

## **Factors that affect public opinion about the police in Gauteng Province**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Several studies about the public's opinion (i.e. confidence, perceptions and trust) of the police have been conducted internationally, nationally and in Gauteng province. These studies revealed that strong relationships of mutual trust between police and the communities they serve are critical to maintaining public safety and effective policing. Police officials rely on the cooperation of community members to provide information about crime in their neighbourhoods and to work with the police to devise solutions to crime and disorder problems. Similarly, community members' willingness to trust the police depends on whether they believe that police actions reflect community values that incorporate the principles of procedural justice and legitimacy. Using data from the perception of safety survey and other safety-related studies conducted in Gauteng province, this paper presents a public opinion about the police in the province, with the aim to examine the factors that influence the public's opinion of the police in Gauteng province. The secondary research method was used to analyse information from the previous reports.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Factors, police, public opinion, public confidence and trust*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The Citizens' perception of safety survey in high crime areas conducted in the Gauteng province in South Africa revealed that citizens have little trust in the police (DCS, 2018). Just under half of the respondents (49.5%) say that they do not trust them while there are still 35.4% of the respondents that believe in the police and the role that they play in society. Two open-ended questions were asked of respondents as to whether they trust the police or not? Poor performance was one of the key themes emanating from this question as to why people do not trust the police. Participants said the police were not doing their job or 'work' and that they were not active in addressing citizens' needs or combating crime. Citizens felt that the police were on the 'take' – taking bribes and too much time to respond to calls for assistance. Based on the findings of the study mentioned above, it is important to examine other factors that can impact public opinion of the police in Gauteng province. The identified factors were supported by the findings from numerous studies that were conducted by the Gauteng Department of Community Safety

Studies on the public perception of police have determined that three different factors make up the public's trust in police. These are: police corruption, the public's perception of police performance in carrying out their duties, and beliefs in police legitimacy and police visibility are seen as having a significant effect on the public's opinion about the police. These identified factors were compared with results from the Department of Community Safety's research studies. Studies on the perception of police argued that trust in the police could best be measured by observing police effectiveness (Sung, 2006). The third dimension of public trust in the police has been termed 'police legitimacy'. Nevertheless, as legitimacy is a vaguely defined concept that has been debated by social scientists for centuries, researchers have preferred to examine the concept by dividing it into smaller, more measurable components (Nur, 2015). With respect to police studies, these components include procedural fairness, outcome fairness, and lawfulness (Nur, 2015).

The Gauteng Department of Community Safety through the Community Police Relations unit that deals with the relationship between the police and the community enjoin the SAPS to: (SAPS, 1995)

- Establish and maintain a partnership between the community and the police service
- Promote communication between the police and the community
- Promote co-operation between the Service and the community in fulfilling the needs of the community regarding policing
- Improve rendering of police services to the community at all levels
- Improve transparency in the police service and accountability of the service to the community, as well as
- Promote joint problem-identification and problem-solving by the SAPS and the community.

## **II. METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1 Secondary research method**

A lot of secondary data is being collected and archived by researchers all over the world for research that is becoming more widespread (Andrews, Higgins, Andrews, Lalor, 2012). Secondary data is collected by someone else for primary research purposes which provides basic research principles. Researchers who have limited time and resources can use the secondary data for their research. For the collection of secondary data for this paper, the researcher used both published and unpublished data.

Secondary data is classified as 'internal or external' in terms of its source. Internal secondary data is information acquired within the organization where research is being carried out (Creswell, 2009). On the other hand, external secondary data are obtained from outside sources (Creswell, 2009). The two major advantages of using secondary data in the research are time and cost savings (Creswell, 2009).

### **2.2 Identifying the reports and data**

In the case of this paper, an in-depth literature review of the areas of interest was conducted examining the previous and current work of the Gauteng Department of Community Safety. Through the literature review, other research on this topic as well as agencies and research centres that have conducted related studies were identified. Research reports and findings of studies from the Department of Community Safety were also identified and reviewed i.e findings from the Citizen perception of safety in the high crime areas of Gauteng province in the 2017/18 financial year, An Assessment of whether Community Police Relations has improved public confidence in the police conducted in 2016/17 financial year and the Mid-term review of policing needs and priorities 2017/18 financial year (DCS; 2017,2018).

### **3. Factors Affecting Public opinion about the police: Police corruption, Police Legitimacy and Police Effectiveness**

Brown and Benedict (2002) reviewed over one hundred studies, highlighting several methodological and conceptual problems associated with measuring attitudes toward the police that should be considered when attempting to synthesise research findings. Change in the opinion of police legitimacy is the most significant variable affecting the citizens' opinion about the police (Roberts & Hough 2005). While taking small steps in police legitimacy may quickly improve the opinion about the police, it became evident that bigger and more fundamental steps are required in order to change trust through improving the perception of police effectiveness (Roberts & Hough 2005). This relationship is valid in both a positive and negative direction (Skogan, 2006). A small-scale change in the perception of legitimacy may affect effectiveness on a larger scale (Skogan, 2006).

