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COPS AND THE COLLEGE CROWD: YOUNG ADULTS AND PERCEPTIONS OF POLICE IN A COLLEGE TOWN*

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ABSTRACT

Research on attitudes of college students toward police provides an opportunity to explore the relationship among age, subgroup/cultural adaptation, and anti-authority orientation. Using data that allow comparisons between college students and the general community population, this study finds that being in college, not age, diminishes students' trust in police, and that students are two times more likely than general citizens to report feeling unsafe. Students' decreased confidence in police, as compared to general citizens, holds for those with and without police contact. However, positive evaluation of contact significantly mediates perceptions of police for whites but not for Blacks. The study demonstrates that even within small, relatively homogeneous communities subgroup identity may inspire or discourage trust and, in turn, diminish feelings of safety. Further, patterns of trust and safety differ for women and men; women report higher confidence in police, but lower feelings of safety, a pattern opposite that for men. The college town provides an instructive case for examining a context in which newcomers and town citizens interact, sometimes with conflicting orientations.

Employment." Monthly

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INTRODUCTION

Trust between police and community engenders police legitimacy and crime control, but confidence in police is seldom spread evenly across groups. Interaction between groups sometimes seen as adversarial, such as police and teens or young adults, may add tension to an already challenging situation. For instance, scholars and practitioners alike agree that positive police-community interaction is desirable, but such interaction also accommodates greater arrest discretion on the part of patrol officers (Mastrofski, 1996), which may produce greater tension between police and groups who view them as oppressive. Police agencies face a conundrum: Building connections and mutual trust with citizens is premium, but greater contact also increases the possibility of negative encounters. Adding further complexity to the situation, recent studies confirm that citizens' attitudes toward the police directly affect feelings of safety in the community (Benedict, Brown, and Bower, 2000; Nofziger and Williams, 2003), which is critical to overall community cohesion.

Certain segments of the population, especially disenfranchised groups, more often consider the police an adversary than an ally. In particular, research fairly consistently recognizes age as a factor in generating negative attitudes toward authority (Apple and O'Brien, 1983; Hurst and Frank, 2000; Levy 2001; Smith and Hawkins, 1973; Stoutland, 2001). Youths may believe that police are not able or willing to "serve and protect" their interests. However, such attitudes may be concentrated within specific populations of young people, and most previous studies have focused on poor or minority inner-city youths. This study compares attitudes toward police of a particular group of youth, college students in a college town, with attitudes of other young people in the community to determine whether college student status and experience generate different perceptions of the police.

YOUTH AND POLICE

Contact between young adults and police is often oppositional. The inverse relationship between age and arrest rates remains one of the most consistent of crime facts (Greenberg, 1985; Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1983; Stark, 1987; Steffensmeier and Allan, 1991). Whereas teenagers make up 6

percent of the total population, they account for about 30 percent of index crime arrests, with peak for offending occurring from 16 to 18 years of age (Steffensmeier and Strefel, 1991). Scholars advance several reasons for the age/arrest relationship. First, basic activities such as sexual involvement, drinking alcohol, and various kinds of celebration – which are often more pronounced among young people – are subject to age-related laws (Feld, 1997). Second, young adults, especially upon leaving high school and the family home, may experience fewer constraints and greater motivation to engage in risk-taking behavior (Mulvey and LaRosa, 1986). Third, some contend that police disproportionately target certain at-risk populations, including youths, for arrest (Davis, 1969; Klinger, 1997; Stoutland, 2001).

Contrary to reports finding that youths typically express positive support for police (e.g., White and Menke, 1982), recent studies conclude that many young people do not report favorable assessments of police (Hurst and Frank, 2000; Stoutland, 2001), and that their attitudes toward law enforcement support a greater degree of cynicism than those of adults (Taylor, Turner, Esbensen, and Winfree, 2001). One reason may be that youths are more likely to be committed to delinquent norms (Leiber, Nalla, and Farnworth, 1998), which elicits negative reaction from police (Becker, 1963; Mastrofski, 1996; Novak, Frank, Smith, and Engel, 2001). Others claim that perceived unfairness of police contact, as well as alcohol and marijuana use, produce more negative attitudes of juveniles toward the police (Cox and Falkenberg, 1987). In particular, some earlier studies found that the demeanor of youths was more likely to be seen by the police as disrespect (Piliavin and Briar, 1964). Taylor, Turner, Esbensen, and Winfree (2001:302) emphasized: "Thus, if police are more likely to engage juveniles in practices which are seen as adversarial or 'harassing' (e.g., enforcing loitering or curfew), one could expect that juveniles would hold less favorable perceptions of the police than adults."

