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Author(s): Cheryl Maxson ; Karen Hennigan ; David C. Sloane

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"Not Just a Popularity Contest: Factors that Influence Public Opinion of the Police"

Cheryl Maxson, Karen Hennigan, and David C. Sloane

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Community residents' perception of the police are often ambivalent, they see officers both as friend and enemy. Police may be a welcome sight when residents are threatened or in need of help, but they are unwelcome or even feared in other situations. The quality of services and effectiveness of police overall can be increased through a better comprehension of the breadth and depth of residents' concerns.

Surveying and understanding the public's opinion of police performance is important for several reasons. First, acceptance of police authority by a community is basic to public order. In instances where this acceptance is challenged, riots or other forms of disobedience may ensue. Second, public confidence in police can lead to cooperation that many consider crucial for effective policing. Police rely on community members' information about crime to perform their duties. Crime identification, investigation and resolution are all heavily dependent on public input. Thus, collaboration with community residents in the co-production of anti-crime activities is a lynchpin of community policing. Third, public support is crucial to maintaining, let alone expanding police funding.

Finally, sensitive measurement of public opinion is an important way to monitor local police activities. Public reactions to local policing can enhance a manager's understanding of police effectiveness by augmenting such traditional indicators of performance as response time, arrests, and crime clearance rates. Such information is particularly useful if community reaction data are available by racial/ethnic or other significant groupings at a division or even beat level. The perceptions of police activities, along with those of crime, levels of fear, and the identification of neighborhood problems and strengths represent an important aspect of the community context of policing.

In this study, researchers sought to identify the principal influences on public opinion of police performance by conducting a mail survey of community residents in four diverse areas within the city of Los Angeles (see "About This Study"). Among the factors investigated were experiences with the police (formal and informal types of contact) and with crime (violent and property crime victimization), respondents' perceptions of their neighborhoods (disorder and collective efficacy), and the respondents' demographic characteristics. Past literature suggests that an individual's opinion of the police is "filtered" through these characteristics, but relatively little is known about the ways that these factors work together to influence perceptions of how well the police are performing their jobs.

In particular, we examine two primary influences on the public's opinion of their police, direct experience with the police and residents' expectations of their public safety. Then, we consider the role of "collective efficacy" in influencing the public's opinion of the police. Collective efficacy is a concept developed by Robert J. Sampson, Stephen W Raudenbush, and their colleagues that is the "linkage of cohesion and mutual trust with shared expectations of intervening in support of neighborhood social control."¹

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Prior studies of influences on opinions

For the last several decades, researchers have studied the source of attitudes toward the police by specifically measuring expectations, experiences, judgments and related variables.² These studies suggest three general areas of influence on opinions: racial/ethnic and age differences, the nature of contacts with the police, and perceptions of crime and safety in the community. Police personnel add a fourth consideration, the impact of the media on public opinion.

The most important demographic finding has been that African Americans, in particular, and in some studies other ethnic minorities, report less favorable attitudes toward the police than white Americans, possibly due to perceptions that minorities are more often mistreated by police.³ Carter suggests that culturally-driven expectations by Latinos for police conduct and for involvement with the police also impact this group's opinions of police performance.⁴ Several studies find that older (though not elderly) Americans view police more favorably than younger persons. Younger residents, particularly young men, are more likely to be involved with police as a victim or a perpetrator crime. More negative views of police held by youth and young adults may be explained by a combination of perceptions of mistreatment and a clash of norms and expectations from both sides (police and youth).⁵

In general, contacts between police officers and residents are associated with less favorable attitudes toward the police. The majority of contacts revolve around criminal activity, either as a result of victimization or as part of an investigation. Expectations, in particular unfulfilled expectations, may be the key to understanding the basis of this finding.⁶ A common unfulfilled expectation concerns response time. Studies suggest that in urgent situations, individuals frequently are dissatisfied with the speed of the police response and may even overestimate the length of delay. Victims of crime, especially serious crime, are generally less favorable toward the police.⁷ Further, Sacco discusses a "halo effect" whereby dissatisfaction with any part of a police experience (even, for instance, the attitude of the person who took the call) colors a person's satisfaction with the experience, and the stressful aspects of an experience are displaced onto the police officer.⁸

Some evidence suggests that informal but official contact between residents and officers result in more favorable attitudes toward the police. In their survey in Pittsburgh, Scaglione and Condon find that both race and the evaluative content of experiences were independently related to satisfaction with police.⁹ They report that speaking with officers in an informal but official way (such as asking for directions) was associated with higher levels of contact satisfaction and resulted in more favorable attitudes toward the police.

Individuals' perceptions of crime, safety, and the functioning of their community may also color their attitudes toward local police. For example, crime levels influenced residents' attitudes toward police in a survey in Atlanta. In Santa Ana, California, the primary indicator of negative attitudes toward the police was how people felt about crime and safety issues in their neighborhood. Further, Greene and Decker suggest that local communities develop neighborhood cultures based on informal histories of accumulated experiences with police, crime, and disorder.¹⁰ These cultures may influence individual's

expectations, evaluations, and support for the local police in important ways, just as racial and ethnic cultures do.

While academics have studied the relationship between media crime coverage and fear of crime, police personnel are particularly concerned about its influence on attitudes toward the police. Several Los Angeles police supervisors that we interviewed prior to the survey believed that we would find that a few highly publicized use of force incidents might have a widespread negative influence on residents' view of the police.

Measuring opinion

Evaluations are inherently relative. An evaluation of police performance usually entails comparing how the individual thinks the police are doing relative to what he or she expects "good" police officers should be doing. Each of these judgments is built from limited knowledge and is subject to influence and distortion. People may only have the vaguest idea of what police officers are doing, let alone, how they are doing it. The basis for judgments may be very expansive (taking in lots of situations) or unique to one instance. Evaluations may be derived primarily from newspaper or television crime reports or "real life" footage of police-in-action programs that are popular on television now. Conversely, assessments about police may be generalized from the way the person, or others they know, was treated for a traffic violation, in a crowd control situation, in a serious violent incident, or in a casual contact in their neighborhood. Similarly, cultural norms, a steady diet of crime drama television shows, or concerns about inequities of treatment can influence an individual's expectations for what a cop should be doing.

With all of this complexity, how can we expect people to come up with reasonable evaluations of police performance? Are answers to questions like "Are you satisfied with the job police are doing in your community?" or "How good a job are police doing in your neighborhood?" meaningful? Researchers have urged that public opinions should not be interpreted as indication of the quality of police work per se, but the public's perception of it. Reactions to specific questions asked about police performance may be colored by the cultural norms of various ethnic, cultural, age, and gender groupings.¹¹ Nevertheless, as Flanagan argues, people do form judgments, sometimes with little or no knowledge, and these judgments have an impact.¹² Therein lies their value. Regardless of the preciseness of its basis, public opinion has an undeniable impact on local police/community relationships and on public support for a wide variety of policies nationwide.