The police's own attitudes and actions, which affect the perception of legitimacy, also affect the society's tolerance towards rights violations/police misconduct as well as their cooperation with the police (Roberts & Hough 2005). The perception of legitimacy and effectiveness may shape the way in which individuals act towards police at critical moments (Roberts & Hough 2005). The change in the perception of legitimacy and effectiveness of the police may affect such tolerance, cooperation, as well as obedience to the police, the law, and regulations (Roberts & Hough 2005). The impact of the positive changes in the perception of legitimacy and effectiveness may contribute to a stable atmosphere in the province (Roberts & Hough 2005). It has been found that the small steps taken towards improving the perception of legitimacy and effectiveness have a substantial impact on increasing trust, especially among demographic groups whose religious, ethnic, and political identity is different than that of the majority of the communities (Mentel, 2012).

#### **3.1 Police Corruption**

Police Corruption has negatively affected the public rating of police performance. From her studies on the determinants of police performance, Silver (2009) discovered that police solicitation of bribes from people has eroded public confidence in the legitimacy of their duties. Studies have also discovered that corruption in other institutions affects public trust in the police negatively (Boateng 2012; Kääriäinen, 2007). A possible explanation for this as demonstrated earlier, is that the police do not operate in a vacuum, but interdependently, particularly with other components of the criminal justice system, and state institutions (Boateng, 2012). Hence, an indictment of corruption in other public institutions often affects public trust in the police (Kääriäinen, 2007).

The study, "Assessment of whether community-police relations have improved public confidence in the police" was conducted by the Gauteng Department of Community Safety in 2017 and concurs with the findings from these researchers. About 4.3% of the respondents (which was not the majority of the respondents in the study), suggested dealing with corruption as one of the factors that can improve the public confidence and trust in the police (DCS, 2017a).

The mid-term review of Policing Needs and Priorities that was conducted in 2018 in Gauteng province shows that a considerable number of respondents (72% of 1923 respondents) expressed their dissatisfaction

based on alleged police corruption (DCS, 2018a). The figure (72%) increased from the baseline study conducted in 2014 that showed 47% of respondents were dissatisfied with the alleged police corruption. The literature shows that police corruption takes a tremendous toll on the reputation of all law enforcement and leaves the community convinced that police officials cannot be trusted (Dantzker, 1997 in DCS, 2018b). The findings of these studies correspond with the police corruption literature review that shows that police corruption is becoming a fundamental problem in South Africa and it may result in the community losing confidence and trust in the police (Kääriäinen, 2007).

### **3.2 Maintain focus on the importance of collaboration and be visible in the community**

Increasing police presence in the neighbourhoods, constant police car and foot patrol, reducing disorderly behaviour, rapid response to calls, and assisting in target hardening (Cordner, 2010) are some of the various ways that can be adopted to promote a sense of security and safety among citizens. It is important for the police to be visible in their communities and know their residents (Ren, Liqun, Lovrich, & Gaffney, 2005). Many people do not interact with the police outside of enforcement contexts (Ren et.al, 2005). This can result in people developing negative associations with the police, for example, if the only contact they have ever had with police consisted of receiving a traffic citation or calling the police to report being the victim of a crime (Ren et.al, 2005). Finding opportunities to interact with community members in a non-enforcement context helps to reduce bias on the part of community members and police officers (Ren et.al, 2005). Getting to know community residents helps both groups to break down personal barriers and overcome stereotypes and allows officers to learn which residents of a neighbourhood are law-abiding and which ones are not (Ren et.al, 2005). Police officers often report that law-abiding residents of high-crime neighbourhoods resent it when police seem suspicious of everyone in the neighbourhood, and, for example, make pedestrian stops of young men who are on their way to work (Reisig & Roger, 2004).

Personal interactions between police officers and community members build mutual trust, which is essential to addressing neighbourhood problems and reducing crime (Gilmour, 2008). Programs and initiatives to foster these interactions include:

- Police involvement in local school activities, and
- Police participation in community events (Ren et.al, 2005).

Police officials should see themselves as a part of the community they serve, and local government officials, police leaders, and community members should encourage the active involvement of officers as participants to help maintain the peace (Reisig & Roger, 2004).

