



# National Police Research Platform



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## Community-based Indicators of Police Performance: Introducing the Platform's Public Satisfaction Survey<sup>1</sup>

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### Purpose

The National Police Research Platform is seeking to advance knowledge of policing by looking both inside and outside of police agencies. The external question addressed by the Platform is, “How well are departments performing during their encounters with the public?” Hence, we are field testing alternative community survey methods as tools to evaluate the quality of policing on the streets.

Public satisfaction surveys have been developed by the Platform team to achieve several goals. First, there is a need for validated measures of police-civilian encounters that can be used as standardized benchmarks or indicators of organizational excellence at the local, regional and national levels. Second, these methods are designed to generate timely feedback regarding police performance that can be used by local agencies to assist them in building smarter, evidence-based learning organizations. Third, these methods will address the growing public demand to have a voice in government services. Creating a visible mechanism for community input will go a long way toward building trust, transparency, and legitimacy.

Police organizations that have strong community support understand the need to meet public expectations. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, community stakeholders expect the police to reduce crime and be fair and sensitive to the needs of persons they encounter. The public and policy makers also expect better systems of accountability for police behavior. Finally, in today's economic environment, police

<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank Chief Edward Davis of the Boston Police Department, Chief Rick Tanksley of the Oak Park Police Department, IL, and Chief Gregory Weiss and former Chief Frank Limon of the River Forest Police Department, IL for their leadership in testing new measures of police performance that will someday benefit the entire field.

## The National Police Research Platform

The National Police Research Platform was developed as a vehicle to continuously advance our knowledge of police organizations and their employees and to provide regular and timely feedback to police agencies and policy makers nationwide. In doing so, the Platform is expected to advance both the science of policing and evidence-based learning organizations. This project was supported by Award No. 2008-DN-BX-0005 awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication/program/exhibition are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.

executives are seeking “smarter” and more efficient methods of policing, relying on better evidence to achieve organization goals and garner public support for police initiatives.

To achieve these goals police executives will need to be responsive to a new “information imperative” and work with researchers to “measure what matters” to their constituents. To achieve organizational effectiveness in crime reduction, Compstat-like systems have been adopted to measure police performance in assigned areas using traditional crime indicators such as arrests, crime incidents, clearances and calls for service. To achieve the newer goal of fairness and equity in police performance, however, experts have argued that data systems will need to incorporate new measures of the quality of police activity. Furthermore, in separate surveys of employees as part of the National Police Research Platform, eight out of 10 police officers reported that their agency is “more interested in measuring the amount of activity by officers (e.g. number of tickets or arrests) than the quality of their work.”

### **A New Set of Measures**

In the larger context of policing in a democratic multicultural society, police scholars and practitioners have called for greater attention to the processes of policing. In this regard, the content of the Platform’s Public Satisfaction Survey has been influenced by work in several areas. First, there is considerable work in the private sector on the “customer service” model, whereby standard indices of customer satisfaction are widely accepted and taken very seriously in competitive markets. Second, research in support of procedural justice theory indicates that people’s judgments

about the police are based heavily on their sense of whether the process is fair, so dimensions of procedural justice are included. Factors such as the officer's demeanor and perceived fairness play a role in determining whether community members are satisfied with their encounter, whether they will trust and work with the police in the future, and whether they will be inclined to obey the law themselves. Finally, research on victims of crime underscores how negative, unsupportive reactions from law enforcement professionals can inhibit crime victims' psychological recovery and reduce the likelihood of future disclosure or reporting to authorities. Negative social reactions to victims can include taking control of the victim's decisions, victim blame, distraction from what happened, and egocentric behavior. Positive social reactions can include instrumental, emotional, and information support.

In sum, extant research and practice suggest that there is more to police-civilian encounters than official statistics on crime incidents, arrests, and traffic citations. Factors such as the officer's demeanor, fairness and impartiality, emotional and informational support, and professional competence all play a role in determining whether community members are satisfied with their encounter; whether they will trust and work with the police in the future; and whether they will be inclined to obey the law themselves. Each deserves to be measured and monitored in a systematic way.