The police have been highly regarded over the years as an institution in American society.¹³ In 1994, a national Gallup poll pegged public confidence in the police at 87 percent, which ranked third among fourteen institutions examined. Police were ranked just below the military and church, and above the Supreme Court, schools, banks, and newspapers. The criminal justice system (at 50%) was at the bottom of the list. In Los Angeles, approval of the way the LAPD is "handling its job" has been documented over the last 30 years in opinion polls conducted by the Los Angeles Times. These ratings have ebbed and flowed with negative responses to well-publicized police brutality incidents. At the time this survey was completed, in April 1997, an LA Times poll reported approval ratings of 77 percent for white, 58 percent for Latino, and 56 percent

for African Americans, close to the 1977 levels. The U.S. Department of Justice reported phone survey results for several major US cities. Their phone survey suggested very high levels of approval for the police in Los Angeles: 86 percent of Angelenos surveyed reported satisfaction with local police.¹⁴

Citywide measures of opinion often rely upon a single question to tap police performance, and by aggregating the figures to the entire city mask variations among the city's neighborhoods. Such variations occur due to significant events that take place in different neighborhoods, as well systemic factors that influence community members' judgments about the performance of their local police.

Researchers in this study sought a more nuanced depiction of opinion. Three measures of community attitudes toward police were formed from items on the survey. First, the measure of job evaluation was a six-item scale modified from Skogan's work in Chicago asking how good a job the police were doing in your neighborhood.¹⁵ A second scale, called demeanor, was formed from five items that asked respondents were asked to rate how respectful, trustworthy, fair, helpful, and concerned police acted. The third measure use of force joined two items asking about how tough police acted and if they used more force than necessary.

What factors influence opinions toward police?

Using these measures, we posit two strong influences on persons' opinions of their police. The first is direct experience. As with anything else good experiences have a favorable impact and bad experiences a negative impact, with neutral experiences presumably less polarizing and more vulnerable to other influences. Direct experiences with police can arise from a variety of activities and be initiated by the police or by the resident. We categorize these direct contacts into two broad types, formal and informal. Formal contacts include resident initiated calls for service and information, as well as officer-initiated stops for questioning or investigation. Informal contacts include chats with officers out on patrol or out in the community, as well as attendance or participation with police-community sponsored activities or events. We predict more positive opinions are associated with informal contact and less positive opinions are associated with formal contact. Since formal contact is typically associated in some way with crime, suspected crime, or some other violation of public order, these experiences often have unpleasant associations.

The second strong influence on a person's opinions is expectations. Expectations arise from indirect experiences, cultural norms and exchanges, political attitudes, and media influences. Our premise is that there is broad consensus that our local police are expected to protect persons and property and help maintain social order. Definitions of appropriate levels and methods of protection and appropriate procedures to maintain order may vary from place to place according to the cultural backgrounds and beliefs of the people who live there, but this basic premise is widely understood. In practice, police rarely directly protect citizens from violent or property crime, instead they apprehend criminals and prevent further victimization.¹⁶ Even so, in many departments, these values are among the stated goals of the police agencies. The LAPD's motto, "to protect and to serve," is emblazoned on every patrol car in the city. For persons who have been a victim of a

crime, especially a violent crime, the expectation that police will keep them safe has been violated. Though there may be exceptions, as a group, we can expect crime victims to have lower approval of the job police are doing in their neighborhood than nonvictims. Further, other experiences and conditions in a neighborhood can violate these expectations. Even if not a victim him or herself, neighborhoods with high levels of crime, especially violent crime, activities such as open drug use and sales, and youth involved in antisocial activities or street gangs violate the expectation of protection and social order. Neighborhoods where residents perceive problems with social or physical disorder violate the expectation that our neighborhoods should be orderly. The police are expected to play a large role in achieving that safety. People's approval of police activities diminishes when they feel unsafe.

In addition, the study explored the role of collective efficacy as an influence on opinion. Building on Sampson and colleagues findings that neighborhoods with collective efficacy experience less crime, we hypothesized that this neighborhood measure would also be associated with opinions about police.¹⁷ Neighborhoods with collective efficacy are perceived to be more proactive and more likely to share responsibility for crime prevention with the police. When the elements of collective efficacy are high, neighborhood social cohesion is strong and informal social controls are in place. We predict that strong collective efficacy gives rise to a parallel expectation that residents themselves can also and perhaps should have an impact on maintaining public order as well. This activity and view of shared responsibility may lessen reliance on police and create an openness to partnership. Residents who perceive a sense of collective neighborhood efficacy are likely to hold more favorable views toward the police.

What about demographics and the media?

Before turning to the influence of direct experience and expectations of safety, we consider the impact of demographics and the media. Past literature and anecdotal information argue that the media and demographics play key roles in shaping the public's opinion of police activities. However, we found surprising results in each of these areas.

Much past literature focuses on demographic characteristics, especially racial/ethnic differences, associated with opinion of the police. Since blacks and Latinos tend to live in higher crime, more disorderly neighborhoods, opinions could differ due to these neighborhood characteristics (reflecting different neighborhood circumstances rather than race or ethnicity per se). A close look at the way respondents opinions of job approval varied by the racial/ethnic background of respondents surveyed, shows that 80 percent of Non Latino whites approve, 73 percent in the category other/Asian approve, and 66 percent Latino and 66 percent black respondents express job approval. However, once respondents are further categorized by the level of perceived disorder in their neighborhood, these racial/ethnic based differences nearly disappear (see Table/Exhibit 1). Only whites in low disorder neighborhoods stand out. Multivariate analyses confirm that the demographic characteristics of respondents are not related or only weakly related to job approval once neighborhood disorder and other neighborhood characteristics described below are taken into account. A negative association between education level and approval of the job local police are doing is remains apparent after controlling for disorder.

Table 1: Job Approval of Local Police by Race/Ethnicity and Neighborhood Disorder

	Neighborhood Disorder High (n=237)	Neighborhood Disorder Low (n=369)
Asian & Other (n=79)	59%	79%
Black (n=84)	54%	79%
Latino (n=198)	54%	79%
White (n=245)	58%	87%

Alternatively, for another opinion measure, officer demeanor, demographics including age, race/ethnicity, and education each explained a small but significant portion of the variance even after taking disorder and other neighborhood characteristics into account. Race/ethnicity (white then Hispanic higher than black), and age were positively related to the opinion that local police are trustworthy, fair, helpful, concerned, and respectful of others. Education level was negatively associated with this view of local police. Perhaps evaluations of officer demeanor, are more strongly based on individual and cultural level expectations than neighborhood context based expectations.

Many police believe that a few highly publicized incidents might have an undue influence on residents' opinions. In this survey, respondents were asked to indicate whether exposure to the media, as well as personal experience, experience with other police agencies, and the reported experience of other persons they know, most shaped their opinions of the LAPD. Overall, half of the respondents indicated they were most influenced by personal and family experiences with police officers in Los Angeles. Thirty-five percent were most influenced by mass media (including newspaper, radio, and television sources) and 15 percent by experiences with police elsewhere or by hearing about other persons' experiences with police.

Those who rely most on the media do not have less favorable opinions (on two of the three opinions included) than other respondents. Indeed, this group has a significantly higher level of job approval than the group most influenced by personal experiences. Interestingly, the group influenced by media reported less approval for use of force than the personal experience group. Media stories and coverage of events apparently had a negative impact on opinions about use of force, but this negative impact did not generalize to other opinions about the police.