Several observations underscore the importance of looking at young people's assessment of police. Youths' attitudes toward police are often more negative than those toward other authority figures such as parents or teachers (Levy, 2001), and relationships between young people and police take on particular importance due to the longevity of initial attitudes and impressions. Young people's memories of police harassment and incivilities are more lasting than those of adults (Stoutland, 2001), and early contacts with police are likely to impose lasting effects on juveniles' relationships with agencies of social control, their long-term attitudes, and subsequent delinquent behavior (Leiber, Nalla, and Farnworth, 1998).

Literature on youths' attitudes toward police, while limited, mirrors several findings elaborated in studies of the general population, especially correlates of race, class, and gender. Minority and lower-class youths

generally view the police more negatively than white middle-class counterparts (Sullivan, Dunham, and Alpert, 1987; Hurst and Frank, 2000; Borrero, 2001). Griffiths and Winfree (1982) report few gender differences among young populations, but others find that girls report more favorable attitudes toward police than boys (Taylor, Turner, Espensen, and Winfree, 2001). However, other researchers found no association between age and attitudes toward police (White and Menke, 1982), and the debate about whether police contact affects perceptions remains unresolved (Brandl, Frank, Worden, and Bynum, 1994). It may be that the age/attitudes issue is conflated by effects of a particular subgroup to which adolescents and young adults belong. One subgroup of particular importance is the college crowd.

A growing college-educated population attests to the significance of this group as an influential segment of the community. About one-fourth of U.S. adults age 25 and over earn a bachelor's degree or higher, and more than 80 million people in the U.S. have at least some college education (U.S. Census, 2000). In 2001, 15.3 million students enrolled in college, a figure that quadrupled since 1950, and reports project that enrollment will grow by an additional 16 percent over the next decade (Mulhauser, 2001). However, since the 1960s and 1970s, when civil unrest was common on college campuses, researchers have devoted little attention to interaction between police and college students.

YOUTH CULTURES, COMMUNITIES, AND CONTEXT

This section addresses two interrelated theoretical concepts that inform this study: group dynamics and corresponding subcultural values, and the importance of local place effects in the form of community and local context.

One theory of crime that addresses group and peer dynamics, especially as they concern youth groups, is subculture or cultural deviance theory. Subculture theory posits that youth culture is fundamentally oppositional, given the lower status of youth and situations that often place young people in a social position of asserting independence from authority. Cohen's (1955) work in *Delinquent Boys* supports the idea that a criminogenic element develops when group values conflict and community controls weaken. Cohen claimed that the problem is not so much a lack of unity in values but that a different set of values develops in response to certain shared adjustment problems. A subculture thus develops, one that differs in beliefs and behavior from the dominant culture, evolving into "a

way of life that has somehow become traditional among certain groups in American society" (1955:13). This idea of an adjustment mechanism has been used primarily to explain lower-class juvenile delinquency (e.g., Cloward and Ohlin, 1960; Hagan, 1991; Miller, 1958) and race-related differences in deviant behavior (e.g., Steffensmeier and Allan, 1995; Hagan and Albonetti, 1982; Willie, 1991; Zinni, 1995).

Dalton and Petrie's (1997) work on peer cultures suggests that a college culture may function similar to a deviant subculture: "Like an invisible invader, the influences of peer culture permeate almost all aspects of students' lives and enhance or erode the best educational efforts of faculty and administrators" (18). Thus, college students may draw upon their status as youths and as students to form their own set of adjustments to problems, which then shape unique attitude sets.

While a subcultural perspective focuses primarily on group dynamics and norm formation, it implicitly addresses the importance of the context in which such norms develop. Recently, a resurgence of community-based research recognizes that local areas – marked by spatial, social, and symbolic boundaries – represent a critical "social container" (Bondi, 1993; Rose, 1993) that exerts influence on youths in arenas that are not necessarily deviant. For example, aggregate community effects, which capture both an opportunity structure and cultural milieu, are found to influence educational aspirations (Williams, 2002), career choices (Villemez and Beggs, 1994), and choices about pregnancy and family planning (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Kiebanov, and Sealand, 1993). Young college adults, experiencing an important life transition, may be especially sensitive to the influence of college culture, a "psychological habitat" that shapes personal meaning and behavior (Dalton and Petrie, 1997).

Critics argue that subculture theory focuses almost exclusively on lower-class behavior, and challenge the assumption that such values exist only in reaction to dominant standards (Kitsuse and Dietrick, 1959). Others claim that subculture theory falsely assumes homogeneity among youth groups (Schwendinger and Schwendinger, 1985), ignores gender (Chesney-Lind, 1997), and identifies groups primarily by delinquent activities (Matza, 1969). This study addresses several of these criticisms by examining attitudes of a subgroup that is not considered lower class – young people in a college setting – and which is not selected on the basis of deviant or criminal activity. We explore the possibility that a cultural influence differentiates this group from the general population of young people by examining differences between the two groups in attitudes toward police.

