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CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF THE POLICE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ATTITUDES AND ATTITUDE CHANGE*

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Prior to the Watts incident in August 1965, the Los Angeles City Police Department was concerned with its public relations. Through the efforts of both the Police Department and the Los Angeles Public Schools, a public relations program was established in first, second and third grades of the public elementary schools.

At the request of the Police Department, the effectiveness of its "Policeman Bill Program" was examined. Third grade public school pupils representing three divergent ethnic and social class categories were asked to draw pictures of the policeman at work. Two days after the presentation of the "Policeman Bill Program", one group of children (residing in Watts) was asked to draw another picture of the policeman performing his tasks. Based upon two independent measures, (i.e., independent raters and picture content), pupils from different ethnic and social class categories displayed significantly different attitudes toward the police. Children from Watts displayed significantly less antipathy toward the police after their contact with the program.

Although no consideration is given to the length of time over which positive attitudes are maintained, this research concludes that the Los Angeles Police Department and public schools should continue a program of attitude change.

Policemen and their tactics are a frequent focus of public criticism. Because the criticisms are frequently general, inclusive and widely divergent, a policeman of superhuman qualities is needed to disrupt or change the prevailing community image. August Vollmer, former Chief of Police of Berkeley, California, once said:

> The citizen expects police officers to have the wisdom of Solomon, the courage of David, the strength of Samson, the patience of Job, the leadership of Moses, the kindness of the Good Samaritan, the strategical training of Alexander, the faith of Daniel, the diplomacy of Lincoln, the tolerance of the Carpenter of Nazareth, and finally, an intimate knowledge of every branch of the natural, biological and social sciences. If he had all these, he might be a good policemen.[1]

There is no such person within or outside of police departments. On the other hand, an accurate and adequate understanding between the police and the community as to the responsibility of each for prevention, control and rehabilitation of deviancy may produce an atmosphere within which the "human" policeman can function more effectively and efficiently.

INTRODUCTION

Prior to the Watts incident in August 1965, the Los Angeles City Police Department, out of concern for its public relations, developed the "Policeman Bill" program. Through the efforts of both the Police Department and the Los Angeles Public Schools, this public relations program (a step toward crime prevention) was

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[1] Bain, *The Policeman on the Beat*, 48 SCIENTIFIC MONTHLY 450–458 (1939).

established in the elementary schools. An officer was detailed to develop a half-hour presentation for first, second and third grade youngsters, describing the function of the police.

During the past several years, a more elaborate discussion has been developed describing, for children, in their language, some of the duties of the policeman, and the responsibility of citizens for assuming control over their own behavior. With the assistance of colorful, visual aids, this presentation includes the developmental history and symbolic significance of the policeman's badge. Through diagraming streets on the chalk board, officers give street-crossing safety hints. Also, emphasis is placed on each child's responsibility for protecting himself against the hazards of loiterers around school buildings. In a relatively non-threatening manner the use of handcuffs and the need for the policeman's tools is demonstrated.

Currently, three policemen are assigned to this detail. Each represents one of Los Angeles' three major ethnic categories (i.e. Negro, Spanish-speaking American of Mexican descent, and Caucasian). When the officers make their presentation, they are in uniform. There is much student participation and genuine interest in the policeman's role. After approximately 20 minutes of discussion, the youngsters are taken to the recess yard by their teacher. There they visit the police car. Each youngster has an opportunity to sit in the car. One who is designated as assistant policeman, blows the siren and lights the trouble light, while all listen to police calls on the radio. At the end of this, a "Policeman Bill" brochure is given to each youngster. This handout describes and reinforces in elementary English or Spanish some previously presented aspects of the policeman's role.

Research Assumptions:

This research assumes that the public image of the police is dynamic. An individual's perception of the police is influenced by numerous socio-cultural forces, not the least of which are age and sex roles, social class, ethnicity, race, newspapers, television, and primary and secondary interactional experiences. Attitude formation is determined by these socio-cultural forces. Attitudes toward the police are formed early.