***Limitations of prior surveys.*** One of the largest changes in police organizations, beginning in the 1990s, has been the increased use of resident surveys to gauge public satisfaction with the police. While this trend is positive, there are several major limitations of this work that the Platform seeks to overcome. The Bureau of Justice Statistic's Police-Public Contact Survey, although scientifically rigorous, is not time sensitive and does not allow for regional or local estimates. Consequently, it is not generally considered useful to local agencies for evidence-based policing. Local surveys by researchers tend to be one-time "snapshots" of the entire community's view of the police (often reported a year later), and therefore, are not helpful for identifying trends, describing the quality of police-citizen encounters, or providing timely information that is actionable. Finally, numerous surveys conducted by law enforcement agencies themselves are typically snapshots that are not based on research or linked to internal accountability systems. Most importantly, because these local surveys are conducted in house by sworn personnel, their

validity is questionable (i.e., When police officers ask community members for feedback about their own performance, such information is suspect because of potential pressure to give “the right answer” and because the identity of the survey respondent is not protected). For this reason, researchers and a number of police executives have called for data collection by an independent agency. Our Platform model relies on the University of Illinois at Chicago to serve as the independent, credible partner institution that collects and analyses the survey data and provides standardized reporting to all participating agencies.

In sum, the advantages of the Platform’s Public Satisfaction Survey are the following: (1) it is independent and credible; (2) the survey items are based on the best available scientific evidence; (3) it is continuous and offers agencies and stakeholders the capacity to monitor changes over time; (4) it provides regular feedback so that participating agencies can improve their performance as learning organizations (e.g. targeted in-service training); and (5) it is efficient and timely. Regarding the latter, the Platform is testing the feasibility of web-based and automated surveys to save costs and reduce the turn-around time to agencies.

## **Methodology**

Starting June 1, 2010, we began field testing the Platform Public Satisfaction Survey in three cities - Oak Park, IL; a nearby community of River Forest, IL; and two police districts in Boston, MA. Each week, agency employees scan departmental records and extract the names and addresses of persons who have had a recent contact with a police officer because of a reported crime incident, a reported traffic accident or a traffic stop<sup>2</sup>. These individuals are then sent a letter from the chief of police encouraging them to complete a short survey evaluating this encounter. The letter indicates that the department “is fully committed to professional service so we have established a new method for you to give us feedback about our performance....We have asked university researchers to conduct an independent survey of persons with recent police encounters. This will help us to improve our services. The survey is short, confidential, and voluntary. It will ask you how you were treated and your level of satisfaction with the police services.” The letter also emphasizes is that this is an independent survey and that the police department will never know

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<sup>2</sup> Cases involving domestic violence, sexual assault, minors, or sensitive investigations are excluded.

whether someone chose to complete the survey or how s/he answered the survey questions. The survey process and infrastructure is managed by the Center for Research in Law and Justice at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

The survey questions focus on the officer’s behavior during the police-civilian encounter as outlined above. In addition, the survey queries respondents about their overall satisfaction with police officers in their community and their overall trust and confidence in the local police department.

**Preliminary Findings**

As shown in Table 1, 672 residents completed the Public Satisfaction Survey after having contact with a police officer in one of the test sites. Survey respondents were a diverse cross-section of these communities, with roughly half being female, more than one-third minority, and ranging in age from 18 to 96, with a median age of 48.

**Table 1. Sample Demographics**

Sample Size: 672	
Female	52.2%
Minority	38.7%
Homeowner	71.3%
Age Mean	48.07
Incident Type	
Traffic Stop	34.2%
Traffic Crash	17.9%
Crime Report	41.5%
Survey Type	
Phone Survey	41.1%
Web Survey	58.9%

