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Results from the 2017 Douglas County Sheriff's Office Survey



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Introduction

Policing in the United States has come under intense scrutiny in recent years following several high-profile deadly encounters between police officers and minority citizens (Weitzer, 2015). Amidst this legitimacy crisis, much has been made about what the police can do differently to restore trust, increase transparency, and otherwise ensure that citizens feel they are being treated fairly and respectfully (President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015). A growing body of research has focused on officers' attitudes and perceptions of law enforcement in the current "post-Ferguson" era of policing (Morin et al., 2017; Nix & Pickett, 2017; Nix & Wolfe, 2016). We endeavored to further this line of research by gaining a better understanding of how police officers in the Omaha area perceived various aspects of policing in 2017. In the brief report that follows, we present basic findings from a survey administered to 50 sheriff's deputies.

Methodology

In November and December of 2017, we surveyed the Douglas County Sheriff's Office (DCSO) in Douglas County, Nebraska. The sheriff's office serves much of the greater Omaha area. The first author attended 10 shift roll call meetings and personally handed out hard copies of the survey. Deputies were also given the option to take the survey online via SurveyMonkey, and a series of reminder emails were sent out over a three-week period to encourage completion. No incentives were offered for participation. The survey was open to all 127 sworn deputies, and we received 50 responses, for a response rate of 39.4%. This is a below average response rate for a police sample (see Nix, Pickett, Baek, & Alpert, 2017) – a limitation which we acknowledge – but the results are still informative nonetheless.

Description of the Sample

The majority of our sample is male (82%), married (76%), and has children (80%). Of the deputies who participated, most are assigned to patrol (44%), followed by courts (16%), and investigations (14%). The remaining 24% of the sample works in Administration or has some other assignment. Roughly 38% of the sample has 21+ years of experience in law enforcement, while at the opposite end of the spectrum, 20% have 0 to 5 years of experience. Roughly 32% of the sample are in their 30s, another 32% are in their 40s, while 20% are 50 or older. Only 14% of the sample are in their 20s. In terms of education, the majority of respondents have earned a bachelor's degree (52%), while 28% have attended some college or hold an associate's degree. Fourteen percent of respondents have earned a master's degree or higher.

Results

Stress

One of our primary research interests was simply to understand how stressful various aspects of police work are to deputies. Prior policing research has demonstrated that stress is associated with adverse outcomes including depression, burnout, and intimate partner abuse (Gershon et al., 2009; Perez, Jones, Englert, & Sachau, 2010). Each respondent was provided with the following definition of "stress":

Stress is a response to pressure or threat. Under stress we may feel tense, nervous, or on edge. The stress response is physical, too. Stress triggers a surge of adrenaline that temporarily affects the nervous system. As a result, when you're stressed you might feel your heartbeat or breathing get faster, your palms get sweaty, or your knees get shaky.

Respondents were then asked to consider a series of 21 potential occupational and organizational stressors, and rate each in terms of the amount of stress it causes them, with 0 indicating no stress and 100 indicating a great deal of stress (Spielberger, Westberry, Grier, & Greenfield, 1981;

Violanti & Aro, 1995). Of these 21 stressors, 10 were related to various aspects of police work (i.e., occupational), and 11 were related to various organizational and/or administrative matters (i.e., organizational). The average for each stressor is presented below in Table 1.

Unsurprisingly, the sample indicated that having a fellow officer killed in the line of duty was the most stressful of the situations listed (mean = 89.11). Other highly stressful situations included vehicle pursuits (mean = 63.19), reading or hearing about any officer killed in the line of duty (mean = 62.00), being physically assaulted by a suspect (mean = 61.53), and child abuse/neglect (mean = 59.68). On the other hand, the sample indicated that the least stressful situations with which DCSO deputies deal are shift work (mean = 31.86) and criminal court processes (mean = 32.86), which both had a lower maximum than most other items (i.e., 90 was the highest that any deputy scored the item). Lack of performance recognition (mean = 33.10) scored as one of the lowest stressors as well. Overall, these findings suggest DCSO deputies feel more stress from job-related tasks than organizational issues.

Table 1. Reported stress from dealing with 21 job-related activities.

