CITIZEN'S POLICE ACADEMIES: BELIEFS AND PERCEPTIONS REGARDING THE PROGRAM

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The Citizens Police Academy (CPA) has gained widespread popularity across the United States. For many police departments, the academies represent a way for local citizens to interact with law enforcement officials in a positive setting. The current study was conducted to determine the effectiveness of the academy in increasing community members' knowledge and understanding of the police department. The results showed significant differences regarding citizens' perceptions of law enforcement and knowledge of the department before and after participation in the academy. The findings suggest that academies are successful in increasing citizen's knowledge of the department and positively influencing community relations. Implications of the findings and suggestions for future research are discussed.

Over the years, the American society has embraced various policing methodologies (Allender, 2004) and witnessed the implementation of many programs across thousands of departments within the United States. Policing policies not only affect the officers and the department, but also citizens in each community (Karp, 1999; Scott, 2002). Officers' acceptance of depart-

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mental policy may affect them in many positive ways, such as greater job satisfaction, increased support from the community, and better relationships within the department (Yates & Pillai, 1996). Likewise, community members realize benefits such as commitment to crime prevention, greater knowledge of police operations, and customized police service (Brown, 1989). Therefore, the philosophies that govern these policies may affect citizens' attitudes toward the department, even if the average citizen is not completely aware of the policy or philosophy.

HISTORY OF POLICING

Hahn (1998) divided the history of policing into three distinct eras: (1) the political era, (2) the reform era, and (3) the era of community policing. The *political era*, which spanned roughly from the late 1840s through the early 20th century, was marked by close ties between the police and local politicians. Officers generally lived in the area in which they patrolled, and directives were handed down from politicians to beat officers. Ties between these politicians and the officers were so close that officers were often viewed as part of the local political machinery. Demand for the services of these officers often came directly from the local politicians or from citizens themselves. Officers provided many services to the community, including helping needy families, providing coal in the winter, playing "Santa Claus" for children, while also fulfilling the regular duties of crime prevention and control. Success of the department was measured by the satisfaction of citizens within an officer's beat (Hahn, 1998).

The *reform era* gave rise to what is referred to now as traditional policing. Policies put into place at this time were in direct response to the corruption of many police departments. During this period, which began in the 1930s, officers began shifting focus from social service duties they had performed in the past, to a strict adherence to law enforcement and little else. In fact, the climate within departments became such that officers viewed any type of non-police jobs as unnecessary and an impediment to performing their "real" jobs. Officers went from participative members of the community in which they lived to impartial law en-

forcers viewed by community members as both distant and neutral.

The traditional policing philosophy held that more officers on the street would result in a lower crime rate, while also promoting an increase in the number of crimes solved; however, research has refuted these objectives. For example, Kelling, Pate, Dieckman, and Brown (1974) conducted a study in Kansas City which showed that increasing the presence of officers with more frequent patrols did not increase citizens' awareness of their presence. Furthermore, crimes such as burglary, auto theft, larceny, robbery, and vandalism also were not reduced by increasing patrols. Other studies also found that random patrol did not necessarily reduce the crime rate, lessen citizens' fear of crime, or increase an officer's chances of apprehending a criminal (Brown, 1989).

Findings such as these alerted law enforcement officials to the fact that the traditional methods of policing were not nearly as effective as once believed. The answer, it seemed, lay not in more officers on the street, but in a different strategy of combining officer and community efforts. Thus, a major occupational shift occurred in the law enforcement field during the 1980s with an increased push to improve police-community relations. Incorporating citizens' concerns into the policing philosophy marked a change from the traditional methods of planning based predominantly on internal police data. Likewise, increased contact between citizens and police officers should, in turn, increase citizens' awareness of the efforts officers were making to control crime (Brown, 1989).

THE ERA OF COMMUNITY POLICING

The turbulent decades of the 1960s and 1970s stimulated renewed interest in determining which types of policing styles would produce the best results (Brown, 1989). A massive research effort was launched in the 1970s to analyze policing issues (Ward, 1991), and the findings eventually lead to the development of a more community-oriented approach to law enforcement (Kelling, Pate, Ferrara, Utne, & Brown, 1981; Schwartz & Clarren, 1977;

Sherman, Milton, & Kelly, 1972). The shift toward community policing has seen the institution of many new programs across the country, such as neighborhood crime watches, the re-introduction of foot patrols, and citizens' police academies (He, Zhao, & Lovrich, 2005; Salmi, Voeten, Keskinen, 2005; Schneider, Rowell, Bezdikian, 2003).

Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) defines community policing as a "policing philosophy that promotes and supports organizational strategies to address the causes and reduce the fear of crime and social disorder through problem-solving tactics and police-community partnerships" (COPS, 2004, p.1). The core values of community policing differ vastly from the traditional policing philosophy (Brown, 1989). Community policing places a greater value on citizen involvement and often incorporates community suggestions into policy. In traditional policing, beats were constructed to meet the needs of the police department, whereas the community policing philosophy develops beats according to the natural boundaries of neighborhoods. Officers are permanently assigned to a beat, rather than being on a rotation, which increases police-citizen interaction, allows officers to become more sensitive to community needs, and alleviates community fears regarding crime (Allender, 2004; Brown, 1989).