Again, the college town provides an instructive example. Similar to other jurisdictions that experience a consistent dynamic of "newcomers" and "townies" – such as areas with tourist trade (Jobes, 1999) or a prison

facility (Carlson, 1992) – college towns often develop a love/hate relationship with its student population. Although college students are viewed as the hope for our future, college students can also be seen as a source of conflict and disorganization within a college town. The town depends heavily on students for trade, labor, and economic stability, and various sporting and cultural events serve as a vitalizing and unifying function for the entire community. However, the town's identification of student includes images of rowdiness, drinking, and out-of-control episodes. Law enforcement, as the town authority, embodies the dual and contradictory position between the "townies" and its student population.

RESEARCHING THE PROBLEM

The small body of literature on young people and attitudes toward police underscores three points. First, understanding the relationship between police and youths is especially important considering the salient roles of youths as offenders, victims, and witnesses of crime, and as future leaders. Second, studies suggest that sociocultural forces may more strongly influence youths' attitudes toward police than those of adults. Significant factors include subcultural socialization (Lieber, Nalla, and Farnworth, 1998), strain between aspirations and opportunity (Yates and Pillai, 1996), and negative demeanor associated with issues of trust and authority (Stoutland, 2001). Third, a tension may exist in the conflicting and complex relationship between the status of youth (which is lower in hierarchy and more likely to be anti-establishment) and education (which marks maturity and higher status) (Ford, Meeke, and Zeller, 1975). Such orientations are embedded in broader views of the social system (Albrecht and Green, 1977) and are intertwined with feelings of alienation (Hagan and Albonetti, 1982). Such global attitudes may "influence evaluations of the police in particular contact situations" (Brandl, Frank, Worden, and Bynum, 1994:129). Further, research suggests that young people do not always respond to different authorities in the same manner (Levy, 2001), and that community context (Benedict, Brown, and Bower, 2000) and group identity (Lieber, Nalla, and Farnworth, 1998) are particularly effectual on youths' attitudes toward authority.

In an attempt to better understand interactions between agents of authority and various groups, this paper explores differences between college students and the general public in attitudes toward police and feelings of safety in a Midwest college town. We expect that age and student status are significantly related to confidence in police, and we further expect race and gender differences. We also examine quality of

contact between college students and police, as compared to that of other community citizens, and the effect of confidence in police on feelings of safety.

METHOD AND DATA

Data were collected in October 2001, as part of an accrediting process for the local county police department. Two randomized samples were drawn from lists of telephone numbers, one sample consisting of the general population of county residents and one of university students. This two-step method assured representation from the college population, which makes up approximately one-third of the county population. The randomized list consisted of 720 telephone numbers and 89 completed student surveys. The responses for general citizens and 89 completed student surveys were overall response rate was 41%; overwhelmingly, most non-responses were due to no answers and/or telephone recording devices. The survey instrument, administered by University students who were trained for this purpose, consisted of 32 items addressing satisfaction with the police department's performance in various duties (e.g., enforcing traffic laws, drug sales or use) and in preventing and solving crimes. The questionnaire also asked about respondents' experiences with victimization and witnessing crime, feelings of safety in the community, and personal contact with police officers. During preparation for the project, the September 11 terrorist attack on New York City and Washington, D.C. occurred, and two questions were added to address the impact of these events on the community and to assess respondents' perceived ability of the police department to handle a major crisis.

The research site in this study is distinct in several ways from samples used by most studies of attitudes toward police. The sample is drawn from a county that consists of 14 small towns or hamlets with a total population of about 63,000 (U.S. Census, 2000). The county is primarily white (85%); African Americans, the largest minority group, make up less than 7% of the entire county. These demographics are consistent with state figures of 86% white and 6% Black, but significantly different from national data, which indicate that 75% of the population is white and more than 12% is Black. This county has a high rate of renter-occupied housing units (only 53% owner occupied, compared to 66% nationally), and median income is slightly less than \$34,000 (compared to \$36,500 for the state and \$37,000 nationally). The county poverty rate is slightly higher than the national rate

(14.1% vs. 13.3%), but the county has a higher percent of college graduates (17%) than either the state or nation (about 12%).

The primary reason for the unique demographic profile of the county is the presence of a state university located in the county seat. The university serves some 22,000 students; the majority (91%) came from within the state but only 19% from the host county (Fact Book, 2001). The presence of the university most likely influences percentages of renters, college graduates, and age distribution. The median age of the county is 24; of the entire county, 37% is within the 15-24 year old categories, the age group most likely to include college students. A common pattern is that university students move into the county during their college years and then move away after graduation.