Stressor	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
1. Fellow officer killed in the line of duty	46	89.11	19.52	10	100
2. Vehicle pursuit	46	63.19	27.92	2	100
3. Reading/hearing about an officer killed in the line of duty	50	62.00	31.04	0	100
4. Being physically assaulted by a suspect	47	61.53	30.56	2	100
5. Child abuse/neglect	50	59.68	25.64	0	100
6. Death notifications	48	59.63	27.59	0	100
7. Lack of support from supervisors	50	59.34	28.93	0	100
8. Felony in progress	50	58.80	25.80	0	100
9. Aggressive crowds	49	57.55	28.14	0	100
10. Incompatible partner	49	56.84	28.54	0	100
11. Use of force incidents	48	55.00	30.32	5	100
12. Lack of agency support	50	54.50	33.11	0	100
13. Staffing shortages	50	50.30	28.02	0	100
14. Policies conflict with practice	47	47.77	30.71	0	100
15. Domestic violence calls	48	46.46	27.69	0	100
16. Discipline process/excessive discipline	47	42.68	33.81	0	100
17. Accident involving county vehicle	47	40.96	27.50	0	100
18. Inadequate agency issued or assigned equipment	49	40.10	29.39	0	100
19. Lack of performance recognition	50	33.10	27.38	0	100
20. Criminal court process (i.e. plea bargaining procedures)	49	32.86	25.41	0	90
21. Shift work	49	31.86	25.73	0	90

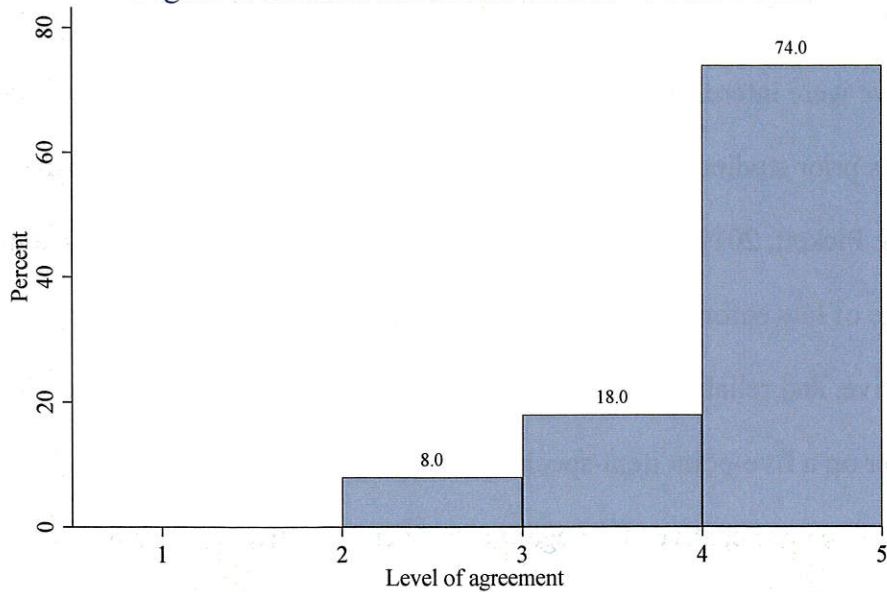
Hostile Media Perceptions

National Media

Next, we were interested in how deputies perceived national media coverage of law enforcement, as prior studies have shown that negative publicity can have an adverse effect on officers (Nix & Pickett, 2017; Nix & Wolfe, 2017). Deputies were asked to what degree national media coverage of law enforcement in the US is: positive/negative, fair/unfair, truthful/deceptive, and reliable/unreliable (Nix & Pickett, 2017). For each item, deputies were asked to answer on a five-point item-specific response scale (e.g., 1 = very positive, 2 = positive, 3 = neither positive nor negative, 4 = negative, 5 = very negative).¹ Principal factor analysis suggested the four items loaded onto a single scale, so we averaged responses to create a mean index. The index ranged from 2 to 5 with a mean of 4.11, where higher scores reflect a belief that the national media is more hostile (i.e., negative, unfair, deceptive, and unreliable) toward law enforcement. Figure 1 shows the distribution of the deputies' scores on this index. As the figure shows, over 90% of the sample scored higher than the midway point (3) on the scale, indicating that deputies tend to perceive the national news media as negative, unfair, deceptive, and unreliable.

¹ Summary statistics for any individual question on the survey are available upon request.

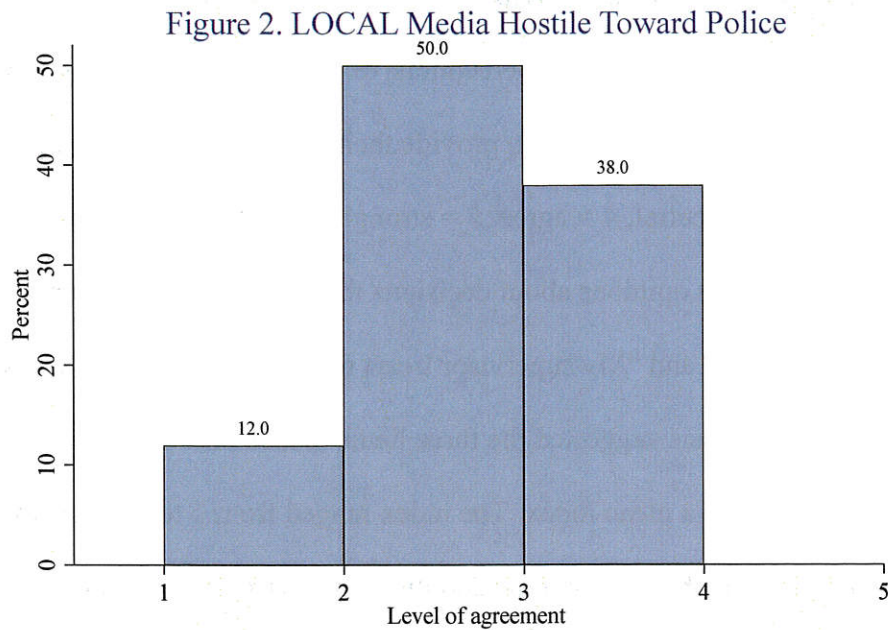
Figure 1. NATIONAL Media Hostile Toward Police