Another assumption is that children from contrasting social classes view the police differently. Also, it is assumed that personal, warm contact between a policeman and the youngsters will provide an experience conducive to redirecting negative attitudes in a favorable direction. The length of time over which the change is effective, without future reinforcement, is not the subject of this investigation, but it can be assumed that the favorable classroom experience will last only until the child has a more negative one. Therefore, whatever potential the "Policeman Bill" program has for reducing the child's animosity toward policemen must be reinforced by both favorable police-community contacts within the child's personal experiences and subsequent reinforcements of the program in future years.

Purpose of This Research

This study is designed to determine the effectiveness of classroom presentations on the attitudes of elementary school youngsters toward the police. Initial hypotheses are: 1) The image of the policeman carried in the minds of elementary school youngsters (as related by their drawings) from low socio-economic areas will describe a policeman with greater antipathy than will youngsters from a significantly higher socio-economic area. 2) Lower-class children who participate in the "Policeman Bill" program will change their perception of the police. Policemen will be viewed with less antipathy than they were perceived prior to the program. This project is not designed to determine long range effects of the "Policeman Bill" program on attitudes and attitude change. If the initial hypotheses are valid, then a follow-up cohort investigation is necessary. The present methodology provides a mechanism for following these children through grade six. A longitudinal study is possible.

Methodology and Population

Data Gathering Procedure:

A Los Angeles elementary school, in a predominantly lower-class Negro area of Watts, was chosen for the before and after investigation. Approximately two weeks before the school visit, by the "Policeman Bill" program, a third grade teacher was requested to aid in this experiment. The teacher was instructed to engage her class in an art exercise utilizing as little teacher intervention as possible. She addressed the class in terms of today's art lesson being of particular interest to her. She wanted each child to draw

pictures describing the policeman at work. The children were given crayons and 12 x 16 manila paper. Directions by the teacher were: "The assignment for today's art lesson is for each pupil to draw a picture of the policeman at work." If any questions were raised by the students as to how or what to draw, the teacher re-emphasized that she desired a picture of a policeman at work; doing his job; performing his tasks. The teacher did not describe any of the policeman's tasks. Stress was placed on the fact that the teacher permit each pupil to draw his image of the policeman's work. The students were told, if they wished, to write on the back any comments they felt necessary to explain the drawings. Privately and individually, each child, without discussion with others, drew his own picture. On the reverse of the paper, each student placed his name, class number, and the date of the drawing. The teacher collected these, and turned them over to the investigator. Written remarks by students were permitted but not requested.

On the Thursday after the Monday presentation of the "Policeman Bill" program the teacher gave these third grade children the same instruction as the gave for the first art lesson. Again the youngsters used 12 x 16 manila paper and crayons. The second drawing also presents a picture of the youngster's perception of the policeman at work.

Population Characteristics:

In two schools serving pupils from extremely different socio-economic levels the first procedure was followed. These were El Soreno and Westchester. (Table I compares these three areas on a number of socio-economic variables.) Afterstudies were not completed in these two schools, because neither had been scheduled for the "Policeman Bill" program.

Since the Los Angeles elementary schools draw pupils from immediately surrounding environs, the characteristics of the census tracts surrounding the schools are indicative of the youngsters' families in each sample. On the basis of each school's information concerning the sample populations, it is reasonable to assume that these students in this study are representative of the census tracts sending students to the school.

Since the summer of 1965, much has been written describing the human problems of the people of Watts. Watts (see Table I) is described as the most disadvantaged area when compared with Los Angeles County, or El Soreno and Westchester, the other two districts in which the sample populations reside. Population density in Watts is the highest.[2] Although its percentage of increase in population between 1950 and 1960 has been the lowest (14.8%) of the three areas this represents not newly-developed, unused land, but continual overcrowding of existing structures. Residing within this community is a high proportion of inadequately housed, highly mobile, financially needy and socially unstable families.

