

# Tip of an Iceberg: Citizen Complaints and Citizen Dissatisfaction with the Police

Robert E. Worden, Ph.D.<sup>1, 2</sup> & Kelly J. Becker, MA<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The John F. Finn Institute for Public Safety, Inc. <sup>2</sup> The University at Albany, SUNY

## Abstract

Citizen complaints about the police might serve important functions such as redress citizens grievances, hold officers accountable for misconduct, and diagnose systemic deficiencies from patterns.

Currently, there is very little evidence about the rate at which police misconduct is reported and factors that influence reporting.

We analyze three datasets in order to generate evidence on the likelihood and the circumstances under which citizens file complaints against the police. First, we analyze citizen survey data collected in 24 localities for the Police Services Study and revisit the results of the only existing study of citizens' decisions to complain. Second, we analyze national survey data collected in the Police Public Contact Survey. Third, we analyze survey data collected in one city, which afford a wider range of explanatory variables.

Findings provide a deeper understanding of citizen complaints as a means of police accountability and as an indicator of police misconduct.

## Hypothesized Influences on Complaining

Research into crime reporting, consumer dissatisfaction, complaint behavior, and citizen-initiated contacts with governmental officials, offered insights into hypothesized factors contributing to complaint behavior:

- Situational factors- cost or seriousness of misconduct; benefit of reporting
- Individual characteristics- personal resources; coping/problem-solving abilities; identification with a cause
- Contextual factors- structural facilitators: civilian review; structural inhibitors: large bureaucracy

## Extant Research

- Only study of citizen reporting of misconduct: Walker & Graham (1998) analyzed citizen survey data collected for the Police Services Study (PSS) in 1977
- Reported a 36% rate of "complaining"- complaints were not all formal complaints as PSS data did not offer the particular distinction
- Results found no relationships between complaining and race, age, sex, income, or education

The rate of complaining was computed based on those who reported that they had a reason to complain about police services, which included:

- those who did not have contact with the police in the previous year;
- those complaining about police services within their neighborhood

## Data Set 1: Police Services Study Survey

### Methods and Respondents

Surveyed 60 residential neighborhoods in 24 jurisdictions across 3 metropolitan areas

- 4 city police departments and other agencies of smaller size
- Approximately 200 respondents per neighborhood in 1977

Some who reported having a reason to complain had no recent contact, and many with recent unsatisfactory contact said they had no reason to complain

### PSS: Perceived Reasons to Complain and Complaining

	All respondents	No contact, last 12 mos.	Contact, last 12 mos.	Only satisfactory contacts	Unsatisfactory contact
No reason to complain	93.4%	97.2%	89.5%	94.8%	73.1%
Perceived reason to complain	6.3%	2.5%	10.2%	5.0%	26.1%
Complained	2.3%	0.8%	3.8%	1.8%	10.0%
Total N	11,985	6,052	5,933	4,482	1,451

## Police Services Study: Continued

### PSS: Regression Analysis

	Unsatisfactory Contact		Perceived reason to complain [given unsatisfactory contact]		Complained [given unsatisfactory contact]		Complained [given unsatisfactory contact and perceived reason to complain]	
	Contact	[given contact]	to complain [given unsatisfactory contact]	Complained [given unsatisfactory contact]	Complained [given unsatisfactory contact and perceived reason to complain]	Complained [given unsatisfactory contact and perceived reason to complain]	Complained [given unsatisfactory contact and perceived reason to complain]	
Age	0.97*	0.98*	0.99	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	
Male	1.16*	1.15*	1.16	1.10	0.95	0.95	0.95	
Black	0.90*	1.62*	1.04	1.25	1.18	1.18	1.18	
Hispanic	0.89	1.00	0.38	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	
Other race/ethnicity	0.80	1.93**	3.04**	0.84	0.31	0.31	0.31	
Family income	1.00	0.98	0.95	1.06	1.15	1.15	1.15	
Education	1.02*	0.98	1.05**	1.01	0.96	0.96	0.96	
Home owner	1.15*	0.96	1.21	1.35	1.17	1.17	1.17	
Large department	1.02	1.54*	0.88	0.69**	0.64**	0.64**	0.64**	
Information^	-	1.74*	1.53*	1.92*	1.71*	1.71*	1.71*	
Assistance^	-	1.00	1.87*	1.39**	0.74	0.74	0.74	
Stop^	-	1.84*	1.08	1.15	1.20	1.20	1.20	
Physical abuse~	-	-	-	-	0.43	0.43	0.43	
Other abuse of authority~	-	-	-	-	0.78	0.78	0.78	
Discourtesy~	-	-	-	-	1.11	1.11	1.11	
Unequal treatment~	-	-	-	-	0.41	0.41	0.41	
Ineffective service~	-	-	-	-	0.85	0.85	0.85	
Constant	3.16*	0.44*	0.16	0.05*	0.72	0.72	0.72	
N	9,961	5,063	1,221	1,225	322	322	322	
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	0.11	0.10	0.05	0.04	0.10	0.10	0.10	