Local Media

It is likely that local media coverage of a specific agency differs from national media coverage of law enforcement more generally. As such, we were interested in how deputies perceived local media coverage of DCSO. Deputies were asked to what degree local media coverage of law enforcement is: positive/negative, fair/unfair, truthful/deceptive, and reliable/unreliable (Nix & Pickett, 2017). For each item, deputies were asked to answer on a five-point item-specific response scale (e.g., 1 = very positive, 2 = positive, 3 = neither positive nor negative, 4 = negative, 5 = very negative). Principal factor analysis suggested the four items loaded onto a single scale, so we averaged responses to create a mean index. The index ranged from 1 to 4 with a mean of 2.54, where lower scores reflect a belief that the local media is more supportive (i.e., positive, fair, truthful, and reliable) toward law enforcement. Figure 2 shows the distribution of the deputies' scores on this index. As the figure shows, 62% of the sample scored lower than the midway point on the scale, indicating that deputies *disagreed* that local media is

hostile toward DCSO. In other words, deputies tend to believe local media coverage of DCSO is generally positive, fair, truthful, and reliable.



Perceptions of DCSO

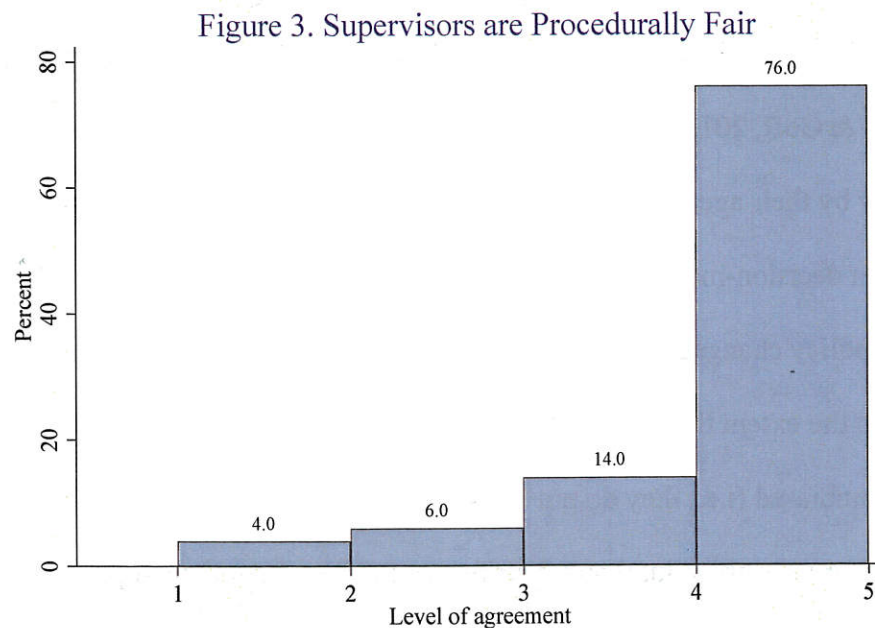
A growing body of research has investigated police officers' perceptions of their organizations (i.e., supervisors, command staff, and colleagues), and the evidence suggests officers value being treated with procedural and distributive fairness (Bradford & Quinton, 2014; Trinkner, Tyler, & Goff, 2016). *Procedural fairness* refers to the extent that officers believe they are treated fairly by their agency. That is, they value being treated with dignity and respect, having a voice in decision-making processes, and being given a clear explanation why important decisions (e.g., policy changes, disciplinary outcomes) are made. On the other hand, *distributive fairness* refers to the extent that officers believe outcomes – such as pay, promotions, or discipline – are unbiased (i.e., they do not favor certain officers or types of officers). When officers perceive greater procedural and distributive fairness from their supervisors and

command staff, they are more likely to comply with procedures (Tyler et al., 2007), and tend to be more committed to community-oriented policing (Myhill & Bradford, 2013).