TABLE I

COMPARISONS FOR THE IMMEDIATE AREA OF THE THREE SCHOOLS FROM WHICH PARTICIPATING SAMPLE POPULATIONS WERE DRAWN

	Los Angeles Co.	Watts	El Soreno	Westchester
Family Income				
(% $4,000 or less)	19.1	44.5	19.4	6.9
Employment:				
(% Unemployed Males)	4.5	9.4	3.7	2.7
Education:				
(% 8 years or less)	13.2	32.5	19.4	4.3
(% 1 year college or more)	24.7	9.7	14.2	37.4
Family Status:				
Families as a % of all households	77.2	85.6	83.4	88.7
% Separated and Divorced	7.1	17.0	7.2	4.1
Housing Status:				
Deteriorated and Deplorable	7.8	22.6	17.8	0.2
Production Ratio:				
Youth and Aged per 100 Adults in Productive Ages	80.8	121.7	86.6	76.7
1962 Youth Status:				
Neglect/1000	1.7	2.7	0.5	0.5
Pre-Delinquent/1000	4.5	7.6	9.8	0.9
Delinquent/1000	11.2	29.3	10.8	5.3

Populations consist of third grade youngsters: 30 Negro children from an area of low social and economic stability; 30 Mexican American children living in an area of average or somewhat below average in socio-economic stability and 30 Caucasian children residing in an area of high socio-economic stability.

Data Analysis Procedures:

Each picture was simultaneously evaluated by four independent raters. Three fourth-year

[2] Freudenberg & Street, *Social Profiles: Los Angeles County* (1965).

resident psychiatrists in a social psychiatric training program and the author completed the ratings. Raters compared each picture on a series of seven, seven-point scales indicating the degree that each picture expressed 1) aggressiveness, 2) authoritarianism, 3) hostility, 4) kindness, 5) goodness, 6) strength, and 7) anger. The composite mean score of the four raters provides mean scores along each of these dimensions. Raters were not completely informed of the purpose of the research, neither did they know which picture was drawn first, nor the names or schools of the individuals who drew the pictures.

Pictures were compared on the basis of the mean scores. Comparisons between groups of students were also judged. Differences between schools and changes within the Watts school were calculated. Student change or non-change can be compared along parameters, (e.g. I.Q. scores, reading and arithmetic levels, education of parents, ethnic background) available from school records. The purposes of this research are: 1) to see if there are significant differences in attitude toward the police, based upon social class and ethnic differences of age peer pupils; and 2) to determine what change, if any, in attitude takes place after the "Policeman Bill" exercise.

The four raters were compared on two of the four sets of pictures. Table II indicates that only one set of raters failed to obtain inter-rater reliability on one set of pictures. Drawings upon which inter-rater reliability was tested were those with the lowest antipathy scores and those with the second greatest antipathy scores.

TABLE II

INTER-RATER RELIABILITY SCORES FOR MEASURING ANTIPATHY OF THIRD GRADE CHILDREN TOWARD THE POLICE

Raters	Drawings:	First Set		Drawings:	Second Set	
	r**	N	P	r**	N	P
I II	.6648	29	.001*	.611	25	.001*
I III	.7644	30	.001*	.638	25	.001*
I IV	.3206	30	.075	.602	25	.001*
IV III	.3803	30	.03*	.904	25	.001*

* Significance is at the 5% level of confidence or better.

** Correlation Coefficient.

TABLE III

MEAN ANTIPATHY SCORES ACROSS 7 SCALES

	Watts	Westchester	El Soreno
Mean	4.33	4.03	4.47
S.D.	.695	.794	.793
Range	5.58–2.28	5.50–2.83	5.53–2.95
N	30	32	30

TABLE IV

DIFFERENCES IN ANTIPATHY SCORES*

	Watts-Westchester	Watts-El Sorena	El Soreno-Westchester
Z Score Differences Between Means	1.68	.704	2.2
P. Value	>.05 Insignificant	>.05 Insignificant	<.02* Significant

* Significance is at the .05 level of confidence.

General antipathy scores (described in Tables III and IV) determined by these four independent raters evaluated (subjectively) the children's feelings as described by their drawings of police tasks as well as the affective implications of color, movement, and line variation.

An item analysis of police task performance drawn in each picture was also completed by another independent rater. This was calculated solely on the basis of the picture's content. No statistically significant differences resulted from comparison between ratings by the four independent raters (taking into account the total field of the picture) and the fifth independent rater who evaluated only content of police role performance.

FINDINGS

The results are presented: 1) Social class differences for experimental populations as represented by their drawings; and 2) before and after differences of the drawings by the Watts population.

