

# Community Views on Criminal Justice: Quarter 1 Report

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## COMMUNITY VIEWS ON CRIMINAL JUSTICE: Quarter 1 Report

The Center for Public Safety Initiatives (CPSI)'s Community Views on Criminal Justice project records public perception of policing and the criminal justice system in Rochester, NY. This quarterly report discusses results from four focus groups on community relations and procedural justice. Research findings lay the basis for actionable recommendations to improve police-community relations. Groups surveyed are staff from nonprofit service providers with three serving at-risk youth and one serving justice-involved adults<sup>1</sup>. Results indicate:

- 1) Half of respondents felt interactions with police are poor when outside of their work roles. Many respondents perceive that Rochester Police Department (RPD) officers approach community members as if they are criminals even in situations not involving crime. Officers usually do not explain what warranted a stop, which increases tensions.
- 2) The majority of participants are unsatisfied with RPD responses to community concerns and do not trust the police to do what is best for the community. Participants want officers to get to know the community better.
- 3) Approximately half of participants believe police are fair in the way they enforce the law. In contrast, about two-thirds of respondents perceive RPD does not treat people with dignity and respect, and perceptions of frequent police profiling are a common complaint.
- 4) Respondents report relatively more trust, sense of fairness and belief that police try to do what is best for the community compared to the justice system.
- 5) About half of participants support body-worn cameras and report hope for more police and citizen accountability due to camera use.
- 6) All of the groups were grateful to have a voice, to offer input and suggestions on these issues, and that the information is submitted to criminal justice leadership.

### **Interaction with Police**

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<sup>1</sup> Descriptive and demographic information on each group surveyed can be found in Appendix 1.

## COMMUNITY VIEWS ON CRIMINAL JUSTICE: Quarter 1 Report

***Questions: Have you had any contact or interaction with a member of the Rochester Police Department (RPD) in the past 6 months? Would you describe your most recent interaction with the police as good, bad, neither good nor bad, or no interaction? Did the interaction with the police get started by you calling or approaching the police or the police approaching you?***

The majority of participants have interacted with RPD in the last six months. About half of respondents report better interactions with RPD while group members are at work because they have a shared purpose and a relationship with officers. Three groups described their non-work interactions with RPD as generally negative. Participants noted a prevalent feeling of “us versus them” dividing RPD and community members. Respondents perceive that officers often approach situations as if everyone involved is a potential criminal, regardless of the situation or the outcome. One participant described calling 911 for assistance when witnessing a person injured in a bike accident and how the officer treated the injured as if he were a criminal.

The most frequent “bad” interaction reported was individuals being stopped and told they fit the profile of someone law enforcement was searching for. One group called this an “excuse” for profiling black males. The shared perception is these are almost always wrongful stops, which some describe as disrespectful and unfair. African American males, and possibly more so young males, are noted as most at-risk for these stops. Some positive interactions described involve favorable outcomes (i.e. a person did not get a ticket, received a lesser ticket, or police worked with the person to find a solution to the situation).

### **Safety**

***Question: How safe do you feel in your neighborhood at night?***

Almost all group members feel safe or somewhat safe in their neighborhoods regardless of the time of day. Neighborhoods were generally defined as the street you live on and the close surrounding streets. Participants live in a variety of neighborhoods; some having reputations of

## COMMUNITY VIEWS ON CRIMINAL JUSTICE: Quarter 1 Report

being the safest areas of the city or suburbs, and some are violence-prone. Most participants report feelings of safety had nothing to do with the police. Respondents say the nature of their work greatly contributed to feeling safe (confident and with a positive, street-smart mentality) in any Rochester neighborhood. Knowing people who live and spend time in the neighborhood are also noted as items that contribute to feeling safe.

### Community Concerns and Trust

***Questions: Overall, how satisfied are you with police responses to community concerns? (Responses range from very satisfied to very unsatisfied.) Rate how strongly you agree or disagree with these statements: I trust the police to do what is best for the community. Overall, the criminal justice system (police, courts, probation, prisons, parole, etc.) tries to do what is best for the community.***

Groups were unsatisfied with RPD responses to community concerns. Issues reported include: slow response time and/or no response, officers that treat community members rudely and lack cultural competence. One group believes the RPD administration has positive goals for community policing, improving police-community relations and cultural competency yet reports not seeing officers on the street follow through on these goals. In contrast, a source of satisfaction is officers attending community meetings to report on RPD actions to address specific concerns raised by residents (such as at PCIC meetings).