Perceived Procedural Fairness by Supervisors

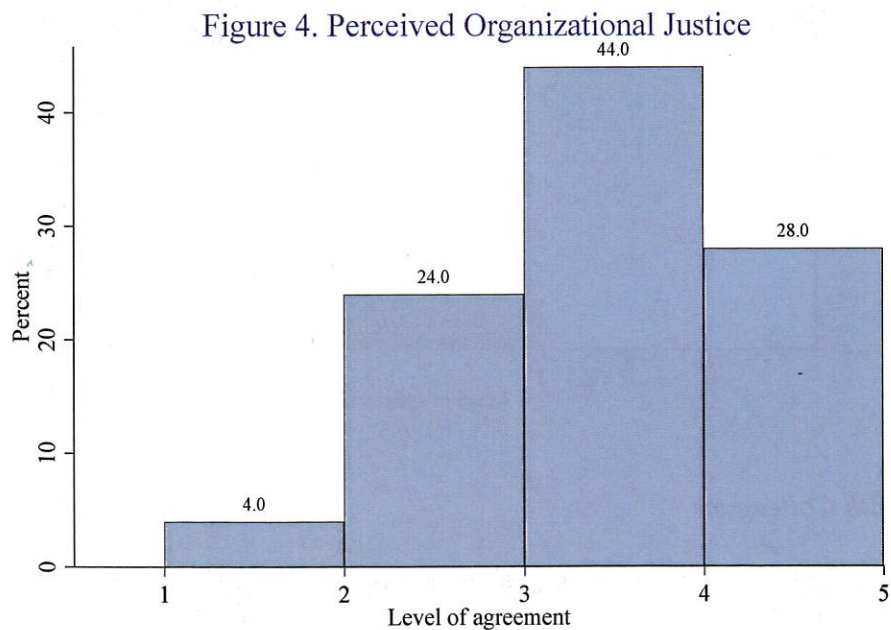
First, we inquired about deputies' perceptions of procedural fairness by supervisors at DCSO. Specifically, deputies were asked to provide their level of agreement (e.g. 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree) with the following three items: "My supervisor listens to my opinions about decisions that affect me," "My supervisor's decisions are based on fact," and "My supervisor treats me with respect" (Bradford & Quinton, 2014). Principal factor analysis suggested the three items loaded onto a single scale, so we averaged responses to create a mean index. The index ranged from 1 to 5 with a mean of 3.97, where higher scores reflect a belief that a the deputies' supervisor is more procedurally fair.

Figure 3 shows the distribution of the deputies' scores on this index. As the figure shows, 90% of the sample scored higher than the midway point on the scale, and 76% scored higher than 4, indicating the majority of respondents believe their supervisors exercise procedural fairness.



