon community services, however, might become a critical method of securing the public approval of police work

that could be necessary to the effective performance of their duties.

Although the task of developing increased support for law enforcement officers among black citizens may require a significant readjustment of police priorities and objectives, it also might be essential to the maintenance of a society founded upon the rule of law. As the violence in Detroit and elsewhere demonstrated, an extensive lack of confidence in the equality of legal processes and law enforcement actions may have serious—even disastrous—consequences for law and society. The failure to heed the sentiments of ghetto residents ultimately may produce even more serious problems for police officers than the immediate difficulties of introducing major changes in law enforcement practices.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ This research was supported in part by a special grant from the University of Michigan and by an intramural grant from the University of California, Riverside.
- ² The four questions comprising this index included: (1) "Would you say the Detroit police treat some groups better than others or do they treat all people the same?"; (2) "Do you think most of the Detroit policemen break the rules for their personal gain at one time or another, or do you think most of them are . . . honest all the time?"; (3) "Do you think most of the laws on the books are fair to all people or do they favor some people more than others?"; and (4) "Do you think all laws are enforced equally or are some laws enforced more than others?"
- ³ The phrase was used consistently throughout the survey to refer to the violence in Detroit.
- ⁴ This measure was dichotomized in a manner similar to the division of the index of public cooperation with the police. Respondents who felt that three or more of the matched pairs of groups received equal protection were rated as "low" on the index of perceived inequalities in police protection, while persons who believed that less than three of the five groups received equal police protection were scored as "high" on this index.

REFERENCES

- BAYLEY, David H., and Harold MENDELSON (1969) *Minorities and the Police*. New York: Free Press.
- BERCAL, T. E. (1970) "Calls for Police Assistance: Consumer Demands for Governmental Service." 13 *American Behavioral Scientist* 681-691.
- CAMPBELL, Angus, and H. SCHUMAN (1968) "Racial Attitudes in Fifteen American Cities," Supplemental Studies for the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office. Pp. 1-69.
- CUMMING, Elaine, I. CUMMING, and L. EDELL (1965) "Policeman as Philosopher, Guide and Friend." 12 *Social Problems* 276-286.
- ENNIS, Philip H. (1967) *Criminal Victimization in the United States: A Report of a National Survey*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- FEAGIN, Joe R. (1970) "Home-defense and the Police: Black and White Perspectives." 13 *American Behavioral Scientist* 797-814.
- HAHN, Harlan (1969) "Philosophy of Law and Urban Violence." 52 *Soundings* 110-117.
- and Joe R. FEAGIN (1970) "Riot-precipitating Police Practices: Attitudes in Urban Ghettos." 31 *Phylon* 183-193.

- KRAFT, John F. (1966) "The Attitudes of Negroes in Various Cities," Federal Role in Urban Affairs, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Executive Reorganization, Committee on Government Operations, U.S. Senate, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office. Volume 6, pp. 1383-1423.
- McCORD, William M., and J. HOWARD (1968) "Negro Opinions in Three Riot Cities," 11 *American Behavioral Scientist* 24-27.
- President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice (1967) Task Force Report: The Police. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- RAINE, W. J. (1967) *The Perception of Police Brutality in South Central Los Angeles*. Los Angeles: UCLA Institute of Government and Public Affairs.
- REISS, Albert J. (1968) "Public Perceptions and Recollections about Crime, Law Enforcement, and Criminal Justice." *Studies in Crime and Law Enforcement in Major Metropolitan Areas*, Vol. 1, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office. Pp. 1-114.