The sample mirrors the larger community in many ways. Table 1 provides key demographic variables for the entire sample and for each subsample (community, college). For the full sample, 78% report "White," while the largest minority group, "Black," represents less than 7% of the sample. In addition, the sample is young, with 52% in the lowest age category of 18-29. The college sample somewhat under-represents white students (62% v. 81%), but accurately reflects the college population in terms of youthfulness (94%) and gender distribution (49% v. 51%). Overwhelmingly, college students rent their place of residence (93%). The community subsample reports about one-third in the youngest age category, 60% as homeowners, and as overwhelmingly white (85%). These demographics closely match those of the county population, in which 85% of residents are white, 53% own their own home, and median age is 24.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Sample

Variable	Value	Full Sample Percent* (n=301)	Comm. Percent* (n=212)	College Percent* (n=89)
Sex	Male	40.5% (122)	36.7% (78)	49.3% (44)
	Female	54.5% (164)	58.0% (123)	46.1% (41)

Table 1. Continued

Race	White	78.1% (235)	84.9% (180)	61.8% (55)
	Black	6.6% (20)	1.4% (3)	19.1% (17)
	Hispanic	4.0% (12)	2.8% (6)	6.7% (6)
	Asian	1.3% (4)	-	4.5% (4)
	Other	4.3% (13)	6.1% (1)	2.2% (2)
Age	18-29	51.5% (155)	32.5% (69)	96.6% (86)
	30-39	12.6% (38)	17.5% (37)	1.1% (1)
	40-49	10.0% (30)	13.2% (28)	1.1% (1)
	59-59	6.0% (18)	8.5% (18)	1.1% (1)
	60-69	6.6% (20)	9.0% (19)	-
	70+	10.3% (31)	14.6% (31)	-
Rent/Own Home	Rent	50.5% (152)	34.9% (74)	93.3% (83)
	Own	44.5% (134)	60.4% (128)	6.7% (6)

*Percentages do not total 100 due to missing data.

VARIABLES

Confidence in Police

Perceptions about police are measured with nine items (each are four- to five-point Likert type) designed to indicate the level of confidence in police. Respondents were asked how well they thought the local police performed on a number of levels: enforcing various types of laws, solving

crimes, patrolling and preventing crime, and responding to a major crisis (see Appendix A for descriptions of variables and distributions). For the three items asking about police ability to solve and prevent crime, 61% to nearly 77% of respondents reported they were satisfied or very satisfied with the local police. Respondents report slightly less confidence in police ability to handle a major crisis, with only 24% indicating the top two levels of confidence and an additional 37% indicating they believed the local police would do "somewhat well." Nine items are combined into an additive scale of overall confidence in police; the alpha coefficient is .8121. After several preliminary analyses (and at the suggestion of reviewers), we opted to include a "no opinion" response as a midpoint category, which allows us to retain 286 cases that are complete on the primary dependent variable measure.

Fear/Perceptions of Safety

A second dependent variable reflects how safe or unsafe the respondents feel in their community. Two items were designed to measure respondents' perceptions of community safety. One measure represents an overall assessment of safety, and a second determines if there are specific locations where the respondent does not feel safe. These items are similar to those used by national polls to assess fear and safety perceptions. Overall, this sample indicates that residents perceive their community to be safe. Only 16 respondents reported that they did not feel safe overall, but 72 reported a specific unsafe area in their community. For these analyses, the measure of feeling unsafe is coded as one if respondents reported feeling unsafe in general or if they indicated there was a specific place where they did not feel safe, and zero if they do not fit these limitations. A total of 78 respondents, representing 26% of the sample, indicated at least some concern for their safety in the community (See Appendix A).

Independent/Control Variables

We define two dichotomous independent variables of primary interest to this study, "Young Population" and "College Population." We are particularly interested in exploring the youth category as a predictor of perceptions of police, and we also explore a subgroup identity thesis, testing whether college students differ from other youths in their attitudes toward authority or feelings of safety. The "Young Population" variable scores all respondents in the 18-29 age group as one (n=155) whether they are in the community or college subgroup, versus all others (n=146) coded as zero.

The "College Population" category includes all respondents in the college sample, coded as '1' (n=89), and all respondents in the random community survey, regardless of age, are coded as '0' (n=212). Within the college sample, 97% (n=86) of the respondents are in the age group 18-29, while within the sample of citizens, 32.5% (n=69) are 18-29 years old.

Several standard demographic variables such as age, race, and sex are included in regression analyses as controls. In preliminary analyses, we tested the use of "Rent" as a rough proxy for social class. While the "Rent" variable held up in tests for the general population, it presented multicollinearity problems in models that include the "College Population" category; for this reason, we omitted the "Rent" variable from multiple regressions. Diagnostics revealed no other indicators of unacceptable levels of multicollinearity; Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) scores were less than two and Tolerance scores were .6 or higher for all models.

