

Community Views of Policing in Milwaukee

Introduction

The ACLU of Wisconsin is the state affiliate of the national American Civil Liberties Union and is a non-profit, non-partisan, private organization. The ACLU of Wisconsin has 7,000 members and is dedicated to defending the civil liberties and civil rights of all Wisconsin residents. The organization is very active in Milwaukee and enjoys strong relationships with many communities by virtue of participation in events, coalitions, government, schools and other forums. Its free programs and speakers reach thousands of people each year.

The ACLU of Wisconsin is dedicated to ensuring that the police protect and serve the citizens of Wisconsin in a professional and unbiased manner, and that there is a fair and effective process for oversight of law enforcement and redress of grievances. To that end, over the past few months, the organization asked over 800 Milwaukee residents, mostly younger people between the ages of 14 and 24, about their views on the Milwaukee Police Department (MPD). While this is not a scientific survey, it does offer critically important insight into the feelings of younger residents, especially those living in communities of color throughout the city.

Background

The last few years have unveiled a bleak portrait of Milwaukee Police Department (MPD) interactions with people who live and work in Milwaukee. Officers have been disciplined for and even convicted of conducting unauthorized strip searches and carrying out illegal humiliating body cavity searches of Black men in public. There have been several controversial deaths in police custody; and recently, when a MPD officer approached an unarmed, sleeping man, the encounter ended with the officer shooting and killing 31-year-old Dontre Hamilton.

These high-profile incidents have occurred against a larger backdrop of invasive and aggressive policing strategies that have generated concerns about racialized policing and exacerbates a culture of mistrust between law enforcement and residents of color. For instance, in 2013, the MPD made 185,358 traffic stops and 57,970 “field interviews” (pedestrian stops) for a combined 243,328 stops, more than a third of the population, in a city of about 600,000 people (MPD office of Management and Planning). A large number of pedestrian stops do not result in an arrest, and this raises questions about their purpose and whether the stops were legally justified in the first place. Additionally, figures showing that Black drivers are seven times more likely to be stopped than their white counterparts even though searches resulting from those stops did not yield higher rates of seized weapons, drugs or stolen property, heighten concerns that the MPD’s aggressive policing tactics are disproportionately and unfairly targeting communities of color (Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, December 3, 2011).

“I was informed that the reason I had been stopped is because they thought they were going to find someone Black or Hispanic, and instead they found a white female, based off of what my car looked like. They then let me go without question. I had also been drinking, but apparently because I was white, this was not an issue.”

- Survey respondent

In an effort to ensure that the MPD be held accountable for its actions, the ACLU of Wisconsin is committed to collecting and disseminating information that provides an accurate account of how police officers are interacting with the ordinary people living in the City of Milwaukee.

Key Findings

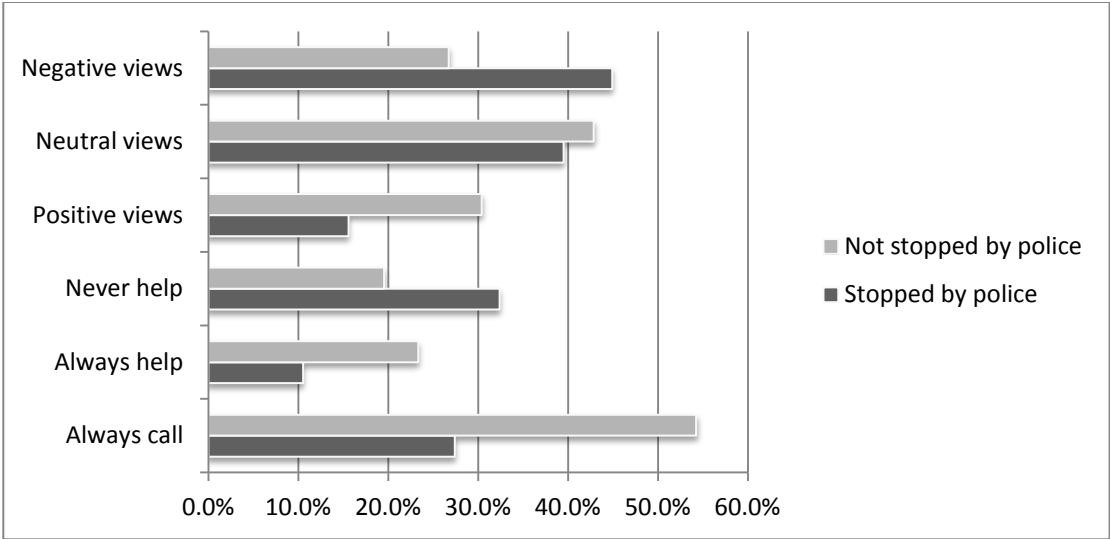
The survey data indicates that individuals who have had contact with the MPD are more likely to have negative attitudes about the police department than respondents who have not had contact with them. This is contrary to Chief Flynn's claims that people are content with being stopped because "80% of our traffic stops are left with warnings, 'Have a nice day.'" (BBC Altered States, Sept 18 2013). More importantly, people who have had negative experiences with law enforcement were far less likely to think calling the police was helpful or want to assist in an investigation. Even those who did not report a negative experience, but did have significant contact with police, reported that they were less likely to assist in a police investigation or report a crime.

