



Harrisonburg Community-Law Enforcement Relations

November 2018

Introduction

Why a Survey on Community-Law Enforcement Relations?

In 2015, with an understanding of criminalization and mass incarceration as major concerns of the Harrisonburg/Rockingham community, Virginia Organizing partnered with Better Together and Southerners on New Ground (SONG) to launch Free From Fear, a campaign intended to fight criminalization and reduce incarceration of Harrisonburg residents. As part of this campaign, the coalition began to investigate the relationship between the Harrisonburg community and local law enforcement. Realizing that there was a shortage of data, both quantitative and qualitative, on Harrisonburg residents' experiences of law enforcement, the campaign undertook a survey project. The survey aimed to increase understanding of how the Harrisonburg community feels about the police force, what degree of familiarity residents have with officers, as well as what residents know about local policing methods. The goal was to hear directly from the people of Harrisonburg and then to share the results with the Harrisonburg police department and community.

Virginia Organizing

Virginia Organizing is a statewide grassroots organization that seeks to empower community members to challenge injustice by becoming involved in issues in their own communities. Virginia Organizing was founded in 1995 and has 15 chapters across the state.

Better Together/Mejores Juntos

An alliance of community members meeting at the intersections of race, culture, class, sexuality, language, immigration status, gender, and ability to engage in the vision and project of building beloved community. This vision is part of the long historical journey of liberation towards a place and sentiment that embraces us all in the collective process of democracy and the ability to self-determine what health, wealth, and love looks like in our communities. Better Together/Mejores Juntos deny that power can only be built on the structural inequities of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and extreme monetary wealth. We assert that communities can be run successfully on the values of beloved community.

Southerners on New Ground

Southerners on New Ground (SONG) is a regional Queer Liberation organization made up of Black people, people of color, immigrants, undocumented people, people with disabilities, working class and rural and small town, LGBTQ people in the South. SONG develops leadership, builds its membership base, and identifies and carries out community organizing projects and campaigns. SONG's work strives to bring together marginalized communities to work towards justice and liberation for all people.

The Process

Virginia Organizing partnered with Better Together/Mejores Juntos and Southerners on New Ground (SONG) in the development of the survey and the training of the surveyors. Ten people from Virginia Organizing then carried out the survey collection. The surveys were distributed during late 2017 and early 2018 throughout neighborhoods in the seven different geographic policing areas. Surveys were conducted in English, Spanish, and Arabic.

The Questions

Background

- Gender
- Age
- Activities done in Harrisonburg
- Race/Ethnicity
- Area lived in

Accessibility of Police

- Harrisonburg law enforcement is able to speak & understand me in a language I feel comfortable in.
- I believe that Harrisonburg law enforcement is willing to accommodate my language needs.

Knowledge of Policing Methods

- I understand how the Harrisonburg Police Department works and makes decisions.
- Do you know the officers who work in your neighborhood?
- Do you know what geographic policing is?
- Did you know that the city of Harrisonburg is broken into seven geographic policing areas?
- Do you know your rights when you interact with law enforcement? If not, would you be interested in attending Know Your Rights training?

Experience with Harrisonburg Police

- I feel safe calling the Harrisonburg police.
- Do you speak to youth/your children about law enforcement? If so, how?
- How do you feel when you see the Harrisonburg police?
- Have you ever called Harrisonburg police? If no, and there was a legitimate reason to call them, why didn't you?
- What has been your experience with Harrisonburg police? Explain

Hopes and Expectations

- What do you expect/want from Harrisonburg law enforcement?
- Would you like police officers to be more involved in your neighborhood? (Please explain why or why not)
- What would you like to know about our local Harrisonburg law enforcement?

Results

The survey concluded with 155 responses, representing each of Harrisonburg's seven geographic policing districts. The pool of respondents included females, males, and trans/gender nonconforming individuals, representing a variety of ages and ethnic/racial backgrounds.

Respondent Profile

- 155 Respondents
- 53 Males, 88 Females, 3 Trans/Gender Non-Conforming, 11 No Answer
- 2 Asian, 5 Middle Eastern, 20 Black, 26 Latino, 81 White, 7 Two or More Races, 5 Other, 9 No Answer

While a majority of respondents reported having had positive experiences with police, only half strongly agreed that they feel safe calling police and 17% reported that they knew the officers who work in their neighborhood. Less than half those surveyed strongly agreed that the police could speak and understand them in a language they were comfortable in.

