

Community Engagement Outcomes: Results from the Community-wide Survey

(An excerpt from the forthcoming Draft Quarterly COCL Report; the full draft report will be released on July 1.)

The Settlement Agreement is designed to encourage systemic changes within the Portland Police Bureau, including new community engagement strategies that will “promote community confidence in PPB and facilitate police/community relationships.” (Section IX Introduction). Increased public trust and confidence in the Bureau should result from improvements in service delivery to Portland residents, especially services to persons with mental illness. Here we review and comment on a few key findings from the citywide community survey (see Par. 146) relevant to these issues, particularly the distinctions between perceptions held by the general public and perceptions held by those who have had personal experiences with the police. We encourage the PCCEP and members of the community to read the full report from DHM as well as PPB’s voluntary response¹ to the survey recommendations, and engage in a dialogue with the PPB, especially any implications these findings might have for the Community Engagement Plan.

Legitimacy and trust. Regarding police legitimacy and public trust, Portland residents (taking together residents who had personal experience with PPB and those that did not) remain positive toward the PPB and these views have remained roughly the same between 2016 and 2019 (3.4 on a 5.0 rating scale). For example, 56% view the PPB as trustworthy, versus 17% who disagree (27% neutral). However, public trust is lower among historically marginalized groups, including African Americans, Latinos, persons with mental health issues, and those who identify as LGBTQIA+. They hold more negative views of the PPB in general, from management to street-level service. These differences in perceptions of the police represent a long-term challenge that can be addressed through consistent community engagement and continuous refinement of service delivery. Research shows that one of the key determinants of police legitimacy and public trust is the level of procedural justice exhibited by officers during encounters with the public. PPB has introduced specific training to enhance procedural justice and reduce implicit bias in policing. Not only should PPB continue this work, but we encourage them to incentivize this type of interaction through performance evaluations, awards, and other forms of recognition.

Quality and Fairness of PPB Services. The community survey queried the public (again, taking together residents who had personal experience with PPB and those that did not) regarding their perceptions of how PPB officers respond to various groups on dimensions such as fairness, respectfulness, and use of force. In general, most people believe they would be treated fairly and respectfully, but there is some concern that the police will not give the same treatment to persons of color or those with mental illness.

Concern that the police might stereotype certain groups was not present for three-quarters of Portland residents, but was very apparent among some of the groups that are stereotyped in society. Concern about being racially or ethnically stereotyped by the police was very high among Native Americans (85%) and Black/African Americans (74%). Concern about being stereotyped was present but was less of a concern among persons who reported a mental health condition (26% vs. 11% other) or a physical disability (27% vs. 6% other). In any event, PPB will need to be sensitive to these groups. Again, procedural justice and implicit bias training should help to alleviate these fears if the training is repeated over time.

¹ <https://www.portlandoregon.gov/police/news/read.cfm?id=229980>

Also, a sizeable percentage of Portland residents felt that the PPB “used more physical force than necessary” when dealing with racial or ethnic populations (47%) and people experiencing a mental health crisis (48%). Similarly, 42% rated the PPB’s performance in responding to mental health calls as “poor” or “very poor” – a lower rating than in 2016.

Real Contact with the Police

No doubt the concerns and opinions described above are real and should be addressed in some way. However, an important distinction must be made between perceptions held by the general public and perceptions held by those who have had personal experiences with the police. To a large extent, the survey respondents’ perceptions of the PPB are not based on recent direct experience, as more than two-thirds of the citywide sample in Portland did not have any direct contact with PPB officers in the past year. The average community member learns about the police in other ways, such as media coverage or through social communication, which provides only select coverage of events. A large percentage of the public is willing to admit that they simply don’t know how people are treated by the police, as they frequently selected the option “Neither Agree nor Disagree” when asked to evaluate how the PPB treated various groups.

The bottom line is that we can learn much more about the quality of police service by asking community residents who have had real contacts with the PPB.² For this group (roughly one-third of the sample), the results of the survey are quite different. DHM reports the following:

Respondents who had contact with the police were asked how satisfied they were with their treatment by the officer in their most recent interaction (voluntary and involuntary contacts) or the overall experience (mental health crisis). Respondents who contacted the police to report a crime or ask for help were most satisfied (86%), followed by those who had been contacted by the police (76%). Of those who had called for assistance for someone experiencing a mental health crisis, 69% were satisfied. Satisfaction rose in all three areas compared to 2016. In the case of involuntary contact, where police officers contacted the respondent, satisfaction rose 17 percentage points... This increase is notable and suggestive of meaningful improvements.

So overall, regardless of whether the contact was initiated by the community member or by the police (including stops), the ratings were positive for more than three-quarters of Portland residents and satisfaction with direct contact with the PPB increased substantially between 2016 and 2019, especially for involuntary contact. This change is consistent with what we would expect from the many reforms that have been introduced by the PPB since 2016, including new training in procedural justice, bias, and decision making.

In addition to overall satisfaction with the encounter, community members were asked about fairness of treatment. The vast majority of persons who called the police or were stopped by the police felt they were treated fairly. For 88% of the community-initiated contacts and 78% of the police-initiated contacts, the community members reported being treated fairly by the PPB. Again, these are positive outcomes that would be expected from the reforms.

² COCL has long advocated for use of a contact survey to capture police behavior from the perspective of community members with a recent police contact. As of this writing, PPB is working with the National Police Foundation to field test such a survey.

But we must be careful to qualify these general conclusions. While most demographic groups within the sample felt they were treated fairly, this was not the case for Black/African Americans when they reported a crime or ask for help from the PPB (only 35% felt treated fairly). Also, for involuntary police-initiated contact, less than a majority of Native Americans (31%) and persons with physical disabilities (45%) felt they were treated fairly. The sample sizes are small, but assuming these findings are reliable, the reasons for these less-positive evaluations should be explored in the future.

Outreach to Community

The PPB keeps a wide range of statistics on its outreach efforts. The number and type of meetings attended by PPB officers have been reported recently by the PPB and COCL and will not be repeated here. However, the community-wide survey offers a new perspective on PPB's outreach efforts, namely that of the community members. Four types of community contacts with a PPB officer were captured through the eyes of the community. Most frequently, community members had a "casual conversation" with a PPB officer (33%). Fewer attended a meeting where an officer introduced themselves (11%), and even fewer attended a meeting where an officer explained what the police were doing to address neighborhood problems (7%). Some of these low numbers may simply indicate a lack of community interest in these venues. However, one indirect measure of whether officers engaging in proactive contact with local residents (e.g. foot patrol) is whether the community member knew the first or last name of any Portland police officer who patrols in their neighborhood. This figure is only 6% and has not changed between 2016 and 2019. Hence, there is still room to increase the number of one-on-one interactions that can lead to increased knowledge and a better understanding of each other at the neighborhood level.

Police Reforms and Lack of Knowledge

Finally, the community-wide survey provides evidence that the residents of Portland could be more knowledgeable about the work of the PPB and recent systemic efforts to enhance the performance of the organization and its officers. Survey respondents were asked about six things the PPB was doing to improve services, from training to accountability. Only about one-third of the city is aware of the changes being made by the PPB and about half of the city admits that they "Don't know." Some portion of these responses may reflect distrust ("I've been told they are doing these things, but I'm not sure if they really are"). Whether it is a genuine lack of knowledge or distrust of the PPB, more work is needed to educate the public and increase their confidence that these reforms are real and substantial.