The study conducted by the Gauteng Department of Community Safety revealed that about 9.7% of respondents mentioned community engagement and police visibility as the factors that can improve the relationship between the community and the police (DCS, 2017). The Citizen's perception of safety survey conducted in the 40 high crime areas of Gauteng also revealed that close to 63% of citizens indicated that police visibility and police patrols would be the one factor that would make people feel safer during the day. People feel that patrolling cannot only be done by the police but by communities as well (DCS, 2018b). Based on the findings from the various studies conducted by the Gauteng Department of Community Safety, police visibility plays a vital role in the opinion of the community. The more community members see police patrolling their areas, the more they trust and have confidence in the police. It can, therefore, be deduced that police visibility has the power to change public opinion about the police.

### **3.3 Legitimacy and effectiveness of the Police**

The legitimacy of the police is seen as an important part of public trust and confidence in the police (Nur, 2017). In order to increase trust and confidence in the police, steps should be taken not only to increase the police's performance in crime prevention, decreasing crime rates, and apprehending offenders, but also towards increasing their legitimacy (Nur, 2015). The criteria to measure the legitimacy of the police officers in the eyes of the public are as follows:

- **The criterion of procedural fairness or attitude of the police:** This criterion is used to measure public perception of how fair the police act in their practices and attitudes (Nur, 2015). Data has been used in a number of recent studies to demonstrate that contact experiences do appear to change people's opinions of the police (Myhill & Bradford, 2012), that fairness judgements play a key role in this process (Tyler & Fagan, 2008), and that the experience of procedural fairness – or unfairness – during face-to-face interactions with officers is linked to legitimacy judgements (Mazerolle, Bennett, Antrobus, & Eggen, 2012).
- **The criterion of outcome fairness or distribution of services:** This criterion is used to understand if the public considers that police actions produce just results, independent of the police's attitude and behaviour toward the public (Nur, 2015). In other words, this criterion tries to describe to what level the public believes that police provide concrete services in accordance with their function (Nur, 2015).

- **The criterion of lawfulness:** This criterion is used to understand whether the police represent the public's common values and the law, both in the eyes of the public and within the general legal/institutional/administrative system of which the police is a part of (Myhill & Bradford, 2012).
- **The criterion of shared common values:** One of the criteria in Turkey, unlike those found in studies conducted in other countries, distinguished from the criterion of police lawfulness (Myhill & Bradford, 2012).

Trust in the police is mostly affected by the police's lawfulness and by factors related to the legal system (Myhill & Bradford, 2012). However, the perception of the actual behaviour of the police and the belief that the police sensitively and fairly respond to the needs of citizens are both relatively negative. Thus, it has been observed that the public distinguishes the system in which police act from the police itself (Myhill & Bradford, 2012). The public is not satisfied with how the system causes the police to act. The conclusions demonstrate that the police do act in accordance with the law, yet the system constituting that law itself falls short (Hough, Mike, Jonathan & Ben Bradford, 2013).

### **3.4 Perception of Police Effectiveness**

Although police effectiveness and public opinion especially confidence in the police are separate concepts, they are related (Sung 2006). The study of Sung (2006) suggests that the public's confidence in the police is one of the best ways to measure police effectiveness (Sung 2006). The following criteria emerged in the Citizen perception of safety survey as measures of public perception of police effectiveness:

- A concrete idea or normative criterion to determine belief in the police's effective implementation of what is expected of them, their impartiality, respectful treatment of citizens at demonstrations, and their competence and effective training (Larsen & Blair, 2009).
- A criterion of the fight against crime (crime-fighting) used to measure perception on topics like crime prevention and reduction, used to understand the perception of performance related to fighting these crimes (Larsen & Blair, 2009).
- A criterion of apprehending offenders used to measure the perception of police performance when it comes to apprehending those who commit crimes like burglary, pickpocketing, petty crimes, sexual harassment, rape or murder (Larsen & Blair, 2009).

According to the study, the public perceives the police to be the most effective in the second dimension, that of crimefighting. Perception of the apprehension of offenders or normative notions of police effectiveness is lower. According to the statistical analysis, the dimension that most significantly improves trust in police is the 'normative' criterion. Increasing the perception that the police are effective and successful, for example by making guarantees that the police will act fairly, increases trust in police. Outside of concrete measures of police performance, the belief in the normative effectiveness or success of the police force is also low (Nur, 2015).

According to the results of the study, trust in the police of groups who did not own a strong sense of political belonging would be significantly affected even by a small change in their opinion of police effectiveness. Steps should be taken to improve the perception of police effectiveness of these groups in order to increase their trust. Based on the influence police effectiveness has in transforming the public's trust in police, it is important to improve the relationship between police and public in Gauteng province in order to increase public trust in police. In situations like these, where police come face to face with the public, police must not only act equally and justly to all, but they should also be effective at establishing order. In this regard, the crowd management policy in place should be utilised effectively in controlling the crowds without resorting to violence/excessive force and police officers should be trained on this issue.