Cell entries are odds ratios; significance \*p<.05 \*\*p<.01

^ omitted category of contact is crime report

~ omitted category of reason to complain is other

### PSS Regressions: Take-Away Points

- Rate at which complaints are made is much less than 36%
- Among people with an unsatisfactory contact with police, only one-quarter perceive a reason to complaining
  - Information and assistance contacts overrepresented
- Among those experiencing unsatisfactory contact with police perceiving a reason to complain, about 40%-10% take action to complain
  - Rate is lower still for people served by large city departments

## Data Set 2: Police-Public Contact Survey

### Methods and Respondents

Supplemental survey to the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) to produce a national population estimate of persons aged 16 years and older

- Conducted between July 2008-December 2008
- 57,978 respondents, 16.5% having reported contact with the police in the previous year
- 930 of those reporting contact perceived officer conduct as improper

### PPCS: Improper Contact and Complaining

	Improper n=930		Filed Complaint n=62	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Citizen Characteristics				
Male	.5538	.49737	.4839	.50382
Age	39.49	15.781	38.50	13.442
White	.6925	.46172	.6290	.48701
Black	.1333	.34012	.1452	.35514
Hispanic	.1161	.32055	.1452	.35514
Other Race	.0581	.23399	.0806	.27451
Employed	.6559	.47532	.6613	.47713

## Police Public Contact Survey: Continued

### PPCS: Improper Contact and Complaining Continued

	Improper n=930		Filed Complaint n=62	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Citizen Perceptions of Police Contact				
Excessive threat/force	.0828	.27572	.2097	.41040
Disrespect	.5849	.49300	.8548	.35514
Illegitimate vehicle search	.0538	.22567	.0968	.29806
Illegitimate person search/frisk	.1226	.32813	.2742	.44975
Situational				
Evidence found	.0172	.13010	.0161	.12700
Citizen Action				
Complaint	.0667	.24958		

### PPCS: Regression Analysis

	Filed a complaint
Age	1.009
Male	0.614**
Black	.972
Hispanic	1.396
Other race/ethnicity	1.560
Employed	1.297
Excessive	1.780
Illegitimate vehicle search	1.182
Illegitimate person frisk/search	2.378*
Disrespect	3.759*
Constant	0.015
N	930

Cell entries are odds ratios; significance \*p<.05 \*\*p<.01

### PPCS Regressions: Take-Away Points

- Of those perceiving police conduct as improper, only about 7% decide to file a complaint
- Males appear to file complaints at a slightly lower rate than females
- Perceptions of illegitimacy among those subject to person search/frisks showed to have effects on a higher rate of filing a complaint
- Those judging officer behavior as disrespectful were nearly four times more likely to file a complaint

## Data Set 3: Ashton Client Survey

### Methods and Respondents

- Bi-weekly samples drawn from calls for service, arrests, and field interviews, 2001-2004
- N= 2,500, including 1,330 calls for service, 917 arrestees, and 253 filed interviewees
- Additional coding in progress for 673 cases; N for the analysis= 1,827, 642 of whom were dissatisfied with police