In addition to these standard controls, analyses include a number of variables previously found to be predictors of perceptions of police. For example, we include a measure asking whether the person has been a victim of crime in the past year and the respondent's perception of crime in the community as increasing or decreasing. A total of 38 respondents (13%) report having been a victim in the past year, and 117 respondents (39%) report that they feel crime has decreased in the community over the last year. Although respondents report low rates of victimization, the majority did not feel that crime is decreasing.

Previous research consistently reports that contact with police alters respondents' views. Therefore, the analysis includes several items to assess the impact of contact with police. A total of 139 respondents had personal contact with a local police officer within the past year. For those who report contact, three items assess whether the experience was positive or negative. Respondents were asked whether the officer seemed willing to help in the situation, whether the police were able to provide guidance or a solution to the situation, and whether the officer was polite and courteous. These three items constitute an additive scale indicating increasing positive experience with police. The mean score for this item (2.43 on a scale from zero to 3) indicates that most of the respondents who interacted with police reported positive experiences.

RESULTS

This study primarily focuses on the effect of youth and college status on attitudes toward police. We begin by focusing on differences in group

means. Ordinary least-squares and logistic regression are then used to determine multivariate relationships among variables of interest.

Descriptive statistics guided the initial stages of analysis. We found few significant differences by subgroups or demographics that have been analyzed in previous studies. However, when contrasting the community group and the student group, 15 out of 20 items tested as significantly different (see Table 2, column A). Of course, the youthfulness of the college population could possibly account for those differences. We then tested for differences between the subsets of youth groups - that is, between young people in the community sample (18-29 years) and college students who fall in that age group. As demonstrated in Table 2, column B, 12 of the 15 items found to be significantly different in column A (community versus college) also reach statistical significance when comparing the two youth subsamples. These analyses clearly demonstrate that the status of college student is potentially a strong indicator of attitudes toward police, as well as of other experience-based reporting.

Table 2
Comparison of Percentages and Means for Subgroups: Community v. College Samples and Community Youth v. College Youth

Questionnaire Item	Column A		Column B	
	Everyone	Age 18-29	Comm. Youth	College Youth
Personal contact with local police?	47.3	50.6	50.7	50.0
For those who reported contact:	90.5	71.1**	88.6	69.8
Was officer willing to help?	79.8	63.0*	80.0	61.4
Did officer solve the problem?	91.6	67.4***	88.6	68.2*
Was officer polite and courteous?	33.5	18.7*	39.7	19.4**
Is there other criminal activity not being dealt with in a satisfactory manner?	14.1	21.8	4.3	22.6**
Do you feel safe in your community?	96.6	89.7*	95.7	89.3
Is there a specific area where you do not feel safe?	22.2	31.0	18.8	31.0
Have you been a victim of crime in the Past year?	9.4	22.4**	7.2	22**

Table 2. Continued

Do you feel crime has decreased in the last year?	45.1	43.7	45.8	42.9
Have you witnessed a crime but did not call the police?	3.5	26.4***	8.8	26.2**
Questionnaire Item	Mean Score^a	Mean Score^b	Mean Score^b	Mean Score^b
Satisfied with local police performance with regards to: (4 = hi)	3.02	2.62***	2.95	2.62**
alcohol sales/consumption	2.97	2.79 ^{ab}	3.02	2.79
drug sales or use	3.00	2.66***	2.97	2.66**
traffic enforcement	2.98	2.65***	2.88	2.65 ^{ab}
nuisance crimes	2.92	2.71***	2.95	2.71*
juvenile delinquency	2.94	2.59***	2.91	2.59**
solving crimes	3.11	2.75***	3.02	2.75*
crime prevention	3.03	2.93	3.15	2.93
detering by patrol				
How well do you think the local police are prepared to handle a major crisis (4=hi)	2.28	1.72***	2.30	1.72***

* Chi-square tests determined statistical differences between the two populations.
 ** These preliminary analyses are only for identifying possible trends in the data. For simplification of presentation, means are reported for ordinal scales; T-tests determined statistical differences. However, additional analyses applied the more appropriate Gamma test; significance levels remained the same except for "drug sales or use" in column 1 (significant only at the .10 level) and "nuisance crimes" in column 2 (significant only at the .10 level).
 *** p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

College students report significantly lower scores on six of eight items measuring satisfaction with police performance, relative to community youths. Students are more likely to report being a victim of crime and also to witnessing a crime without reporting it to the police. While the two groups are equally likely to experience contact with the police, students who do experience contact are more likely than their community counterparts to report that the police officer was not polite and courteous. Finally, the college group reports a much lower level of confidence in police ability to handle a major crisis. Twelve items demonstrate differences between community youths and college students, despite the fact that the two groups do not differ significantly on feelings of safety or on perceptions

of decreasing crime. This led us to further explore multivariate analyses to determine whether college status exerts a meaningful influence on attitudes toward police while controlling for other factors.

