

**POLICE COMPLAINT REVIEW  
IN ALBANY:  
The Views of Complainants  
and Police Clients**

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## Introduction

Created by legislation that was signed into law in July of 2000 and effective October 27, 2000, the Albany Citizens' Police Review Board (CPRB) became operational in May of 2001, after its members had undergone mandated training, and after its by-laws had been approved by the Albany Common Council. The Government Law Center (GLC) of Albany Law School, having been retained by the City to provide support services to the CPRB, was required by the same legislation that created the CPRB to "contract with one or more local colleges, universities or research institutions to conduct surveys of complainants concerning the level of their satisfaction with the process and to conduct surveys of the community to get feedback concerning the CPRB and the Police Department. The results of those surveys shall be reported to the CPRB, the Chief and the Common Council." The GLC contracted with the Hindelang Criminal Justice Research Center of the University at Albany, and this report summarizes the research conducted thus far pursuant to the legislative mandate.

The purpose of the research is to contribute to informed decisions about the structure and process of citizen involvement in complaint review in Albany. Accordingly, it has been designed to measure conditions on which citizen review may have effects, and to illuminate the social psychological mechanisms through which those effects are thought to operate. The findings will not resolve all of the issues that are raised in discussions of police complaint review, nor could the findings of any study. Little is known about the effectiveness of complaint review systems, and about the relative success of differently structured systems in achieving social objectives; moreover, the objectives may not be mutually compatible, and thus even definitive empirical findings would not suffice to resolve the issues. But in collecting and analyzing systematic data about the processes and outcomes of complaint review in Albany, we hope that research findings may form a better basis for sound judgments about the performance of the complaint review system in Albany, and about what—if any—steps are needed to improve the system.

### *Anticipated Benefits of Citizen Involvement in Complaint Review*

Citizen involvement in complaint review can take any of a number of different forms, and one can find many variations on this theme in cities across the United States. Some efforts have been made to reduce this complexity in order to describe the main features of citizen review. One such effort describes four "models" of citizen review:

- complaint review that provides for fact-finding investigations of complaints by persons who are not sworn police officers (i.e., "external" investigations), reports of which are reviewed by other civilian officials, who make recommendations about disposition to the police executive;
- complaint review that provides for investigations conducted by police personnel ("internal" investigations) with citizen input in the review of investigative reports, whereby citizens may monitor police handling of complaints;
- complaint review that provides for citizen involvement in an appellate capacity, with a board to which complainants may appeal if they are dissatisfied with the outcomes of their complaints;

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- complaint review that provides not only for citizen involvement in the review of police investigations of individual cases, but also for a citizen role in reviewing police policies and procedures and making recommendations for change.<sup>1</sup>

Albany's CPRB would appear to fit into the last category.

Citizen involvement in complaint review is thought to have a number of salutary effects. It might improve:

- the perceived receptivity of the complaint review system to complaints;
- the perceived efficacy of the complaint review system;
- the rate at which perceived misconduct is reported to authorities;<sup>2</sup>
- the depth and thoroughness of complaint investigations;
- police performance in interactions with citizens, and hence citizens' subjective assessments of police services;
- the satisfaction of complainants with their experiences with the complaint review system;
- the fairness of complaint review, as it is judged by complainants.

Thus complaint review is about much more than the accurate and fair disposition of individual allegations of police misconduct. It may have implications for the legitimacy of the police department in the eyes of the public, and the tenor of police-community relations. It also may have implications for the capacity of police managers to monitor police performance, identify problems, and intervene to resolve those problems at minimum cost to the citizenry and to officers.<sup>3</sup> It may have implications even for citizens' confidence in local governmental institutions more generally.

Even if all of these propositions are true, it does not follow that maximal citizen involvement in complaint review will yield the greatest possible benefits. Some forms of citizen involvement could even have detrimental effects. A system that tends to elicit

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Walker, *Police Accountability: The Role of Citizen Oversight* (Belmont, Cal.: Wadsworth, 2001), pp. 61-63. However, this set of models might oversimplify the structure of complaint review and thereby obfuscate elements of the complaint review process to which attention could be usefully devoted. Citizen involvement in complaint intake might be important, for example, but it is not a feature that is highlighted in these models of citizen review. For somewhat different formulations, see Douglas W. Perez, *Common Sense about Complaint Review* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), and Wayne A. Kerstetter, "Who Disciplines the Police? Who Should?" in William A. Geller (ed.), *Police Leadership in America: Crisis and Opportunity* (New York: Praeger, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> By "misconduct" we mean "any alleged improper or illegal act, omission or decision" by a police officer that directly affects the person or property of an individual by reason of a violation of any general, standing or special order or guideline of the police department, a violation of any federal law, state law or municipal ordinance, or "any act otherwise evidencing improper or unbecoming conduct." In this we follow the City of Pittsburgh Citizen Police Review Board, "Rules and Operating Procedures" (1998), p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> "Early warning systems," which are intended to enable police managers to detect emerging patterns of police misconduct, are typically based in whole or in part on citizen complaints. See Samuel Walker, Geoffrey P. Alpert, and Dennis J. Kenney, "Early Warning Systems for Police: Concept, History, and Issues," *Police Quarterly* 3 (2000): 132-152; and Geoffrey P. Alpert and Samuel Walker, "Police Accountability and Early Warning Systems: Developing Policies and Programs," *Justice Research and Policy* 2 (2000): 59-72.

frivolous or otherwise unfounded complaints at high rates bears obvious financial and human costs. Internal investigations, some research suggests, may be superior to external investigations.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, if officers have less respect for judgments about their work when they are made by people who do not (or have not) performed the same work, those judgments will have less influence in improving police officers' performance.<sup>5</sup> The *optimal* form and extent of citizen involvement in complaint review may be much less than the maximum.

Unfortunately, these propositions have seldom been treated as testable hypotheses and subjected to systematic empirical analysis. Here in Albany, decision-makers lacked any but anecdotal information on these conditions at the time of the CPRB's creation. Nor did they have reliable information on the scope of the problem: the incidence of police misconduct that would form the basis for valid complaints, and the prevalence of citizen dissatisfaction with which such misconduct is presumably associated. The objective of the research reported here is to bring *systematic* information to bear on these questions in order to better understand how the process works in Albany, and the degree to which it is fulfilling these expectations.

#### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Mindful of the above propositions, and the legislative mandate to survey complainants and the community concerning the CPRB and the Albany police, we formulated a plan for data collection that would enable us to measure many of the conditions on which citizen involvement in complaint review may have effects. This plan is based on the premise that the review of complaints about the police has several primary constituencies:

- "clients" of the police, that is, people who have contact with the police and who as a consequence of that contact—whether it is voluntary or involuntary—are *direct* consumers of police services, and from among whose interactions with the police complaints are most likely to arise;
- complainants, i.e., people who file complaints against police, and who have direct experience with the complaint review process;
- Albany police officers, particularly those against whom complaints are filed.

Each of these constituencies has been or is currently being surveyed, as we explain further below. In addition, the APD contracted separately with the Hindelang Center for a survey of Albany residents, which was conducted by phone last year. Selected results from that survey are discussed here, as they pertain to an assessment of complaint review in Albany.

Clients. "Clients" comprise a population whose perceptions of the complaint review system are particularly relevant, and we might suppose that their perceptions will most affect the

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<sup>4</sup> Perez, *Common Sense about Complaint Review*, and Kerstetter, "Who Disciplines the Police? Who Should?"

<sup>5</sup> Perez, *Common Sense about Complaint Review*.

rate at which acts of perceived misconduct are reported; they are a target audience of crucial importance for complaint review. Clients who believe that complaints are investigated thoroughly, outcomes are reached fairly, and sanctions are imposed appropriately, have more faith in the complaint review system, and as a result may be more likely to give voice to their complaints when they are subject to (or witness) police misconduct. Thus two measures of the success of any complaint review system, whether or not it provides for citizen involvement, are (1) clients' perceptions of complaint review, and (2) clients' proclivity to complain, given some reason to complain.

We planned to periodically sample from several subpopulations of clients, including those who called for police service, those who were arrested, and those who were field interviewed by police, and to conduct (most) interviews by phone. (When we learn that a would-be respondent is unavailable by phone because s/he is incarcerated in the Albany County Correctional Facility, we make arrangements to contact the respondent there and conduct the interview in person.) The infrastructure for this survey effort, including the construction of the survey instrument and especially the sampling procedures, was put into place only after some anticipated obstacles occasioned a delay of unanticipated duration. As a consequence, the client survey was initiated on October 15 of last year, with a sample of clients whose contacts with police took place between September 3 and 16.

From the client survey we can gauge clients' satisfaction with their interaction with the police and their evaluations of police performance in their contact along several more specific dimensions of service quality. Because we interview clients within four to seven weeks of their contacts with police, their responses are subject to a minimum of error or distortion due to their recall of the events. We sample disproportionately from among those subpopulations—arrestees and field interviewees—who are presumptively more likely to be dissatisfied with their contact with the police; to estimate characteristics for the client population as a whole, respondents are weighted to reflect their probabilities of sample selection. Moreover, clients who are dissatisfied with their treatment by police are asked why they were dissatisfied, and they are also asked whether they made a complaint; if they complained, they are asked to whom they made their complaint, and if they did not complain, they are asked why. Thus we can examine the CPRB as part of a much larger set of mechanisms through which aggrieved citizens may communicate their dissatisfaction and seek redress. Clients' perceptions of complaint review are also measured.

By conducting the interviews on an on-going basis, the client survey affords an opportunity to monitor perceptions of police service and of complaint review, as well as the behavior of would-be complainants. As the CPRB continues its outreach efforts, and as perceptions of complaint review filter through the community as the CPRB is institutionalized, one might expect to see changes in these indicators over time.

Complainants. Our research plan provides for surveying *all* complainants by phone (so long as they consent to the interview, of course), as soon after the final disposition of their complaints as we can contact them. (As we do for the client survey, we provide for interviewing complainants in person at the Albany County Correctional Facility as needed.) Hence our findings about complainants are subject to no sampling error (but they may be subject to some nonresponse bias). The complainant survey provides information about the

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goals of complainants in filing a complaint, their subjective assessments of the intake and investigation processes, their perceptions of the fairness with which their complaint was handled, and their satisfaction with the outcome of the complaint review.

Officers. Officers, of course, also have an important and legitimate stake in complaint review, and we believe that no balanced evaluation of complaint review would fail to take their perceptions of and experiences with complaint review into account. While our contract with the GLC did not provide for it (and funds from that contract are not used for it), we are surveying officers against whom complaints have been filed. This survey parallels the complainant survey in two respects: we are surveying all officers against whom complaints are filed, not a sample; and the survey instrument includes items on their subjective assessments of the investigation process, their perceptions of the fairness with which their complaint was handled, and their satisfaction with the outcome of the complaint review. The officer survey differs from the complainant survey in that it takes the form of a self-completed questionnaire, rather than a phone interview, and it is anonymous, with completed questionnaires to be returned directly to us by mail.

Albany Residents. We surveyed a sample of Albany residents by phone between July and October of 2001. (A more complete discussion of survey methods, and of findings from the resident survey, can be found in our report to the APD, which is included in its entirety as Appendix A.) From the resident survey we can gauge the community's satisfaction with the Albany police, and residents' subjective assessments of the police along a number of more specific dimensions. Thus we can describe the breadth and depth of the problems for which effective complaint review may be a partial solution, using information that is more systematic than anecdotal accounts of individual cases of misconduct. We can also examine some dynamics of the complaint system: respondents were asked whether in the preceding twelve months they had any reason to complain about an aspect of police service. To those who said they did, questions were posed about whether they complained, if so to whom and with what effect; if they did not complain, they were asked why they had not complained. These questions cast a very wide net for "complaints," which could take the form of formal, written complaints filed with the police department as well as informal and undocumented communications with police or other city officials, civic or religious leaders, and even friends and neighbors.

### *Organization of Report*

We first discuss residents' satisfaction with and perceptions of the police, relying on findings from the resident survey. We then discuss clients' perceptions of complaint review in Albany, including their confidence in the process and their awareness of citizen involvement in complaint review. We examine the prevalence of and reasons for dissatisfaction with the police, and we analyze the rate at which such dissatisfaction takes the form of complaints. We thereupon summarize findings to date from the complainant survey. We do not discuss the officer survey, which was initiated in November, and to which we have not yet received any responses.

## **Residents' Perceptions of the Police**

As we detail in our report to the APD, the 2001 survey of Albany residents reveals fairly high levels of satisfaction with police services in Albany. The proportion of Albany residents who are satisfied overall with the police services in their neighborhood—nearly 80%—is high in absolute terms, and it is within the range found in other cities. Citizens' assessments of more specific dimensions of police service also tend to be positive. Two thirds to three fourths favorably evaluate the demeanor of police—how fair, helpful, concerned, and polite the police are when dealing with residents—while small proportions evaluate police demeanor unfavorably. Half to three fifths of those with an opinion have positive views of the performance of the police—in keeping order on the streets, preventing crime, and helping victims—while fairly small proportions believe that police are doing a poor job in these respects. About half or more assess police responsiveness positively, and small proportions of residents give the police poor marks for responsiveness. Most residents do not perceive police corruption, police use of excessive force, or police stops as problems in their neighborhoods, although at least one tenth of residents perceive all or most of these as at least some problem in their neighborhoods.

Furthermore, residents who have recently had direct contact with the police also tend to be satisfied with police service. More than three fourths of those who called for assistance were very or somewhat satisfied with how their problem was handled, and 70% or more evaluated their interaction with the police positively. Almost three fourths of those who were stopped were very or somewhat satisfied with the way they were treated by the police in their most recent stop, and most assessed the interaction with the police—with respect to whether the police were polite, fair, and so forth—positively. One can see in the survey results systematic evidence that police services in Albany are for the most part meeting residents' expectations, even while one might see room for improvement.