Social Class Comparisons:

The three schools represent divergent socio-economic patterns and ethnic variations (see Table I). Differences exist between the manner in which the third grade sample populations evaluate the policeman through their drawings. Antipathy scores were calculated for each sample by combining the scores across the seven scales (see Methodology). The greatest amount of antipathy is scored by seven (7) while its absence is designated by one (1). High antipathy scores suggest that policemen are aggressive, cruel, bad, weak, authoritarian, hostile, and angry. Low antipathy scores view the police as passive, kind, good, strong, non-authoritarian, hospitable and friendly.

Third graders in the El Soreno school demonstrate, through their drawings, a greater negativity toward the police than do either the Watts children or the Westchester youngsters. Although the Watts pupils are not significantly more negative toward the police than the Westchester children, they tend to place the police in a negative position. No statistically significant difference exists between the manner in which El Soreno and Watts children see the police. Statistically, El Soreno and Watts youngsters have comparably high degrees of antipathy. Westchester third graders, on the other hand, show significantly less antipathy toward the police than does the El Soreno sample (see Tables III and IV).

From the picture content data four categories emerged: 1) aggressive police behavior: fighting, chasing, shooting; 2) assistance with negative overtones: unloading a paddy wagon, searching a building, in car with prisoners, giving traffic tickets; 3) neutral behavior: walking, riding in a car, directing traffic; 4) assistance with a positive connotation: talking with children and giving directions. Table V demonstrates the differences for these categories.

TABLE V

PICTURES OF POLICE PERFORMANCE OF TASKS AS DRAWN BY THIRD GRADE CHILDREN

	Watts	Westchester	El Soreno	Total (N)
Aggressive	10	4	6	20
Assistance Negative	6	4	9	19
Neutral	11	18	15	44
Assistance Positive	3	6	0	9
Total	30	32	30	92

$\chi^2 = 12.60$. d.f. = 6. $P < .05$.

TABLE VI

POLICE TASK CHANGES FOR 26 THIRD GRADE CHILDREN AT A WATTS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

	Negative	Positive	Total
Before:	15	11	26*
After:	5	21	26
Total	20	32	52

$\chi^2 = 8.33$. d.f. = 1. $P < .002$.

* Although 30 children participated the first time, 28 drew pictures the second time. Of these, only 26 drew both before and after pictures.

Watts children indicate significantly more concern with aggressive behavior than the Westchester or El Soreno youngsters. When aggressive and negative behaviors are combined, both Negro and Mexican American children differ significantly from upper middle-class white Anglo youngsters. On the other hand, Westchester children significantly differ from the other two samples with their drawings displaying a high interest in positive assistance and neutral behavior. These findings (both by independent raters and picture content analysis) suggest that lower-class Negro and lower middle-class Mexican American third grade children see the policeman's tasks as aggressive, negative and hostile while upper middle class white children are significantly more preoccupied with the tasks being neutral, non-aggressive, and assisting.

Comparison after Policeman Bill Program:

Table VI shows the direction of police tasks after the "Policeman Bill" presentation. The McNemar test indicates a statistically significant change in the direction of less antipathy toward the police. Twenty-six of the original 30 Watts youngsters took part in both phases of the experiment. While 15 of the first pictures depicted the police in a negative manner only 11 pupils showed the police in a positive role. However, these attitudes as displayed by the drawings were substantially reversed after the "Policeman Bill"

TABLE VII

AFTER THE POLICEMAN BILL PROGRAM A COMPARISON OF THE PERFORMANCE FOR WATTS AND WESTCHESTER CHILDREN

	Watts	Westchester	Total
Aggressive	5	4	9
Assistance Negative	1	4	5
Neutral	8	18	26
Assistance Positive	14	6	20
Total	28	32	60

$\chi^2 = 8.379$. d f. = 3. $P < .05$.

program. In fact, the Watts children after discussion with the police, displayed statistically less antipathy toward the police than the Westchester children (see Table VII). The major change for these children was drawing pictures to indicate assistance positive when previously they drew pictures demonstrating aggressive, assistance negative and neutral behavior.