Experiences with the police and crime

While media and other sources have an impact on the opinions of some residents, for the majority of people, personal experiences and the nature of these experiences is most important in shaping their opinions. We expect that persons who state they have had a good or a bad experience with police in the last year, will be especially likely to base their opinion on personal experiences. Seventy-one percent of respondents who reported

having a “good experience” or “bad experience” with police in the last year indicated that their direct experiences with police had the strongest impact on their opinions. For the others, those with little or no contact or with more neutral experiences in the last year, only 39 percent rely on personal experiences to form their opinions.

The survey captured two kinds of contact with officers. Forty-five percent of the respondents reported some type of formal or traditional contact with local police. This contact includes resident-initiated contact such as calls for service and crime reports directly to the station (33%) or through 911 (23%), and police initiated contact including stopping or questioning residents regarding a possible crime (14%), or an arrest (1%). Forty-six percent of the respondents had informal contact with officers in their neighborhood. Almost a third of respondents reported talking with an officer who was patrolling the neighborhood or at a community meeting or local event. Twenty-seven percent interacted with officers through a police-sponsored youth activity, volunteer work with police, or attendance at a community safety fair or other community event to discuss crime or safety. Less than one in five residents knew or recognized local officers.

As a way of further understanding the role of contact in shaping public opinion, respondents were categorized into four groups: thirty-four percent with neither kind of contact; twenty percent with formal contact only; twenty-two percent with informal contact only; and twenty-four percent with both types of contact. Table/Exhibit 2 shows the opinions held by respondents in these four groups. Those with only informal experiences hold the highest opinions of police performance and officer demeanor. Those with only formal experiences hold the least positive attitudes toward their local police on these two dimensions. The individuals with no experiences with police have high opinions of job performance and officer demeanor, but they are least likely to agree that police use appropriate levels of force. The most approval for use of force is found in the group with both types of personal experiences.

Table 2: Opinions by Type of Contact with Local Officers

	Job Approval (okay to very good)	Officer Demeanor (somewhat to very)	Appropriate Use of Force (agree to agree strongly)
Neither (N=200)	80%	84%	33%
Informal Only (N=134)	87%	92%	40%
Both (N=166)	65%	78%	49%
Formal Only (N=140)	56%	66%	35%

Is one type of contact more often associated with a “good experience?” Forty-three percent of those with only formal experiences and forty-one percent of those with only informal contact reported having a good experience with police in the last year. Similarly, 17 percent of those with formal and 12 percent of those with informal

experiences reported having a bad experience with an officer over the last year. The relationship between contact and opinion does not appear to be shaped by the tone of experiences.

Direct experiences with crime should impact opinions of the police. Police are expected to protect persons and property from crime. For persons who have been a victim of a crime, the expectation that police will keep them safe has been violated. How do crime victims rate their local police? As Table/Exhibit 3 shows, 57 percent of respondents who experienced a violent crime, 70 percent who experienced a property crime only, and 85 percent who did not experience a crime in the last year approve of the job their local police are doing. Being a victim reduces favorable opinion of local police, except with regard to use of force. This relationship between crime victimization and attitudes toward police is consistent with past research.

Table 3: Opinion by Type of Victimization

	Job Approval (okay to very good)	Officer Demeanor (somewhat to very)	Appropriate Use of Force (agree to agree strongly)
Victim of Violent Crime (N=103)	57%	70%	44%
Victim of Property Only (N=300)	70%	79%	37%
Not a Victim (N=220)	85%	87%	41%

Perceptions of neighborhood crime and safety

One source of expectations not explored extensively in prior studies is the impact of respondents' perceptions of his/her surroundings. Most of us want and many of us expect our neighborhoods to be safe and orderly. Further, many of us believe that it is the job of the police to achieve these goals. Respondents who report that violent crime is a problem in their neighborhood, are fearful of neighborhood crime, or who see other disorder issues in their neighborhood can be expected to express less approval for their local police. Table 4/Exhibit 4A-C shows that among respondents who say that violent crime is a problem in their neighborhood, 60 percent view local police performance favorably, whereas 81 percent who do not report violent crime problems have a favorable view. Similarly, persons who express fear of crime are also less approving of the job local police are doing. Sixty percent of persons who are fearful and 84 percent of those who are not fearful approve of their local police. Fear is weakly related to demeanor and use of force. Respondents who noted that various types of social disorder are problems in their neighborhood, give lower opinions of their local police (57% approve) than those who see their neighborhoods as free of disorder issues (83% approve).

Table 4: Opinion by Perceptions of Violence, Fear of Crime, & Disorder in the Neighborhood

	Job Approval (okay to very good)	Officer Demeanor (somewhat to very)	Appropriate Use of Force (agree to agree strongly)
Violence High (N=253)	60%	76%	38%
Violence Low (N=372)	81%	84%	41%
Fear High (N=301)	60%	75%	33%
Fear Low (N=338)	84%	83%	45%
Disorder High (N=237)	57%	74%	36%
Disorder Low (N=369)	83%	86%	42%

The distribution of contact experiences (i.e., formal, informal, both or none) varies by the perceived level of disorder in the area. Residents in low disorder communities are more likely to report no contact with the police (38%) than those living in high disorder areas (25%). The positive police job approval assessments in low disorder neighborhoods range from 71% among residents with only formal contact to 88-89% among those with either no contact or only informal contact. The range of opinion by contact experience is much wider among respondents who perceive their neighborhoods as disorderly. Only 35% of high disorder residents with only formal contact offer positive approval ratings. Strikingly, 88% of residents in disordered areas approve when they experience informal police contact only. Even those residents with formal contact express more approval when they have informal contact experiences as well (49% approve).

Collective efficacy

Sampson and his colleagues conceptualize collective efficacy as perceptions of community cohesion and informal social control. In this study, researchers hypothesized that collective efficacy will favorably impact opinions of police. Residents who report social cohesion and informal social control in their neighborhood, the elements of collective efficacy, are expected to have higher opinions of police, for two reasons. First, they are more likely to have informal experiences with officers than residents of areas low in neighborhood collective efficacy. Thirty-two percent of respondents in areas described as high in neighborhood collective efficacy, compared to twenty-three percent in areas low in collective efficacy report participation in police-sponsored events or activities. Also, more fall into the category of "informal contact only" with local officers, twenty-six percent vs. sixteen percent. Second, these respondents may hold different expectations by which they judge local police. Residents in areas described as high in collective efficacy may be more likely to believe that the community "shares" responsibility with the police for a safe orderly neighborhood, and therefore be less likely to judge officers harshly when crime and social disorder occurs. Table/Exhibit 5

confirms these predictions for job approval and officer demeanor. The prediction does not hold for use of force, which is unrelated to collective efficacy.