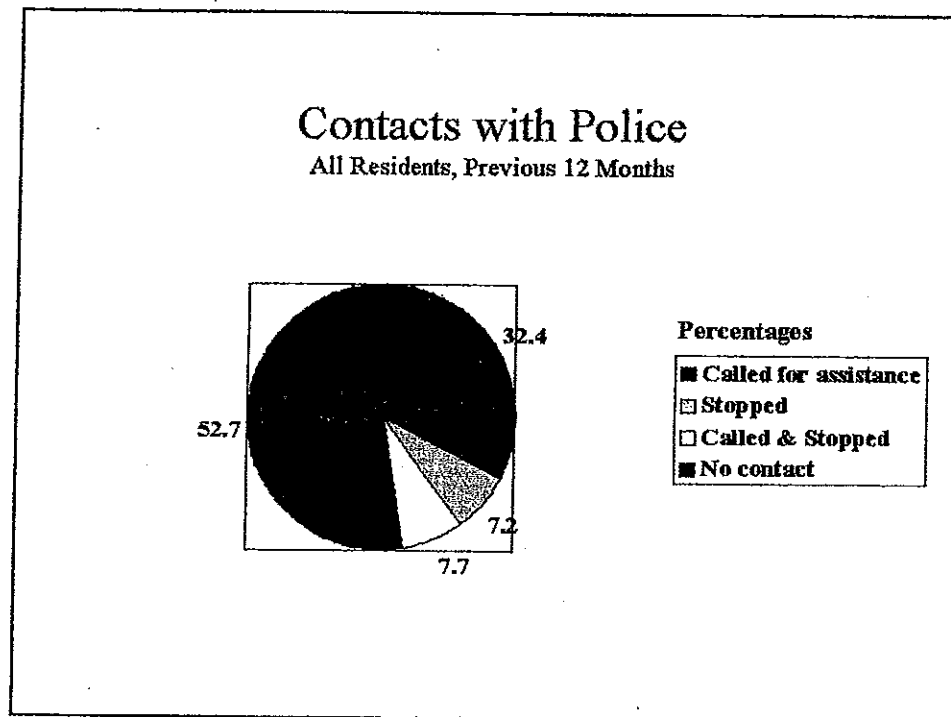
## **Clients' Perceptions of the Police**

### *Contacts with the Albany Police*

As Figure 1 illustrates, slightly less than half of all residents reported having had contact with the Albany police during the twelve months preceding the resident survey, either in calling for assistance by the police or in being stopped by the police. Forty percent had called for assistance, and fifteen percent had been stopped (some had both called and been stopped). Among those who called the police for assistance, 52% called more than once, and 26% called more than twice. Among those who had been stopped, 30% had been stopped more than once, and 15% had been stopped more than twice. If we think of each police-citizen contact as a potential complaint—although some contacts have, by their nature, more such potential than other contacts have—then the number of potential complaints is tremendous. The survey results reveal only part of that potential, since the Albany police have contact with people who are not residents. In 2000, the last year for which information is available, the APD handled 141,419 calls for service, made 5,926



arrests, and issued 13,592 traffic tickets.<sup>6</sup> From any one of these citizen contacts, one or more complaints could arise.



**Figure 1**

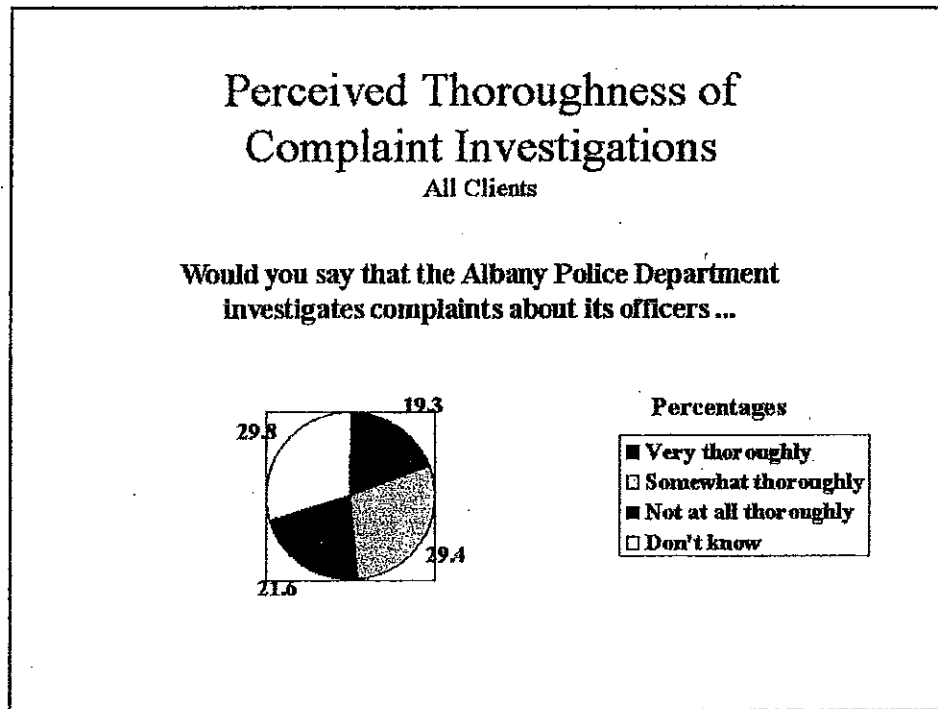
### *Perceptions of Complaint Review*

As we observed above, on p. 4, clients' perceptions of the complaint review system are important insofar as they have a bearing on the likelihood that acts of perceived misconduct will be reported: clients who have faith in the complaint review system are, we might postulate, more likely to make complaints if they have been (or believe that they have been) subject to police misconduct. The client survey provides some information with which we can gauge clients' perceptions of complaint review. (We caution readers that at this time, the client sample is of modest size, and so the margins of error in our estimates are rather large.)

**Complaint Investigations.** One important element of the legitimacy of complaint review concerns the vigor with which police are perceived to investigate complaints against officers. Proponents of citizen review often claim that internal investigations are not thorough, as police investigators are presumably not eager to discredit fellow officers. (The accuracy of this claim is an open question, as it has not been subjected to empirical research,

<sup>6</sup> City of Albany Department of Police, *2000 Annual Report* (Albany: Author, undated).

but it is citizens' perceptions—whether or not they are accurate—that are central to police legitimacy in the community.) At this point in time, almost half of police clients in Albany believe that complaint investigations are very or somewhat thorough, one fifth believe that investigations are not thorough, and 30 percent do not know (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2**

**Sanctions for Misconduct.** Another element of the legitimacy of complaint review concerns the sanctions imposed on officers against whom allegations of misconduct are substantiated, since a common problem is the perception that officers are punished lightly for their misdeeds. Among clients, 37 percent believe that sanctions are very or somewhat severe, while 47 percent believe that sanctions are very or somewhat lenient, and 16 percent do not have an opinion (see Figure 3).

**Awareness of Citizen Review.** Forty percent of the people who have contact with the police are aware that Albany has a "civilian review board," which was generically described to respondents as "a board that includes civilians who oversee the police department's investigation of complaints about its officers" (these clients comprise the upper bar in Figure 4). (The precision of this estimate is plus-or-minus 6.5%.) Almost 30 percent believe that Albany does not have civilian review, and the rest—nearly one third—profess not to know. While 40% may seem low, and certainly leaves room for improvement through outreach, it is comparable in size to the proportion of Minneapolis residents who were aware of a citizen review panel there two years *after* that panel was created; in the Minneapolis panel's first

year, only 29% were aware of it.<sup>7</sup> These figures are difficult to compare, not only because of the margin of error in the estimates, but also because the Minneapolis study surveyed the entire city population, while we have surveyed clients.

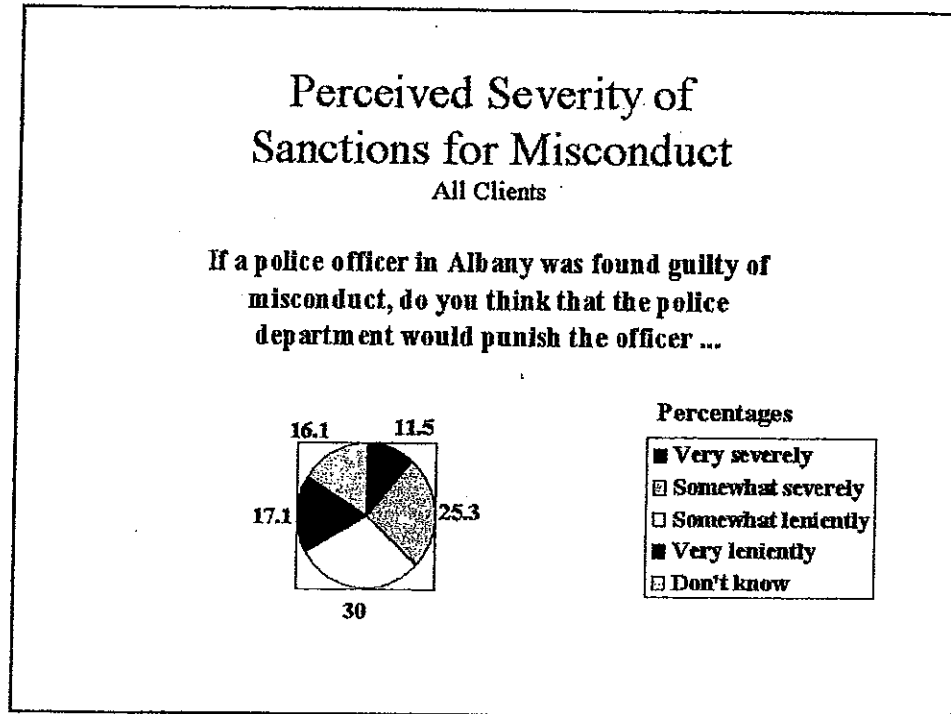


Figure 3

Of those who know about citizen review in Albany, 30 percent say that civilian review gives them a lot more confidence in the police department's investigation of complaints, and an additional 46% say that it gives them a little more confidence. Approximately one fifth say that it gives them no more confidence in the investigation of complaints. (See Figure 4, the upper bar of which is decomposed in terms of these perceptions.)

Of those who are not aware of civilian review in Albany, one third say that they would have a lot more confidence in investigations if there were civilian review, and an additional 42% say that they would have a little more confidence in complaint investigations; 14% say that they would have no more confidence, and the remainder do not know. (See Figure 4, the lower bar of which is decomposed in terms of these perceptions.)

Clients' perceptions of the thoroughness of complaint investigations, and of the severity of sanctions, bear strong relationships to their more general views of the police: clients who are satisfied with police services in their neighborhood, and those who have confidence in the police (see Figure 5), tend to believe that investigations are thorough and

<sup>7</sup> Wayne A. Kerstetter and Kenneth A. Rasinski, "Opening a Window into Police Internal Affairs: Impact of Procedural Justice Reform on Third-Party Attitudes," *Social Justice Research* 7 (1994): 107-127.

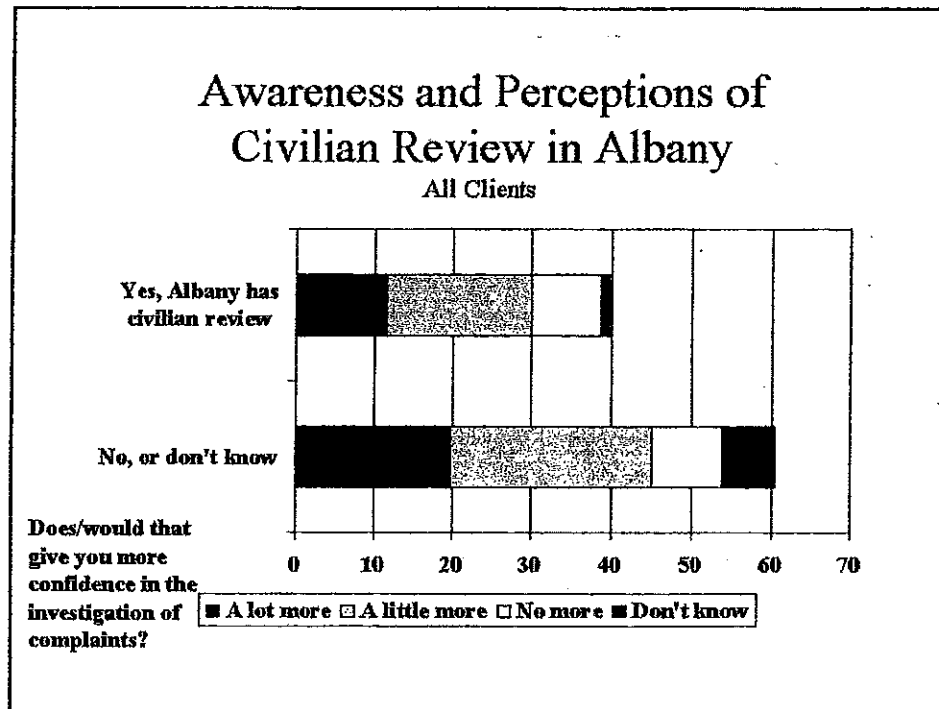


Figure 4

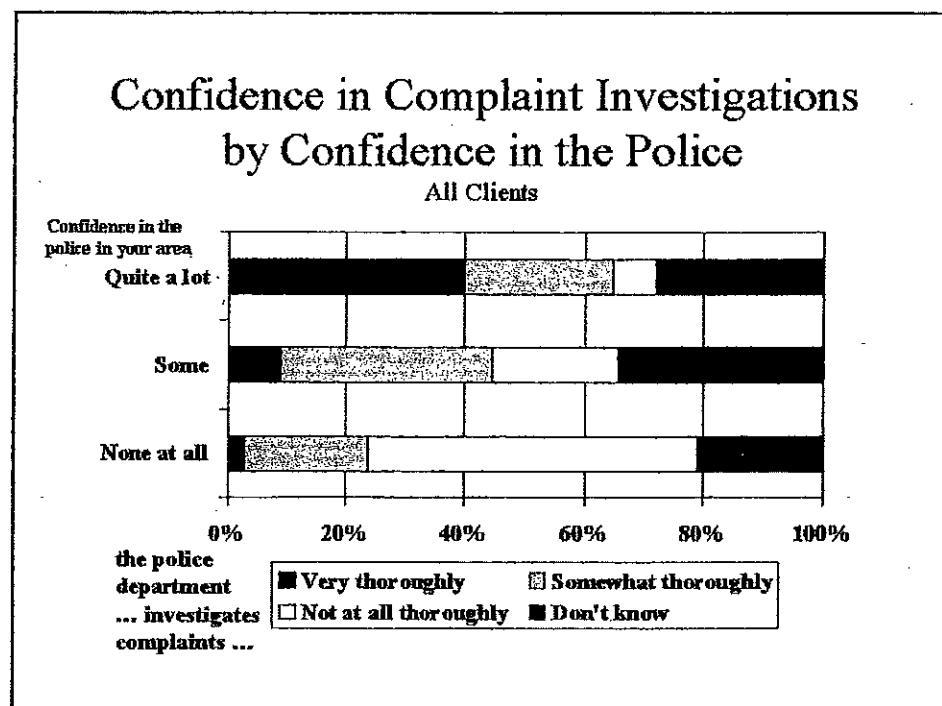


Figure 5

that sanctions are severe, while those who are dissatisfied with police in their neighborhood and who lack confidence in the police tend to believe that investigations are not thorough and sanctions are lenient. Similar relationships hold between how much more confidence clients have or would have given civilian review of complaints, on the one hand, and their satisfaction with and confidence in the police more generally, on the other hand; that is, those with more positive attitudes toward the police tend to be more sanguine about the impacts of civilian review on the thoroughness of complaint investigations. The most plausible interpretation of these patterns, we believe, is that clients tend to attribute to the police properties that are consistent with their more general attitudes toward the police: people with less favorable attitudes toward the police are more skeptical about the integrity of the complaint review process, and about the effects of citizen participation on that process.