Community policing is rapidly becoming a very popular policing philosophy. Dicker (1998) reported that 61% of local law enforcement agencies throughout the U.S. either have or are planning to implement a community-oriented policing program. Dicker (1998) also noted that community policing does not refer to one specific program, but to an array of programs that fall under a broader governing philosophy. Rather than relying on the reactive techniques used in traditional policing, this new philosophy focuses on being proactive. Departments that adapt community policing are looking at ways to solve problems before they arise. Police officers are also given greater latitude to experiment with alternative problem-solving techniques, and are encouraged to focus on more than their law enforcement duties (Kennedy & Veitch, 1997). In fact, officers are given the authority to establish

working relationships with community groups, various social service organizations, and other criminal justice agencies in order to address community law enforcement needs (Byrne & Hummer, 2004).

Of the various community policing programs, the Citizen's Police Academies (CPA) in particular has gained widespread popularity (Becton, Meadows, Tears, Charles, & Ioimo, 2005). The first program of this kind in the United States was organized in 1985 in Orlando, Florida (Aryani, Garrett, & Alsabrook, 2000). The Orlando program consisted of a week-long class that allowed residents to become more familiar with law enforcement operations. The course offered hands-on learning experience regarding topics such as police administration, narcotics, and firearms safety. The overwhelming popularity of the program spawned various academies across the country. Recent surveys report that nearly half of the police departments across the United States offer some form of citizen's police academy (Becton, et al., 2005).

For many police departments, the academies represent a way for local citizens to interact with law enforcement officials in a positive setting. Becton, et al. (2005) reports that many CPA's have increased in popularity due to benefits such as increased awareness of the day-to-day operations of the local police department, positive interaction with police officers, decreased suspicions and misconceptions regarding law enforcement, and the development of trust and cooperation between the police and citizens. However, despite the widespread acceptance of CPA programs, little empirical evidence exists regarding the specific benefits of the curriculum (Schneider, Pilon, Horrobin, & Sideris, 2000).

A recent study by Becton, et al. (2005) assessed the extent to which such programs influence citizens' beliefs and perceptions of the police. The authors report that many respondents (71%) had no knowledge of such programs in their communities. The mere 2% of respondents who had participated in an academy agreed that the academies help promote good community relations

between citizens and police departments. Unfortunately, the Becton, et al. (2005) study is really the first study to report information regarding respondents' perceptions of such programs. As such, many more questions remain unanswered? For example, why do citizens choose to participate in these programs and what have they gained upon completion. Also, what were citizens' attitudes and beliefs regarding policing prior to participating in such programs?

The current study furthers research in this area by attempting to better understand the usefulness of such programs. The researchers were able to assess participants' responses before beginning the CPA class and following completion of the program. Consistent with Becton, et al. (2005), it was hypothesized that participants enrolled in the academy would show increased knowledge of the department and possess more positive attitudes of law enforcement professionals following completion of the program. It was also hypothesized that citizens would show increased familiarity with the various programs offered within the department.

METHODS

Participants

Participants in the current study (N=87) participated in a 10-week Citizen's Police Academy which was held at the local police department. Many of the academies limit the number of participants in order to allow for close interaction between the officers and citizens, with each class averaging approximately 16-21 participants. The academies included 63% females and 37% males, with approximately 91% of the participants being Caucasian. Slightly more than 40% of the respondents had obtained a college degree and 14% held advanced degrees. The mean age of the participants was 44.0 years (17-78 years of age).

Materials

Pre- and post-surveys assessed participants' beliefs and attitudes regarding the academy and various other law enforcement issues. We divided the survey into three sections: a) *demo-*

graphic section, where questions addressed background information about the participant, how he/she learned of the academy, and what prompted him/her decide to enroll, b) *general knowledge* pertaining to the CPA and its function, including what the participant expected to gain from participation in the academy, c) *general attitudes toward the police*, which included questions pertaining to law enforcement and crime prevention in general (adopted from Martin & Cohn, 2002; Regoli, 1976), and d) *department programs*, which included various programs offered within the department such as crime-stoppers, K-9, robbery prevention, and victim advocacy.

Procedure

We administered surveys during fall and spring classes that were offered through the local police department where the classes were held each week. The classes covered such topics as crime scene processing, narcotics information, communications, crime prevention, criminal justice, and victim advocacy. Programs were instructed by officers specializing in each area. Participants voluntarily agreed to participate in the study and the study was approved by the university Human Subjects Review Board. On the first day of class, participants completed the pre-test measure. Post-tests surveys were administered on the last day of class and assessed knowledge gained following completion of the course.

RESULTS

Citizens' Participation in the Academy

Participants were asked two questions, 1) how they knew of the CPA and 2) why they decided to enroll in the academy. According to the findings, 58% of the participants reported they learned of the academy from a family member or friend, 19% from local advertisements and word of mouth, 11% from a co-worker, and 10% from an officer in the force. When asked why they decided to enroll in the academy, over 70% of the respondents indicated an interest in the academy and understanding the operations of the police department.