Table 5: Opinion by Collective Efficacy

	Job Approval (okay to very good)	Officer Demeanor (somewhat to very)	Use of Force (agree to agree strongly)
Collective Efficacy High (N=327)	81%	87%	41%
Collective Efficacy Low (N=346)	66%	73%	37%

Summary and implications

While past literature relies heavily on demographic characteristics to explain opinions, this study found that the most consistent independent correlates of favorable opinion of the job local police are doing were experiences (including greater informal contact and less victimization), perceptions of neighborhood crime and safety (including less fear of crime, lower perceived level of violent crime, and lower perceived disorder in one's neighborhood), and higher neighborhood collective efficacy. Lower education is the primary demographic characteristic independently associated with higher officer job approval in this survey. Additional demographics, older respondents and non Latino whites were more likely to express positive impressions of officer demeanor.

The media is often perceived by police and others as having a significant impact on the public's opinion of police performance. The media did not appear to be a source of negative opinion of the LAPD, except with regard to the use of force. As predicted, instead of relying on the media for their opinions, respondents appeared to react primarily to their experiences and expectations in forming opinions of their local police.

Our findings confirm and expand earlier suggestions that informal contact has a favorable impact on opinions of police. In this survey, speaking to officers on patrol or at events or meetings was positively associated with opinion, independent of the influences of negative experiences or disorderly neighborhoods. It could be that those predisposed to be more favorable initiate informal contact with officers out in the community, or as one officer suggested, "to know us is to love us." Either way, it seems likely that promoting informal social contact may favorably impact opinions. These findings suggest that police departments may want to consider the ways that they are currently encouraging or discouraging informal contact with their residents.

Also, respondents who perceive that their neighborhood is safe, orderly, and who perceive that their neighbors act more cohesively and are more inclined to exercise

informal social control, hold more positive opinions of the police. This suggests that the functionality of a neighborhood is closely aligned with opinions of police. Specifically, disorderly neighborhoods and neighborhoods with low collective efficacy present a challenge for officer-community relations. Such communities may benefit from community policing strategies that are successful in increasing community participation with officers and increasing informal contact between local officers and residents. For this reason, comparisons between divisions or parts of a single department need to be evaluated separately, taking into account differences in residents' social and physical environment and the community context. So to differences in community policing strategies may be taken into account or monitored.

Yearly surveying is essential for understanding these issues further. Such surveys should be conducted by independent organizations to avoid biased responses (see "About This Study"). Conducting the survey over a number of years would allow for greater comprehension of the public's opinion. An annual survey with standard samples and procedures crafted to examine trends would be most meaningful. Then, police officials and community representatives would notice anomalies in the pattern of opinion as influenced by respondents' experiences and neighborhood sense of community. In other words, community stakeholders could track indicators of issues that are targets of intervention, such as neighborhood conditions or people's lack of informal contact with officers.

Surveying community residents can provide valuable information about the public's approval of police activities. As this study demonstrates, such a survey can provide surprisingly rich information about the relationship between communities and their police. Such information can provide direction for police and community change and assistance in monitoring the effectiveness of interventions.

About This Study [sidebar to major text] Area Description

The study sample was taken from four of the LAPD's 18 Geographic Areas after discussions with police managers, study consultants and the NIJ program monitor. The areas were chosen to reflect contrasting rates of reported property and violent crimes and demographic profiles, especially income and race/ethnicity. One representative from each of the LAPD's four administrative bureaus was included. However, the four areas are not, nor were they intended to be, representative of the entire city.

The four areas were chosen to reflect the geographic diversity of Los Angeles. While Areas A and B were near downtown, Areas C and D were many miles to the west near the Pacific Ocean. Specifically, Area D is located in the San Fernando Valley, Area C on the city's west side, Area A in South Central, and Area B just north and east of downtown.

Each area has a distinct crime profile. Area A has one of the highest violent crime rates in the city, more than three times higher than any of the other areas surveyed. Area B has the second highest violent crime rate, fueled by largest gang population in the city, with more than 7,000 gang members in some 40 gangs. However, it has the lowest property

crime rate among the four areas sampled. Area C has a relatively low violent crime rate, but the highest rate of property offenses among the surveyed areas. Area D has a very low violent crime rate, and second lowest reported property crime rate (higher only than Area B).

The areas' population and income characteristics were demographically distinct as well. In the 1990 Census, A was 55 percent black and 40 percent Latino with approximately 150,000 residents. Latinos have moved into the traditional African American area in increasing numbers. Eighty-six percent reported household incomes below \$45,000, 43 percent below \$15,000. Area B is populated primarily Hispanic (84%) and low income, often living in multi-generation households. In the 1990 Census, 80 percent reported household incomes below \$45,000, 32 percent below \$15,000. Area C has an ethnically diverse population (61% white, 22% Latino, 10% Asian, and 6% black) with roughly 200,000 residents. In the 1990 Census, fifty-nine percent reported household incomes below \$45,000, 17 percent below \$15,000. Area D is primarily white (73%) with growing Latino (17%) and Asian (8%) populations. Residents of D have higher incomes than those in other areas surveyed: fifty percent reported household incomes above \$45,000 and 26% above \$75,000 in the 1990 Census.

Survey Methods

Residential addresses were obtained from citywide utility service lists that were geocoded to permit selection of addresses located within the four oddly shaped geographic areas. A random sample of 375 addresses for each area comprised the original sample. Survey procedures were adopted from Dillman's Total Design Approach, including up to six contacts with potential respondents: a pre-notification postcard, four survey mailings (the last two with a one dollar incentive) and a thank you/reminder following the first survey mailing.¹⁸ All mailed materials included Spanish translations and other languages were offered, but requested only rarely.

Mailings to 14 percent of the selected addresses were returned by the post office, primarily for inaccurate address information. Excluding addresses where the post office could not deliver the survey, the response rate varied from 44 percent to 65 percent across the four areas with a combined response rate of 57 percent. 714 completed surveys were available for analysis.

Researchers conducted two methodological experiments with implications for whether mail or telephone surveys might provide better results for police departments and researchers. In the first, they demonstrated that concerns that surveys had to be short (as is typical with telephone surveys) were overstated. The response rates for shorter and longer survey versions were very similar and survey length had few detectable effects on the nature of responses or the characteristics of those who responded.¹⁹ These findings suggest that mail surveys permit more extensive data collection from community members (the long survey contained 112 response items) than might be advisable for telephone surveys.

A second experiment contrasted modes by testing response and respondent bias in the mail as compared with a random digit dialing telephone survey.²⁰ The two survey approaches produced achieved samples that differed in demographics and experiences and respondents varied in their reports of fear, cohesion and police assessments. Analyses found that these differential responses could not be fully explained by respondent demographic and experience differences. The examination of potential sources of bias in these parallel surveys suggested that the mail and random digit dialing (RDD) phone survey modes used in this study were susceptible to different biases due to selective nonresponse and to response bias arising from self-presentational concerns. As a result of these biases and the way they vary by survey mode, the RDD phone community survey on attitudes toward police, likely overestimated the true level of approval held by the population, whereas the mail survey likely underestimated these levels. Overall, the mail approach was found to be preferable in capturing resident attitudes and perspectives, especially within socially and economically disadvantaged communities. For these reasons, only the mail survey results are reported here.

If the results are to be meaningful, it is very clear that rigorous survey procedures, close attention to sample issues, and survey sponsorship that is independent of the police department are all essential to producing valid and useful community survey data. Guarding the rigor of these survey methods over time will be essential for the meaningful interpretation of trend data on opinions toward officers, crime, and safety in communities.