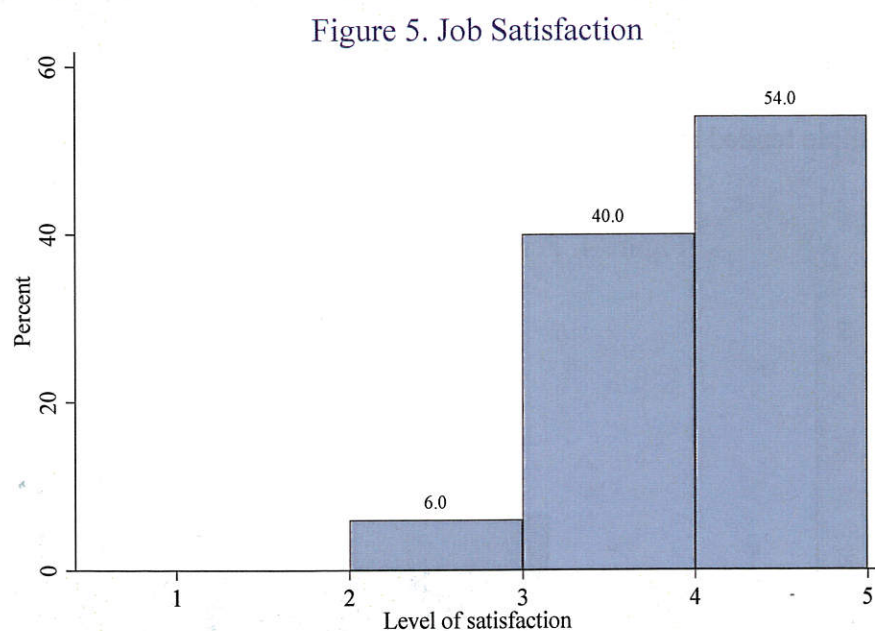
Perceived Organizational Fairness

Similarly, we were interested in deputies' perceptions of fair treatment by command staff. Deputies were asked to provide their level of agreement (e.g. 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree) with the following five items: "I am happy with the level of communication I receive from command staff," "Command staff is open and honest with staff," "Decisions are made fairly by command staff in DCSO," "I am recognized fairly for the work that I do," and "The amount of work I am expected to do is reasonable" (Bradford & Quinton, 2014). Principal factor analysis suggested the five items loaded onto a single scale, so we averaged responses to create a mean index. The index ranges from 1.6 to 5 with a mean of 3.38, where higher scores reflect belief that command staff is more fair. Figure 4 shows the distribution of the deputies' scores on this index. There was more variation in deputies' perceptions of organizational justice than supervisory procedural justice. Still, as the figure shows, 72% of deputies scored higher than the midway point on the scale. Thus, generally speaking, the sample tended to believe command staff uses fair management tactics.



Job Satisfaction

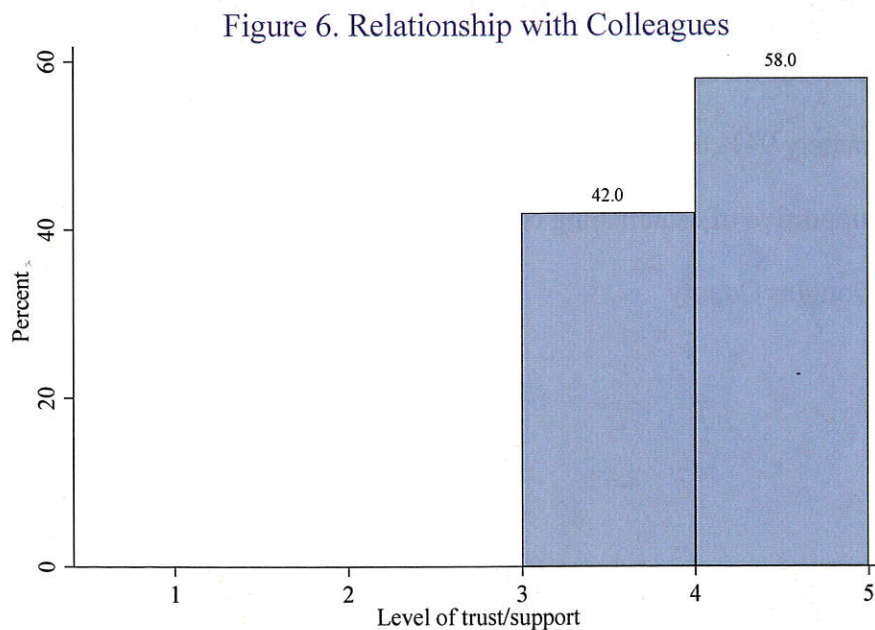
Next, we inquired about deputies' satisfaction with their job at DCSO. Deputies were asked to provide their level of agreement (e.g. 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree) with the following three items: "Overall, I am satisfied with my jobs at DCSO," "Overall, I am satisfied with my pay at DCSO," and "Overall, DCSO is a good agency to work for" (Wolfe & Nix, 2015). Principal factor analysis suggested the three items loaded onto a single scale, so we averaged responses to create a mean index. The index ranges from 2.33 to 5 with a mean of 3.83, where higher scores reflect greater job satisfaction. Figure 5 shows the distribution of the deputies' scores on this index. As the figure shows, 94% of deputies scored higher than the midway point on the scale. Thus, most of the sample indicated they were satisfied with their job at DCSO.



Relationship with Colleagues

Interdependency theory suggests coworker support (or nonsupport) is a key predictor of role perceptions and work attitudes (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959).

Therefore, it is important to consider whether officers have a good working relationship with their colleagues at DCSO. Deputies were asked to provide their level of agreement (e.g. 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree) with the following six items: “I enjoy working with my colleagues at DCSO,” “I feel I have a good working relationship with the officers in my agency,” “I feel that other officers in the agency trust me,” “I feel supported by other officers in my agency,” “Other officers in the agency treat me with respect,” and “My views about what is right and wrong in law enforcement are similar to the views of the majority of officers in my agency” (Nix, Wolfe, & Campbell, 2018). Principal factor analysis suggested the six items loaded onto a single scale, so we averaged responses to create a mean index. The index ranges from 3.17 to 5 with a mean of 4.00, where higher scores reflect belief that a deputies’ relationships with colleagues are more positive. Figure 6 shows the distribution of the deputies’ scores on this index. As the figure shows, the entire sample scored higher than the midway point on the scale, with the majority scoring 4 or higher. In other words, deputies overwhelmingly reported having a good working relationship with their colleagues.