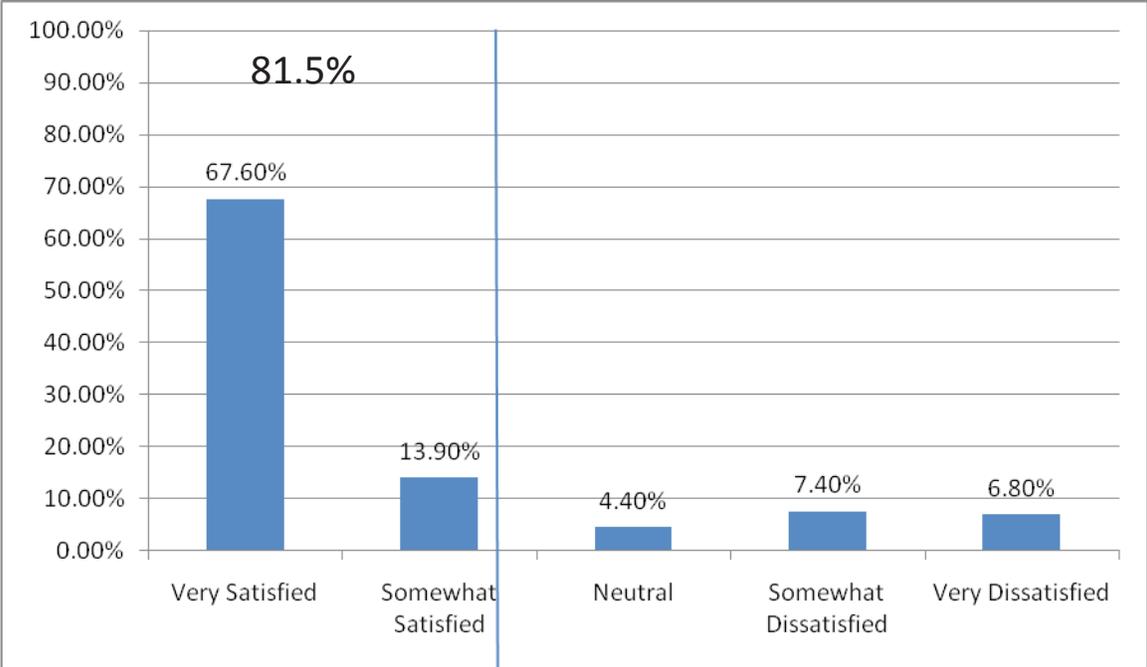
All respondents were given the option of doing an online web survey or an automated telephone survey. Most preferred the web survey (58.9 percent), although a substantial portion chose the automated telephone survey (41.1 percent). The telephone option was more popular among African Americans (62.4 percent vs. 32.5 percent Non-African Americans) and older

community members (51.2 percent of those 55 or older vs. 23.8 percent of those 18 to 29 years old). Crime incidents were the most frequent type of encounter in the sample (41.5 percent), followed by traffic stops (34.2 percent) and traffic crashes (17.9 percent), with 6.4 percent unknown. More than four in 10 survey respondents were non-residents of the community where the encounter occurred, primarily due to traffic stops.

**Overall Satisfaction with the Encounter**

As shown in Table 2, the vast majority of survey respondents in the three pilot communities reported they were either “very satisfied” or “somewhat satisfied” with the way they were treated by police officers they encountered. Two-thirds were “very satisfied” and another 14 percent “somewhat satisfied,” bringing the total to 81.5 percent. Given that one-third of these encounters were traffic stops -- often an upsetting experience -- these findings can be viewed as a positive indicator of organizational performance.

**Table 2. Overall Satisfaction**  
**“Taking the whole experience into account, how satisfied are you with the way you were treated by the officer in this case?”**



## Factors that Influence Satisfaction

Public satisfaction with police encounters varies as a function of the type of incident, the characteristics of the civilian, the specific behaviors of the police officer, and the outcome. These factors are summarized below.

**Procedural justice.** Public satisfaction with police encounters stems, in part, from high marks the officers received on procedural justice. Roughly nine of 10 persons who had contact with the police felt that the officer listened to them, was fair and evenhanded, was polite, and demonstrated competence. The only dimension where slightly lower evaluations were received was showing concern for the civilian’s feelings or wellbeing (3 out of 4). When the items were combined to form a single Procedural Justice index (See Table 3), we find that civilians who report more procedural justice by the officer were more satisfied with the encounter, even when controlling for demographic characteristics of the civilian, the officer, or the type of encounter.