Table 3
OLS Regression Analysis, Influence of Being Young on Confidence in Police

	Model 1 n = 285 Adj. R ² =0.0537	Model 2 n = 254 Adj. R ² =0.1352
	b	
Young Population	-1.64*	-0.40*
Black	-3.49**	-3.11*
Male	-0.77	-0.07
Less Crime		3.47***
Contact		-0.03
Victim		-1.37
		-0.08

*p<0.05 **p<0.01 ***p<.001

Studies on perceptions of authority indicate that in addition to age, race and sex fairly consistently exert influence on attitudes toward police. To test for this possibility, we model a multivariate analysis based on all respondents in the full sample who are not missing on the dependent variable, *Confidence in Police*. Model 1 in Table 3 (n=285) presents results, regressing *Confidence in Police* on the age variable, Young Population (all respondents in the 18-29 age group), while controlling for Black (Black respondents versus all others) and Male (versus all others). The unstandardized coefficient for each variable is negatively related to *Confidence in Police*, though Male is not statistically significant. Standardized coefficients demonstrate that Black is only a slightly stronger predictor than youth. The model verifies that being young significantly decreases confidence in police, controlling for Black and Male. However, the R² indicates that these three variables account for less than 6% of the variance in the dependent variable. Model 2 in Table 3 demonstrates that

when other known predictors of attitudes toward police are added to the analysis, coefficients for both Young Population and Black remain significant, but Less Crime is the strongest predictor, suggesting that those who believe that crime is generally decreasing in the community also believe that the police are at least partly responsible for that success. Model 2 explains about 13.5% of the variance in the dependent variable.

Table 4
OLS Regression Analysis, Influence of Being in College on Confidence in Police

	Model 1 n = 286 Adj. R ² =0.09	Model 2* n = 254 Adj. R ² =0.17	Model 3 (only with contact) n = 119 Adj. R ² =0.36
	b		
College Population	-3.02***	-0.24	-3.16***
Young	-0.20	-0.02	0.19
Black	-2.36	-0.11	-2.09
Male	-0.73	-0.06	-0.58*
Less Crime		3.48***	0.30
Contact		-0.10	-0.01
Victim		-0.89	-0.05
Positive Experience			2.68***
			0.43

*p<0.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

*Note: This model was also analyzed for only those with contact, n=119. "College Population" coefficient was significant at p<.05; "Young" was statistically nonsignificant. R² = 0.1700.

We are interested in examining why age predicts attitudes toward police and are particularly interested in looking at differences among youths. Specifically, these data allow us to look at the college population as a subgroup of young people. Subculture theory predicts that adjustment mechanisms to a new or distinctive social context often include development of attitudes and behavior patterns that differ from those of the

dominant culture. This study specifically addresses the possibility that a college culture develops as a response to adjustment challenges those college students share. While we expect that one source of commonality that students share is simply being young, we also expect that college students share other common experiences and orientations that may influence attitudes toward police. Table 4 displays results of a regression analysis testing those assumptions.

Table 4, Model 1 directly tests for a college student status effect on *Confidence in Police*. Controlling for Young, Black, and Male, College Population exerts a negative and significant effect on the dependent variable, and the three control variables become nonsignificant. In this sample, being in college significantly decreases confidence in police, controlling for the demographic variables. Stated differently, the negative effect of youth and Black (and to a lesser extent, male) on confidence in police, as displayed in Table 3, is largely due to the effect of being in college. The R^2 is modest, with the four variables explaining about 9% of the variance in the dependent variable.

Model 2 ($n=254$) demonstrates that the negative relationship between college status and confidence in police remains significant when also controlling for several known predictors of attitudes toward police, including police contact, victimization, and perception of decreasing crime. The fit of the model increases significantly, now explaining 17% of the variance in confidence, and the strength of the college group coefficient is rivaled only by that of "Less Crime." Note that men report significantly lower confidence than women, and that the influence of college status remains strong, even controlling for age.