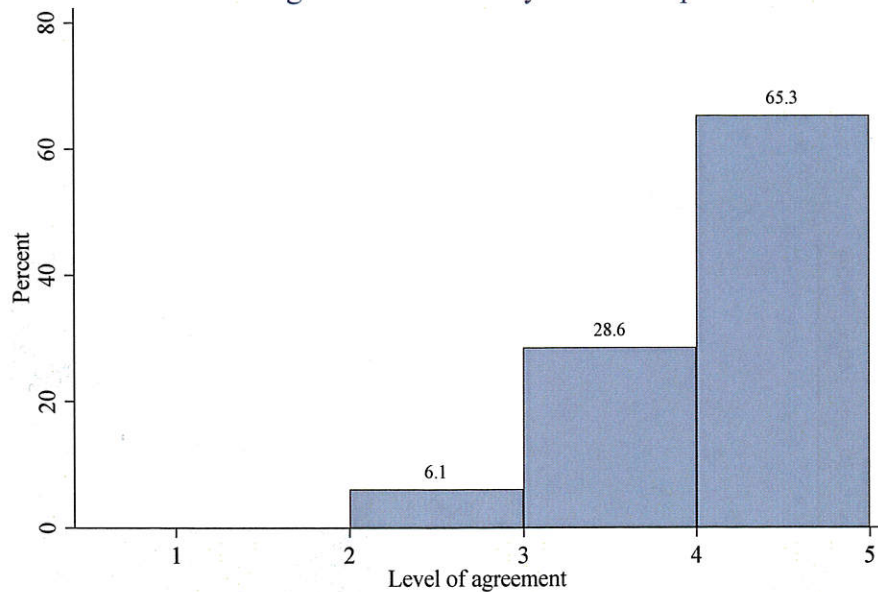
Perceptions of the Community

One of the most significant factors that influence policing in a democratic society is the public (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012). For our survey, we focused on deputies' attitudes toward engaging in partnerships with the community, and the extent they believe the public views them as legitimate.

Willingness to Engage in Community Partnership

We asked deputies to provide their level of agreement (e.g. 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree) with the following four statements: "Law enforcement and community members must work together to solve local problems," "Collaborating with community members is an important aspect of law enforcement," "Working with the community to solve problems is an effective means of providing law enforcement services to this community," and "I routinely collaborate with community members in my daily duties" (Wolfe & Nix, 2016). Principal factor analysis suggested the four items loaded onto a single scale, so we averaged responses to create a mean index. The index ranges from 2 to 5 with a mean of 4.03, where higher scores reflect belief the community partnerships are more important. Figure 7 shows the distribution of the deputies' scores on this index. As the figure shows, approximately 94% of deputies scored higher than the midway point on the scale. Thus, deputies were supportive of establishing community partnerships as a means of providing service to residents of Douglas County.

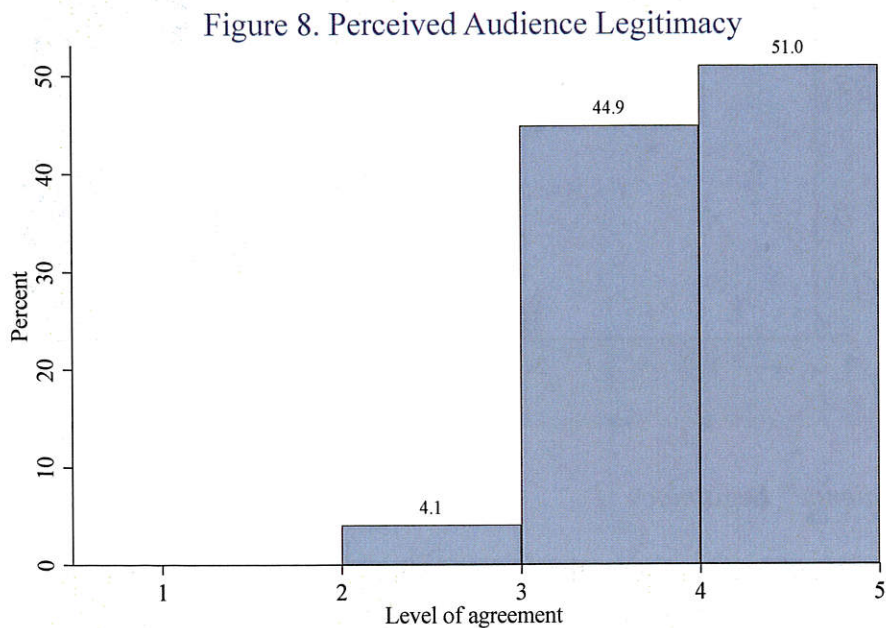
Figure 7. Community Partnership



Perceived “Audience” Legitimacy

Audience legitimacy is a term that refers to the extent police officers feel they have legitimacy in the eyes of the public (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012). In other words, do police officers believe citizens of their community trust them, feel obligated to obey their commands, and think they are effective at what they do? We asked deputies to provide their level of agreement (e.g. 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree) with the following six statements: “I have a good relationship with people in the community,” “People in this community view DCSO as a legitimate authority,” “People in this community respect law enforcement,” “People in this community trust DCSO officers,” “People in this community are willing to obey DCSO officers,” and “The public thinks that we do our job effectively” (Nix et al., 2018). Principal factor analysis suggested the six items loaded onto a single scale, so we averaged responses to create a mean index. The index ranges from 2.33 to 5 with a mean of 3.88, where higher scores reflect a belief that the community views DCSO as more legitimate. Figure 8 shows the distribution of the deputies’ scores on this index. As the