DISCUSSION

Data based upon drawings of third grade children support the hypothesis that for these children social class and ethnic forces influence their perceptions of the police. Also valid is the hypothesis that personal contact with policemen under informal, non-threatening conditions, significantly reduces children's antipathy. The duration of reduction in police negativity is not determined by the present study. Hopefully, this program has lasting effects. However, experience of others who have researched attitudes and attitude change suggests that changes of this nature last only until future negative experiences. It would be of interest to examine the Watts children at the beginning of the fourth grade to establish if their antipathy scores have increased, remained the same, or decreased.

Highest antipathy was illustrated by Mexican American youngsters. This finding is interesting in light of the more recent Watts revolt. Although the Mexican American Community verbalized resentment toward the Negro Community for its "violent" action, harbored within these Mexican American youngsters are feelings of negativity toward police equal to those felt by Negro children. If the degree of police antipathy held by the children is a reflection or indication of their parents' attitudes, then the lower-class Mexican American Community, no doubt, does not differ significantly from the lower-class Negro Community, in its feelings toward authority as represented by the police. On the basis of past research there is every reason to believe that these youngsters accurately reflect the attitudes of their parents and other significant persons in their environment. The major difference is in the manner in which representatives of these two communities handle their antipathy and hostility.

The Mexican American Community's lack of overt action toward authority when compared with the Negro Community may be due to the built-in cultural norm of respect for authority. This respect prohibits taking action against authority, but does not necessarily prevent antipathy toward authority. Another explanation may lie in the more frequent reliance upon gang life for Mexican American youth than for Negro youth. Gang rivalry and warfare may supply the needed reduction in hostility, which prevents action against the police.[3]

Although interpretation is difficult, Mexican American youngsters are significantly more preoccupied with fires than are Negro or white children. While seven El Soreno youngsters drew pictures of fires in which policemen were involved, only one Watts and one Westchester child described a fire in their pictures.[4]

Children of lower-class, culturally excluded minorities, living in the inner city (Watts, El Soreno) exhibit significantly more antipathy toward the police than youngsters living in an upper middle-class area (Westchester). This can be explained by the quality and quantity of police contact experienced by lower-class children in neighborhoods exhibiting high degrees of police community social distance.

[3] To list some of them: Bogardus, *Mexican-American Youth and Gangs*, 28 SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL RESEARCH 55–66 (1953); Glane, *Juvenile Gangs in East Los Angeles* FOCUS 136–141 (1950); Lemert & Rosberg, *Crime and Punishment Among Minority Groups In Los Angeles County*, PROCEEDINGS OF THE PACIFIC COAST SOCIOLOGICAL SOCIETY 135–144 (1946); Miller, *Lower Class Culture as a Generating Milieu of Gang Delinquency*, 14 J. SOCIAL ISSUES 5–19 (1958).

[4] Dunlap and Associates indicated a similar finding in a study of pre-school children. Perceptions of riot awareness (immediately after the Watts incident) showed Mexican American children significantly more concerned with fires than Negro or Anglos. Dunlap, Beigel & Armen, *Young White Pre-School Children to the Los Angeles Race Riots*, presented to California State Psychological Association, San Francisco, California, (Jan. 28, 1966) (Mimeograph.)

Particularly, for the inner city urban community, policemen are important representatives of the social control system. Power and authority are maintained through the symbols of the uniform and badge. When these significant symbols of authority fail, the spontoon, side-arm and handcuffs assume the functional elements of legal authority. This type of social control provides the middle-class community with feelings of security. Their neighborhoods are protected. Lower-class persons, more frequently see these coercive powers of the police as a threat. Recent criminologic studies support the assumption that the coercive powers of the police are the most effective with persons who have internalized controls over their behavior. In other words, this type of control is most effective with those who need it the least.

Advantages of intact homes and adequate supervision seldom permit middle-class youth to see a policeman, except possibly directing traffic. "We should obey the laws" and "The policeman is our friend", are statements supported by the middle-class system, but direct contact with law enforcement is seldom encountered. Middle-class culture permits little firsthand knowledge of behavior patterns associated with the coercive role of the police.

