

**The Bill Blackwood  
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**Community Surveys in Today's Law Enforcement**



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## **ABSTRACT**

Unreported crime in America has long been a setback for law enforcement agencies and the communities in which they serve. The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) distributed in 2012 indicated that 18% of violent victimizations were not reported to the police because the victims felt that it was not important enough to report (Berzofsky, Krebs, Langton, & Smiley-McDonald, 2012). Adopting a similar survey within a certain community or geographical area will help local law enforcement agencies localize specific crimes and adopt counteractive measures to reduce these crimes.

Several of today's businesses use some type of survey to identify problems of their customers and implement solutions. Law enforcement agencies can view themselves as a business and incorporate some of the same ideas used to identify problems within the community they serve. Counteractive measures can then be implemented and communities can become more involved in the reduction of crime and better overall service from their local law enforcement agency. With new age methods of distributing surveys, law enforcement agencies need a standardized community satisfaction survey. Online, telephone, direct mailing, or face to face surveys have become less expensive and are a reliable tool for identifying problems and providing a grading system for law enforcement agencies from a citizen's standpoint.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	
Introduction.....	1
Position.....	2
Counter Position.....	6
Recommendation .....	8
References .....	11

## INTRODUCTION

Law enforcement agencies and organizations in today's age and time must incorporate much of the same ideas and techniques used by today's flourishing businesses. Surveys utilized by businesses are a technique often used to achieve a better overall product and service. The same customer satisfaction survey, when used by law enforcement agencies, will help in meeting the needs of their citizens and businesses and improve their overall relationship. Agencies that do not have an open communication with the community they serve cannot properly address concerns or problems within a neighborhood or geographical location. By implementing a community survey that is direct and easy to follow, the responses can be analyzed and an improvement can be implemented.

The 2012 National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) showed that 18% of total crime was not reported because the victims thought their crime was not important enough to report to a law enforcement agency. This report reflects crimes ranging from small misdemeanors to aggravated felonies (Berzofsky, Krebs, Langton, & Smiley-McDonald, 2012). Educating the community on how to overcome this verified factor can improve the overall relationship between a community and law enforcement reporting agency. The old saying that "If a crime was not reported, it must have not happened" only validates the need to change the way calls are handled and prioritized. Community surveys could validate the NCVS and show that officers need to not be awaiting a call for service, but identify, target, and implement solutions (Kappeler & Gaines, 2005).

Using community surveys to identify problems and concerns with citizens and businesses is not an uncommon practice. In the past, police departments have asked

citizens about their fear of crimes, amount of crimes, and types of unreported crimes in their neighborhood (Kappeler & Gaines, 2005). Implementation of a community survey can once again help law enforcement agencies ask questions in regards to the fear of crimes, amount of crimes, and unreported crime in their neighborhoods.

For several years, the requests to participate in a satisfaction survey have grown and the information learned has been an integral part of identifying the needs of customers. From purchasing a new vehicle to visiting a local restaurant, surveys are being employed to change the overall experience and compose the necessary changes when the experience has failed to uphold the level of service dictated by the business. Law enforcement agencies should follow the innovative techniques of other businesses and use community surveys to identify unsatisfactory levels of service and the definitive desires of the respondents.

## **POSITION**

Law enforcement agencies are no different than cutting edge businesses; they must keep up with the times and mirror any practices that have been proven successful. Businesses need to make a profit to thrive while law enforcement agencies are given a beginning budget that is decided by the city council and ultimately by the citizens in which it serves. Staying within or under the predetermined budget can be accomplished by a law enforcement agency operating like a business and using better business practices. A law enforcement agency should be cost efficient, as small as possible, competitive, and dedicated to pleasing the customer (Box, 1999). Law enforcement agencies that use surveys as a competitive edge will increase their overall customer

satisfaction and maintain a loyal following in reference to their customers or citizens relying upon them for excellent service.

By modeling the way that law enforcement agencies view their customers' needs by means of business satisfaction surveys, the law enforcement agencies can prioritize unsatisfied customers and produce ideas for change that will ultimately give more satisfaction with less service. Less service to satisfied customers translates into a more efficient law enforcement agency that can be smaller in size but maintaining the overall customer satisfaction standard that has been previously set. Identifying citizens as customers and treating these customers with the mannerisms often used by businesses, law enforcement agencies can retain their satisfied customers and re-evaluate the way their displeased customers are handled, treated, and the way service is provided.