Cheryl Maxson, Ph.D. is an assistant professor in the Department of Criminology, Law and Society at the University of California at Irvine as well as a Research Associate Professor in the Social Science Research Institute at the University of Southern California. Karen Hennigan is Research Associate in the Social Science Research Institute at the University of Southern California. David C. Sloane, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor in the School of Policy, Planning, and Development at the University of Southern California. This research was supported National Institute of Justice (grant #96-IJ-CX-0069). The authors would like to acknowledge the aide of Jack Greene, who served as consultant to the project, as well as Garrett Zimmon, Dan Koenig, and many other members of the Los Angeles Police Department.

Findings and conclusions of the research reported here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

Endnotes

¹ Robert J. Sampson and Stephen W. Raudenbush, "Systematic Social Observation of Public Spaces: A New Look at Disorder in Urban Neighborhoods," *American Journal of Sociology* 105, 3 (November 1999): 603-651, quote on page 612-3. Also see, Robert J. Sampson, Stephen W. Raudenbush, and Felton Earls, "Neighborhoods and Violent

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Exhibit 1: Job Approval by Race/Ethnicity and Neighborhood Disorder

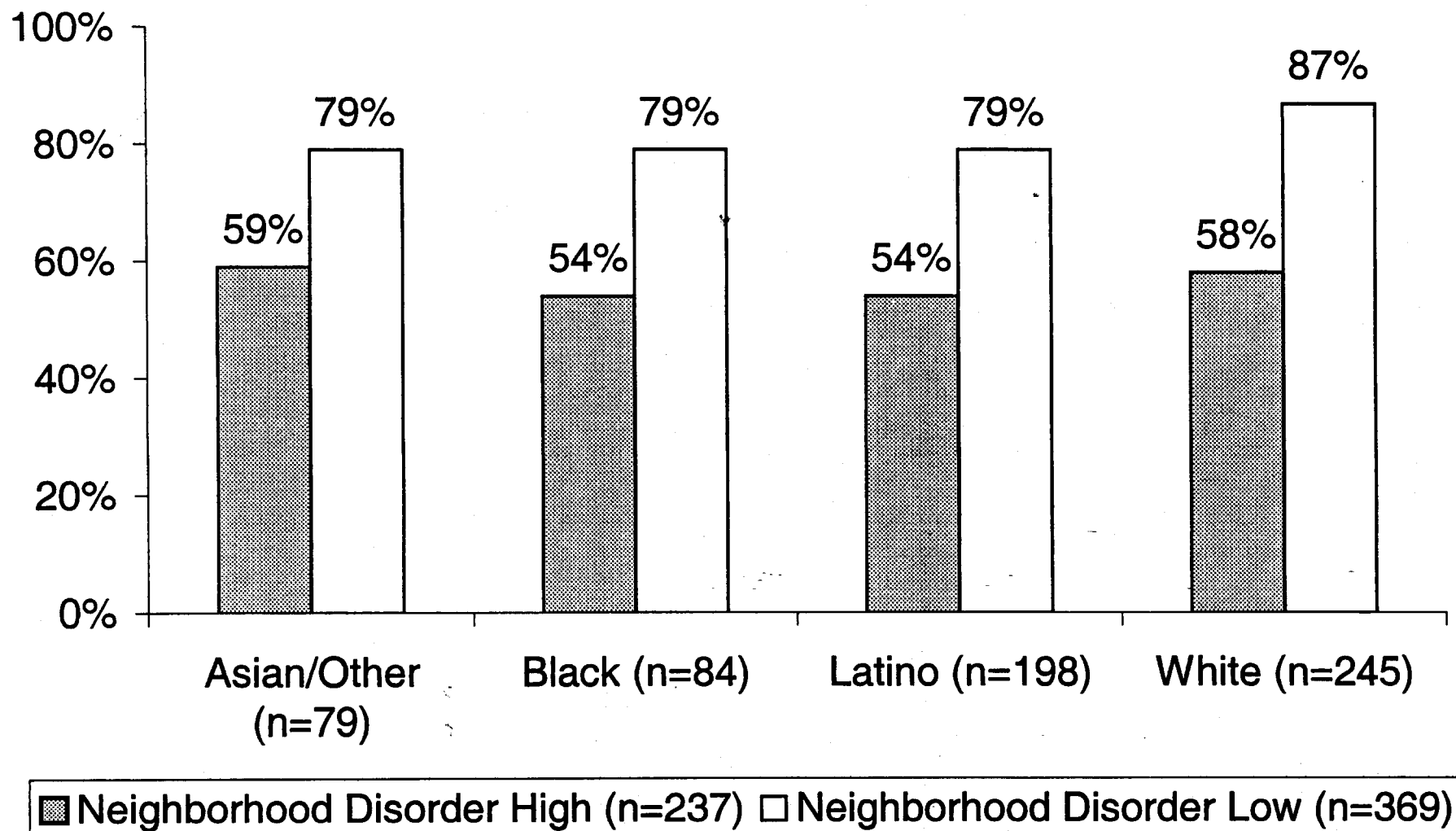


Exhibit 2. Opinions by Type of Contact with Local Officers

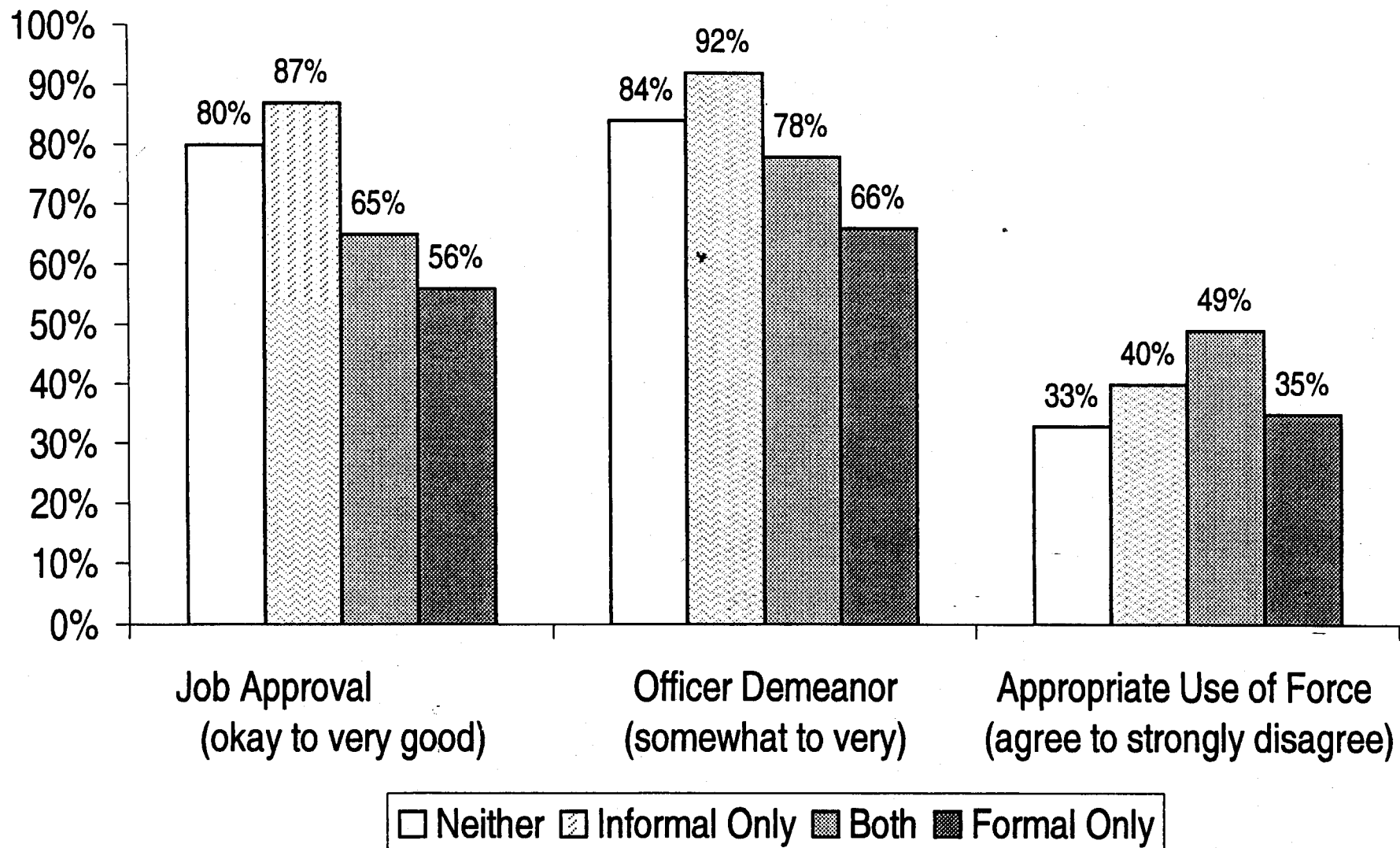
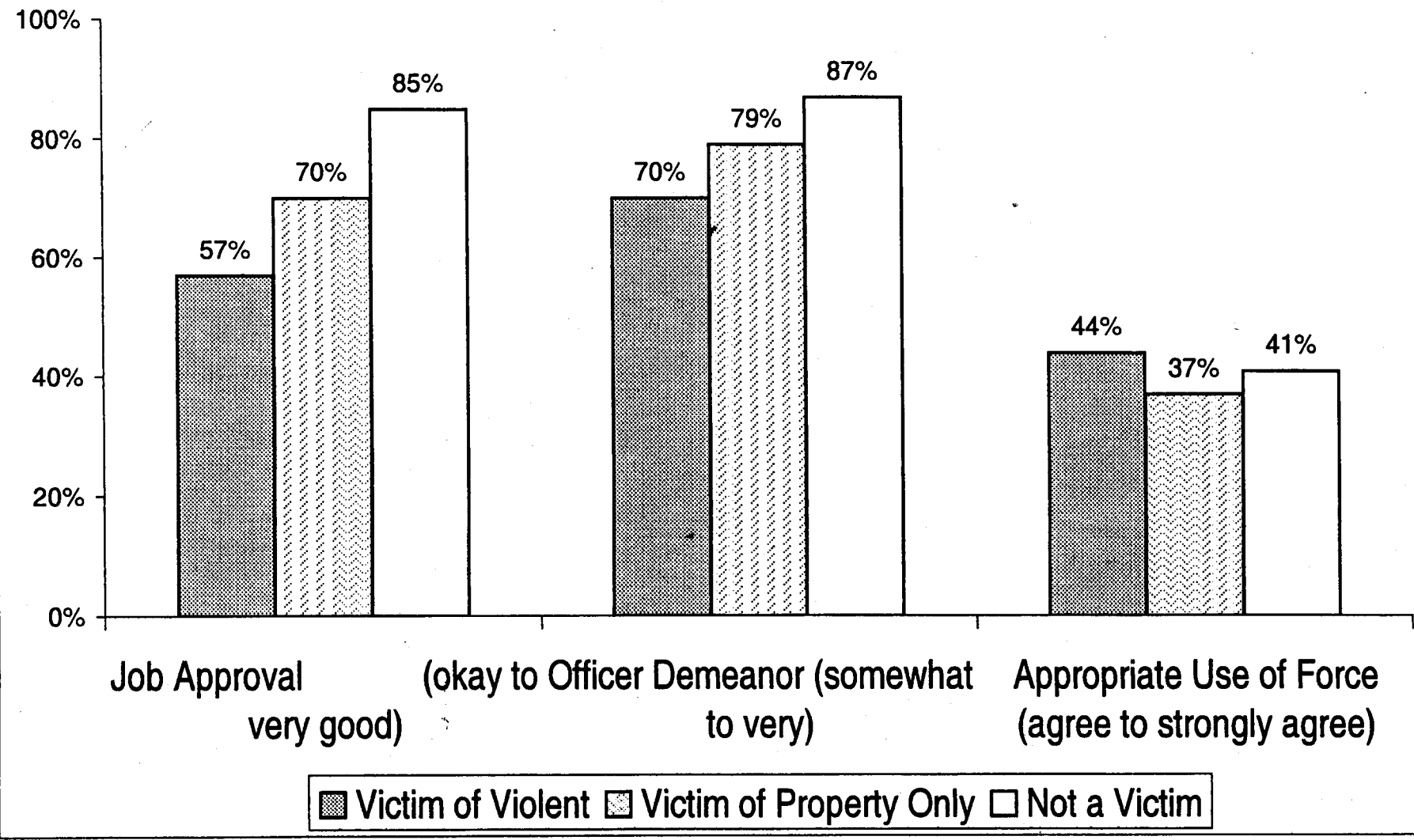


Exhibit 3. Opinion by Type of Victimization



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Exhibit 4B. Opinion by Neighborhood Violent Crime