"Officers policing this city should have respect for diversity and the people who live here. They should have an emotional investment in the health of those communities."

- Survey respondent

The survey results suggest that whether or not a person has been stopped by the MPD has a tremendous effect on the person's view of the police. Of the 489 respondents who reported being stopped by police, 44.9% indicated that they had negative views of the police, 39.5% were neutral, and just 15.6% reported positive views. Of the 279 respondents who had not been stopped by MPD, 26.7% expressed negative views of police, 42.9% were neutral, and 30.4% expressed positive views.

When asked whether they would voluntarily help with a police investigation, an alarming 32.4% of respondents that had been previously stopped claimed they would **never voluntarily help**, versus 19.5% of those who had not been stopped. (For those who had been stopped, 13.6% said they would almost never help, 28.8% said they would sometimes help, 14.7% would almost always help, and 10.5% would always help.) Those stopped by MPD were also far less likely to say that they would call police if they needed help. Only 27.4% of those stopped shared that they would **always** call police if they needed help, compared to 54.2%, or nearly double, for respondents who had not been stopped by police.



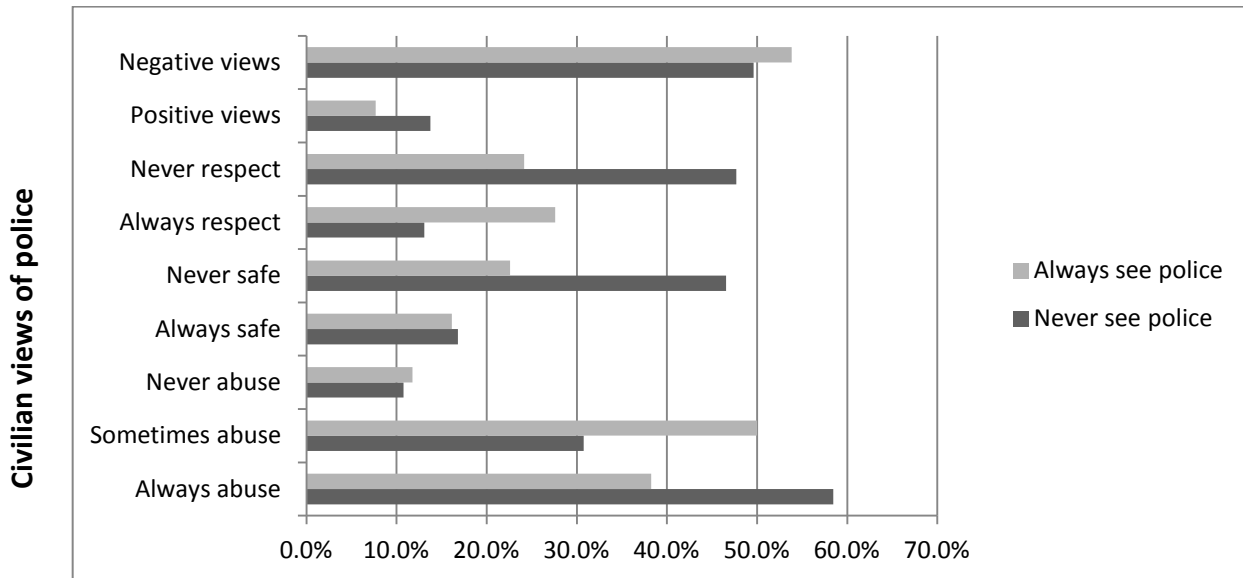
Percentage of Survey Respondents

To be clear though, these trends in negative attitudes about the police were not only apparent in respondents who had been stopped by police, but also for those who see MPD in their neighborhoods most often. Nearly 50% of respondents who stated that they always see police in their neighborhood reported negative views of the police. Some 47.7% of those who reported always seeing police in their neighborhood expressed the view that MPD does not treat people in their neighborhood with respect. And 46.6% of the same group of respondents claimed that having MPD officers in their neighborhood did not make them feel safer. Another disturbing statistic among those who always see police in their neighborhood is that 89.3% felt that MPD officers, at least sometimes, abuse their power. These statistics are significantly different for respondents who reported never, or almost never, seeing police in their neighborhood.

