



Portland State  
UNIVERSITY

# PUBLIC CONTACT WITH AND PERCEPTIONS REGARDING POLICE IN PORTLAND, OREGON

2013

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On September 12, 2012 the United States Department of Justice (DOJ) filed a complaint in the Federal District Court for Oregon asserting that the City of Portland has engaged in a pattern and practice of unnecessary or excessive force against persons experiencing a mental health crisis. This survey is the result of a settlement agreement between Portland's City Council and the DOJ which specified the Portland Police Bureau (PPB) develop a means of assessing public perceptions.

The first report generated by the research team examined general attitudes of residents. This second report focuses on an area pertinent to the DOJ settlement – police contact experiences. The purpose of this second report is to: 1) examine whether persons who report voluntary (e.g. asking police for help) or involuntary (e.g. being stopped by the police) police contacts in the past year felt they were treated “fairly” or “unfairly”, and 2) examine whether perceptions of treatment relate to attitudes about the Bureau. Data for the report were obtained from a postal survey sent in July of 2013 to a random sample of Portland addresses, including an oversampling of Census tracts with higher percentages of African American, Hispanic/Latino, and younger residents.

### Key Findings

- Contact Experiences
  - Close to one-third (30.8%) of Portland residents surveyed reported they had contacted the Portland police for help in the prior year (i.e., voluntary contact).
  - The vast majority (88.7%) of those with voluntary contact perceived that they were treated fairly during their most recent encounter.
  - Roughly one in five residents (17.4%) had an involuntary contact with Portland police in the past year (e.g., traffic stop, citation, arrest).
  - Three quarters of persons reporting an involuntary contact (73.1%) also believed they were treated fairly during their most recent encounter.
  - Racial/ethnic minority respondents were more likely to perceive their treatment as unfair in both voluntary and involuntary contacts.
- Legitimacy & Trust
  - Those who perceived their treatment during a contact as “fair”, whether voluntary or involuntary, have greater or equal trust in the Portland Police compared to those who report no police contacts in the prior year.
  - Perceptions of “unfair” treatment were related to lower trust in police.
- Evaluation of PPB's Performance
  - Those who perceived their treatment during a contact as “fair” have similar evaluations of PPB's performance across a number of indicators compared to those who report no contacts.

- Perceptions of “unfair” treatment were related to lower evaluations of police performance.
- PPB’s Use of Force
  - Those who perceived their treatment during a contact as “fair” have similar evaluations of PPB’s Use of Force compared to those who report no contacts.
  - Perceptions of “unfair” treatment were related to greater agreement that officers use more force than necessary.

Overall, these findings suggest that Portland’s police officers have mostly been engaging with the public in ways that seem fair to those involved and reflects positively on the officers as a group and the organization as a whole. The findings are supportive of a growing interest in law enforcement to reinforce the importance of communication techniques that help to resolve contacts in a manner that increases perceptions that one was treated fairly. The results indicate that perceptions of being treated fairly increases trust and legitimacy, whereas perceptions of unfair treatment are related to negative perceptions of trust, police performance, and use of force. Understanding what differentiates perceptions of fair and unfair treatment, and seeking community input, is an important next step to developing strategic efforts to improve contact experiences in the future.