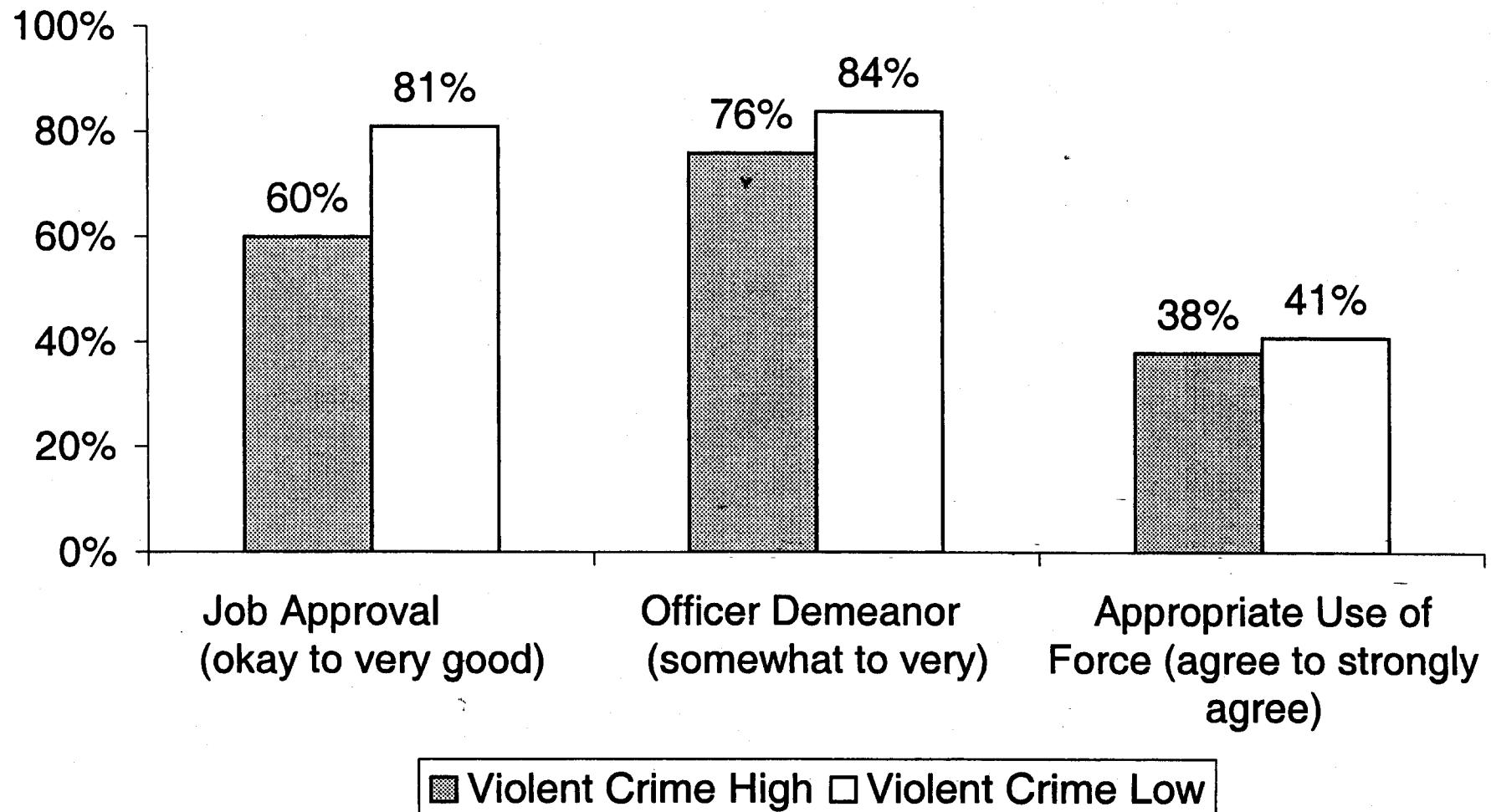


Exhibit 4B. Opinion by Neighborhood Violent Crime

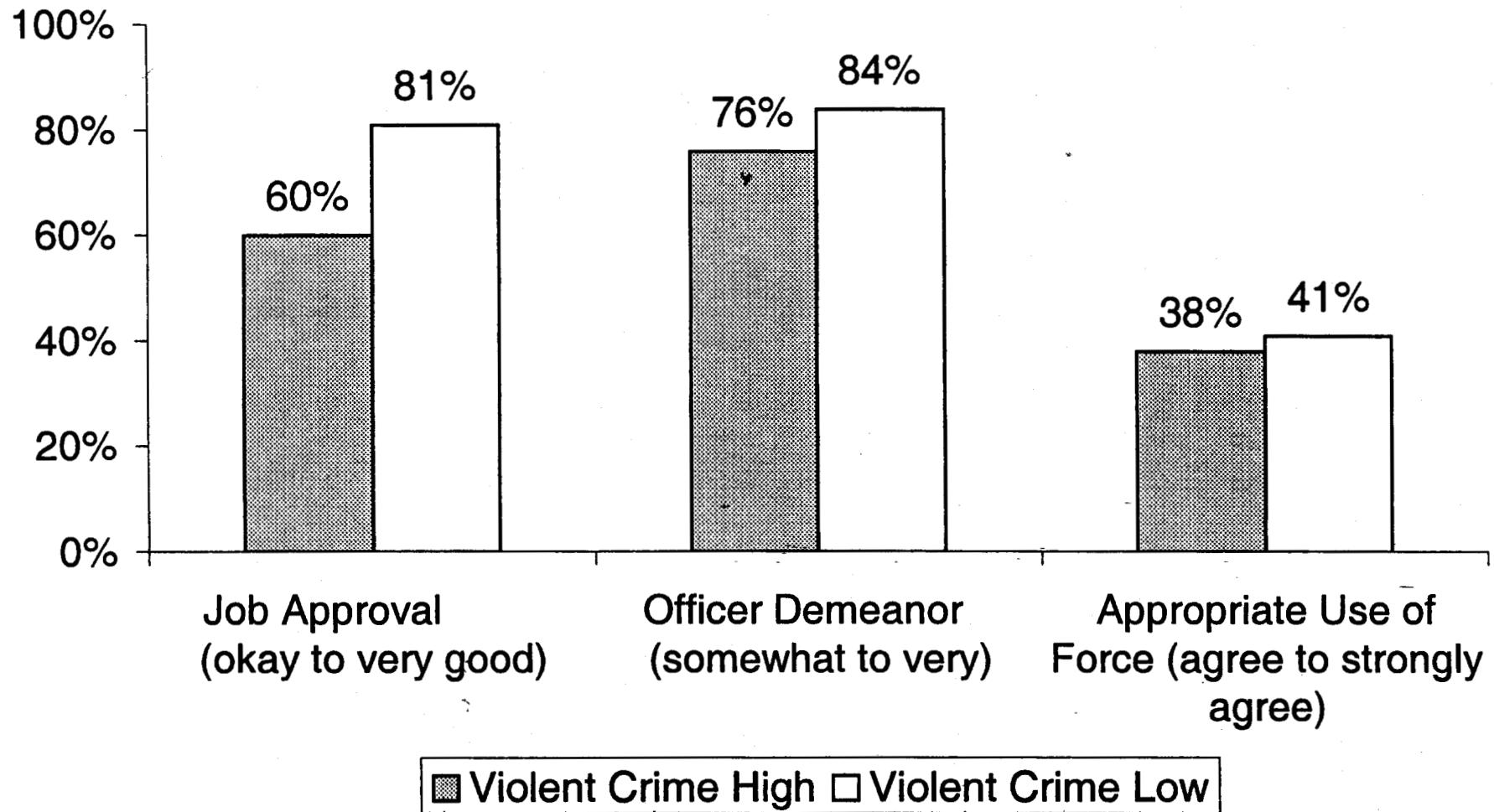


Exhibit 4C. Opinion by Fear of Neighborhood Crime