Model 3 (Table 4) tests whether the college status variable remains significant among those who had contact with the police ($n=119$). The parameter estimate for college population becomes statistically nonsignificant for this subgroup when controlling for other relevant variables plus Positive Experience, which is, as expected, positive and strongly correlated with confidence in police. That is, for those having contact with the police, the quality of contact determines the level of confidence in police. The R^2 increased significantly, with this model explaining more than 36% of the variance in the dependent variable. These data indicate that college status does exert influence on students' overall perceptions of the police, but perceptions of those with police contact are, in general, mediated by quality of contact. However, note that the coefficient for Black remains negative and significant, indicating that even positive contact does not ameliorate the negative effect of being Black on confidence in police.

Finally, because recent studies find that confidence in police is intertwined with feelings of safety in the community (see Benedict, Brown, and Bower, 2000; authors, 2003), we regressed a dichotomous dependent variable, *Feeling Unsafe*, on College Population and the control variables. Results of logistic regression, exhibited in Table 5 ($n=258$), demonstrate that college students are two times more likely to report feeling unsafe, as compared to the general citizens population (see odds ratio estimate). Other variables included in the model include Black, Male, Less Crime, Contact, and Victim. Other than College Population, only Male and Less Crime remain significant; the negative direction indicates that men and those who believe that crime is decreasing are less likely to report feeling unsafe. The coefficient for Black, though not significant, is also negative.

Table 5
Logistic Regression Analysis for Feeling Unsafe

	Coefficient Estimate ($n=258$)	Odds Ratio
College Population	0.69*	2.00
Black	-0.29	0.75
Male	-0.61*	0.54
Less Crime	-0.72*	0.49
Contact	0.25	1.29
Victim	0.26	1.30

* $p<.05$ ** $p<.01$ *** $p<.001$

This finding supports recent research that connects confidence in police to feelings of safety and further specifies dynamics for a particular subgroup. College students in this sample, who are less likely than general citizens to trust police, are also much more likely to feel unsafe. This relationship is not supported by age alone, but is directly connected to college status. Gender exerts an independent effect, with women more likely than men to report feeling unsafe. When specific groups demonstrate decreased confidence in police, accompanied by increased feelings of fear, a downward spiral may transpire in which group members become even less integrated, and community cohesiveness diminishes.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The past year brought heightened awareness to issues of trust and security. This study demonstrates that even within relatively small, homogeneous communities, group identity may inspire or discourage confidence in local police and, in turn, affect feelings of safety. Specifically, being in college, not age, diminishes students' trust in law enforcement in this community and elicits more negative attitudes toward police performance. Students' decreased confidence in police, as compared to general citizens, holds for both those with and without police contact, but positive evaluation of officer contact significantly mediates overall perceptions of police. Critical to note, though, is the independent effect of being Black, which remains negatively related to confidence in police even with positive contact. Previous studies of attitudes toward police focused on various subgroups by age, race, gender, and class. The current study extends this body of research, directly testing for and supporting a subgroup effect for college student status. College students in this sample are significantly more negative in their evaluation of police than either the general population or other young adults in the sample. We can think of several reasons why this might be true. Within the research site, college students (who represent one-third of the county and almost one-half of the host town's population) are highly visible and are concentrated in a district surrounding the university campus. In addition to traditional dormitories, many fraternity and sorority houses are located close to campus, and many more students live in apartments near the university, conditions common to university communities. This town also has a small shopping and bar district adjacent to the campus, known to be highly frequented by college students, especially for nightlife. This area is routinely patrolled by police. Alcohol-related and disturbance events are regularly reported in the college newspaper, and it is easy to imagine that anti-police sentiments may develop as college students and officers encounter one another in this district.

In addition, community context remains a significant consideration when considering interaction dynamics. A large proportion of students in this case study come from very small towns and rural areas, and anecdotal evidence suggests that they may be accustomed to local law enforcement who handle complaints and minor offenses on an informal basis. Being pulled over by a local sheriff who is a friend and neighbor may elicit different responses and outcomes than in this college town, where violations are more likely to be handled "by the book."

Finally, though we cannot be sure, permanent residents may more often report disturbances by the college crowd, and it is possible that police more often patrol and target areas known to be frequented by college students. Indeed, the effect we detect in this study may result from perceptions (and/or the reality) that college students are more often the object of social control by police. We further argue that this possibility does not negate, but may actually enhance, a distinct college culture effect. This connection underscores the idea that group identities – as young, as Black, as male, as student – are interrelated in complex ways, some of which are seen as more (or less) oppositional to agents of social control. Interactions with police are likely to organize around these multiple identities.

These observations underscore the point that this study is exploratory and that results cannot be generalized to other populations. Data in this study are especially limited in that they may reflect a fairly unique context, and we are hampered by the lack of potentially important variables such as education and income levels. However, the findings do emphasize the importance of considering various adjustment mechanisms that groups and communities may experience. Context – including local educational and economic institutions, but also spatial organization, historical significance, and migration patterns – is pivotal to thinking about research designs, interpretation of results, and policy implications. These data further suggest that local interaction is critical in determining attitudes toward police, including officer-citizen and newcomer-resident dynamics, and that these dynamics are different for whites and Blacks, and for men and women.

