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## Public Perceptions Regarding the Use of Force by Police in Portland, Oregon

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# Public Perceptions Regarding the Use of Force by Police in Portland, Oregon

Research In Brief

Criminal Justice Policy Research Institute (CJPRI)

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## Key Findings

- *According to the Portland Police Bureau, incidents involving use of force by officers against citizens/suspects fell 59% between 2007 and 2011.*
- *Over 60% of Portland residents surveyed believed that use of force by local police increased over the past five years. Less than 1% believed use of force incidents decreased commensurate with police data.*
- *One-quarter of residents grossly overestimated the number of police involved shootings in 2011.*
- *These findings suggest that law enforcement agencies need to be more proactive in communicating use of force data to the public. Efforts to increase public confidence in these data are also warranted.*

## Introduction

The primary mission of the Portland Police Bureau (PPB) and other law enforcement agencies is to enhance public safety through crime prevention activities and legal action with known suspects. In order to be successful in these efforts the police must be able to develop and maintain a positive working relationship with members of the public. Lacking this cooperation, crimes go unreported, witnesses fail to testify, citizens refuse to comply with police directives, and people may not participate in crime prevention efforts promoted by police.

A key factor in developing and sustaining police-citizen partnerships is legitimacy: People are more willing to cooperate with the police when they believe that agencies and their personnel are trustworthy and fair when dealing with members of the public. Given this, law enforcement agencies need to be extremely sensitive to actions that negatively impact perceived legitimacy.

Perhaps more than any other behavior, the use of force by police officers has the potential to decrease public trust. While most citizens recognize the occasional need for force, the overall frequency of force used by police and force that is perceived to be excessive are clearly of concern to the public.

The current study sought to assess public perceptions regarding the frequency of force used by Portland police and determine whether these beliefs are consistent with officially recorded data on force used by officers in recent years.



## ABOUT THE SURVEY

Data for the current report were drawn from the larger 2012 *Portland Criminal Justice Survey* conducted by the Criminal Justice Policy Research Institute at Portland State University.

A multi-stage sampling procedure was used for the survey. We started with a list of 75 neighborhood/areas previously categorized by the City of Portland's Auditors Office. Forty neighborhoods were then randomly chosen from this list for inclusion in the present study. Statistical analyses verified that the sample of 40 neighborhoods accurately represents the overall demographics of the city and the geographic distribution of residents across neighborhood coalitions.

A random sample of 150 addresses was then pulled from each of the 40 neighborhoods, resulting in a final sample of 6,000 residential locations in Portland. Households were mailed a postcard alerting them to the forthcoming survey, then the survey instrument, a reminder postcard, and then a final reminder. Residents were asked to have the adult with the most recent birthday complete the survey.

There were 162 invalid addresses making the valid sample size 5,838. As of July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2012 we had received 2,461 completed surveys for an overall response rate of 42.2%. Females, Whites, and people with a college degree were overrepresented among those returning the survey.

The error attributed to sampling for the survey as a whole is  $\pm 2.47$  percentage points (95% confidence level).

For more information about the research methodology contact Dr. Brian Renauer, CJPRI Director (renauer@pdx.edu).

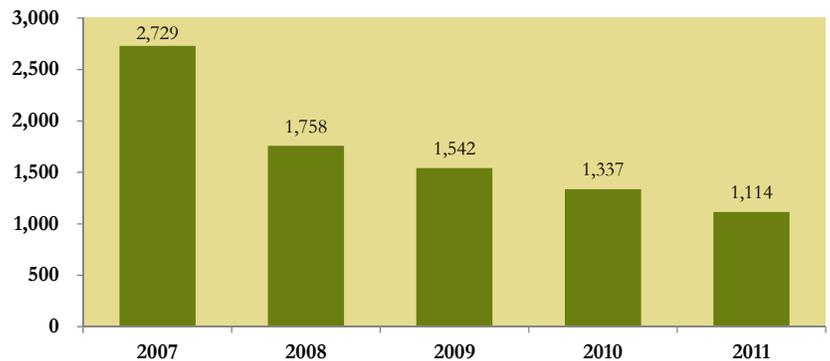
CJPRI would like to thank Kate Ginsberg, MS for assistance in designing the study and managing the data collection.

"The inclusion of "pointing a firearm" in this study results in different use of force totals as compared to recent reports issued by the Portland Police Bureau. Also, due to changes in how use of force was documented, which occurred in 2007, the number of "pointing firearms" incidents for that year was estimated and then added to the total of the other force incidents to obtain 2007's total force.

## What Happened to Use of Force by Police In Recent Years?

Portland police officers who use force against a suspect or citizen are required to document their actions using an official "force report". Data from these reports were provided to us by PPB's Professional Standards division. For the current report "force" included pointing firearms, takedowns and hobbles, striking a person (e.g., baton, hands, feet), the use of chemical sprays, and deploying a less than lethal weapon (e.g., Taser, bean bag).<sup>a</sup> Our analysis of these data finds that use of force incidents involving PPB officers has declined 59.2% over the past five years (see Figure 1).