Citizens' Perceptions of Policing

Using a five-point Likert-scale, with 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree, participants were asked whether they believe the average citizen is well-informed about policing activities in their community. Participants disagreed with the statement, "I think the average citizen is well-informed about policing activities in their community" (M=2.20, SD=.90), and this viewpoint held true following completion of the academy (M=2.15, SD=.76), $t(87) = .56, p < .59$.

Participants in the study perceived officers to be genuinely concerned with issues and problems affecting the local community (M = 4.33, SD=.60) and this perception was strengthened following participation in the academy (M=4.64, SD=.61), $t(87) = 3.51, p < .001$. Interestingly, when asked more specifically whether they perceived the officers knew which law enforcement issues were important in their community, the respondents were a bit more uncertain (M=3.61, SD=.78) in their pre-test responses to this question, yet reported more agreement with this question on the post-test measure (M=4.16, SD=.79), $t(85), = 4.55, p < .001$.

Knowledge of the Department

Pre- and post-test analyses revealed that citizens possessed very little knowledge of a police officers' daily work duties (M= 2.65, SD= .94) prior to participation in the academy. This would be expected if citizens of the community did not have much interaction with those in law enforcement beyond the usual traffic stop. However, following completion of the class, citizens reported significant increased knowledge of these activities (*M*= 4.23, *SD*=.64), $t(86) = 14.85, p < .001$.

Participants were asked more specifically about their familiarity with various programs offered within the department. Pre- and post-tests analyses revealed that participants were familiar with programs, such as crime stoppers, $t(87) = 1.75, p < .09$ and neighborhood watches, $t(87) = .26, p < .80$, both of which are often well publicized. Following the academy, participants reported significantly greater familiarity regarding other programs within

the department, such as the police explorer program, $t(87) = 6.54$, $p < .001$, robbery prevention, $t(86) = 6.04$, $p < .001$, ride-a-long, $t(85) = 4.59$, $p < .001$, K-9 unit, $t(86) = 5.64$, $p < .001$, and victim advocacy programs, $t(85) = 7.96$, p $< .001$, all of which were presented during the class. Following completion in the academy, when asked whether they believe the CPA was effective in informing the community about the police department, 95% of the respondents agreed that the academy was doing a good job of informing its citizens.

DISCUSSION

It appears that the academies are effective in increasing citizen's knowledge of the department and positively influencing their perceptions of those in law enforcement. Following participation in the academy, citizens reported greater understanding of how their local police department functions and increased familiarity with the various programs available. Additionally, participants perceived that officers knew which law enforcement issues were important in their community and that they seemed genuinely concerned about helping to resolve these issues. Finally, participants reported that they gained a greater understanding of the daily work duties of officers. These findings are similar to those reported by Becton, et al. (2005) in which CPA participants reported increased understanding of the operations of their local law enforcement officials. According to Salmi, et al. (2005), the movement toward community policing generates increased interest in the perceptions of the public regarding police activities. If the purpose of community policing is to strengthen the relationships between police and the public, it appears the academy is capable of achieving this goal.

As with most studies of this kind, there are a several limitations worth mention. While the sample size might be an issue of concern for some, the unique nature of these types of programs limit themselves to smaller classes. This allows for more personal interaction between the participants and officers. As research studies have shown, an increase in class size can result in less in-

teraction between instructor and participants. Future studies might assess the effectiveness of programs with various class sizes.

Another concern is that the department does not appear to be capturing a diverse population of participants. The majority of participants in our study reported that they were made aware of the program through family and friends who had already participated in the program or who knew of others who had done so. Although this self-selected sample is not uncommon in field research, this word-of-mouth publicity often limits the diversity of participants enrolled in such programs. One way to increase the diversity of participants would be to present the CPA in various community locations. This would serve several benefits to the department and community. First, it would be an attractive incentive to those interested in attending the class, but unable to travel far in order to participate. Second, this may help to capture those community members who tend to be more neutral or hostile towards law enforcement officials. Finally, this would increase the exposure of local law enforcement officials within one's community and positively increase community relations, especially in troubled areas of the community.

Our focus was primarily on replicating the Becton, et al. (2005) findings while using a different design strategy. The findings supported our hypotheses and further confirmed the Becton, et al. (2005) study; however, future studies could improve by including more detailed questions that assess participants' attitudes across a variety of law enforcement issues, especially as they pertain to community policing. Of greater concern is the lack of conceptualization pf community policing. Until we have reached some finality regarding the concept, attempts to measure it may be challenging. According to Williamson (2005), we have only just begun to understand community policing. With many more departments across the nation implementing these types of programs, it is important to continue to gather information regarding the various programs being offered. While numerous studies have reported success, the diversity of programs across departments

makes generalizing theses findings questionable. At the same time, the uniqueness of each community and department must be taken into consideration when designing such programs. Currently, it does appear that continued investment in CPA programs can greatly benefit police departments as well as community members.

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