### Ashton Client Survey: Contacts and Dissatisfaction

	All clients	Only dissatisfied clients
Arrested	16.5%	30.4%
Stopped in motor vehicle	9.4%	16.2%
Stopped on foot	7.3%	14.8%
Other contact with police	12.1%	17.5%
Unsatisfactory contact with police	28.8%	100%
Reason for dissatisfaction		
discourtesy	-	19.5%
physical abuse	-	8.0%
verbal abuse	-	2.2%
unequal treatment	-	4.7%
not able to solve problem	-	12.9%
incompetent, poor judgment	-	11.7%
did not care, not understanding	-	24.4%
poor response time	-	5.4%
lack of action	-	9.0%
other	-	4.3%
no reason	-	9.6%
Took action to complain	-	18.6%
Directed complaint to police department	-	7.5%
Filed written complaint	-	4.1%
N	1,827	642

## Ashton Client Survey: Continued

### Ashton Client Survey: Clients' Perceptions

	All clients	Only dissatisfied clients
Complaint investigation		
Very thorough	14.4%	4.5%
Somewhat thorough	31.8%	24.9%
Not at all thorough	19.9%	42.8%
Don't know	33.9%	27.8%
Severity of sanctioning		
Very severe	11.5%	5.8%
Somewhat severe	22.8%	14.5%
Somewhat lenient	29.5%	35.1%
Very lenient	16.2%	30.0%
Don't know	20.1%	14.9%
Citizen oversight – yes	31.7%	26.4%
Citizen oversight – don't know	34.9%	38.0%
N	1,827	642

### Ashton Client Survey: Regression Analysis

	Unsatisfactory Contact	Took Action to Complain	Filed Formal Complaint
Black	1.24	2.55*	2.06
Hispanic	0.83	3.66*	6.51**
Other race/ethnicity	1.48**	4.13*	6.53*
Age in years	0.98*	1.00	0.96
Sex – male	1.08	0.94	0.49
Household income	0.98	1.17	0.91
Education	1.06	1.70*	1.34
Employed full-time	0.84	1.04	0.72
Arrested	1.52*	1.20	0.58
Stopped in motor vehicle	2.61*	0.63	0.48
Stopped on foot	3.30*	0.94	2.02
Other contact with police	2.00*	1.21	0.29
Complaint investigation very thorough		0.53	-.1
Complaint investigation somewhat thorough		0.76	1.36 <sup>1</sup>
Complaint investigation don't know		0.47**	0.30
thoroughness			
Sanctions lenient		0.90	2.65
Sanctions: don't know severity		0.59	1.64
Citizen oversight – yes		2.18*	5.94*
Citizen oversight – don't know		0.99	0.81
Dissatisfied - discourtesy		1.60	4.34*
Dissatisfied - physical abuse		2.74*	4.27**
Dissatisfied - verbal abuse		7.89*	45.12**
Dissatisfied - unequal treatment		0.84	1.84
Dissatisfied - not able to solve problem		0.93	0.84
Dissatisfied - incompetent, poor judgment		2.49*	2.14
Dissatisfied - poor response time		0.86	-
Dissatisfied - lack of action		0.57	1.79
Dissatisfied - other		2.28	0.46
Dissatisfied - no reason		2.97*	12.77*
N	1,494	533	533
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	0.12	0.21	0.33

Cell entries are odds ratios; significance \*p<.05 \*\*p<.01

### Ashton Regressions: Take-Away Points

Dissatisfied clients more likely to complain if:

- Subjected to perceived misconduct, but even then the likelihood is low
- They are aware of citizen oversight
- They are racial/ethnic minorities
- They are better educated

Complaints seldom made in formal form

- 4% of all clients who were dissatisfied

## Conclusions

- Rate at which citizens' dissatisfaction with police contacts eventuates in a complaint is low: 10-20%
- Rate at which formal complaints are filed, given dissatisfaction, is lower still: about 5%
- Misconduct reported at a somewhat higher rate
- Complaining is affected by situational factors, individual characteristics, and by contextual factors