Overall, the satisfaction of a law enforcement agency's customers or citizens can be achieved by understanding, analyzing, and fixing the problems identified by a well-designed community survey. Using a survey that has been proven effective by other stable businesses can be a helpful tool in communication between a law enforcement agency and the citizens or customers in which it serves. Without the knowledge that a problem within a law enforcement agency's jurisdiction is occurring, the law enforcement agency cannot take the appropriate action to rectify the problem. A community survey is a sound business approach to identifying a problem, and taking the correct business like action to address the problem. An embracing value of business philosophies for a law enforcement agency is that it makes the citizens the ultimate go-between of what makes community policing (Kurz, 2005).

Improving the relationship between law enforcement agencies and the community is not a new concept. Survey public opinion's regarding the police was determined to be made in the 1950's (Carter, 2002). Officers going door to door in uniform and taking these polls was a start to early American community policing, and the way communities and law enforcement communicated. As stated by Kappeler & Gaines (2005), "Increased reliance on high-tech gadgetry instead of human interaction" (p. 66) has changed the way law enforcement and the community communicates. New age and current communication methods have changed the way surveys, and their ultimate goals, have been implemented into the community. A law enforcement agency's willingness to accept and use these means can improve the communication and relationship between the agency and community in which it serves. Surveys and the way they are distributed is viable to improve the quality of life for the citizens that rely on law enforcement to identify and fix problems that were once overlooked when not reported. Educating the citizens to report criminal activity, however minor, will help law enforcement reach the ultimate goal of overall satisfaction for the community it serves. The community will be better served by its local law enforcement agency by assisting the need to express the concerns for extra patrol and once unreported criminal activity. This can be achieved by better communication with local law enforcement and their community's willingness to complete the survey and help identify problems and concerns.

Law enforcement must rely on its citizens for community feedback whether it is positive or negative. Policing agencies have long been interested in the community's view of them (Weisel, 1999), and implementing a community survey can answer the

question of what the community's view of law enforcement is. Once the community's views have been expressed, law enforcement can adapt necessary changes and improve the relationship and service it provides to its community.

Using a community survey not only answers the question of how the community views its local law enforcement, it can also identify the problems and crimes that were unreported. Community surveys asking similar questions such as the Victimization Not Reported to the Police within the years 2006-2010 study can access the percentage of unreported crime inside their isolated geographical area or neighborhood. It can also help identify problems in the neighborhood not classified as a criminal offense under Texas law. A close ended survey question that limits the respondent's answer choices can pinpoint problems that may have previously been overlooked. A closed ended question as simple as whether a citizen feels safe walking down their street at night, with a limited response of always, sometimes, or never can alert the law enforcement agency that although citizens are not contacting the agency, they feel that they cannot walk down a specific street at night feeling safe. The law enforcement agency can analyze the response and although no criminal activity is being reported, a law enforcement initiative needs be implemented which may include a greater law enforcement presence that is essential in a certain neighborhood or area.

Many citizens may notice an increase presence of juveniles walking the streets late at night. Not having a city ordinance dealing directly with juveniles or a juvenile curfew, citizens may not report the disruption to a law enforcement agency. A survey indicating that juveniles are out at all hours of the night can be analyzed and a solution can be identified. Some surveys asking direct question can help law enforcement



agencies identify problems that have been previously identified but have gone cold due to lack of communication or leads. Citizens need to be surveyed and problems need to be addressed. A citizen can also be asked about whether, in the last 30 days, if they or anyone in their family has witnessed a drug deal in their neighborhood, and if the crime was reported to the local law enforcement agency. If the citizen responds that there has been a drug deal witnessed, and the crime was not reported to their local law enforcement agency, that agency can now change the focus of certain daily routines and cases, and begin a new policing technique to meet the needs of the community. This new satisfaction and support can result in a catalyst for continued law enforcement service and improvement (Saltarelli & Deck, 2004). A community survey is a practical way of improving law enforcement's vision of seeking the most satisfaction and service for their community.

### **COUNTER POSITION**

Community surveys were implemented around the time community policing was adopted in the United States. There are beliefs that community policing is a thing of the past and several ideas from that period did not work including the community surveys. Several community surveys were not well tested and their target demographics did not reflect the actual feelings and concerns of the community: these were mostly done by sampling. Sampling communities or geographical areas did not reflect the true feelings of the community as a whole. Some law enforcement agencies also used a professional outside company to develop, test, administer, and analyze surveys; this was very expensive and time consuming.

The technique of going door to door for a survey was also very costly to carry out (Weisel, 1999). Having uniformed officers go door to door and administer the community surveys shifted the uniformed officer's role from crime prevention to crime statistics. Citizens would also be more likely to give an intimidated response while having a law enforcement officer in uniform stand over them while answering the survey. Citizens answered more favorably towards law enforcement fearing retaliation for giving a bad remark or customer satisfaction review.

