Research Brief

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Meaning of Police Legitimacy Differs among Groups
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PENN STATE HARRISBURG – In the aftermath of recent high-profile cases of police use of deadly force, commentators have claimed there is a current "legitimacy crisis" in policing.[1] What exactly legitimacy is, though, is up for debate. According to political scientists, legitimacy can be defined in terms of legality or lawfulness – whether the state and its representatives (i.e., the police) follow the law; in terms of morality – whether the state and its representatives respect the customs of various social groups; and through acts of consent – where the citizenry actively supports the state and its representatives through actions like reporting crime.[2] Criminologists define police legitimacy as trust, the voluntary obligation to obey the law and police directives, procedural justice or fair treatment, outcome fairness, lawfulness, and effectiveness.[3] Most surveys of public perceptions of police legitimacy use these definitions to assess which is most likely adopted by the public, but few have directly asked citizens how they define police legitimacy.

Penn State Poll

To address this debate, the Center for Survey Research at Penn State Harrisburg contacted 601 random Pennsylvania residents by telephone between March 4 and April 15, 2015, as part of the Penn State Poll conducted twice annually. Four hundred twenty-three respondents answered the question, "Thinking about the police, what does 'legitimacy' mean to you?"; the more common words used in the responses are in larger font in the word cloud displayed in Figure 1. (See Table 1 for the sample demographics.)

[1] Cook, Philip J. (2015). Will the current crisis in police legitimacy increase crime? Research offers a way forward. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest, 16*(3), 71-74.

[2] Beetham, David. (1993). In defense of legitimacy. *Political Studies, XLI*, 488-491.

[3] Tankebe, Justice (2013). Viewing things differently: The dimensions of public perceptions of police legitimacy. *Criminology, 51*(1), 103-135.

Two coders grouped each definition, with 95% agreement of the groupings; after discussion, the coders reached consensus. Careful examination of the key themes of each group of definitions suggested that, with some exceptions, responses tended to fall in some of the categories used by academics: (1) integrity/morality; (2) lawfulness/legality; (3) fairness; (4) protection/effectiveness; (5) adequate training/certified and (6) other.

The public defines legitimacy as integrity… but not always
Overall, the majority of respondents defined police legitimacy one of three ways: in terms of integrity or morality (37.8%), followed by legality or lawfulness (25.0%), and fairness (17.7%). (See Figure 2.) Citizen definitions falling into the integrity or morality grouping included responses like, "being honest", "doing the right thing", and "truthful". One-quarter of respondents defined legitimacy in terms of legality or lawfulness: "lawful", "legal", "following the law", and "they follow the rules". Other respondents defined legitimacy as fairness: "acting without bias", "transparent", and "fair".

Figure 2. Percentage of responses falling into each legitimacy definition
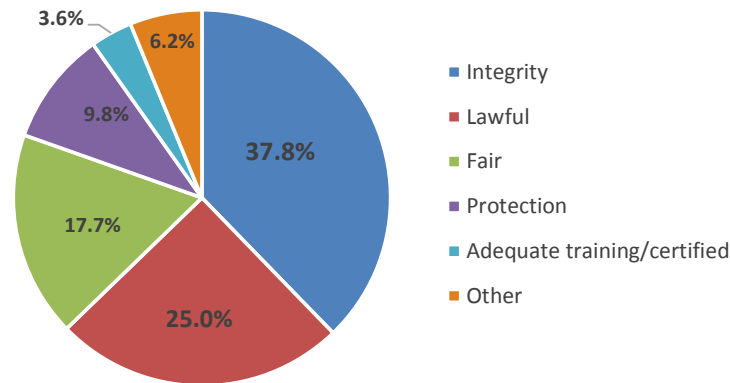
The most common definitions varied by racial and ethnic groups. While most definitions were categorized as integrity/morality (37.9%) or lawfulness/legality (27.5%) for Whites, Non-White respondents most often defined police legitimacy as integrity/morality (41.5%) or fairness (26.2%). (See Figure 3.) The difference between these two groups was statistically significant.