About 65% of respondents report that police and the justice system do not do what is best for the community. People see the system as overwhelmed and influenced by political agendas, money and status rather than what is best for the community. Respondents voiced more trust of the police than the justice system because they think of the police as individual officers trying their best. Some reported difficulty trusting the police to do what is best for the community because RPD is often not aware what the community needs. Participants were adamant that officers need to get to know neighborhoods and the people in them. Some participants say when

## COMMUNITY VIEWS ON CRIMINAL JUSTICE: Quarter 1 Report

officers act professional *and* are personable, they are perceived as more trustworthy. Others said trust is gained by trying to understand a person's situation, and trust worn away when officers make assumptions or see people for the color of their skin.

### **Dignity, Respect and Fairness**

***Questions:*** *Rate how much you agree or disagree with each of these statements: Police officers in my community are generally fair in the way they enforce the law. The police in my community generally treat people with dignity and respect. The criminal justice system generally treats people fairly.*

Participants were split in their perceptions of if the police are fair or not in the way they enforce the law. One youth-serving group strongly believed the police do not enforce the law fairly due to unfair practices of profiling and witnessing police react with use of force if a person fits the profile of a criminal. Two groups discussed fairness not as equal treatment, instead as doing what is needed or interpreting the law depending on the situation (i.e., since everyone has different needs, following the same procedure for each person is not always fair).

About 60% percent of respondents perceive that RPD does not treat people with dignity and respect. Most participants would like to see RPD being more personable and show care for the community. The majority of participants also do not believe that the criminal justices system treats people fairly (perceptions of the system as stated above). Two groups note the negative influence of the media which reinforces stereotypes of race/ethnicity, poverty, as well as police use of force which perpetuates distrust.

### **Body-Worn Cameras**

***Question:*** *Rate how much you agree or disagree with this statement: The use of body-worn cameras is good for the relationship between police and this community.*

Almost 60% of people interviewed felt body-worn cameras are good for the relationship between police and this community, and 31% were neutral. A "neutral" group explained their

## COMMUNITY VIEWS ON CRIMINAL JUSTICE: Quarter 1 Report

response as seeing both possibilities and concerns with the use of body cameras. Since RPD responded to community members' requests for body cameras, it may help prove the departments' interest in building better relationships. While most participants believe cameras will increase accountability on the part of citizens and police, one youth-serving group was skeptical either party will be held accountable. Finally, participants report strong concerns the technology may be tampered with prior to release or information will be taken out of context, as we see with snippets captured by cell phone videos.

### **Discussion**

Since participants are providing services to groups on the fringe of society it makes sense that responses to procedural justice and community relations questions are similar and critical of police and the justice system. These groups reflect people with interest in reform. Respondents had many suggestions for improving police-community interactions rather than only complaints. We assume that responses from business associations or neighborhood groups in less challenged of Rochester may vary more than responses reported here.

Every group highlighted that community members have responsibilities in police-citizen interactions. Perhaps this is not surprising since these participants serve as mentors to their clients, and mentees are often taught to take responsibility for improved behavior. Participants noted that a polite and respectful community member can often keep an encounter from escalating into a bad encounter, regardless of the officer's demeanor.

It is interesting that many respondents' work experiences have developed confidence and a mentality which helps them feel safe in violence- or crime-prone neighborhoods. Familiarity with the life situations and struggles of youth, having relationships and "cred" with people in

these neighborhoods were reported as contributing to feelings of safety. It is not surprising, then, that almost all participants call for RPD to develop stronger relationships in the community.

### **Actionable Recommendations**

Here we present recommendations based on concerns and suggestions raised across all focus groups. Additional specific suggestions for improving police-community relations from each group interviewed are captured in the report for that focus group.

- 1) Officer training should be reviewed to assure that it reinforces the expectation that when community members are stopped they are given a specific explanation about the reasons for the stop.** What officers communicate and how they treat people is key. This may address participant complaints of being treated like criminals regardless of the situation and some profiling complaints. Instead, officers can approach each situation with an open mind and attitude of gathering information. Officers can also respond to participants request for “showing care” by expressing understanding and/or concern for the community member’s situation. If someone is stopped when law enforcement is looking for a criminal, providing information on the following will be helpful: what specific parts of the profile they fit, and how this stop relates to tips law enforcement received.
- 2) Focused cultural competency training should be available to help officers decide what is best for particular neighborhoods and situations. Refresher training should occur every year. These trainings should be action-oriented to show sensitivity for and acknowledge issues of race, poverty and mental health.** This suggestion may also assist with the complaint of profiling, which leads to more tension between police and the community. Respondents report perceiving most stops as wrongful profiling, unfair, and disrespectful due how the stops are handled by officers. Trainings that help officers learn

## COMMUNITY VIEWS ON CRIMINAL JUSTICE: Quarter 1 Report

strategies for interacting with and better understanding community members of another race, in situations of poverty or with mental health issues can help RPD show concern and care for the community. Ongoing, yearly refreshers will provide time for officers to consider their own patterns of response and take away new strategies to incorporate. Respondents felt that as officers show greater care and understanding for the neighborhoods they work with, community members' trust in RPD will grow.