Answer Options	Always See Police	Almost Always See Police	Sometimes See Police	Almost Never See Police	Never See Police
Do Milwaukee Police Department (MPD) officers treat people in your neighborhood with respect?					
Always	6.2%	1.3%	7.2%	11.1%	13.8%
Almost Always	6.9%	10.1%	19.4%	16.2%	13.8%
Sometimes	39.2%	58.9%	54.0%	58.6%	48.3%
Almost Never	21.5%	19.0%	12.6%	9.1%	3.4%
Never	26.2%	10.8%	6.8%	5.1%	20.7%
Do MPD officers in your neighborhood make you feel safe?					
Always	7.6%	6.1%	10.2%	8.1%	12.9%
Almost Always	9.2%	14.7%	17.7%	17.1%	3.2%
Sometimes	36.6%	49.1%	44.9%	45.9%	61.3%
Almost Never	17.6%	15.3%	16.3%	16.2%	9.7%
Never	29.0%	14.7%	10.9%	12.6%	12.9%

Do MPD officers abuse their authority?					
Always	35.4%	15.9%	11.6%	7.4%	23.5%
Almost Always	23.1%	21.7%	20.6%	21.3%	14.7%
Sometimes	30.8%	52.2%	51.3%	55.6%	50.0%
Almost Never	6.2%	6.4%	7.9%	10.2%	2.9%
Never	4.6%	3.8%	8.7%	5.6%	8.8%

The above table reflects the responses of individuals who report that they always, almost always, sometimes, almost never, or never see police in their neighborhoods.



Percentage of Survey Respondents

Recommendations

We need to strive for what all people of Milwaukee deserve – a just, fair, and open society, where everyone’s rights are respected, and people of color feel protected by the police – not unfairly targeted and alienated. It is in everyone’s interest to improve police/community relations.

Milwaukee’s patrol-based policing strategy has directly led to high numbers of officer-initiated stops every year, particularly in predominantly Black and Latino neighborhoods. As the ACLU of Wisconsin’s survey suggests, these stops undermine confidence in the police among people in communities that feel unfairly targeted by such tactics. It is time to end the over-reliance on a huge volume of pretextual stops that appear to lead to the targeting of communities and people of color and, due in part to the sheer volume of stops, raise questions regarding whether police-civilian encounters are properly supported by individualized reasonable suspicion.

The City of Milwaukee and the Fire & Police Commission must order the Department to stop this counterproductive and unconstitutional policing strategy. This climate of mistrust and fear is neither conducive to, nor evidence of, effective and just policing policies or practices. The citizens of Milwaukee deserve better.

The MPD should actively enforce a policy requiring officers to have reasonable suspicion even before seeking consent to search an individual. Moreover, for the sake of transparency, the MPD must collect and regularly release racial and other demographic data on traffic and pedestrian stops, frisks, and searches throughout the city. Without taking this step it will never remedy the levels of distrust among residents of color or identify patterns and practices of systemic racial profiling and misconduct by officers.

The Mayor, Common Council, FPC and the Department need to re-evaluate the MPD's community-oriented policing programs in light of the huge number of civilian stops made every year in predominantly Black and Latino neighborhoods. A patrolling strategy that deeply stigmatizes Black and Latino residents by targeting them for stops that may not be supported by reasonable suspicion of illegal activity negates much of the good that may result from such programs. The City needs to expand the evaluation of community-oriented policing programs, such as those funded by Byrne Justice Assistance grants, to assess the impact of high-visibility patrolling. Milwaukee residents should not have to settle for second-class police service, or be treated as second-class citizens by the police.

Survey Methodology

Included in this report are the results from a written ACLU of Wisconsin survey of over 800 Milwaukee residents' views toward police, which demonstrate that Milwaukeeans are less likely to trust or seek help from police officers to protect them from safety or security concerns. This finding is especially true in the six zip codes (53212, 53206, 53208, 53213, 53218, and 53216) that correspond to neighborhoods heavily policed by the MPD. The racial demographics of survey respondents are 57.7% of respondents identifying as Black or African American; 32.3% identifying as White; 14.4% Latino/Latina or Hispanic; .9% Afro-Caribbean; .75% Middle Eastern; 3.5% Asian, South Asian or Pacific Islander; and 4.95% identifying as Native American or American Indian. 43.9% of respondents were between the ages of 13-18, 18.25% were between the ages of 19-24, 17.5% between the ages 25-34, 13.85% between the ages of 35-49, and 6.3% were 50 years old or older.

Complete [survey instrument](#) and data available upon request.