In contrast with these patterns, awareness of civilian review is *not* related to more general views of the police. Of the clients who are very satisfied with the police in their neighborhood, 43% believe that Albany has a civilian review board, while at the other pole of the satisfaction scale, 41% believe that Albany has a civilian review board; the percentages are comparable among those between these attitudinal poles. We might surmise that clients' *knowledge* about citizen review is largely cognitive in nature and thus independent of their *affect* toward the police. Further (albeit only preliminary) analysis suggests that this knowledge has some effect on clients' perceptions of the thoroughness of investigations, even when satisfaction with and confidence in the police is statistically controlled, but it has a very weak effect (that cannot be distinguished from sampling error) on perceptions of the severity of sanctions. These effects are much smaller in magnitude than those of more general attitudes toward the police, however. While the sample may yet be too small to support firm conclusions, these findings suggest that citizen review has had a salutary effect on the perceived legitimacy of the complaint review system, and that successful efforts to increase clients' awareness would further enhance its legitimacy—more than half of police clients are unaware of the citizen role in complaint review, and their perceptions of complaint review are less positive than those of clients who are aware of citizen review. But the findings also suggest that the legitimacy of the complaint review system is sharply bounded by deeper—and probably more enduring—attitudes toward the police.

### *The "Dark Figure" of Dissatisfaction*

In the 1960s, as social scientists were undertaking some of the first victimization surveys, sociologists Albert Biderman and Albert Reiss coined the phrase, the "dark figure of crime," by which they referred to the crimes that go unreported to the police and uncounted in official crime statistics.<sup>8</sup> Social scientists have likewise assumed that many instances of (real or perceived) police misconduct go unreported, and following Biderman

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<sup>8</sup> Albert D. Biderman and Albert J. Reiss, Jr., "On Exploring the 'Dark Figure' of Crime," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 374 (1967): 733-748.

and Reiss, we might think of this as the "dark figure" of dissatisfaction with the police. But previous research offers little basis on which to estimate the size of this figure. Of the tens of thousands of contacts that the APD had with the public during 2000, few yielded complaints that could be enumerated: APD's Office of Professional Standards processed 141 complaints arising from 120 incidents.<sup>9</sup> No systematic data are available that would enable us to say how many incidents of misconduct went unreported during that year.

One way to estimate the dark figure of dissatisfaction is to ask those who have contact with the police—i.e., clients—whether they were satisfied with their contact with the police; then, in cases of dissatisfaction, clients may be asked (a) whether any action was taken to complain, and if so, (b) to whom, and if not, (c) why no complaint was made.<sup>10</sup>

Results from the client survey (shown in Figure 6) mirror the findings of the resident survey: three fourths of clients are very or somewhat satisfied with how the police treated them, while 84% of those who requested assistance are satisfied with how police handled their problem. (The current estimates, however, are subject to margins of error of plus-or-minus 5.7% and 5.5%, respectively; they will be more precise with a larger sample.) Remarkably, between 55 and 60 percent are *very* satisfied with their treatment by police, and how police handled their problem. The client sample, compared with the resident sample, might better represent people whose contacts with the police are involuntary and hence potentially problematic; thus it might form a firmer basis for conclusions.

The client survey enables us not only to estimate the level of satisfaction, but also to estimate changes in the level of satisfaction over time, month by month. Thus far, with less than three months of data, we can detect no statistically significant changes in clients' subjective assessments of police service.

Clients' dissatisfaction stems mainly from a lack of concern by the police—i.e., the officer did not care or listen—discourtesy, and incompetence and poor judgment (see Figure 7), cited by 35%, 32%, and 22%, respectively, of clients who are dissatisfied with their treatment by police (while 11% did not cite a reason). (We coded from each respondent's open-ended accounts one or—if necessary—two reasons for his/her dissatisfaction, so the percentages do not sum to 100. But we have completed the coding for only 70% of the dissatisfied clients) In addition, among clients who requested assistance and who are dissatisfied with how police handled their problem, 18% cite a lack of action by police, and 11% say that police did not solve the problem. Small proportions of dissatisfied clients cite verbal abuse (9%), unequal treatment (4%), or physical abuse (3%). These results—which we must emphasize are based on a rather small sample of dissatisfied clients—suggest, first, that dissatisfaction stems not only from actions that (as they are perceived by the clients) constitute misconduct by the police, but also from what clients judge (correctly or not) to

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<sup>9</sup> City of Albany Department of Police, *2000 Annual Report*.

<sup>10</sup> Clients whose contact with the police arose from a request for service are asked how satisfied they were with how the police handled their problem, and they are also asked how satisfied they were with how they were treated by the police; other clients, whose contacts with the police stemmed from police initiative or another citizen's request for police assistance, are asked only how satisfied they were with how they were treated by the police.

be poor service, and second, that the forms of misconduct about which clients are dissatisfied tend to be of a less serious nature (e.g., discourtesy).

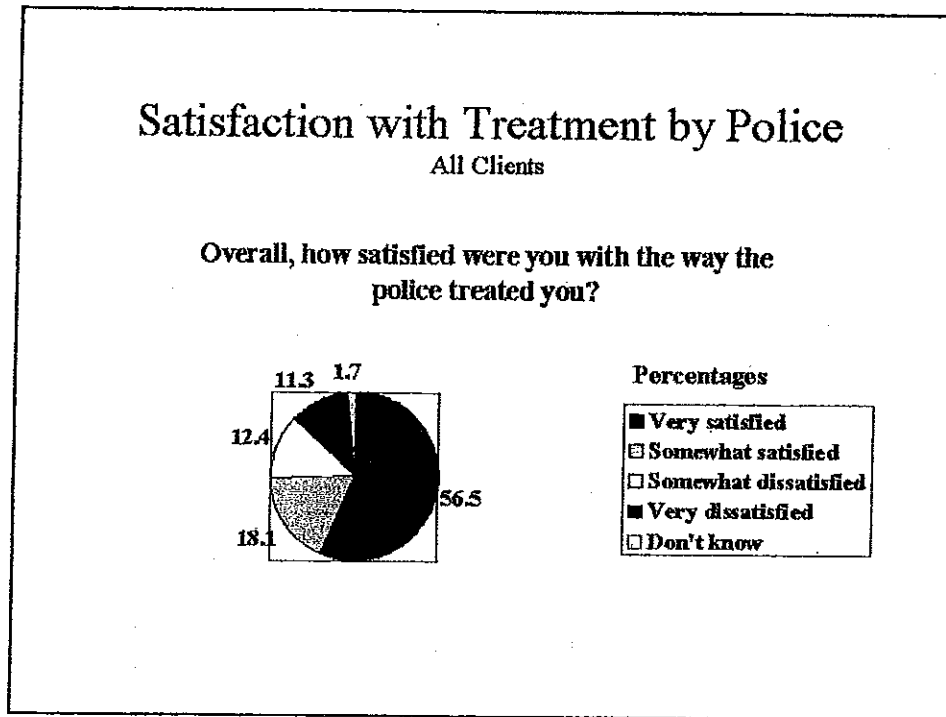


Figure 6

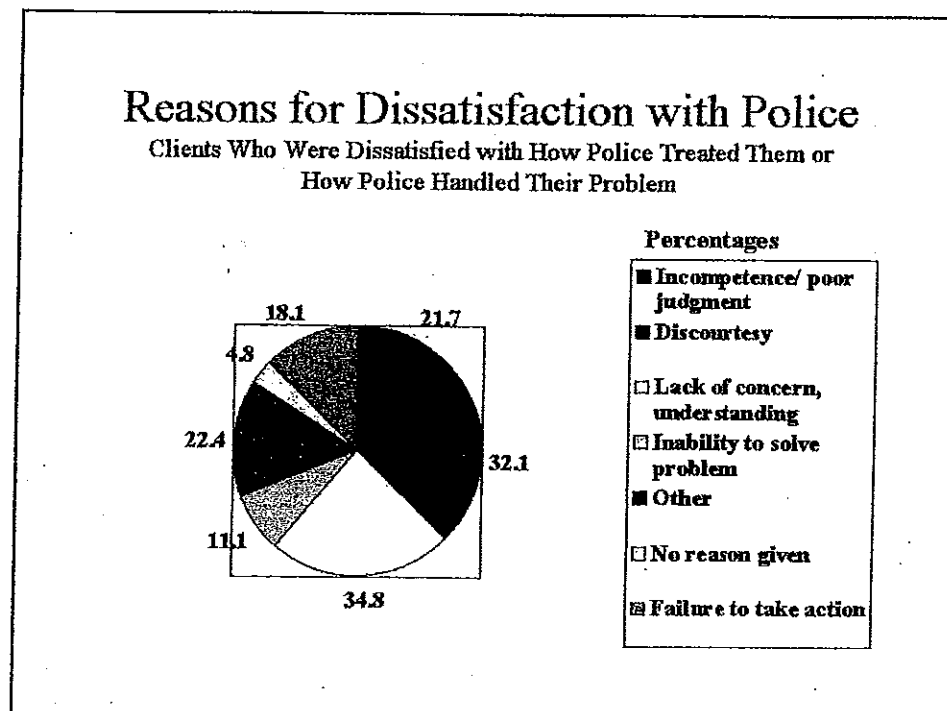
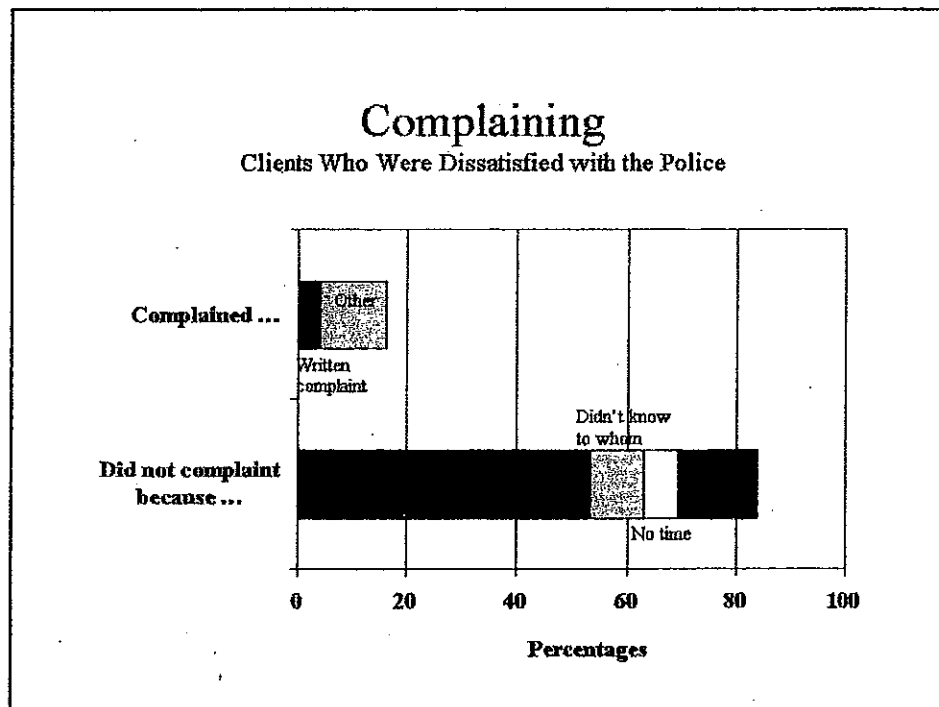


Figure 7

Furthermore, clients who are dissatisfied with their treatment by the police are substantially less likely than satisfied clients to be aware of citizen review. Only 26% of dissatisfied clients say that Albany has civilian review, and 41% say that they do not know; 44% of the satisfied clients are aware of civilian review. Thus the people who are most likely to have a reason to complain are those among whom awareness of citizen review is currently low.

Of those who are dissatisfied either with how police treated them or with how police handled their problem (or both), 16% took some action to complain. Only 25% of those—comprising 4% of all of the incidents in which clients were dissatisfied—reportedly took the form of written complaints. This suggests that the ‘dark figure’ of dissatisfaction is quite high. Of those who did not complain, almost two thirds did not complain because it would not do any good to complain (see Figure 8). Twelve percent say that they did not know to whom to complain, and 8% say that they did not have the time to complain.