Figure 3. A comparison of White and non-White respondents' definitions of legitimacy
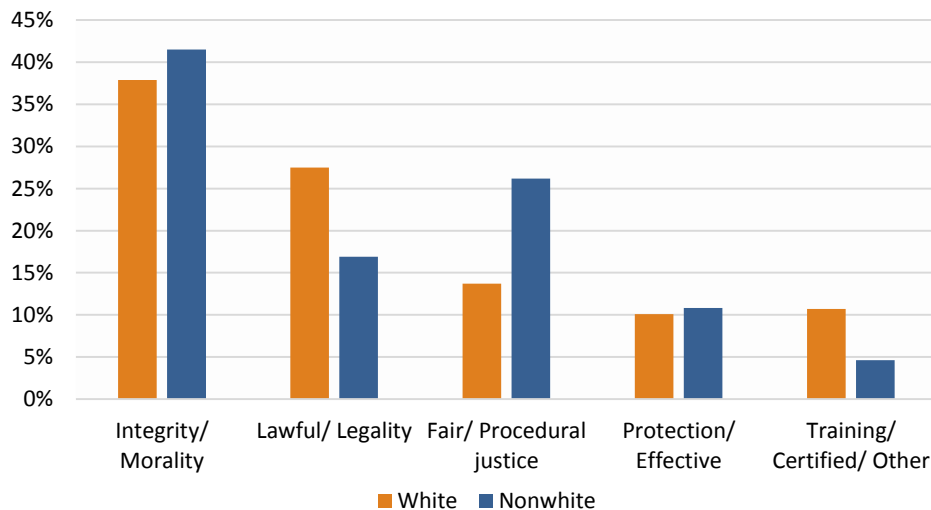
Significant differences also emerged among age groups. Three main age groups were formed: 18-34 years old; 35-54 years old; and 55 years of age or older. All ages primarily defined police legitimacy in terms of integrity/morality (45.7%, 43.5%, and 34.4%, respectively). While the oldest group also defined police legitimacy as lawfulness or legality (33.1% compared with 34.4% for integrity/morality), the younger groups were split between that definition (17.9% among the youngest group and 16.1% for the middle group), fairness (14.3% among the youngest group and 16.1% among the middle group) and effectiveness (17.9% among the youngest group and 14.5% among the middle group). (See Figure 4.)

No significant differences emerged between definitions among men and women, educational levels, or income groups.

Figure 4. Police legitimacy definitions by age

"Legitimacy crisis" linked to police-public violence?
Police leaders and policymakers may wish to take heed of these varying definitions of police legitimacy, given the recent "legitimacy crisis" in policing. Some commentators have voiced concerns that this "legitimacy crisis" will prompt violence against police, which also has gained public attention. Just last month, a veteran female Philadelphia police officer was ambushed in her squad car, echoing an attack on a male officer in the city back in January. These events come on the heels of the sniper rifle ambush-style attack on two state troopers in Pike County back in 2014.

Analysis of Law Enforcement Officers Killed or Assaulted (LEOKA) data from Pennsylvania's 2014 UCR Report indicate a total of 2,215 assaults on the state's 29,687 law enforcement officers in 2014. Four of these assaults resulted in the death of an officer. Injuries were sustained by 29.2 percent of the law enforcement officers assaulted in 2014. Overall, there were 647 assaults with injury reported, for an assault with an injury rate of 2.2 per 100 full-time officers. Whether the current reports of violence against police are linked to citizens' perceptions of legitimacy is a question for future research.

Similarly, whether citizens' views of police legitimacy are affected by the use of deadly force by police – as speculated – is also an avenue for additional research. However, one barrier to understanding this relationship is the current lack of data in the area of police shootings. The good news is that this is set to change. The increased scrutiny of police encounters with the public has highlighted the lack of mandatory data collection surrounding these events. A recent announcement from the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) to start collecting nationwide data on all officer-involved shootings, whether fatal or nonfatal, as well as any in-custody deaths, will erase this information void and allow for additional research and informed discussions. Please click here to read the DOJ's press announcement regarding its plan to enable the collection of use-of-force data. Additional data will allow researchers to study the theorized cycle between police shootings, citizens' perceptions of police legitimacy and violence against police. At present, current data allow us to examine only the latter.

Trends in Assaults on Police

Over the ten-year period from 2004 to 2014, assaults on police rose from 2,865 in 2004 to a peak of 3,576 in 2008, then fell every year to a low of 2,215 in 2014. Accompanying this decline in assaults on police since 2008, with the exception of 2010 to 2011 time period, was an increase in the number of police officers in the state (see Figure 1.) This resulted in an overall decline in the assault rate per 100 officers, which decreased from 13.1 in 2008 to 7.5 in 2014. During the period, the percentage of assaults on officers that caused an injury remained near to 30.0 percent, while those that resulted in an arrest were near 90.0 percent.

Figure 5. Number of Full-Time Officers and Assault on Police, PA: 2004-2014
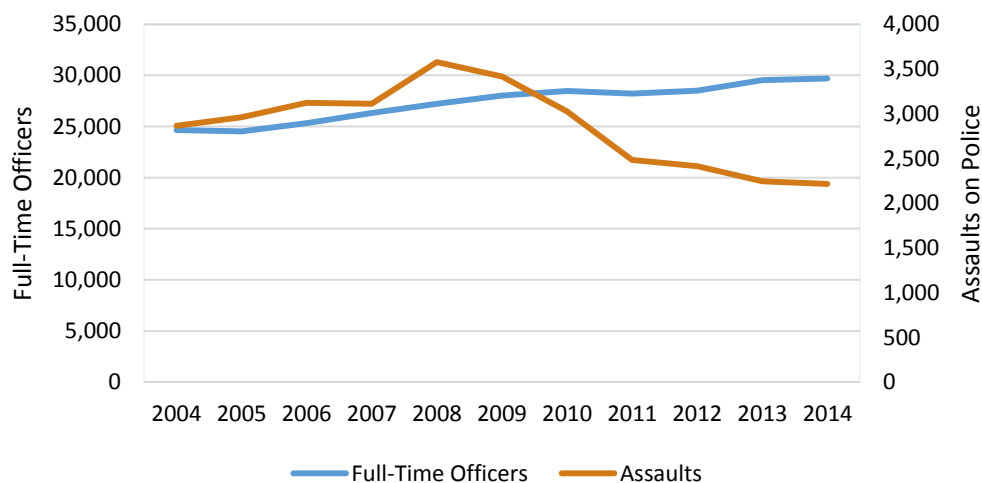
Ambush Assaults as a Gauge of Public Discontent

