



Public Perception

How does an officer's physical appearance influence public opinion?

Rebecca Waters

Recent events involving police use of force have compelled law enforcement to spend more time considering their relationship with the communities they serve and how to improve the public's perception of officers and their role in the community. In addition to public outreach programs designed to bring citizens in contact with officers in constructive, positive ways, recent research suggests that an officer's appearance can influence public opinion.

"It is possible that even mere presence factors (i.e., absent contact), such as the appearance of police officers in different attire and patrol capacities, may be enough to impact their perceived approachability, accountability, respectability, and so on," posits Rylan Simpson, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Criminology, Law and Society at the University of California, Irvine, in his recent research paper, "The Police Officer Perception Project (POPP): An experimental evaluation of factors that impact perceptions of the police," published in the *Journal of Experimental Criminology*.

Simpson strives to extend previous research by identifying how police attire and patrol strategies influence public opinion.



Bike officers were perceived as being friendlier and more approachable.

"My interest in mere presence and the effects of such presence on perceptions of the police motivated my current research," Simpson said of his work. "Although few people engage with the police under formal conditions, most people observe the police at

least on a semifrequent basis: at traffic lights, civic centers and community events. I was curious how these informal, and often unceremonious, observations of the police impact the ways in which citizens perceive officers."

The Study

Simpson hypothesized that, as a symbol of a community and its values, a uniform serves to legitimize police, enhancing public perception of officers presented in uniform and diminishing an officer's perceived status when presented in civilian clothing.

The study presented participants with 64 images each depicting one of four officers in a uniform or civilian clothing and either in a vehicle, on foot or on a bicycle. For each image, the study participants were asked to categorize it along five subdivided variables: aggressive versus not aggressive; approachable versus not approachable; friendly versus not friendly; respectful versus not respectful; and accountable versus not accountable.

Results

"I find that participants generally reported favorable views of the police. Contrary to much public discourse, participants overwhelmingly rated images of police officers as accountable, respectful and approachable," Simpson concluded.

"Although participants perceived police officers as more aggressive when presented in police uniform (versus civilian clothing), they also perceived them as more approachable, respectful and accountable. The police uniform, therefore, appears to convey aggression, but it does so without compromising more favorable perceptions," he adds.

Patrol strategy also played a part in how participants perceived police officers, with officers being perceived as more approachable, respectful and accountable when presented on a bicycle or on foot than in a vehicle and as more friendly and less aggressive when seen on a bicycle than in a vehicle.

"Police departments may maximize the benefits of police/

community events by increasing the presence of officers on bicycles during such events. Where feasible, police departments may also consider incorporating more bicycle and/or foot patrol into their regular patrol practices,” Simpson writes.

Future Research

While this study represents a large-scale evaluation of factors which impact perceptions of the police, Simpson has further evaluated the effects of police vehicles (e.g., marked vehicles versus unmarked vehicles, etc.) and accoutrements (e.g., high visibility vests versus load bearing vests, black gloves, etc.) on perceptions in related manuscripts. “In future research, I intend to extend my work from the laboratory to the real-world environment,” says Simpson. “As part of such work, I hope to evaluate the effects of appearance on perceptions of officers under conditions where more dynamic and contextual stimuli are present. It is my hope that other researchers will direct greater attention to similar questions as well.”

Industry Insights

Steve Zalkin, President of the North-American Association of Uniform Manufacturers & Distributors (NAUMD), hesitates to classify the image of an officer in uniform as aggressive. “A well-dressed and groomed police officer in a Class A uniform reflects a dedicated civil servant to her/his community and portrays safety. A peace officer only wants to show aggression when an environment needs to be controlled,” he says.

“Police uniforms provide an image to the community that they serve. The image portrayed to the public can be professional, mil-



A police officer in a top-notch uniform reflects a dedicated civil servant to his (or her) community.

itaristic or community policing,” he adds. “Public opinion is a little more outspoken when a department has a military presentation. Uniforms need to fit the job function and need to be functional for the job description.”

Public perception is increasingly a concern for police departments, concedes Cory Nykoluk, Director of Design for First Tactical. “In today’s political climate, the appearance of an officer is vital,” he says. “Even before words are spoken, the uniform is the first point of communication. If an officer looks like he is prepping for World War III, it’s easier for public opinion to view that negatively.”