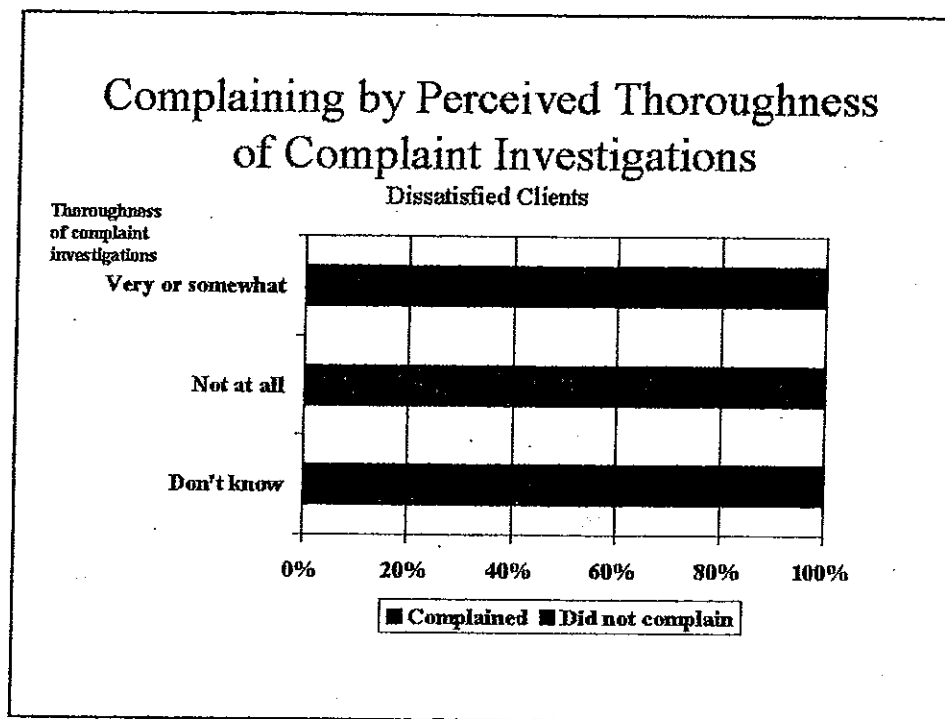


**Figure 8**

The decisions by dissatisfied clients to complain or not are, as one might expect, related to their beliefs about the efficacy of complaint review: of the dissatisfied clients who believe that complaint investigations are (very or somewhat) thorough, 38% took action to complain, while of the dissatisfied clients who believe that investigations are not thorough, 11% took action to complain (see Figure 9). Those who do not know about the thoroughness of investigations are least likely to complain. Similarly, of the dissatisfied clients who believe that sanctions are very or somewhat severe, one third took action to complain, while of the dissatisfied clients who believe that sanctions are very or somewhat lenient, 12% took action to complain. Curiously, those who believe that Albany has civilian review, as well



as those who do not know, are less likely to complain than those who believe that Albany does not have civilian review (but these differences are not statistically reliable, i.e., they are statistically insignificant).



**Figure 9**

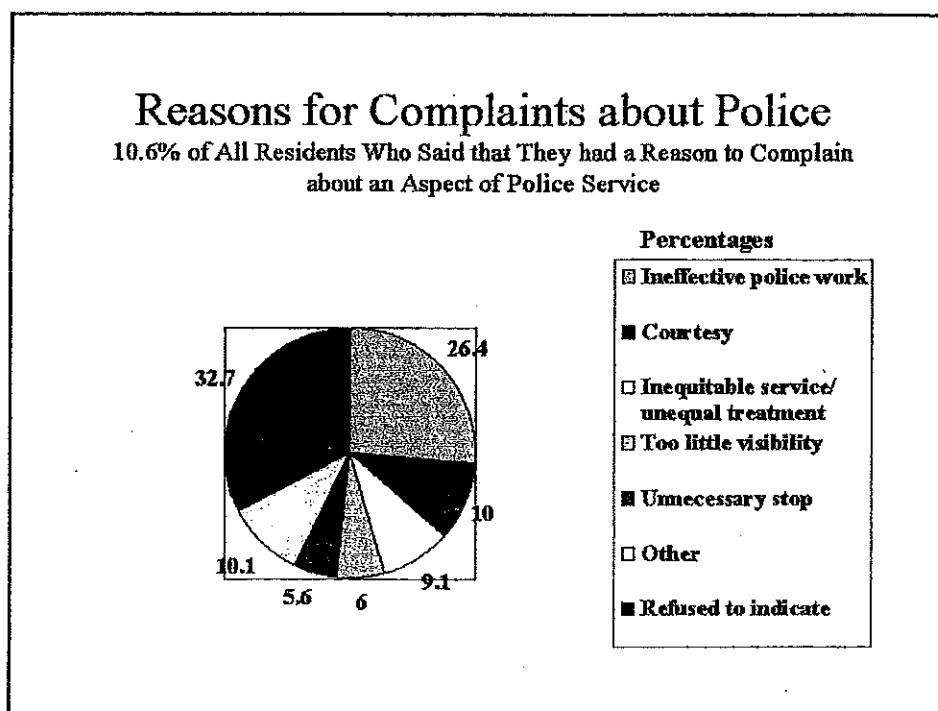
We also find that the propensity to complain varies some across clients' reasons for dissatisfaction. For example, of those who are dissatisfied with the courtesy of police, 24% complained, and of those who are dissatisfied with the judgment or competence of police, 36% complained, but of those who cite a lack of concern by the police as a reason for their dissatisfaction, only 11% complained. However, these estimates are based on so small a subsample that they have wide margins of error, and the differences are not statistically reliable.

Of those who complained, half said that the person to whom their complaint was directed either did nothing to help or made matters worse, and one quarter do not know what the person might have done. Not surprisingly, three fourths are dissatisfied with the way that their complaint was handled and with the outcome of their complaint. But we caution that these estimates rest on a very small sample.

The client survey enables us not only to estimate the frequency with which dissatisfaction gives rise to complaints, but also to estimate changes in the frequency over time, month by month, so that we may be able to detect changes in this figure as the CPRB is better institutionalized. Thus far, we can detect no statistically reliable changes in the likelihood that complaints are made, given dissatisfaction with the police contact.

Another way to examine the dark figure of dissatisfaction is to ask people, as we did the respondents in the resident survey, whether in a specified time frame (the previous

twelve months) they had any reason to complain about an aspect of police services in Albany. Slightly more than one tenth (10.6%) of the residents believe that they had something to complain about with respect to the police. Figure 10 shows the percentages of those residents who cited each of the different aspects about which they had reason to complain (the sum of which exceeds 100 due to rounding).



**Figure 10**

One third declined to cite the reason. Among the rest, the most common aspect of police service about which residents felt that they had a reason to complain concerned “ineffective or incomplete police work”; as we observed above, many “complaints” concern not misconduct but rather poor service (as the citizen judges it). One tenth concerned discourtesy by officers, and nearly one tenth concerned complaints of unequal treatment (of individuals) or inequitable service (to neighborhoods). About five percent cited unnecessary stops by police. Only one percent cited physical mistreatment by police.

Of the residents who believe that they had some reason to complain, less than 30% complained, in the sense that they expressed their dissatisfaction to another party (see the upper bar in Figure 11). (The discrepancy between this figure and the 16% of dissatisfied clients who complained bears further examination; it may be that many clients who are dissatisfied do not think of it as a reason to complain.) Most of those who complained called the police department, while a few contacted a friend or relative in the department; an unknown—but probably small—fraction of these “complaints” took the form of formal, written complaints. The remainder of the complaints were directed toward a wide variety of targets: the mayor, a city council member, state officials, relatives, friends, or neighbors.

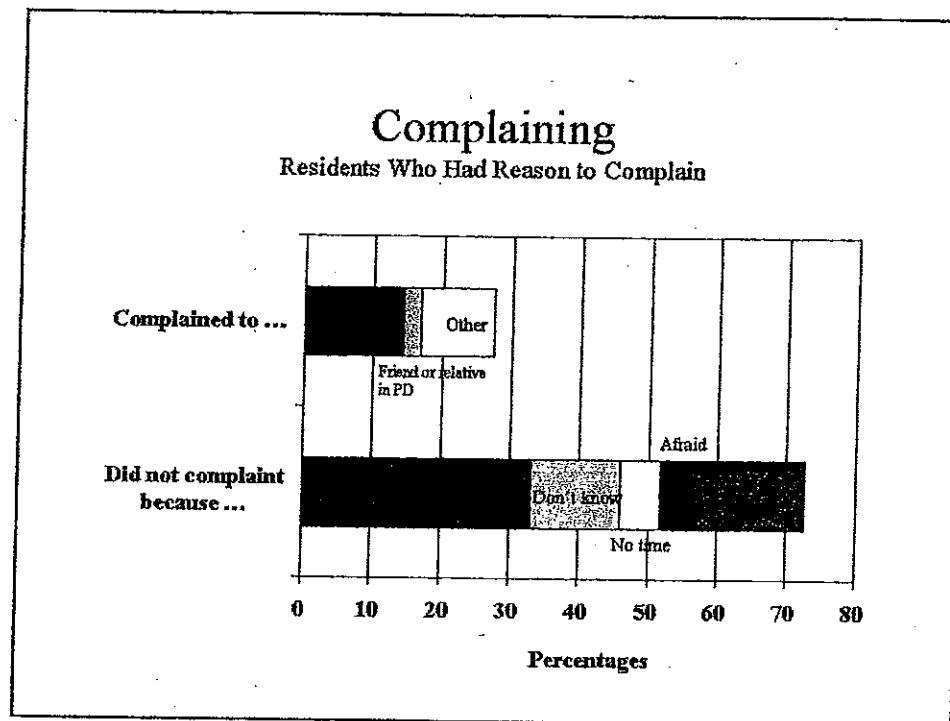


Figure 11

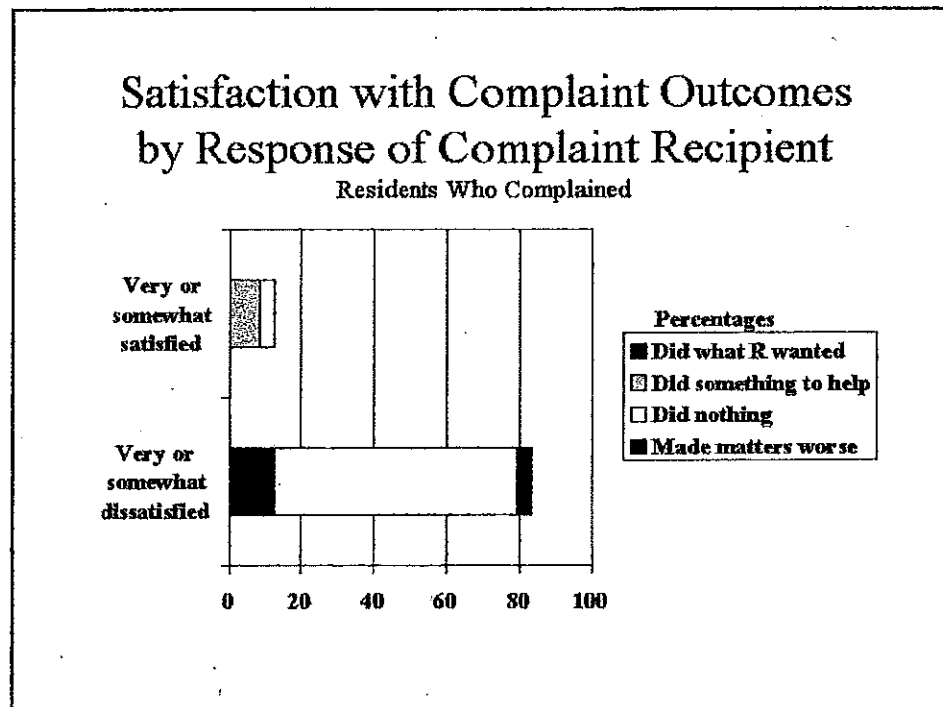
Most—over 70%—of those who believe that they had some reason to complain did not complain (the lower bar in Figure 11). This is another measure of the dark figure of dissatisfaction, and it too is substantial in size. Many (almost half) of those who did not complain believed that complaining would not be effective —“wouldn’t do any good”—and small but nontrivial fractions cited a lack of time or a fear of police. This is further evidence that whether or not some action is taken to complain turns to a significant degree on the clients’ sense of efficacy—their confidence that it would make a difference to complain. This finding underscores the importance of clients’ perceptions of the complaint review system for how well that system works.

The only other study of which we are aware that examines these patterns of complaints about the police is based on survey data collected in 1977 in three metropolitan areas (Rochester, St. Louis, and Tampa-St. Petersburg) encompassing twenty-four jurisdictions.<sup>11</sup> Of more than 12,000 respondents, about 6% said that they had a reason to complain about an aspect of police service in the preceding twelve months (in response to an item that is virtually identical to the one that we used in Albany for the resident survey). Almost three fourths concerned reasons that were classified as the “least serious” by the previous study, including requests for more service and ineffective police work. Excessive force comprised 2.8% of the cases. Thirty-six percent of the respondents who believed that they had a reason to complain did so; about half of those called the police department. In

<sup>11</sup> Samuel Walker and Nanette Graham, “Citizen Complaints in Response to Police Misconduct: The Results of a Victimization Survey,” *Police Quarterly* 1 (1998): 65-89.

general, then, the patterns that we find here in Albany resemble those found elsewhere, albeit more than two decades ago.

As Figure 12 shows (in the lower bar), most—over 80%—of the Albany residents who had a reason to complain and did so were not satisfied with the response. In slightly more than one tenth of the instances, the recipients of the complaints reportedly did what the residents wanted, but the residents were nevertheless dissatisfied. In 8%, the recipients of the complaints did something to help, and in all of these cases the residents were satisfied. In two thirds of the instances, nothing was done, as the complainants saw it, and in most of those, the residents were dissatisfied. In one instance, the recipient's response reportedly made matters worse. (A comparison of those who called the police department with the rest revealed no differences in the patterns of perceived outcomes and satisfaction; the subsample size does not permit more detailed analyses.) In these respects also, the findings here resemble those obtained from the 1977 data to which we referred above.