figure shows, approximately 96% of deputies scored higher than the midway point on the scale, indicating that the sample tended to believe Douglas County residents afford legitimate to the DCSO and its officers.



Self-Legitimacy

A growing body of research suggests that self-legitimacy (i.e., confidence that one's authority is morally justified) is associated with many positive attitudes and behaviors, including commitment agency goals (Tankebe, 2010), commitment to treating citizens fairly (Bradford & Quinton, 2014), less reliance on using physical force (Tankebe & Meško, 2015), and willingness to engage in community partnerships (Wolfe & Nix, 2016). We asked deputies to provide their level of agreement (e.g. 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree) for the following nine items: "I feel that I represent the values of the public in my local community," "The authority I have as a law enforcement officer is morally right," "I am sure I can give a good reason to members of the public as to why my authority as an officer is morally proper," "I believe my role as an officer is necessary to deter and prevent crime," "As a law

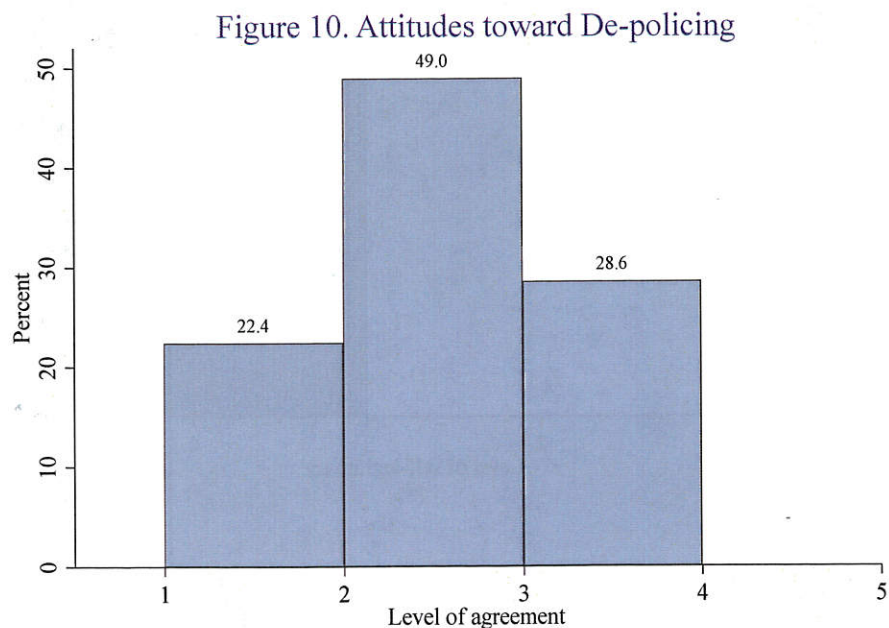
enforcement officer, I believe I occupy a position of special importance in society,” “I have confidence in the authority vested in me as a law enforcement officer,” “I believe people should always follow my lawful directions and orders,” “I am confident I have enough authority to do my job well,” and “I believe law enforcement can provide security for all citizens in my community” (Nix & Wolfe, 2017; Tankebe, 2014) Principal factor analysis suggested the nine items loaded onto a single scale, so we averaged responses to create a mean index. The index ranges from 3.33 to 5 with a mean of 4.12, where higher scores reflect a greater perceived self-legitimacy for each deputy. Figure 9 shows the distribution of the deputies’ scores on this index. As the figure shows, the entire sample scored higher than the midway point on the scale. In other words, the deputies tended to express great confidence in their role as law enforcement officers.