Questions about gender differences continue to plague studies of social control and crime. Only recently has criminological research begun to consider gender as a social construct that heavily influences both crime and responses to crime. In this study, women report higher confidence in police than men, but lower feelings of safety, a pattern opposite that for men. It is possible that other, unidentified variables account for women's fear, and that the predictors may be different for college women than for others. For example, women who walk on campus at night or who are told they need extra protection in the bar district may have different perceptions and experiences than other women in the community. These questions, together with the finding of a gender interaction, warrant further research.

These results clearly demonstrate that age alone does not account for young people's attitudes toward the police, and that future studies should take into account subgroup and cultural explanations for group differences. These findings bear significant import for policy. For police agencies, public education campaigns and proactive community programs must specifically address problem areas, and this study demonstrates that the college student population is an important target. Training that specifically

addresses interaction and perception differences between officers and students will be most effective. At the same time, university programs that promote positive interaction between students and law enforcement will help integrate the college crowd into the larger community. Both venues would be well served to plan diversity training, especially with regard to race, gender, and sexual orientation.

In this community, the law enforcement organization adopts a community-oriented policing philosophy. They conduct a citizens' academy where interested residents can learn information and hands-on techniques that police use in their daily jobs. Police regularly interact with civic groups, and they sponsor several youth-oriented programs, including placing officers in the high schools. However, other than a few isolated guest lectures in criminology classes, officers' primary interaction with college students comes under adversarial conditions. At the same time, the university community engages in no proactive plan for educating and sensitizing its students to local law enforcement. As Osterman (2000) contends, "community is not present until members experience feelings of belonging, trust in others, and safety" (323). The two groups, university and law enforcement, would benefit from co-sponsored programs, each optimizing value-added resources by promoting citizen participation, developing more accurate perceptions of each other, and improving relations between the two groups. In turn, more positive perceptions of police will enhance feelings of safety in the community, enabling young leaders to better prepare for the future and to work toward creating a true community.

NOTES

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² One could argue that separate regressions should be conducted for each subsample. Because the data consist of two randomized samples, general

citizens and college students, we conducted separate regression analyses for each group and then calculated separate predicted scores on the dependent variable, *Confidence in Police*, while controlling for Black, age group, male, rent, victim, contact, and "less crime." The prediction equation utilized group means, weighted by the coefficient derived from the multivariate regression analysis. The predicted average means from the separate equations are 11.403 for the general citizens group and 9.931 for the college student group, a statistically significant difference, $p < .001$. Using a dummy coding for the 18-29 age group, we also ran a separate analysis, determining a predicted score of 11.770 for the youngest age group among the general citizens sample. Finally, we conducted a regression analysis for the full sample, adding "College Population" as an independent variable, and again calculated prediction equations from this single regression analysis. The predicted scores from this method yielded 11.461 for the general citizens group, 9.822 for the college student group, and 11.941 for the youngest age group of the general citizens sample. Each score is not significantly different from the respective scores derived from separate regression models. For this reason, and to more directly test for the effect of College Population in this sample, we present results from multiple regression models based on the full sample.

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Appendix A

Description and Distribution of Variables for Regression Model

Variable	Description	F	Dist.
Confidence in Police Index	Enforcing laws related to alcohol sales/use Enforcing laws related to drug sales/use Enforcing laws related to traffic nuisance crimes Enforcing laws related to juvenile delinquency Solving Crimes Working with the community in crime prevention Detering crime by visible presence (patrol) How PD is prepared to handle major crisis	286	Range: 9-44 Mean = 31.7 sd = 5.7 Alpha = .81
Feeling Unsafe (yes/no)	In general, do you feel safe in your community? Specific area where you do not feel safe?	301	Mean = .26
Young Population	All respondents in 18-29 age group All others	1 = 155 0 = 146	51.5% 48.5%
College Population	All respondents in college sample All respondents in citizen sample	1 = 89 0 = 212	29.6% 70.4%
Victim this Year	Have you been a victim of a crime in this community within the last year?	Yes = 38 No = 250	12.6% 83.1%

Appendix A. Continued

Less Crime this Year	Do you feel that crime has decreased in your community during the last year?	Yes = 117	38.9%
Contact with Police	During the past year, have you had personal contact with an RCPD officer?	No = 250	48.2%
Positive Experience with Police	Officer was willing to help Officer was polite and courteous Officer solved problem	Yes = 139 No = 149	46.2% 49.5%
		138	range: 0-3 Mean = 1.4 sd = 1.0

(p. 152 is blank)