**Figure 12**

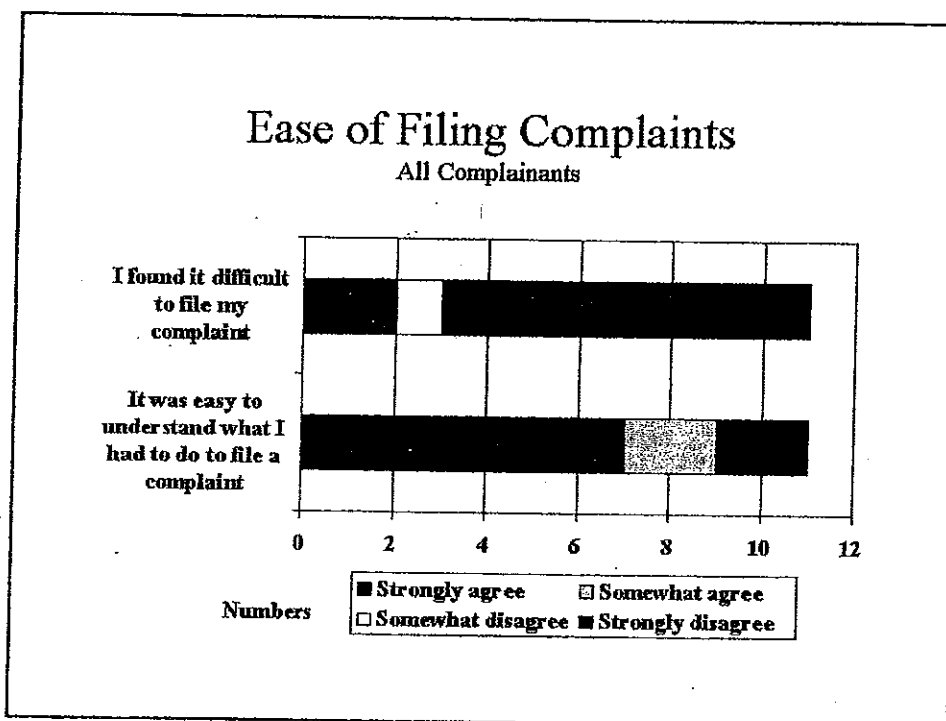
### **CPRB Complainants' Perceptions of Complaint Review**

Of the seventeen complainants whose cases have been disposed by the CPRB to date,<sup>12</sup> we have interviewed eleven. We have been unable to reach four, and our efforts to contact the remaining two continue. Although these data do not pose problems of sampling

<sup>12</sup> We count as disposed any case in which notification of the CPRB's disposition has been sent to the complainant, and in which the GLC has so indicated to us, whereupon we make contact with the complainant.

errors, the small number of cases to date make it nearly impossible to extrapolate from the results to describe patterns; the picture could look very different several months from now, if the cases handled so far are in any ways unusual. Thus we caution readers not to over-interpret the results. Because the number of cases is so small, we report responses in absolute numbers, rather than percentages.

As Figure 13 shows, complainants have not, for the most part, found it difficult to file complaints. None had any difficulty in completing the complaint form (not shown in the figure), and it appears that the intake process worked smoothly for these complainants.



**Figure 13**

Complainants typically had multiple goals in filing complaints; respondents could identify as many as they wished, and the ten who answered this question identified twenty-four goals. These goals can be arrayed in terms of their seriousness, from having the officer punished, to corrective actions (such as ending harassment, getting charges dropped, and being compensated monetarily), to merely letting the department know about the incident or the officer, so that each complainant's most "serious" goal can be identified (see Figure 14). Punishment is far from a dominant theme: only one complainant wanted to have the officer punished, while a number of complainants indicated that they wanted the police department to know about the incident or the officer (or both). This (nascent) pattern resembles that found in New York City, where in 1989 an evaluation of the Civilian Complaint Review Board found that twenty percent of the complainants surveyed wanted to have the officer punished, while about sixty percent had more "moderate" goals, such as having the officer reprimanded or spoken to, and one fifth the "milder" goal of merely

having the incident reported.<sup>13</sup> That evaluation concluded that the focus of civilian review in New York City on investigation and punishment was not compatible with the goals of many complainants.

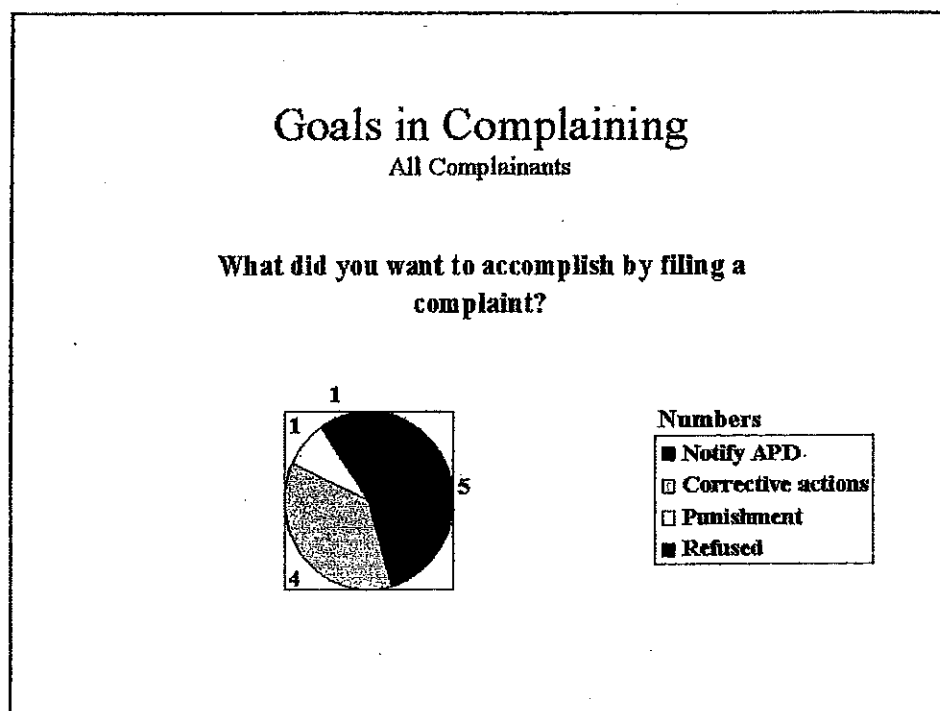


Figure 14

As Figure 15 shows, complainants who had contact with complaint investigators were (with some exceptions) favorable about the investigation. Just over half of the complainants reportedly had no contact with investigators, and these complainants had negative views about the thoroughness of the investigation. We might surmise that these complainants filed their complaints with OPS, and that the investigative interview with the complainant coincided with the intake process, so that the complainants had no contact with police that they recognized as investigative in nature.

Complainants' level of satisfaction with how their complaints were handled is, as the lower bar in Figure 16 shows, low overall but somewhat dispersed: a few were satisfied, with varying intensity, one did not know, and the rest were dissatisfied, but not all to the same degree. Complainants' level of satisfaction with the outcomes of their complaints, shown in the upper bar in the figure, are less dispersed and still more negative. As we cautioned above, however, one is ill-advised to draw conclusions about patterns from these data.

<sup>13</sup> Michele Sviridoff and Jerome E. McElroy, *Processing Complaints Against the Police in New York City: The Complainant's Perspective* (New York: Vera Institute, 1989), pp. 27-30. The categories into which we classified complainants' goals are the same as those formulated for this evaluation.

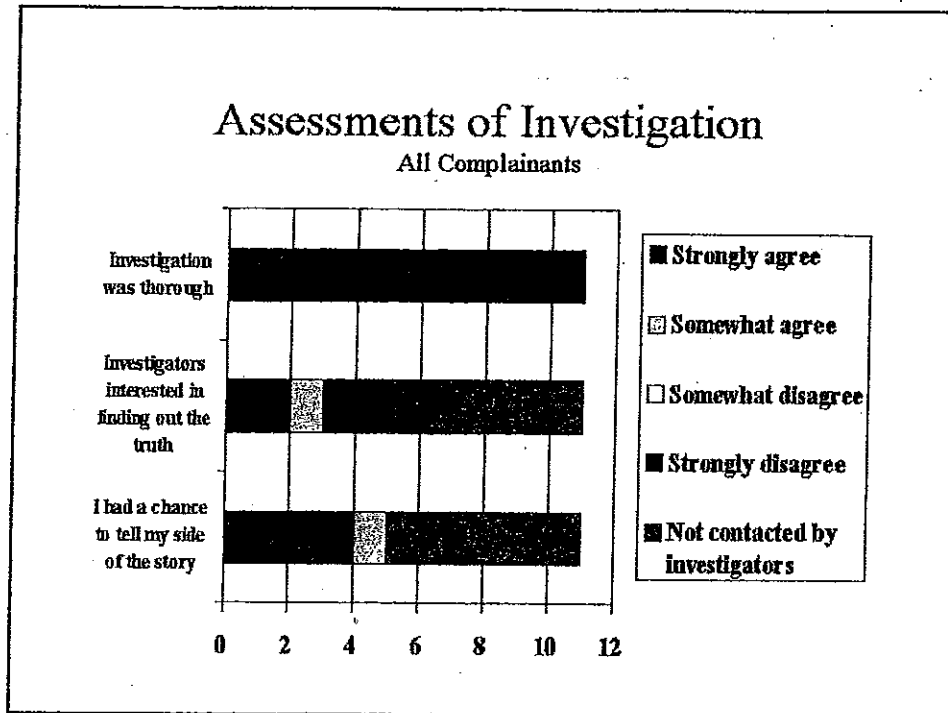


Figure 15

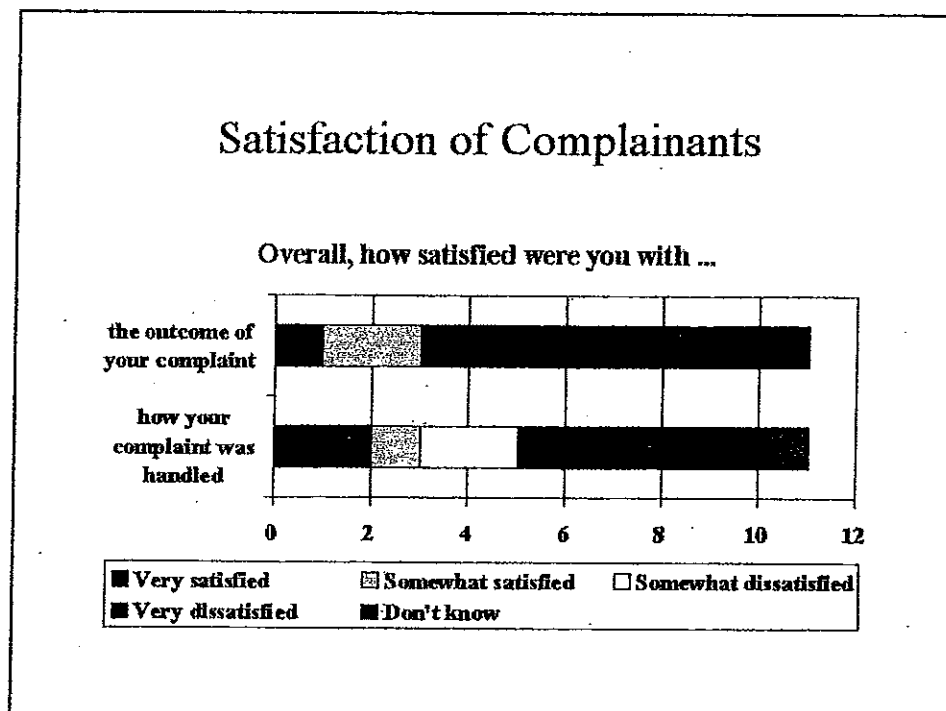


Figure 16

The eleven cases on which survey data have been collected do not support much analysis that could provide insight into the dynamics of complainants' satisfaction, but some additional findings are noteworthy, even at this time. First, some complainants—four of ten—noted that the CPRB resolution took more time than they had expected (and one complainant reported that s/he had not received any notification of the outcome), although three complainants volunteered that they had no preconceptions about the duration of the process, and complainants' judgments about the timeliness of the dispositions do not appear to be related to their satisfaction. Second, more than half of the complainants said that they did not receive an adequate explanation of the outcome of their complaint, and most said that they did not understand why their complaint was not sustained or unfounded, as the case may have been. Finally, just over half of the complainants said that they would have preferred to have a face-to-face meeting with the officer against whom the complaint was made. As more cases are disposed and we accumulate more data, we will be able to gain more insight into the dynamics of complainants' subjective experiences.

These results are fairly consistent with the findings of the evaluation of New York City's Civilian Complaint Review Board. Thirty-six percent of the surveyed complainants were "satisfied," in terms of a composite index that combined satisfaction with the handling of the complaint and satisfaction with the disposition of the complaint. Satisfaction was higher among those who withdrew their complaints (62% satisfied) and those whose complaints were disposed through conciliation (59% satisfied) than among those whose complaints were fully investigated (16% satisfied). The complainants who withdrew their complaints tended to have less serious goals, and satisfaction among these complainants was related to goals: those with more serious goals tended to be less satisfied. But among those whose complaints were investigated, satisfaction was unrelated to their goals and strongly related to the outcome: of those whose complaints were disposed as substantiated, 46% were satisfied; the corresponding figures for those whose complaints were disposed as unsubstantiated, unfounded, and exonerated were 13%, 12%, and 7%, respectively.<sup>14</sup>

### **Summary and Discussion**

At the time of this writing, the CPRB has been reviewing complaints for somewhat longer than eight months. It is premature to draw conclusions about the success of the board in fulfilling the expectations that proponents would have for citizen review. But it would not be inappropriate to offer some broad observations, based on the foregoing findings from our survey research.

First, we find in the surveys no evidence of pervasive misconduct, nor do we find evidence of widespread perceptions of police misconduct. We find among Albany residents a high level of satisfaction with police services in their neighborhoods, and favorable views of the performance of Albany police on more specific dimensions of police work. Furthermore, among people who have contact with the Albany police, we find a high level

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<sup>14</sup> Sviridoff and McElroy, *Processing Complaints Against the Police in New York City: The Complainant's Perspective*, pp. 45-57 and 96-98. Also see Perez, *Common Sense about Complaint Review*.



of satisfaction with how they are treated by the police and how their problems are handled. Even among those who are stopped by Albany police, we find a high level of satisfaction with how they are treated by officers. A fairly small segment of residents perceive abuses of police authority—stopping too many people, or using excessive force—as problems. Thus we might very safely conclude that the breadth and depth of the problem of police misconduct in Albany does not appear to be unusual or grave, hence calling for drastic measures.

Second, many people who are dissatisfied with the police, and others who believe that they have a reason to complain about the police, do not complain through any channels; this is what we have called the “dark figure of dissatisfaction.” It does not appear to be larger in Albany than it is elsewhere, but it is properly cause for some concern. Whether this figure, and the beliefs and perceptions on which it presumably rests, can be improved is an open question. For the CPRB, the answer may turn partly on raising the level of awareness of complaint review mechanisms among would-be complainants—people whose contacts with the Albany police are unsatisfactory from their perspectives; at this time, it appears that a small fraction—about one quarter—of dissatisfied clients are aware of citizen review in Albany. But in addition, the answer will probably turn also on the degree to which would-be complainants have confidence in the process, and believe that they can be efficacious in complaining. There is some evidence to believe that the former—increasing awareness—can affect the latter—people’s confidence in the complaint review system—but the evidence also suggests that confidence in complaint review hinges even more on confidence in the police.