### **Gauteng Province Interventions to improve public opinion and confidence about the police**

There are programmes in place that the Gauteng Department of Community Safety and other relevant stakeholders in the province e.g. Law Enforcement Agencies are implementing to improve public opinion about the police.

**Community engagement-** Overall the evidence suggests that the strategies most likely to be effective in improving confidence are initiatives aimed at increasing community engagement. As part of instilling public confidence in the police, the Department of Community Safety through the Community Police Relations unit promotes safety of communities through encouraging good relations between the police and communities and involvement of communities in crime prevention. The relations between police and communities are improved through the existence of street committees and engagements with rural and business communities. It is believed that the programme is effective in improving public confidence in the police. This was also confirmed by the respondents from the study that was conducted in 2017 by the department where community members believed that building community police relations through for example, Community Police Forums (CPFs) increased their

confidence and trust in the police (69.7%), are sustainable in future (68.5%), and increased police transparency and police accountability (69.3% and 70.2% respectively). The findings suggest that 72.2% thought that these CPFs mobilized the community against crime, while 72.9% felt that it increased community involvement in the fight against crime (DCS, 2017a).

The department is putting an effort into ensuring that public confidence is restored in different communities through coordinating the implementation of social crime prevention initiatives. There are a few initiatives in place such as Men As Safety Promoters (MASP), Women As Safety Promoters (WASP), Youth Crime Prevention Desks (YCPDs) and the elderly safety groups that were established. It was believed that through these initiatives community members with assistance from the SAPS will be able to deal with community safety issues, which will instill public confidence in different communities. The evaluation of the Men as Safety Promoters programme was undertaken in the different areas where the initiative was implemented. MASP is the initiative to deal with crimes perpetrated by men against women and children. The general findings of the study revealed the initiative is effective. From the respondents interviewed, 87% of community members agreed that the MASP programme was succeeding in achieving its objectives (DCS, 2017b).

**Police performance, legitimacy and effectiveness** –The Positive image of the police is necessary for the police to function effectively in the communities. The Department of Community Safety is monitoring and evaluating performance of the police through the Police Performance: Monitoring, Evaluation and Service Delivery Complaints Directorate. The programme is aimed at facilitating improved delivery of police services through monitoring and evaluation of the functionality of law enforcement agencies in the province. The programme monitors and evaluates the performance of the police through Quarterly Review Sessions (QRS) of the Law Enforcement Agencies. The Gauteng Law Enforcement Agencies Forum (GLEAF) was also established in Gauteng province as part of monitoring the performance of the police. The DCS believes that the existence of the GLEAF ensures collaborated efforts in the fight against crime, with the intention to ensure the realisation of safer communities. It is through this programme where the department recommends disciplinary action against officers found to be in contravention with the requirements of the Domestic Violence Act.

**Police corruption** –The National SAPS established the National Anti-Corruption unit to deal with police corruption. The National Anti-Corruption Strategy was also launched by Police Minister Bheki Cele and National Commissioner General Sithole in 2018. The purpose of the strategy was to encourage the police to do the right thing when nobody is watching. The Gauteng SAPS established an anti-corruption hotline that was launched in 2018. The Gauteng province committed to restoring trust and confidence in the police in Gauteng and therefore encourages members of the public to use the 24-hour anti-corruption hotline. It is believed that all these interventions are efforts to increase public confidence in the service.

### **III. CONCLUSION**

This paper examines factors that affect public opinion about the police. Combining data from different surveys of the Gauteng Department of Community Safety, the analysis revealed that factors such as police corruption, police legitimacy, police effectiveness and maintaining focus on the importance of collaboration and visibility in the community play an important role in the public's opinion about the police. The analysis also finds that members of the public look to the police as representatives of community values and norms as well as a symbol of moral authority who address everyday problems and strengthen social order. To increase public confidence and decrease the fear of crime, the police need to re-engage as an active part of the community and represent and defend community values, norms and morals.

Strategies in place are likely to be most effective in improving public confidence and are associated with initiatives aimed at increasing community engagement. From the above-mentioned interventions most included an element of communicating and engaging with the community, thus, Community engagement among others can be confirmed as the promising interventions to improve public confidence.

Increasing and maintaining public confidence in the police should be seen as a long-term continuous process with the time taken to understand and address the expectations of different communities. As indicated few of the evaluations conducted measured the impact of interventions over relatively short periods of time. Therefore, it is difficult to assess whether these programmes would have sustained their successes, improved or declined over time. It is important for the Department of Community Safety to keep evaluating the implemented programmes to track the community's opinion about the police and departmental programmes.

To deliver any of the identified interventions successfully, a high quality of implementation is required. Without high-quality implementation, there is a risk that the opposite effect to that intended could occur, i.e. a reduction in confidence.

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