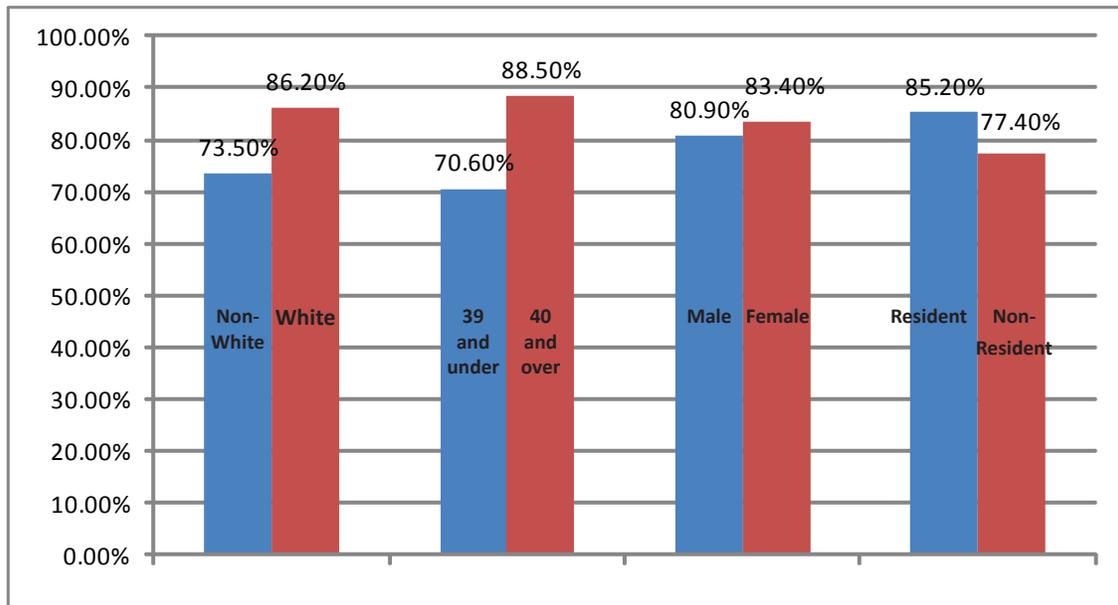
**Table 3. Survey Questions on Procedural Justice**

Did the officer listen to what you had to say?
Was the officer polite?
Do you feel the officer treated you objectively without considering your race, gender, age religion or sexual orientation?
Did the officer seem concerned about your feelings?
Did the officer answer your questions well?

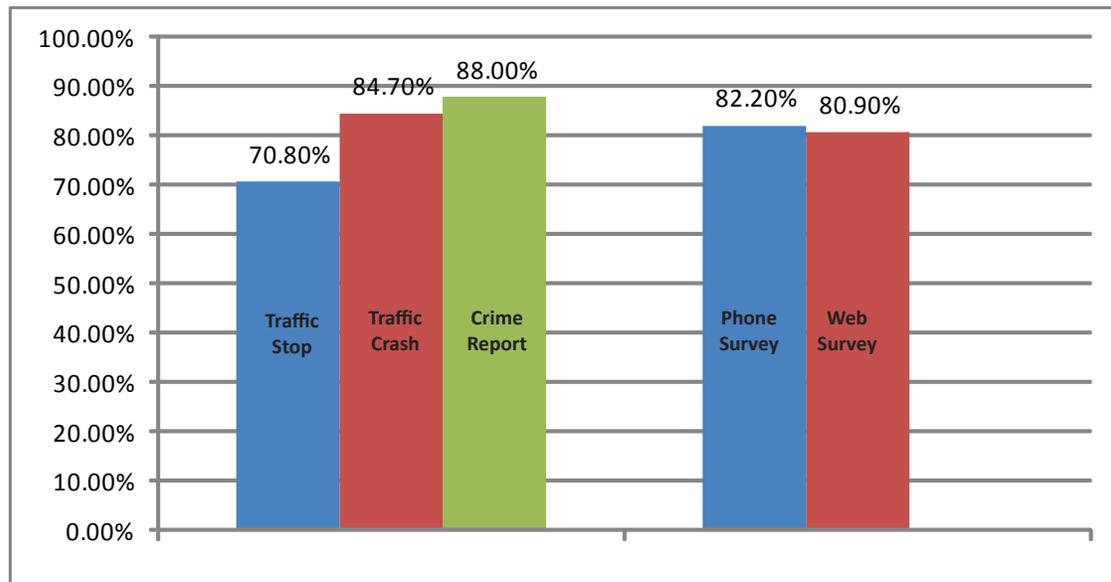
**Respondent characteristics.** As shown in Table 4, males, minorities, person under 40 years of age and non-residents were less satisfied with their police encounter than females, whites, older civilians and residents.

**Incident characteristics.** As shown in Table 5, satisfaction was also influenced by the type of incident. Overall satisfaction with police encounters was highest among persons who reported a crime (88 percent) and second highest among persons involved in a traffic crash (84.7 percent). Not surprisingly, the lowest ratings came from persons stopped by the police, but even here, 7 out of 10 reported being satisfied with the encounter (70.8 percent).