Ambush attacks on police officers deserve special attention. Despite the relatively low number of ambush-style assaults on police, it is the characteristics of such an attack that provides a useful gauge of a perpetrator's existing attitude toward the police and law enforcement in general. Ambush assaults on police are attacks that include: the element of surprise; concealment of the assailant, intentions, and/or weapon; suddenness of the attack; and a lack of any provocation. In Pennsylvania, between 2004 and 2014, ambush assaults on police reached a high of 18 in 2006 and low of 4 in 2010, never reaching one percent of all assaults in any one year over the ten-year time frame.

A total of 120 police officers have suffered an ambush-style assault in Pennsylvania over the 2004-2014 ten year period. During this period, hands, fists and feet were the most used method by perpetrators of ambush-style officer assaults. Sixty-six (55.0 percent) assailants used their own body as a weapon. A firearm was used in 33 (27.5 percent) cases of an ambush assault on police. Knives (2 cases, 1.7 percent) are the least frequently used weapon. Finally, 19 (15.8 percent) ambush assaults on Pennsylvania officers were carried out using "other" deadly weapons, which include anything from a blunt object to a motor vehicle. In comparison to total assaults on police, ambush-style assaults were more likely to use firearms, knives and other sharp weapons in attacks. (See Figure 6).

Figure 6. Total Assaults and Ambush Assaults on Police by Weapon Used, PA: 2004-2014

Total Assaults

- 8.2%
- 2.3%
- 13.0%
- 76.6%

Ambush Assaults

- 27.5%
- 1.7%
- 15.8%
- 55.0%

■ Firearms ■ Knife or Other Sharp Weapon ■ Other Weapon ■ Hands,Fists,Feet Etc.
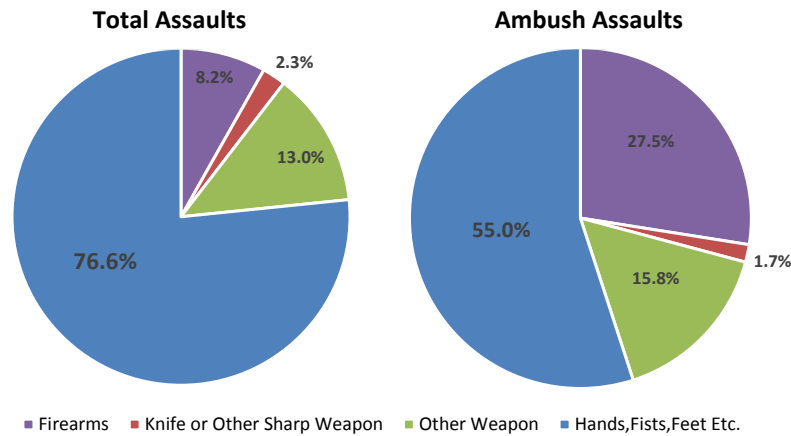
Summary and Discussion

PA residents' definitions of police legitimacy are similar to some of those found in both the political science and criminological academic literature. In particular, PA residents define legitimacy as integrity/morality, lawfulness/legality, fairness and effectiveness. However, respondents also offered new categories of police legitimacy, like having adequate training, certification and other definitions like "real" and "legitimate". Despite being limited by the predominantly White sample, racial differences emerged among common definitions. The primary implication of these findings is that police and academicians alike should take heed of the public voice. Police should consider ways to promote public perception of officer integrity, lawfulness and fairness, and include various communities in discussions of how to do so. Scholars studying police legitimacy may want to rethink some of the classic conceptualizations, like an obligation to obey the law, and incorporate new categories, like training and certification. Future research may want to determine what affects public definitions of police legitimacy and whether citizens' definitions of police legitimacy affect their attitudes and actions toward police.

The School of Public Affairs (SPA) at Penn State Harrisburg is Penn State's flagship for public affairs education, offering excellent graduate and undergraduate programs in Criminal Justice (certified by the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences), Health Administration, Homeland Security, Public Administration, Political Science, and Public Policy. The SPA boasts an engaged faculty, fostering collaboration between the School and the community to produce research and learning opportunities that promote positive social change.

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