Third, and relatedly, perceptions change slowly. The public’s attitudes toward the police are fairly stable, and evidence from other research suggests that these attitudes are only weakly influenced by actual experiences with the police (of either a positive or negative nature).<sup>15</sup> The effects of the citizen role in complaint review that the CPRB plays in Albany (and of other initiatives by the APD) may accumulate gradually and be felt only in time.

Fourth, we should not presume that, even if the ratio of complaints to misconduct rises, the complaints will or should take the form of written complaints that fall within the purview of the CPRB and APD’s Office of Professional Standards. We believe that the CPRB can be most usefully considered part of a much larger set of mechanisms by which aggrieved citizens can be heard and seek the redress that they consider appropriate, and through which citizen feedback on police performance is channeled to police executives. Many complaints here in Albany, as in other cities, involve allegations of fairly minor forms of misconduct, such as discourtesy. Moreover, many complainants do not seek to have officers punished, but rather want some corrective steps taken, or simply to inform the department about what happened. Many complaints, then, can and probably should be resolved without recourse to the CPRB. But if citizen involvement in complaint review enhances the legitimacy of the complaint review system, it might also enhance the legitimacy of the police department, and thereby facilitate complaint-making in various forms. We would not presume that complaints serve no useful purpose if they are not

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<sup>15</sup> Steven G. Brandl, James Frank, Robert E. Worden, and Timothy S. Bynum, “Global and Specific Attitudes toward the Police: Disentangling the Relationship,” *Justice Quarterly* 11 (1994): 119-134.

processed through the CPRB.

Finally, we would note that, in fulfillment of our contract with the GLC, we continue the client survey, with a projected completion at the end of March, 2002. At that time, we will revise our report to incorporate the findings of that survey, which will include more precise estimates of:

- clients' subjective assessments of their contacts with the police, and especially the reasons for dissatisfaction;
- the level of awareness among clients (and subsets thereof) of citizen involvement in complaint review;
- clients' confidence in complaint investigations, and perceptions of the seriousness of sanctions that are imposed on officers whose misconduct is substantiated;
- the proportion of dissatisfied clients who complain, with what objectives, and to whom;
- the proportion of dissatisfied clients who do not complain, and why.

We will also include updated results from the complainant survey, and results from the officer survey. By then, we hope that responses to these surveys will suffice to examine (in more detail)

- the goals of complainants;
- complainants' perceptions of the complaint intake and investigation processes;
- officers' perceptions of the investigation process;
- complainants' satisfaction with the outcome and with how their complaints were handled;
- officers' satisfaction with the outcome;
- how complainants' satisfaction is related to their goals, their perceptions of intake and investigation, and the disposition.

If additional funding is forthcoming from the City, we will continue the complainant and client surveys beyond March.

# **APPENDIX A**

## **POLICE SERVICES IN ALBANY: CITIZENS' VIEWS**

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Report prepared for the Albany Police Department  
January 4, 2002

## Introduction

Citizens' satisfaction with police services forms one of the 'bottom lines' for any American police agency. Citizens are, in a sense, customers of the police, and the social value of police services turns to some degree on citizens' assessments of service quality. But because police services are not delivered through market mechanisms, citizens' valuations are not measured by what they willingly pay as the service is rendered.<sup>1</sup> Instead, police executives and city officials must rely on other information about whether and to what degree the services that are provided by police are meeting citizens' expectations.

One well-established method of obtaining such information is to survey citizens about their assessments of and experiences with the police.<sup>2</sup> In 2001, under a contract with the Albany Police Department (APD), the Hindelang Criminal Justice Research Center conducted a survey of Albany residents. The survey addressed residents' assessments of the quality of police services and their perceptions of public safety problems in their neighborhoods. In this report, we summarize city-wide survey results concerning residents' assessments of police services, including residents' overall satisfaction with police services in their neighborhoods, their assessments of police services along several specific dimensions of service delivery, and for those who had contact with the Albany police during the twelve months preceding the survey, their satisfaction with police service in their contacts. Future reports will summarize results concerning citizen satisfaction in each APD patrol zone, and concerning residents' perceptions of public safety problems in their neighborhoods.

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<sup>1</sup> The analogy between police agencies and private sector firms has important limitations. Writing about the application of "total quality management" (or TQM) to policing, Larry Hoover observes that "the issue of definition of customer satisfaction for police agencies is far from a simple one"; see Larry T. Hoover, "Translating Total Quality Management From the Private Sector to Policing," in Larry T. Hoover (ed.), *Quantifying Quality in Policing* (Washington: Police Executive Research Forum, 1996). The analogy has another limitation also: citizens are not only consumers of police services but also "co-producers" of public safety, in that they contribute to public safety both independently (e.g., by taking steps to reduce their risk of victimization, and by intervening directly to curb disorderly or even illegal behavior) and in conjunction with the police (e.g., by providing information, or through collective crime prevention efforts). See, e.g., Gordon P. Whitaker, "Coproduction: Citizen Participation in Service Delivery," *Public Administration Review* 40 (1980): 240-246.

<sup>2</sup> Generally, see Kenneth Webb and Harry P. Hatry, *Obtaining Citizen Feedback: The Application of Citizen Surveys to Local Governments* (Washington: Urban Institute, 1973), and with respect to the police particularly see Bureau of Justice Assistance, *A Police Guide to Surveying Citizens and Their Environment* (Washington: Author, 1993), Deborah Weisel, *Conducting Community Surveys: A Practical Guide for Law Enforcement Agencies* (Washington: U.S. Department of Justice, 1999), and Robert H. Langworthy (ed.), *Measuring What Matters: Proceedings from the Policing Research Institute Meetings* (Washington: National Institute of Justice, 1999).

### *Survey Methodology*

We surveyed randomly selected households in Albany by phone, between July 2, 2001, and October 4, 2001. One adult in each household was interviewed, if s/he consented to the interview. We sampled households from each of the 1,924 blocks in the city on which we found at least one residential phone number in a reverse phone directory. The number of households per block ranged from 1 to over 200, although the number was less than 20 on 80% of the blocks; we sampled one household from every block and a second household from blocks with 20 or more households. We conducted interviews with 962 respondents, who represented 866 (45%) of the blocks; 900 of the interviews were completed to the end of the interview schedule, and those 900 respondents represent 826 blocks. (Interviews with 35 additional respondents, who were later determined to live outside of Albany, have been excluded from the analysis.) Because households selected from smaller blocks had a higher probability of selection for the survey, the respondents are weighted in order to make the sample representative of the population.

With currently available 2000 census data, we can evaluate the representativeness of the sample only in terms of age, race, ethnicity, and home ownership. The age distribution of survey respondents closely parallels that of the population: the median or typical age is nearly the same in the sample as in the (adult) population, and the proportion of senior citizens is nearly identical. Equal proportions of the households in the sample and the population reported having members who are under 18 years of age. To some degrees, however, the sample overrepresents whites and home owners and underrepresents African-Americans, Hispanics, and renters. These discrepancies must be considered in interpreting city-wide results for phenomena that vary across these socio-demographic categories, which we note as relevant below.

## **Residents' Views of the Police**

### *Residents' Satisfaction with the Police*

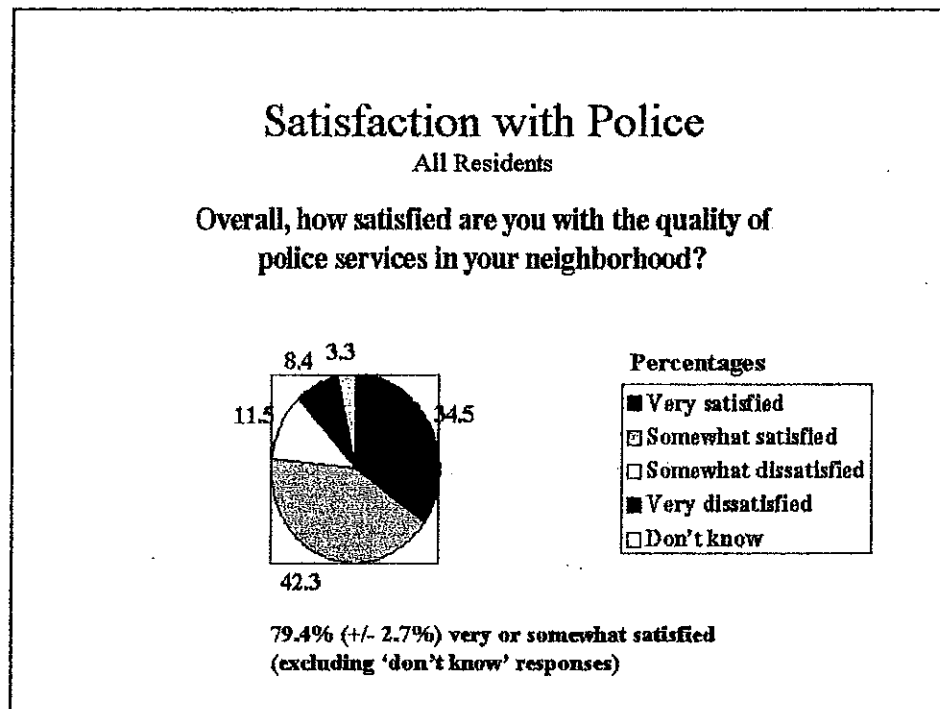
As Figure 1 shows, more than three fourths of Albany residents are satisfied overall with the quality of police services in their neighborhoods; of those who expressed an opinion, nearly 80% are satisfied. This estimate is accurate within a margin of +/- 2.7%.

One baseline against which this figure can be compared is formed by a twelve-city survey conducted in 1998 by the Census Bureau.<sup>3</sup> The twelve cities were Chicago, Kansas City, Knoxville, Los Angeles, Madison, New York, San Diego, Savannah, Spokane, Tucson, and Washington, DC. In those cities, the percent satisfied "with the police who serve their

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<sup>3</sup> Steven K. Smith, Greg W. Steadman, Todd D. Minton, and Meg Townsend, *Criminal Victimization and Perceptions of Community Safety in 12 Cities, 1998* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics and Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 1999). The wording of the item in that survey, and especially the response categories, were somewhat different than the item used here, and it would be ill-advised to draw comparisons of the percent very satisfied or very dissatisfied, but the comparisons made above are safe to make.

neighborhood" ranged from 78 (in Washington) to 97 (in Madison). The percentage satisfied in eight of the twelve cities was between 84 and 89 percent; each of the sample estimates is subject to a margin of error that is quite similar to that of the Albany survey. The direct comparison of Albany with any of these other cities could be misleading, because the cities differ in a number of respects that bear on citizens' satisfaction with the police, including the composition of their populations, the health of their economies, their histories of police-community relations, and so forth. Hence we might safely say that the proportion of Albany residents who are satisfied with the police services in their neighborhood is high in absolute terms, and it is within the range found in other cities, albeit toward the lower end of that range.



**Figure 1**

Residents' satisfaction with police in their neighborhoods can also be assessed along several specific dimensions of service delivery. Following the Chicago Community Policing Evaluation Consortium, from whose survey instruments we borrowed a number of survey items, we examine three dimensions of police services.<sup>4</sup> The first is police performance, which encompasses:

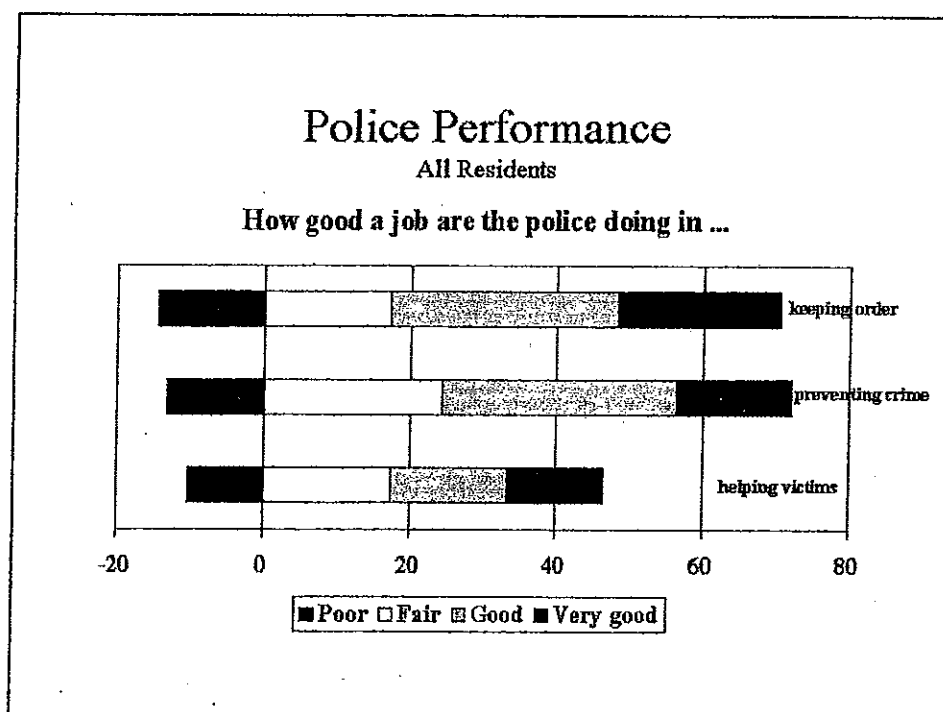
- how good a job the police are doing keeping order on the streets and sidewalks;

<sup>4</sup> Chicago Community Policing Evaluation Consortium, *Community Policing in Chicago, Year Seven: An Interim Report* (Chicago: Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, 2000).

## *Police Services in Albany: Citizens' Views*

- how good a job the police are doing preventing crime; and
- how good a job the police are doing helping people out after they have been victims of crime.

Figure 2 shows the percentages of residents with more favorable views (shaded green and blue), less favorable views (shaded yellow), and unfavorable views (with negative numbers, shaded red) of police performance. The percentages of residents who give police the higher marks of "good" or "very good" range from 29% (helping victims) to 53% (keeping order), with a margin of error between 3 and 3.3%. Some residents (15% to 43%) profess not to know how good a job the police are doing in each of these respects, and they are excluded from the bars (and thus the percentages do not sum to 100). Of those who have an opinion, half to three fifths believe that police are doing a good or very good job, and fairly small proportions—15% to 18%—believe that police are doing a poor job.