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Traditional MOLLE gear still tends to occasionally elicit a negative perception among some in various communities.

officer uniforms – all of which can affect how the public perceives officers: headwear (baseball cap versus dress cap versus no cap); shirts (tactical shirt versus dress shirt versus polo shirts); pants (dress slacks versus tactical pants [cargo side pants] versus shorts [hot weather environments]); jackets (professional outerwear versus athletic outerwear); and body armor (under uniform versus over uniform). These items can also be found in different fabrics and colors and public perceptions will differ based on those choices and how they are presented.

“Gloves are a great example of officers influencing their image,” Nykoluk adds. “Take the traditional molded knuckle plate on the outside of traditional hard knuckle gloves. The plate tells you that this glove is designed for a very specific purpose. Modernized hard knuckle gloves are becoming more low profile with the protective knuckles moving underneath the fabric and becoming less pronounced, thus giving officers a more professional appearance that isn’t ‘aggressive.’”

The addition of body armor and other protective gear can in-

fluence public perception, “depending on a person’s understanding of a police officer’s job responsibilities and job function. It depends on specific situations and the environment. Schoolchildren typically will relate better to resource officers who are in casual attire versus a tactical uniform. In an active shooter situation, I am running towards a SWAT officer first,” says Zalkin. “The uniform must fit the job function and be functional for the job. Patrol officers, horse patrol, K-9, SWAT, bomb squad, school resource officers, and command staff all can, and should, have a different uniform.”

“One of the big complaints you hear is that the traditional heavy MOLLE gear is the first thing that an untrained eye catches and responds negatively to,” says Nykoluk. “The MOLLE platform is seen throughout images of the military and the public sees that and thinks of war. In recent years, popular media has given this functional gear a negative connotation and, unfortunately, police departments have had to adjust accordingly.”

Dress for Success

There has been a shift in uniform styles, Zalkin notes. “During my tenure in the uniform industry, which began in 1983, there has been consideration by command staff in choosing uniforms to fit the public’s perception for the police agency. School resource officers wore embroidered polo shirts with khaki pants (a soft sell look); street officers wore Class A uniforms for a professional look; and only tactical teams wore the military look. Today, everything is about functionality, number one, and comfort, number two. In the



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past, body armor was always worn under uniform shirts. Today, many agencies wear body armor in MOLLE carriers over their uniforms. Uniform pants yesterday were traditional looking dress slacks; today, many agencies wear cargo pants or tactical pants.”

Nykoluk has also noted a shift in police uniforms. “Many departments have changed to polos with a refined tactical pant. Both items are still tools for their job (functional on the street, in the office and on the range), but are refined in silhouette, keeping a neat, clean and professional look. I think that directly ties into the idea of public perception driving the appearance of law enforcement officers.” Vest carriers which look like uniforms are also an emerging trend, he adds.

Zalkin’s advice: “Dress for success with the skew on officer safety and functionality. There is an old saying that perception is 99% reality. It is not just about the public’s perception. It is also about officer pride and department culture. Do you sew an American flag on the uniform? What does the department emblem look like? The emblem portrays the community.”

Conclusion

“Mere presence matters,” Simpson advises law enforcement. “Simply observing police in different attire and patrol capacities impacts perceptions of them. An officer does not necessarily need to initiate formal contact in order to change the way in which a citizen thinks about them. Even just driving, walking or biking through a neighborhood is enough to elicit perceptions. With that being said, different types of attire and patrol strategies elicit different types of perceptions. For example, officers are

perceived more favorably when presented on a bicycle, or on foot, than when presented in a vehicle. Officers should thus be mindful of the perceptual effects of their presence.”

“Appearance does not exist in a vacuum: Perceived visual characteristics may shed insight into perceived philosophical characteristics (e.g., guardian versus warrior). Officers must remain vigilant of the effects of their presence and how they can manipulate their presence in order to enhance public/police relations,” Simpson adds. **P&SN**

Formerly the Editor-in-Chief for Forensic Magazine, Rebecca Waters is a freelance writer and editor.



Currently, headwear can range from a baseball cap to a traditional uniform or campaign hat to nothing at all.

Access Rylan Simpson’s study at
<http://www.rylansimpson.com/publications.html>.

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