Although attitudes toward law enforcement has changed since the implementation of community policing and satisfaction surveys, critics still feel that the community survey has failed and is still not a viable concept. These critics still believe that uniformed law enforcement officers should be out patrolling and locating unreported crime as part of their daily routine. Critics have argued that it is the law enforcement agency's problem to locate and react to all needs of community, which includes unreported crimes and nuisances.

There is a solution to the implementation of a community survey in today's day and age that is low cost and easy to use. With today's technology and social media outlets, community surveys can be reinstated at a low cost to a law enforcement agency. Web-based surveys with pre-made templates are ideal for law enforcement agencies wanting to implement a new community survey. Websites, like [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com) are an easy-to-use tool to create an online survey. Their intuitive web interface makes it easy to use and export collected data (Weisel, 1999).

Several law enforcement agencies using Web-based surveys have posted their surveys online which are viewable at no cost. These online templates can be a good

starting point for law enforcement agencies in the early development stage of their implementation. Professional companies still provide services that market and survey on a specific targeted area or audience; these services are at a much lower cost than when first introduced in early community policing services.

The idea that a uniformed law enforcement officer taking community surveys is the thing of the past. With the different distributing methods such as online, telephone, and paper mailings, surveys are easier to send out to a law enforcement agency's targeted audience. Online surveys could possibly target younger citizens that rely on high tech gadgets to relay their messages to the masses. Younger generations typically have no problem giving feedback as long as it is done in a way that adheres to their daily lifestyle. Telephone surveys are typically non-threatening and allow the respondent to feel a degree of confidentiality or anonymity from the person administering the survey (Weisel, 1999). Other surveys can be printed on paper and easily placed into a citizen's city provided utility bill or other direct city mailing. Smaller communities can provide a self-addressed stamped envelope to be used by the respondent, while larger communities can target a certain neighborhood and provide a self-addressed stamped envelope to a pre-selected part of the community.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Law enforcement agencies should learn the new techniques for implementing community surveys and discard outdated means. Community surveys were heavily introduced in the beginning stages of community policing and some are still used today, however most of them are insufficient and provide small amounts of useful information. The introduction of community policing adapted several ideas including the use of

community surveys to view the citizen's feelings on law enforcement. Earlier models of the community survey proved to be time consuming and costly; only the better-off and larger agencies could provide the financial means of community surveys. With new advances in reaching a specific audience, law enforcement agencies now have the resources to use community surveys to question their citizens about localized and unreported crime.

Law enforcement agencies should view themselves as a business and use tactics that have been proven to help other businesses thrive. Several of today's businesses use customer satisfaction surveys to learn about a customer's overall satisfaction in regards to a service or product they have encountered. Most customer satisfaction surveys are completed by telephone or an online website and require only a small amount of time to complete. Implementing a survey proven by a business to be successful, law enforcement agencies can acquire a better understanding of its customers and their expectations. The overall goal of business satisfaction should be customer service, meeting or exceeding the customer's expectations, and reliability of the service. Law enforcement agencies should treat their citizens as customers and make their service expectations the agencies ultimate goal.

The relationship between law enforcement agencies and their citizens has always had room to improve. A community survey that allows citizens to make their problems and concerns known will allow law enforcement agencies to address the problems and provide solutions. This positive problem solving will increase the public's perception of the local law enforcement agency and improve the relationship between the two.

A community survey may imply that an increase of non-criminal activity is occurring in a certain neighborhood; the survey information will direct law enforcement to a viable solution and again improve the relationship between the agency and community. The community having the ability to voice their concerns without attending a town hall meeting or other gathering that loses the anonymity of the citizen is another benefit to the community survey.

Critics may believe the community survey is another failed attempt in community policing. In early community policing, surveys were found to be time consuming and costly. However, uniformed officers going door to door administering surveys have been transformed into online and phone surveys. Online and telephone surveys are easily available, and templates and professional companies offer surveys for a low prices. The leading online service also provides a free 100 question survey with limited responses and reviewing (Westin, 2005).

The application of law enforcement agencies operating like a business is not a new concept. Operating a law enforcement agency like a business allows for usage of common business-like practices and working methods. Changing the way concerns of the community are acquired and implementing a way to address the concerns is the sole responsibility of the community survey. Using online, easy-to-use surveys is an advantageous way for any law enforcement agency to implement a community survey with their community.

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