**Table 4. Satisfaction and Respondent Characteristics  
(% Very Satisfied and Somewhat Satisfied)**



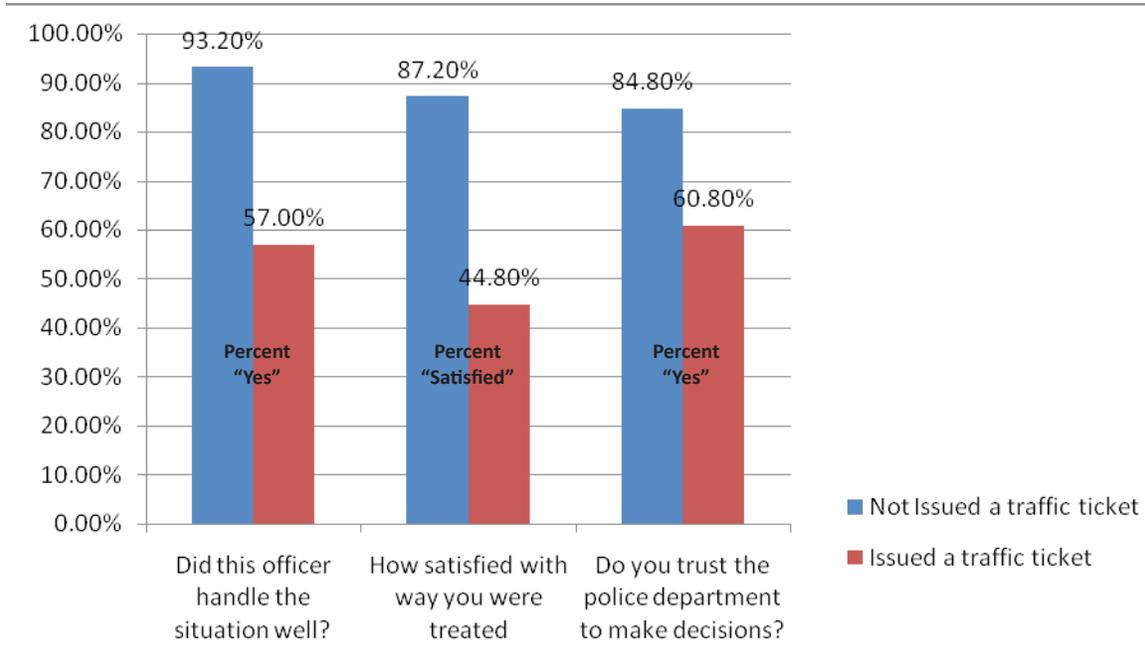
**Table 5. Satisfaction by Type of Incident  
(% Very Satisfied and Somewhat Satisfied)**



**Outcome vs. Process.** With so much emphasis on process, we run the risk of concluding that the final outcome is irrelevant. To the contrary, these data show that for traffic stops, the decision to write a traffic ticket (or not) has a sizeable effect on the public’s satisfaction with the encounter and other judgments as well. As shown in Table 6, when the officer gives a citation, the recipient’s rating of the officer’s handling of the situation drops 36 percentage points; the rating

of satisfaction with the way s/he was treated drops 42 percentage points, and the recipient’s trust in the department “to make decisions that are good for everyone” drops 24 percentage points. In sum, the outcome (ticket or no ticket) is still very important when evaluating police performance, even to the point of influencing the public’s general assessment of trust and confidence in the police department’s decision-making.

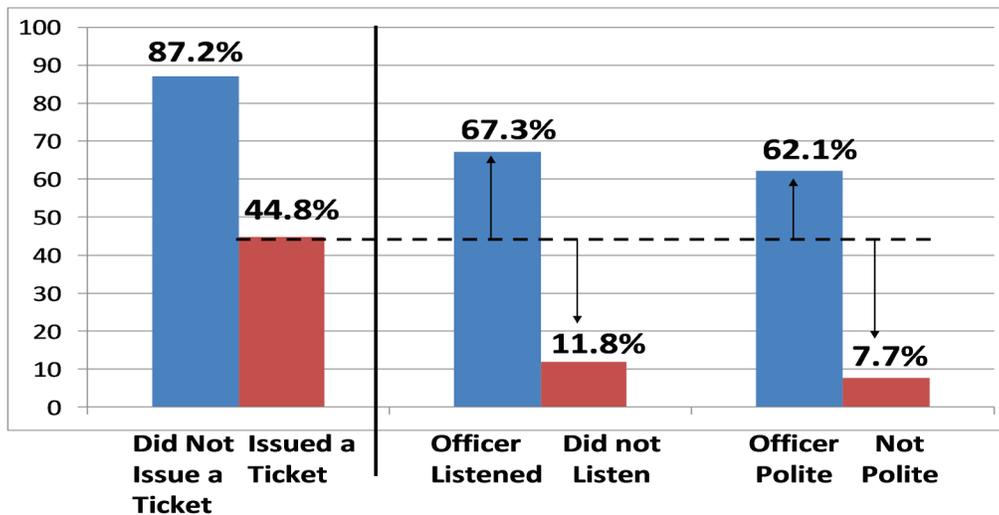
**Table 6. Officer Evaluations and Ticketing Outcomes**