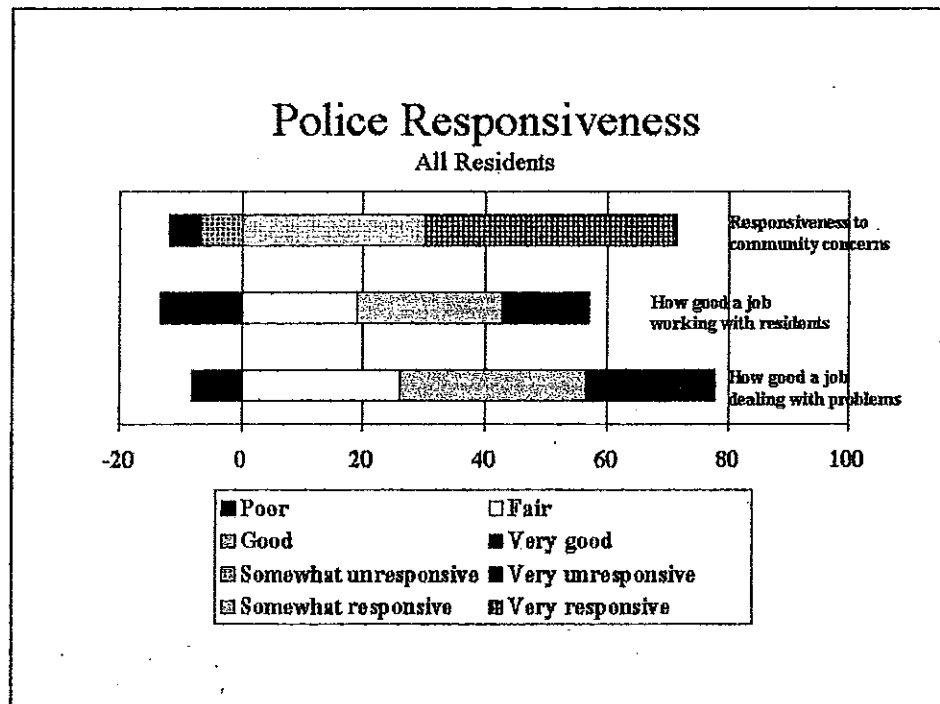
**Figure 2**

The second dimension of police service is police responsiveness, including:

- how responsive the police are to community concerns in the neighborhood;
- how good a job the police are doing working together with residents in the neighborhood to solve local problems; and
- how good a job the police are doing dealing with the problems that really concern people in the neighborhood.

Figure 3 shows the percentages of residents with more favorable views (shaded green and blue) and less favorable or unfavorable views (shaded yellow and red, respectively) of police responsiveness. (The response options for the item on responsiveness to community

concerns—very responsive, somewhat responsive, etc.—differed from those of the other items, and thus they appear in the chart with a hatch pattern.) Over 70% of residents believe that the police are very or somewhat responsive to community concerns in the neighborhood, while 17% do not know (and are not shown in the bar chart), and 12% believe that the police are very or somewhat unresponsive. Slightly more than half believe that the police are doing a good or very good job dealing with problems that concern residents of the neighborhood, and only 8% think that the police are doing a poor job; 14% do not know (and are excluded from the bar chart). Slightly less than two fifths of residents believe that police are doing a good or very good job in working together with residents to solve local problems, while almost one third do not know how good a job police are doing in this respect; 13% believe that the police are doing a poor job. Overall, then, small proportions of residents give the police poor marks for responsiveness, and about half or more assess police responsiveness positively.



**Figure 3**

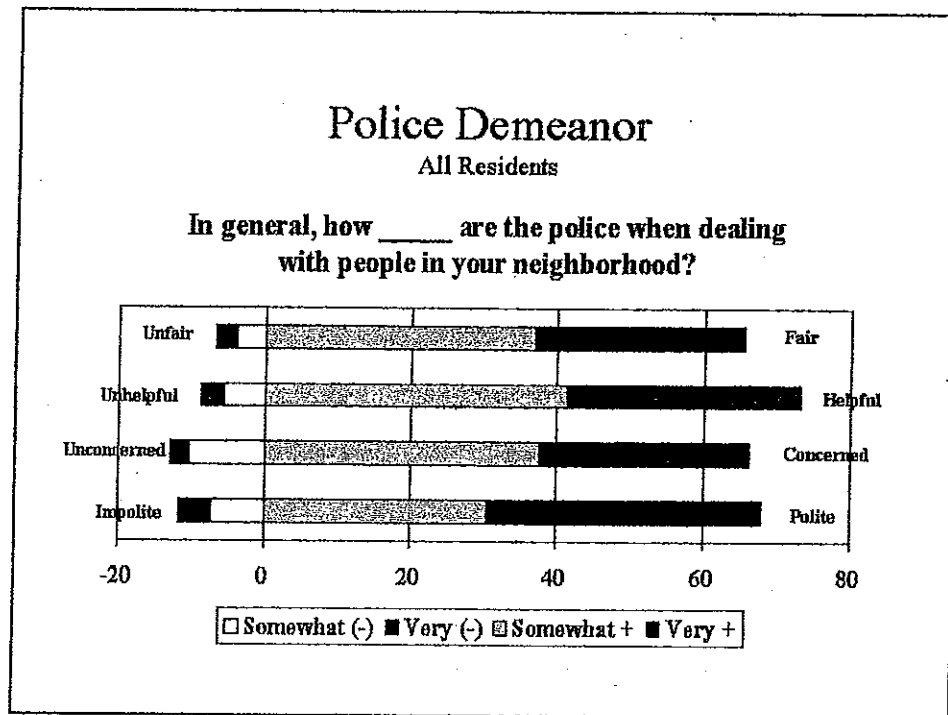
The third dimension is police demeanor, which encompasses

- how polite the police are when dealing with people in the neighborhood;
- how concerned the police are when dealing with people's problems in the neighborhood;
- how helpful the police are when dealing with people in the neighborhood; and
- how fair the police are when dealing with people in the neighborhood.

Figure 4 shows the percentages of residents with favorable views (with positive numbers shaded green and blue) and the percentages with unfavorable views (with negative numbers



shaded yellow and red) of police demeanor. Most residents believe that police are very or somewhat fair, helpful, concerned, and polite when dealing with people in their neighborhoods. The percentages (which do not sum to 100 because "don't know" responses are excluded) range from 65% to 73%, with a margin of error between 3 and 3.3%. Small proportions of residents—7 to 13 percent—rated police demeanor negatively.



**Figure 4**

It appears, then, that residents are largely satisfied with the delivery of police services in their neighborhoods. Additional (albeit only preliminary) analysis indicates that satisfaction varies with residents' age, income, education, length of residence, home ownership, and race. Age is positively associated with satisfaction—that is, the older one is, the more satisfied with the police one tends to be—as is income and education. Length of residence is inversely associated with satisfaction—that is, the longer that one has lived at one's current residence, the less satisfied one is with the police. Home owners are, on average, less satisfied, and citizens who are neither white nor African-American are more satisfied with the police. (African-Americans are neither more nor less satisfied than whites are, when other socio-demographic factors are statistically controlled.) These differences will be explored more deeply when we examine variation in citizens' assessments of police across patrol zones. But none of these differences is so large in magnitude that the overrepresentation or underrepresentation of any socio-demographic group in the sample is likely to have substantially biased the city-wide estimate of satisfaction among Albany residents.

Further analysis also suggests that residents' satisfaction with the police is associated with the perceived level of disorder in their neighborhoods. In particular, people who perceive higher levels of social disorder in their neighborhood (e.g., groups hanging out, public drinking, drug dealing) are less satisfied, and people who perceive higher levels of physical disorder (e.g., abandoned cars, graffiti, vacant lots) are less satisfied. Remarkably, people who perceive crime (robberies, attacks, break-ins) as more of a problem are *not* less satisfied with the police. We might infer, then, that while citizens hold police responsible for reducing and controlling disorder, they do not hold the police responsible for controlling crime. We might also infer that residents' evaluations of police are influenced not only—and perhaps not primarily—by overt police practices, but also by the neighborhood environments in which they reside. One clear implication of this is that the quality of police services can be enhanced, in citizens' eyes, by successful police efforts to address problems of disorder in Albany's neighborhoods.

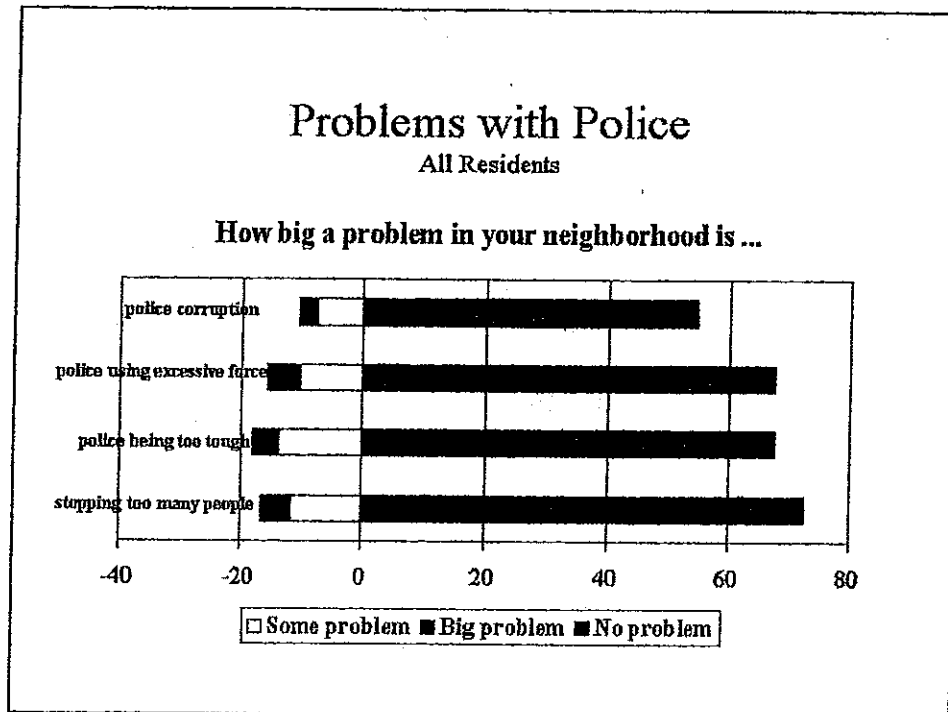
#### *Perceptions of Problems with Police*

Public perceptions of police practices, such as stopping suspicious people or cars, and police abuses, such as excessive force, are typically at the crux of problems of police-community relations. Perceptions of these phenomena, even apart from the actual incidence of abuse or misconduct, can give rise to tension between the community and the police. Figure 5 shows the percentages of residents who perceive as a problem:

- police corruption;
- police use of excessive force;
- police being too tough on the people they stop; and
- police stopping too many people.

For each issue, most residents do not perceive a problem with the Albany police (some said that they did not know, and they are not included in the bar chart). No more than one fifth of the residents saw any one of these as either some problem or a big problem; the percentages range from 11 to 18, with a margin of error between 2 and 2.5%. Of those who believe that excessive force is a problem, 41% said that it was verbal abuse only, while 59% said that it was (also or instead) physical abuse.

These perceptions are fairly strongly interrelated: people who perceive one of these problems tend to perceive others. Three fourths believe that none of these are problems (or profess not to know). Of those who see at least one of these as a problem, 44% see three or all four as problems. We note also that these perceptions are strongly associated with race: African-Americans and other racial or ethnic minorities are (independent of the effect of other socio-demographic characteristics) much more likely to perceive these behaviors as problems in their neighborhoods. To the extent that the sample underrepresents these groups, therefore, these sample statistics to some degree underestimate the proportions of Albany residents who perceive these issues as problems.



**Figure 5**

### **Contacts with the Albany Police**

As Figure 6 illustrates, slightly less than half of all residents reported having had contact with the Albany police during the twelve months preceding the survey, either in calling for assistance by the police or in being stopped by the police. Forty percent had called for assistance, and fifteen percent had been stopped (some had both called and been stopped).

#### *Assistance Calls*

More than three fourths of those who called for assistance were very or somewhat satisfied with how their problem was handled in their most recent contact with the police; see Figure 7. (The margin of error in this estimate is  $\pm 4.9\%$ , somewhat larger than that of estimates reported above, because the subsample of residents who called for assistance is smaller.)