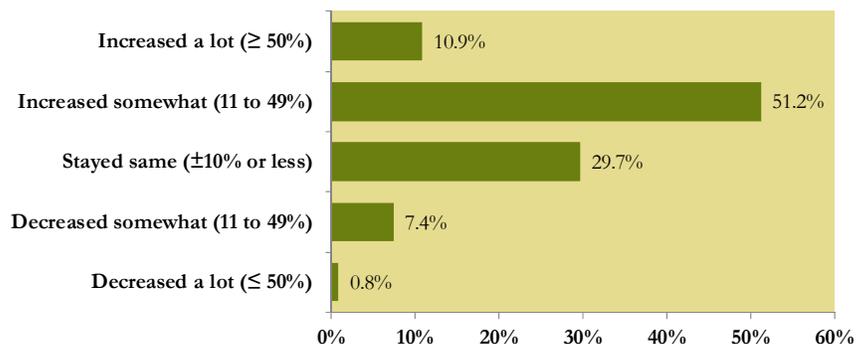
Figure 1. Incidents involving use of force by Portland police



## What Do Residents Think Happened to Use of Force?

We were interested in determining whether the general public knew about the reductions in force recorded by PPB. To examine this we contacted 2,461 Portlanders and asked them what happened to use of force incidents in Portland over the past five years. Force was defined as, "things like an officer struck someone, used pepper spray, or pointed/fired a weapon." The findings from the survey highlight a sizable gap between public perception and the law enforcement data reported above. The majority of residents (62.1%) believe officer-involved use of force has increased at least 11% over the past five years. Only 8.2% of Portlanders thought use of force incidents decreased by 11% or more (see Figure 2).

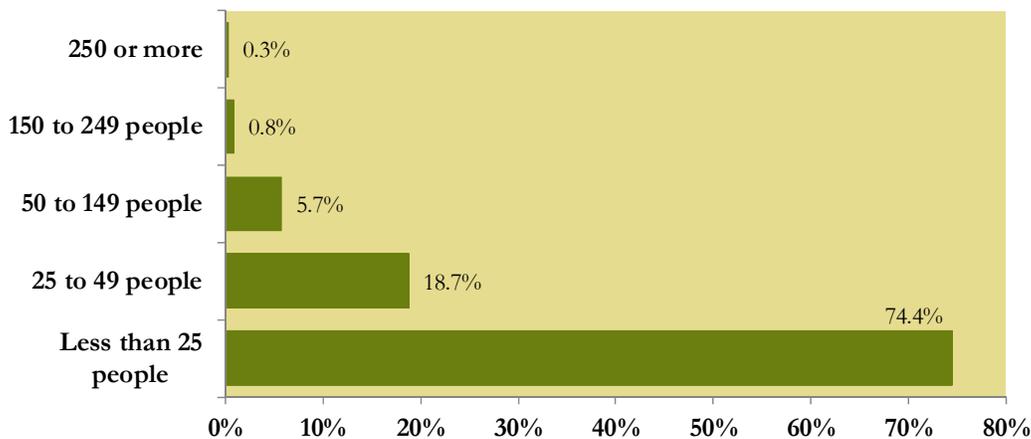
Figure 2. Public opinion on use of force incidents over past 5 years



## Do Portlanders Over or Underestimate Police-Involved Shootings?

Residents were also asked to estimate how many people PPB officers shot with a firearm in 2011. They were given five response options to choose from, ranging from “less than 25” to “250 or more.” The actual number of shootings reported by PPB for the given year was **four** incidents. As shown in Figure 3, three-quarters of the respondents were correct in believing that fewer than 25 shootings occurred. The remaining quarter of Portlanders reported that PPB shot 25 or more people in 2011.

Figure 3. Public opinion on number of people shot by police in 2011



## Conclusions

Portland police data indicates that officers are using force considerably less often than they did five years ago. Changes like this could enhance police legitimacy in the eyes of the public, a necessary ingredient for successful police-community partnerships addressing crime. In order to have an impact, however, the public has to: 1) be informed about the decline, and 2) trust that the data have been accurately collected and analyzed. The results of the present study raise serious questions about whether these conditions have been met.

More than 90% of residents in Portland grossly underestimated the decline in use of force as compared to officially reported data. Likewise, one quarter of Portlanders seriously overestimated how many officer-involved shootings there were in 2011. Further research will be needed to assess how much of this discrepancy results from a lack of knowledge regarding recent police statistics versus a lack of trust in the agency’s recording of these data. Likewise, additional research is needed to identify factors that might impact public opinion regarding the frequency of force used by police.

In the meantime, the findings presented in this *Research Brief* highlight a couple of recommendations for police administrators. Local residents may not have been adequately informed about recent declines in use of force by PPB officers. As such, PPB and other agencies with similar trends need to be more proactive in disseminating their findings using traditional media sources, websites, social media, and community organizations. Second, to address potential lapses in public confidence, law enforcement agencies including PPB should strive for greater transparency and oversight in the collection and analysis of their use of force data.

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Criminal Justice  
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