Overview

- 59% have had a positive experience
- 50% strongly agreed that they feel safe calling the police
- 17% know the officers who work in their neighborhood
- 42% strongly agreed that they felt as though the police could speak & understand them in a language they were comfortable with

Experience with Harrisonburg Law Enforcement

- 59% positive
- 11% negative
- 4% mixed

Positive Experiences with Police

- Professional
- Helpful
- Timely

Negative Experiences with Police

- Racial profiling
- Socio-economic bias
- Bias against youth
- Rudeness
- Unlawfully detained

- Wrongfully stopped
- Harassment

Safety and Accessibility

- 50% strongly agree that they feel safe calling Harrisonburg police
- 42% strongly agree that Harrisonburg law enforcement is able to speak and understand them in a language they feel comfortable in
- 53% strongly agree that Harrisonburg law enforcement is willing to accommodate their language needs
- 82% feel that they know their rights when interacting with law enforcement

When they see the police, Harrisonburg residents feel

- Safe
- That they protect us
- Normal
- Uneasy/scared
- Pre-judged
- Distrust

Familiarity with Police and Policing Methods

- 17% know the officers who work in their neighborhood
- 72% do not know what geographic policing is
- 46% agree or strongly agree that they understand how the police department works and makes decisions

On Hopes and Expectations for the Future

- 59% would like to see more police involvement in their neighborhoods

Harrisonburg Residents' Expectations of Law Enforcement

- Safety/Protection
- Fairness
- Respect
- Competence
- Non-bias
- Nonviolent presence
- Engagement with community

Discussion

The majority of respondents reported having positive experiences with Harrisonburg police and feeling safe in their presence. Fifty-nine percent of respondents reported positive experiences with police, while 15% reported negative or mixed experiences. Respondents of color were less likely to report having positive experiences with police and 23% reported negative or mixed experiences. Respondents who identified as having had negative experiences expressed feeling targeted by racial, socio-economic or age bias, with several respondents citing experiences where they felt that they had been unlawfully detained or stopped. Respondents reporting positive experiences noted Harrisonburg police officers' professionalism, helpfulness, and timeliness.

The experiences that members of the community have with local law enforcement undoubtedly influence how safe the community feels in the hands of the police. When asked to respond to the statement, "I feel safe calling the Harrisonburg police," 76% of the general pool reported that they agree or strongly agree, while 65% of respondents of color did. Eight percent of the general pool disagreed or strongly disagreed while 14% of respondents of color did.

A Note on "Geographic Policing"

The Harrisonburg Police Department utilizes a method known as Geographic Policing, which divides the city into seven districts and assigns officers and supervisors to each district with the aim to increase accountability and familiarity. 72% of people surveyed reported that they did not know what geographic policing was, and 83% did not know the officers who worked in their neighborhood.

A Vision for Future Community-Law Enforcement Relations

Fifty-nine percent of those surveyed said "yes" to police officers becoming more involved in their neighborhoods. Respondents said that they would like the police to interact with them more in addition to being more visible; they don't want officers simply sitting in their patrol cars. Having the police around more would also help them feel safer, they expressed; however, many respondents stated that they would only want an increased presence if it was a positive and nonviolent presence. Of those who answered "no" to the question, many were satisfied with the current level of police, and some were wary of the idea, stating that, "they make me feel uneasy."

When asked about expectations of the Harrisonburg police department, safety and protection were most frequently identified, followed by fairness, respect, and competence. In addition, respondents stated that they wanted the police to act in an unbiased manner and have a nonviolent presence. They expect police to make themselves familiar to the community.

Recommendations

- Expand policing methods in order to cultivate familiarity in community
- Conduct effective and regular cultural sensitivity and bias training
- Increase hiring of officers speaking languages of community

References

United States Census Bureau. (2017). *Quick facts Harrisonburg city, Virginia*. Retrieved from, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/harrisonburgcityviriniacounty>

Harrisonburg Government. (2013, November 12). *Second phase of geographic policing kicks off*. Retrieved from, <https://www.harrisonburgva.gov/sites/default/files/Police/files/news-releases/2013/11-13-13%20Second%20Phase%20of%20Geographic%20Policing%20Kicks%20Off.pdf>



Harrisonburg Community and Police Relations



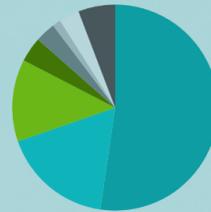
83%

of respondents didn't know the officers who worked in their neighborhood

59%

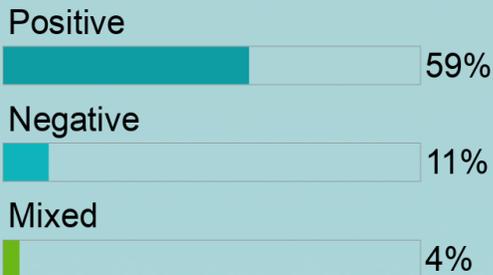
said yes to wanting police officers more involved in their neighborhoods

Demographics of Respondents



White (52.30%)	Latino (17.40%)	Black (12.90%)
2+ Races (3.90%)	Middle Eastern (3.20%)	
Asian (1.30%)	Other (3.20%)	Didn't Answer (5.80%)

What Has Been Your Experience With the Harrisonburg Police?



72%

of people surveyed didn't know what geographic policing was

IMPORTANT POINT!
The Harrisonburg Police Department uses Geographic Policing to break the city up into 7 districts. Officers are then assigned to a district.



VIRGINIA ORGANIZING

Real People. Real Change.