Attitudes toward De-policing

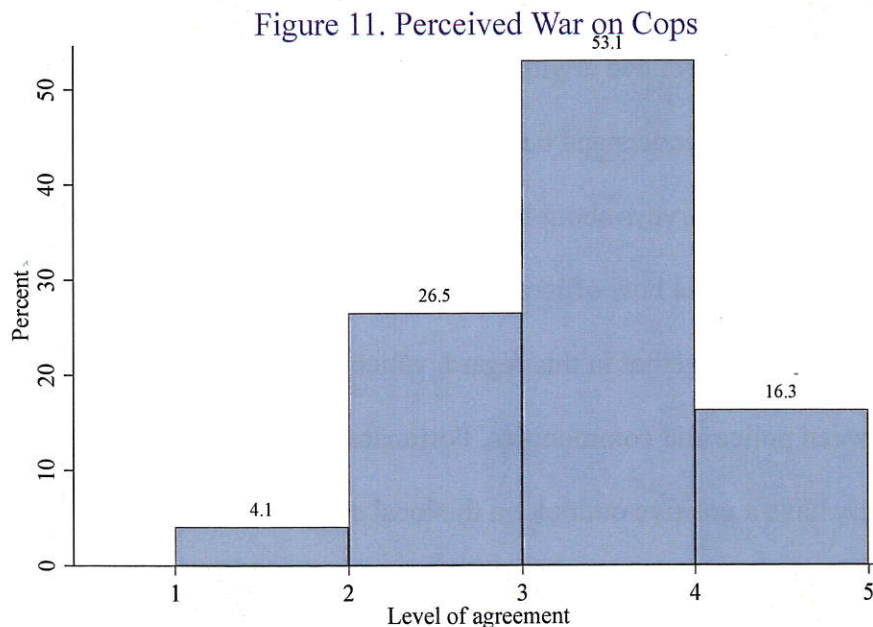
Given the national discourse of late regarding the “Ferguson Effect” and de-policing (Mac Donald, 2017; Shjarback, Pyrooz, Wolfe, & Decker, 2017), we inquired about how deputies view proactive/investigative traffic stops. Deputies were asked to provide their level of

agreement (e.g. 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree) for the following three items: “In today’s world, it is in a law enforcement officer’s best interest to avoid making investigative stops (e.g., minor traffic violations, suspicious persons),” “Other officers in my agency avoid making investigative stops,” and “I avoid making investigative stops” (Nix et al., 2018). Principal factor analysis suggested the three items loaded onto a single scale, so we averaged responses to create a mean index. The index ranges from 1 to 4 with a mean of 2.4, where higher scores reflect that deputies believe that it is in a deputies’ best interest to avoid making proactive/investigative stops. Figure 10 shows the distribution of the deputies’ scores on this index. As the figure shows, approximately 71% of deputies scored *lower* than the midway point on the scale. In general, this suggest deputies do not agree in principle with de-policing. Still, it is noteworthy that that approximately 1 in 4 respondents tended to agree with these statements regarding de-policing.



Perceived “War on Cops”

Finally, related to the above discussion, we were interested in whether deputies would agree there has been a “war on cops” in recent years. Deputies were asked to provide their level of agreement (e.g. 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree) with five items: “Criminals have become more emboldened in recent years,” “I worry about citizens recording my actions and uploading the video on the Internet,” “I worry about suspects being physically combative with me during investigative stops,” “I worry about how I’ll be portrayed if I use force against a suspect,” and “Most people are out to make law enforcement look bad” (Nix et al., 2018; Nix & Pickett, 2017). Principal factor analysis suggested the five items loaded onto a single scale, so we averaged responses to create a mean index. The index ranges from 1.6 to 4.8 with a mean of 3.24, where higher scores reflect that deputies believe that recent years have been characterized by a “war on cops”. Figure 11 shows the distribution of the deputies’ scores on the index. Approximately 70% of the sample scored higher than the midway point on the scale. Thus, deputies tended to agree with the “war on cops” discussion of late.



Conclusion

Given the controversy surrounding law enforcement in the US in recent years, we are encouraged by many of our findings. Although deputies felt the national media is unfair in their coverage of law enforcement, they had more favorable opinions of local media coverage. Deputies expressed positive attitudes toward their supervisors, command staff, colleagues, and community, and appear to be satisfied with their jobs at DCSO and confident that their authority is morally justified. Though they tend to buy into the notion of a “war on cops,” most did not indicate that de-policing is appropriate, or occurs in their agency.

Before closing, we must point out the limitations of our research. First, these findings are based on a survey of one agency administered at a single point in time. As such, the attitudes uncovered here may not reflect those of officers working for other agencies in other parts of the country. We also achieved a low response rate (39.4%), which means our sample may not provide an accurate depiction of the DCSO as a whole. Finally, given the small number of surveys returned (50), we were unable to perform more sophisticated analyses, which might shed additional light on the relationships between the attitudes we explored.

Moving forward, we believe it will be important for researchers to continue asking these critical questions in order to understand better police officers’ state of mind in the current climate. While community surveys about how citizens view the police are immensely important, so too are police surveys about how officers view citizens. It is our hope that researchers and agencies continue to work together in this regard, which would put us in a better position to restore trust between police and communities. Fortunately, our findings suggest that DCSO deputies generally have a positive outlook on the local state of affairs.

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