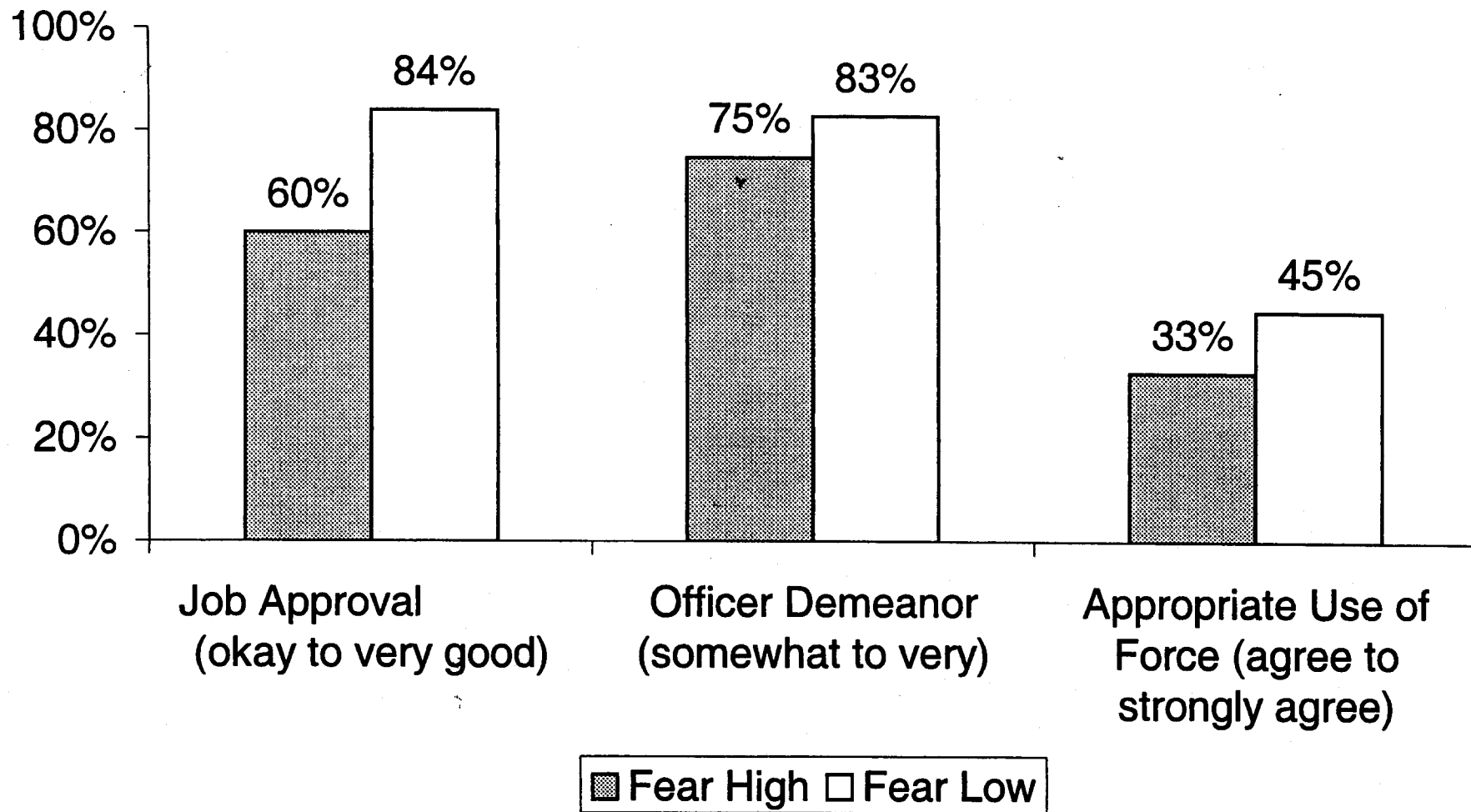
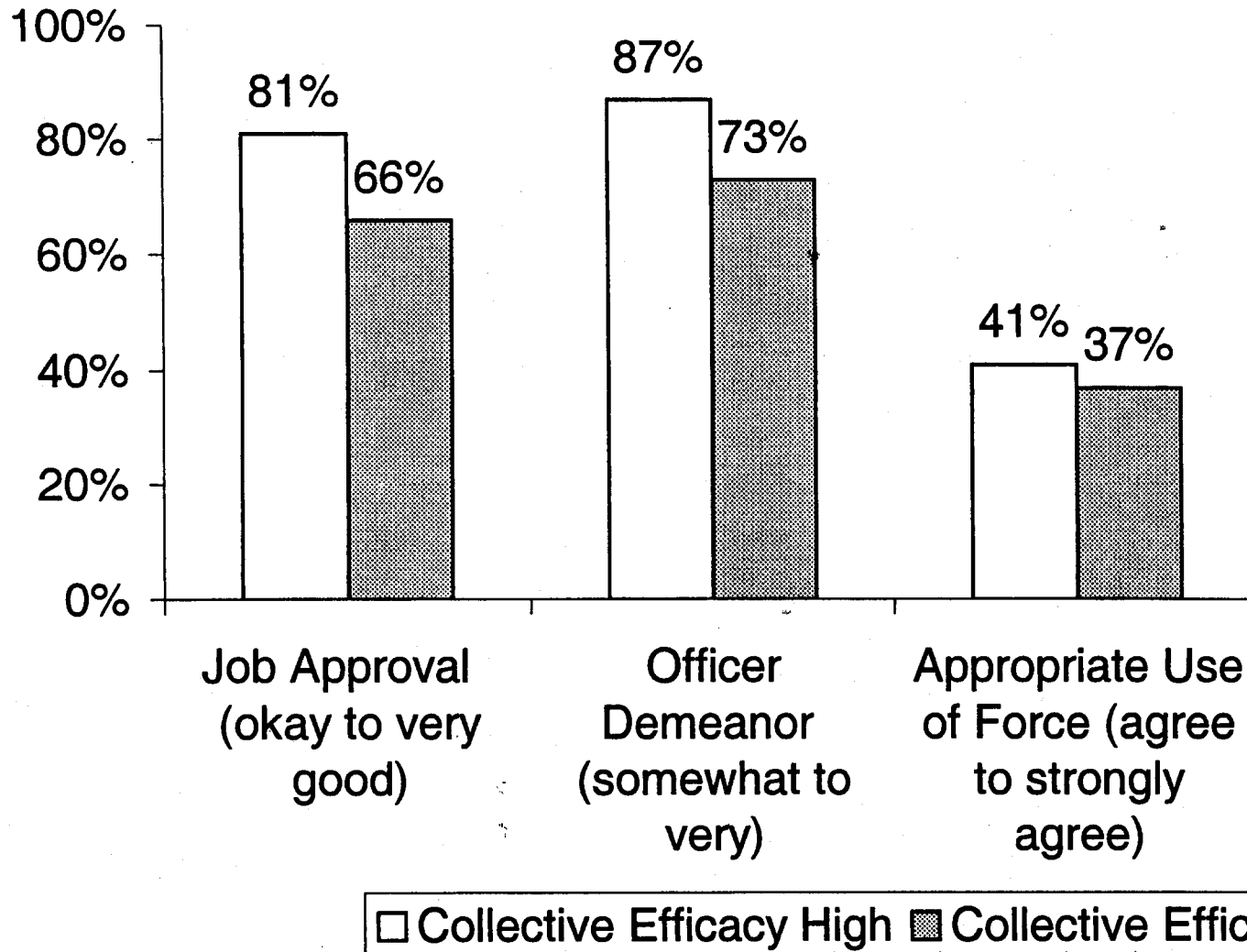


Exhibit 5: Opinion by Collective Efficacy



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