**3) The most frequently discussed strained relationships were between officers and young people, especially young men of color. RPD should try to develop an ongoing program for building relationships with at-risk youth, perhaps linking a youth-serving organizations in each quadrant with officers that serve that quadrant.** Not surprisingly, participants discussed African American males, and possibly even more so young males, as most at-risk for profiling. Respondents noted how youth like to challenge authority especially if they feel they are not being treated respectfully and/or when friends are present. The goal is to better understand and deal with troubled youth in a more neutral environment, that of the youth-serving organization. Officers may want to “show care” as suggested by these focus group participants: interacting with people as simply another person rather than as a cop, not assuming that every situation is negative or potentially criminal, shaking hands and asking about the other person. Developing relationships with at-risk youth will assist officers in practicing how to respond to youth, especially those that may challenge their authority, if officers need to stop them on the street.



### **Appendix 1: Methodology**

Focus groups were held from October to December 2015. Almost all respondents interact with RPD officers or the local justice system as part of their work, and most have personal experiences with RPD through spending time or living in the city of Rochester. The majority of clients have had interactions with the justice system or law enforcement.

Due to researchers' use of group feedback analysis, individualized demographic information was not collected (more information can be found in the forthcoming paper Community View on Criminal Justice: Methodology). General group demographic and descriptive information is as follows.

- **Focus group one: Staff members serving justice-involved adults** (8 participants). The majority of participants were women, approximate age ranged 30 to 60, the dominant racial/ethnic group was White with three people of color, and 75% live in the suburbs.
- **Focus group two: Staff members serving at-risk youth** (12 participants). Women made up about sixty percent of the group, approximate age ranged 30 to 50, the dominant racial/ethnic group was African American with a few White and Latino participants, and 75% live in the city of Rochester.
- **Focus group three: Staff members serving at-risk youth** (2 participants). Half of the group was male, approximate age ranged 40 to 50, half of the group was Latino and half was African American, and all participants live in the city of Rochester.
- **Focus group three: Staff members serving at-risk youth** (7 participants). The majority of participants were women, approximate age ranged 40 to 50, and the dominant racial/ethnic group was White with a couple of African American participants, and about half living in the city of Rochester.

**Appendix 2: Focus Group Questions with Corresponding Results**

**1) Have you had any contact or interaction (by phone, office, car, on the street, etc.) with a member of the Rochester Police Department (RPD) in the past 6 months? (N = 29)**

Responses	Yes	No
Quarter 1 Percentage	76	24

**2) Would you describe your most recent interaction with the police as... (N = 29)**

Responses	Good	Bad	Neither good nor bad	No contact
Quarter 1 Percentage	34	7	35	24

**3) How did the interaction with the police get started? (N = 28)**

Responses	I called 911	A police officer approached me	No recent interaction
Quarter 1 Percentage	14	57	29

**4) How safe do you feel in your neighborhood at night? (N = 29)**

Responses	Very safe	Somewhat safe	Somewhat unsafe	Very unsafe
Quarter 1 Percentage	69	28	0	3

**5) Overall, how satisfied are you with police responses to community concerns? (N = 29)**

Responses	Very satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Somewhat unsatisfied	Very unsatisfied
Quarter 1 Percentage	3	31	48	17

**6) I trust the police to do what is best for the community. (N = 28)**

Responses	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Quarter 1 Percentage	0	29	54	18

**7) Police officers in my community are generally fair in the way they enforce the law. (N = 29)**

Responses	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Quarter 1 Percentage	0	54	39	7

COMMUNITY VIEWS ON CRIMINAL JUSTICE: Quarter 1 Report

**8) The police here generally treat people with dignity and respect. (N = 28)**

Response	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Quarter 1 Percentage	4	35	54	8

**9) Overall, the criminal justice system (police, courts, probation, prisons, parole, etc.) tries to do what is best for the community. (N = 28)**

Responses	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Quarter 1 Percentage	3	28	38	31

**10) The criminal justice system generally treats people fairly. (N = 26)**

Responses	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Quarter 1 Percentage	0	18	46	36

**11) The use of body-worn cameras is good for the relationship between police and this community. (N = 29)**

Responses	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Quarter 1 Percentage	28	31	31	7	3