However, the importance of process is also apparent in these preliminary results. Again, looking only at traffic stop cases, Table 7 shows that the baseline level of satisfaction among all drivers is 44.8 percent for cases when a ticket is issued. But satisfaction levels during these encounters where negative information (a ticket) is communicated can be influenced by car-side manners or procedural justice. For example, drivers’ satisfaction with the encounter increases to 67.3 percent (from 44.8 percent) if the officer is viewed as listening to driver’s side of the story, but drops to 11.8 percent if the officer is not considered a good listener. Similarly, satisfaction increases to 62.1 percent when the officer is judged to be polite during the encounter and drops to 7.7 percent if the officer is judged to be impolite. In a nutshell, some methods of delivering bad news are more effective than others for maintaining positive relations with the community. By being polite and listening, an officer who gives a ticket can gain an additional 17 to 22 percentage points in

his/her overall evaluation. However, when the officer does not use good car-side manners, ratings will plummet 33 to 37 percentage points. So demeanor and fairness are important when delivering bad news. Respondents were given a chance to offer open-ended comments at the conclusion of the survey and it was not uncommon to hear, “I received a ticket, but the officer was so polite.”

**Table 7. Satisfaction and Procedural Justice when Writing Tickets**  
 (% Very Satisfied and Somewhat Satisfied)



## Conclusions and Implications

This report introduces the Platform’s Public Satisfaction Survey as an additional tool for building evidence-based police organizations that are responsive to community input and that measure organizational performance in new ways. Additional methodological work is underway to test the feasibility of this automated survey system, but the preliminary results are very promising. The participating agencies were able to work closely in partnership with the University to generate useful and timely information. Feedback to the agencies has already resulted in plans for in-service training on police-civilian encounters.

The preliminary findings from the Platform Public Satisfaction Survey indicate that both process (e.g., officer’s demeanor) and outcome (e.g., giving a ticket) are important for determining public satisfaction with police encounters. Furthermore, the results suggest that single encounters can influence the individual’s overall evaluation of the police department, at least in the short

term. In essence, persons who encounter a police officer want to be heard, treated with respect and treated fairly. These ideas are not new, but the Platform Public Satisfaction Survey offers a mechanism to begin measuring them locally, regionally and nationally as standardized indicators of organizational performance. Based on these preliminary data, we expect that agencies will find substantial variation in public satisfaction as a function of officers' behavior, types of incidents, neighborhood, city, event outcome and other contextual factors. But this initial analysis is sufficient to illustrate the relevance of these findings for training officers on how to engage in professional respectful policing.

Finally, we wish to emphasize several points about the Public Satisfaction Survey (PSS). First, police organizations have very little data at their disposal (other than citizen complaints) to judge the quality of their performance on the streets. The PSS is based on a much broader and more representative sample of community contacts in a variety of settings. Second, no officers or civilians are harmed by these surveys because the Platform uses only summary statistics. Local agencies do not receive feedback about individual officers. Third, the results can be used locally to identify areas where performance might be improved, such as particular segments of the community, particular beats or areas of city; particular groups of officers; particular types of incidents; and specific behavioral responses during encounters. In our test sites, the feedback of results has already stimulated internal dialogue about the quality of police-citizen encounters and opened the door to potential training opportunities. Finally, with a large sample of departments involved in Phase 2, we hope to develop local, regional and national indicators of the quality of police-citizen encounters. These data will help to establish evidence-based benchmarks and define appropriate levels of performance for professional policing in the United States.