On the other hand, due to such factors as family disorganization, child neglect, deteriorated housing and others, many inner city youngsters may observe the police more frequently than their own fathers or other significant persons. Many informal social controls taught by and expected of the middle-class are not experienced by these children. Young persons and families living in lower-class communities see policemen breaking up family fights, taking drunks and derelicts off the street, raiding a prostitute's flat or a gambling house, picking up some of the local boys for interrogation, entering the house due to a reported disturbance, dispersing a game of pitching coins or shooting dice on the street, checking locked doors of merchant neighbors, evicting slum residents, protecting the property of "slum lords", asking questions pertaining to rat control, transporting patients to mental hospitals, beating others and being beaten, taking bribes and arresting bribers, and numerous other behaviors associated with most police systems.

Lower-class children form their impressions and develop attitudes toward the police under these conditions. These same attitudes are frequently transferred to and from the larger adult world and its system of social control. Within this environment these children gain their most purposive information about the law, rights, duties, privileges, loyalties and many other items necessary for adulthood. Many of these are developed from impressions received while observing policemen, one of the few representatives of the social control system with whom lower-class children have had direct contact. Within lower-class communities, the function of the police is integrated into child's behavioral expectations early, no doubt before he knows the role of teachers.

This research evidences the need for the police to introduce more persuasive methods of social control, particularly within lower-class communities.[5] If the children in this study can change their attitudes (even temporarily) after only one short contact with the "Policeman Bill" program, then a more intensive program not only with grammar school children, but with adolescents, and adults should change police-community relations in these lower-class areas of the city.

The most important function of policemen in inner city crime control is their role of persuasive control. A stable, steady, friendly person with whom to identify is necessary for lower class youngsters. They need help to understand that controlling their own behavior is most effective and appropriate when it is controlled because one wants to do what significant persons in his life wish him to do and not because he is afraid of force if he doesn't control his behavior. Police contact through programs such as the "Policeman Bill" establishes a beginning for persuasive control.

Effective persuasive control emanates from a particular type of policeman who has the personality, motivation, interest, time, training and the fortitude to work closely with slum families and other human beings. He should be specifically and adequately trained for this role and commensurately rewarded. A consistently emulative image must be presented so that children, adolescents, young and old adults alike will look to policemen for guidance in areas other than crime control alone.

There is also no reason to believe that these

[5] For some interesting comments on a program of community relations in New York City see: N.Y. Times, June 1, 1965, *Puerto Rican Community Hails Police Friend Plan.*

youngsters would necessarily respond to all authority (father, teacher, boss) in the same manner. In fact, in another study this investigator found teenage Mexican American children to view father, policeman, boss and teacher in a completely different manner. It cannot be concluded at this point that youngsters who show antipathy toward police authority necessarily maintain the same type of negativity toward their father and transfer it to the policeman.[6]

The greater antipathy scores of lower middle-class Mexican Americans may be viewed in terms of their particularistic motif. This investigator's impressions of Mexican American's attitudes along a universalistic-particularistic continuum are supported by Zurcher, et al.[7] Although no value orientation scale was included in this experiment, Mexican American antipathy may be explained in terms of a particularistic cultural norm. Significantly greater antipathy scores for these Mexican American children may not be antipathy but may be a negative reaction to an impersonal, universalistic institution and its representatives.

[6] Derbyshire, *Adolescent Identity Crisis in Urban Mexican Americans in East Los Angeles*, Brody (Ed.), MINORITY GROUP ADOLESCENTS IN THE UNITED STATES (1968).

[7] Zurcher, Meadow & Zurcher, *Value Orientation, Role Conflict and Alienation from Work*, 30 AMER. SOCIOL. REV. 539–548 (1956).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

At the request of the Los Angeles Police Department, and the Los Angeles Public School System, the effectiveness of the "Policeman Bill" program was examined. Third grade public school pupils representing three divergent ethnic and social class categories were asked to draw pictures of the policeman at work. Two days after the presentation of the "Policeman Bill" program, one group of children (residing in Watts) was asked to draw another picture of the policeman performing his tasks. Through two independent measures, i.e., independent raters and picture content, the Watts children displayed significantly less antipathy toward the police after the contact with the program. Pupils from the three different ethnic and social class categories displayed significantly different attitudes toward the police.

This research concludes that the Los Angeles Police Department and the Los Angeles Public Schools must not only continue the "Policeman Bill" program, but it should be intensified. Hopefully, this new challenge to the dynamic role of the police in inner city community relations will be adequately met in Los Angeles.