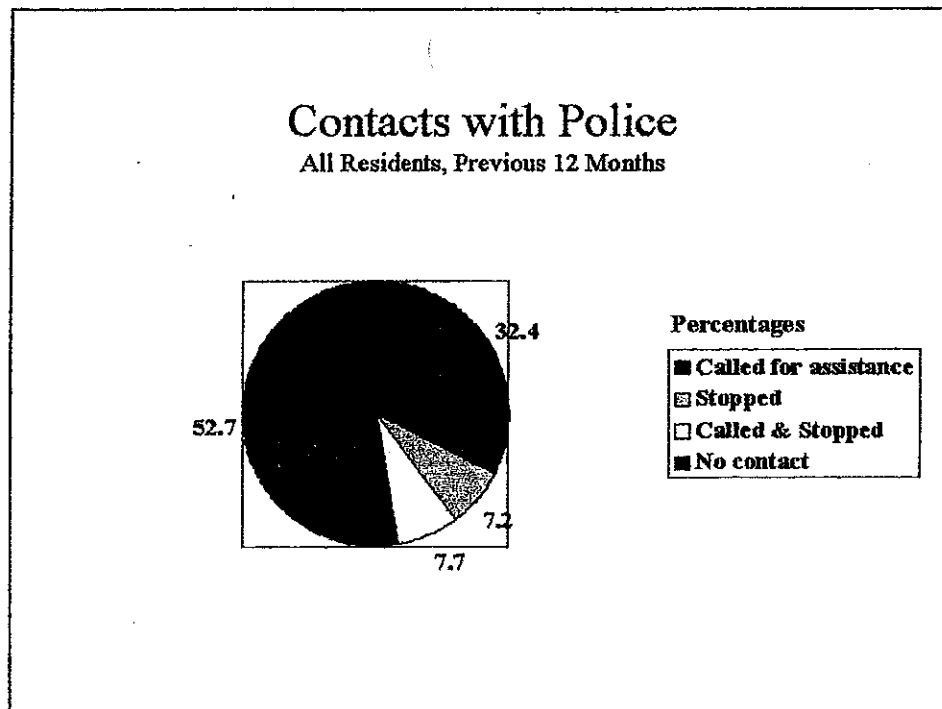


Figure 6

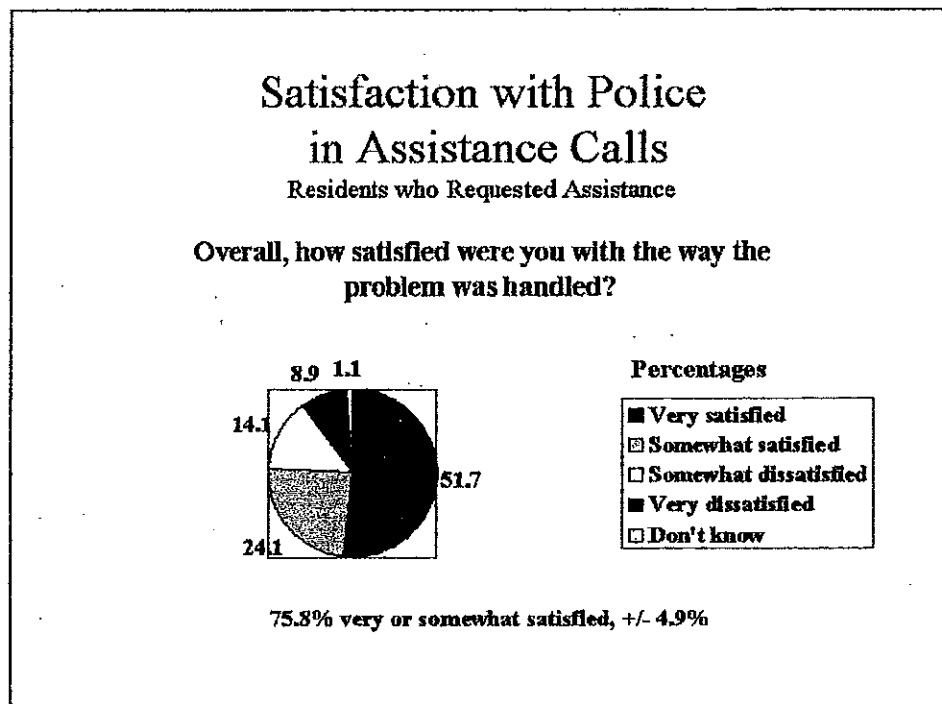
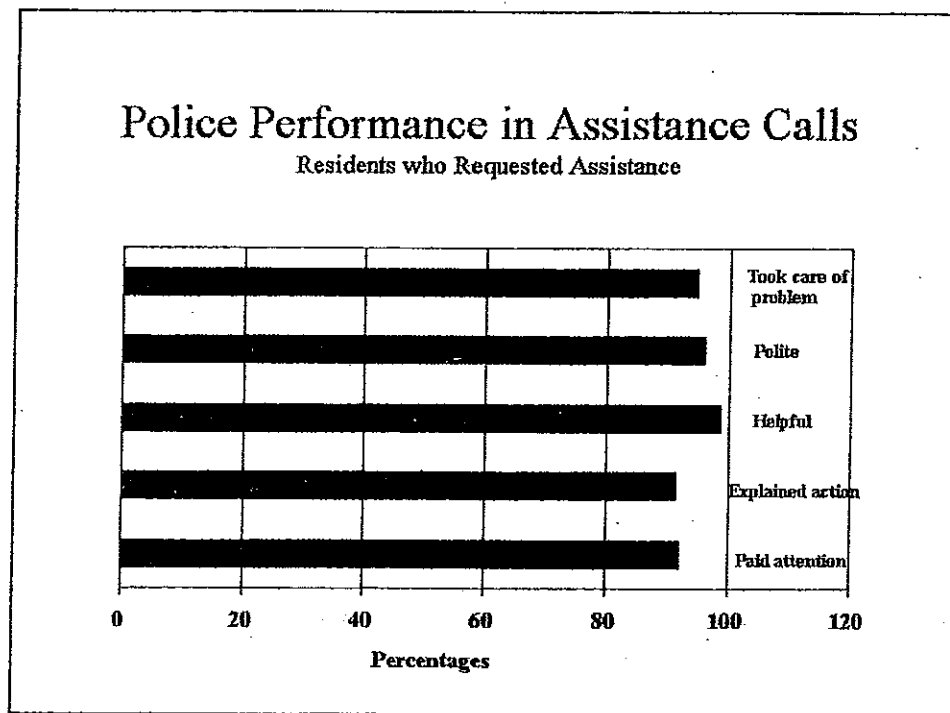


Figure 7

Dissecting further the views of those who had called for assistance, in terms of more specific dimensions of police service (see Figure 8), it is clear that most assessed the performance of the police favorably, with respect to whether the police:

- took care of the problem;
- were very or somewhat polite;
- were very or somewhat helpful;
- explained what action they would take in response; and
- paid careful attention to what they had to say.

On each of these dimensions, 70% or more evaluated the contact with the police positively.

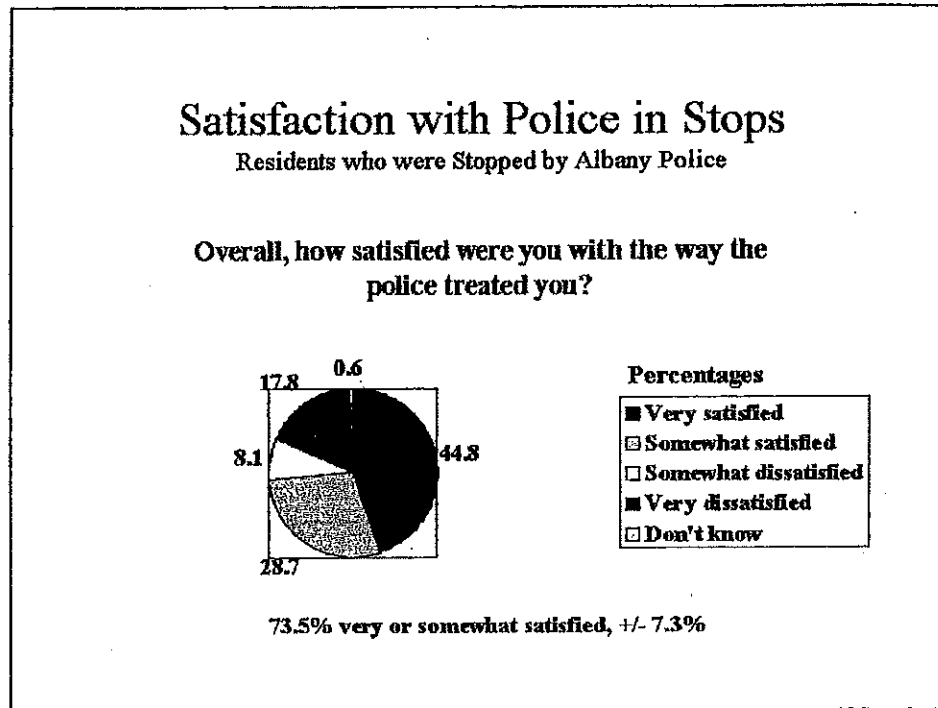


**Figure 8**

### *Stops*

Figure 9 shows that almost three fourths of those who were stopped were very or somewhat satisfied with the way they were treated by the police in their most recent stop. (The margin of error in this estimate is  $\pm 7.3\%$ , larger than that of estimates reported above, because the subsample of residents who were stopped by the police is much smaller.) This is really quite remarkable, in view of the common assumption that the people who are stopped by the police have a negative experience and assess the experience unfavorably. It is, however, quite consistent with previous research, which has also shown that substantial majorities of those who are stopped by the police are satisfied with how they are treated by

the police.<sup>5</sup> But we note also that those who were dissatisfied tended to be *very* dissatisfied, and not merely somewhat dissatisfied.



**Figure 9**

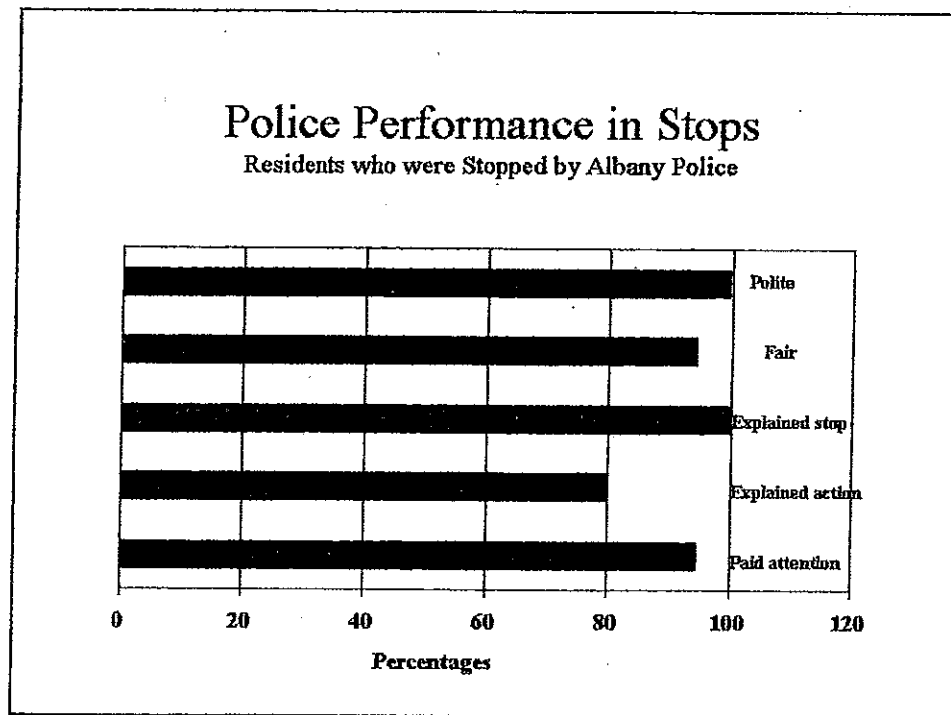
Of those who were stopped (see Figure 10), most assessed the performance of the police favorably, with respect to whether the police:

- were very or somewhat polite;
- were very or somewhat fair;
- explained the reasons for the stop;

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<sup>5</sup> We found comparably high levels of satisfaction among Indianapolis and St. Petersburg residents who had been stopped by police, based on survey data collected in 1996-1997, and also among residents of the St. Louis, Rochester, and Tampa-St. Petersburg metropolitan areas who had been stopped by the police, based on survey data collected in 1977; see Robert E. Worden and Shelagh E. Catlin, "Field Stops: Police-Citizen Interactions and Citizen Perceptions" (presented at the Annual Meeting of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences, 2001). Also see Patrick A. Langan, Lawrence A. Greenfeld, Steven K. Smith, Matthew R. Durose, and David J. Levin, *Contacts between Police and the Public: Findings from the 1999 National Survey* (Washington: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2001), who found that among all U.S. residents who had been involved in traffic stops with the police and surveyed in 1999, 84% felt that they had been stopped for a legitimate reason and 90% felt that the police had behaved properly during the stop.

- explained what action they would take<sup>6</sup>; and
- paid careful attention to what they had to say.



**Figure 10**

Citizens' overall satisfaction with their treatment by the police when they are stopped is strongly associated with their assessments of these dimensions of police-citizen interaction, which of course suggests that their subjective experiences are to some degree shaped by what the police do (and do not do) during these encounters. Moreover, this also suggests that proactive patrol strategies that provide for high levels of police-initiated contact with citizens need not erode police-community relations, so long as the citizens are treated by police with respect and consideration.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

The 2001 survey of Albany residents reveals fairly high levels of satisfaction with police services in Albany. The proportion of Albany residents who are satisfied overall with the police services in their neighborhood—nearly 80%—is high in absolute terms, and it is within the range found in other cities. Citizens' assessments of more specific dimensions

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<sup>6</sup> Note that with respect to 20% of the stops, respondents indicated that no action was necessary, and they are not shown in the bar for "explained action."

of police service also tend to be positive. Two thirds to three fourths favorably evaluate the demeanor of police—how fair, helpful, concerned, and polite the police are when dealing with residents, while small proportions evaluate police demeanor unfavorably. Half to three fifths of those with an opinion have positive views of the performance of the police—in keeping order on the streets, preventing crime, and helping victims, while fairly small proportions believe that police are doing a poor job in these respects. About half or more assess police responsiveness positively, and small proportions of residents give the police poor marks for responsiveness. Most residents do not perceive police corruption, police use of excessive force, or police stops as problems in their neighborhoods, although one tenth of residents (and perhaps more) perceive all or most of these as at least some problem in their neighborhoods.

Furthermore, residents who have recently had direct contact with the police also tend to be satisfied with police service. More than three fourths of those who called for assistance were very or somewhat satisfied with how their problem was handled, and 70% or more evaluated their interaction with the police positively. Almost three fourths of those who were stopped were very or somewhat satisfied with the way they were treated by the police in their most recent stop, and most assessed the interaction with the police—with respect to whether the police were polite, fair, and so forth—positively. One can see in the survey results systematic evidence that police services in Albany are for the most part meeting residents' expectations, even while one might see room for improvement.

We might add, with respect to prospective improvements, that citizens' perceptions of the police change slowly. The public's attitudes toward the police are fairly stable, and as we have seen, they are influenced not only by their experiences with the police but also by the conditions of the neighborhoods in which they reside. Previous research suggests that citizens' satisfaction with the police influence their subjective experiences with the police (when they call for assistance, or are stopped by the police) as much as or more than their subjective experiences influence their overall satisfaction: citizens with positive attitudes toward the police tend to evaluate their experiences with the police favorably, while citizens with negative attitudes toward the police tend to evaluate their experiences with the police unfavorably.<sup>7</sup> Hence we might expect that any improvements in the objective character of police-citizen contacts will yield only small increases in citizen satisfaction with the police and only in time. Previous research and the results summarized here also suggest, however, that citizen satisfaction with police services turns to some extent on citizens' perceptions of conditions for which they hold the police at least partly responsible, namely the level of social and physical disorder in their neighborhoods. While the amelioration of such conditions is by no means simple or straightforward, efforts to do so—and to form partnerships with residents toward these ends—appear likely to increase levels of citizen satisfaction with the police.

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<sup>7</sup> Steven G. Brandl, James Frank, Robert E. Worden, and Timothy S. Bynum, "Global and Specific Attitudes toward the Police: Disentangling the Relationship," *Justice Quarterly* (1994): 119-134.