



The 2021 Fairfax County Community Survey of the Fairfax County Police Department

Cynthia Lum and Christopher Koper (PIs)
William Johnson (GRA)

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**George Mason University
Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy
Department of Criminology, Law and Society**



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BY: CYNTHIA LUM, CHRISTOPHER S. KOPER, & WILLIAM JOHNSON



Questions regarding this report can be addressed to:

Drs. Cynthia Lum and Christopher Koper, Principal Investigators
Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy
Department of Criminology, Law and Society
George Mason University
4400 University Drive, MS 6D12
Fairfax, VA 22030
Email: clum@gmu.edu
Phone: 703-993-3421

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Executive Summary

In February 2021, the Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy (CEBCP) at George Mason University (GMU), in partnership with the Fairfax County Police Department (FCPD), implemented a random-sample community survey of 6,000 Fairfax County households. The CEBCP previously conducted the 2015 FCPD Community Survey (see Lum et al., 2016). One significant difference between the 2021 and 2015 surveys was that for the 2021 survey, the research team attempted to improve the racial and ethnic representativeness of the participants (this strategy is detailed in the methodology section in the next section). As with the 2015 community survey, the 2021 survey was implemented as part of FCPD's requirements for continued accreditation with the Commission on Accreditation of Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA).¹

The survey solicited Fairfax County residents' opinions about the police department and their perceptions of crime and safety in their neighborhoods. Given that the survey was implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, the CEBCP team also asked about FCPD's response to COVID 19. Over two months, the research team sent two reminders to respondents to increase the survey response rate. As of May 2021, the response rate for this survey was 20.3%, which is an excellent response rate for mail-out surveys and higher than the 15% response rate achieved in the 2015 survey.

The 2021 survey findings were similar to the 2015 survey; overall, the survey responses were positive. Most respondents were satisfied with the Fairfax County Police Department and reported that the FCPD serves the community effectively. In addition, differences in these perceptions across race and ethnicity persist between 2015 and 2021. Specifically, non-White or Hispanic residents have relatively poorer perceptions of the police than White, non-Hispanic residents. These differences in perceptions across race and ethnicity mirror similar studies conducted nationally.

This report describes the survey methodology and administration, highlights main results, and provides recommendations to the FCPD.

¹ See <https://www.calea.org/>.

Project Background

In February 2021, the Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy (CEBCP) at George Mason University, in partnership with the Fairfax County Police Department (FCPD), conducted a random-sample survey of Fairfax County residents. The survey solicited residents' opinions about the services of the FCPD and their perceptions of crime and safety in the respondents' neighborhoods. The goal of the survey was to provide the FCPD with a scientifically sound and objective assessment of community views of FCPD police officers and the agency. The project was directed by Professors Cynthia Lum and Christopher Koper of the CEBCP, with assistance from Mr. Bill Johnson, a research assistant at the CEBCP.

The CEBCP is an internationally recognized university-based research center focused on the generation, translation, dissemination, and institutionalization of rigorous science in criminal justice policy and practice. An important goal of the CEBCP is to increase the use of science and scientific processes by police agencies to improve their crime control effectiveness and police-citizen relationships. Developing a more systematic and objective understanding of community members' perceptions of and interactions with the police is essential to this goal.

The CEBCP first partnered with the FCPD in 2015 to conduct a random sample and anonymous community survey to gauge county residents' perceptions of police services and public safety. The survey was conducted as part of the FCPD's continued accreditation with the Commission on Accreditation of Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA). The results of that survey are publicly available at <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/police/sites/police/files/assets/images/chief/reports/surveyreportfinal.pdf>.

In February 2021, the FCPD again asked the CEBCP to conduct a rigorous and independent community survey of Fairfax County households to fulfill CALEA requirements and gauge the community's perceptions of police services and public safety. As with the 2015 survey, the 2021 survey solicited Fairfax County residents' opinions about the police department and their perceptions of crime and safety in their neighborhoods. However, given that the survey was implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, the CEBCP team also asked about FCPD's response to COVID-19. Over two months, the research team sent two reminders to respondents by mail to increase the survey response rate. We detail the survey methodology below.

Survey Methodology

The Survey Instrument

The survey instrument used in 2021 was developed from the 2015 survey with added and modified questions. The survey was designed to be “evidence-based” in several ways. First, it included survey items that have been asked and validated in previous community surveys. Second, it followed best practices based on the science of survey methodology. This included asking neutral and unbiased questions, considering the ordering of questions, providing an appropriate range of responses from which respondents can choose, and including an open-ended question should they wish to add any other information (Blair et al., 2014). Third, we used what is known from research about citizen-police relationships to develop survey questions. In particular, the survey included questions reflecting the four elements of police legitimacy in democracies (see Bottoms and Tankebe (2017). These are lawfulness (do the police act within the rule of law); distributive justice (fairness of decision making); procedural justice (including how the police treat individuals); and effectiveness (in providing for public safety). Questions about residents’ fear of crime and other community concerns were also included.

The survey included 17 questions (some with multiple parts) and an invitation letter to participate. This letter and the survey are shown in Appendix A. Included in those questions were general demographic inquiries (such as age, race, ethnicity, and gender), which are needed in community surveys of the police to understand differences in responses across groups.

The Survey Sample

Fairfax County, Virginia, contains approximately 400,000 residential households, which house its 1.15 million residents. To ensure that all possible households had an equal chance of receiving the survey, we randomly selected recipients from the population of Fairfax County households, including rental units. The research team did not share the addresses sampled with the Fairfax County Police Department (see the section on privacy below).

The CEBCP research team used a commercial entity, InfoUSA Marketing, Inc., now known as Data Axle (see www.data-axle.com), to obtain a random sample of household addresses. Commercial entities have current postal mailing addresses of all resident households in a jurisdiction specific to the household level, to include apartment units (which are often not readily or publicly available from county-government information).

Commercial mailing data also have up-to-date estimations of household demographics, which can be used to improve the representativeness of the sample selected.

For the 2021 survey, the CEBCP research team made two significant sampling adjustments to the strategy used 2015 survey. First, the CEBCP increased its sample to 6,000 (compared to 4,250 in 2015), given the available mailing budget provided by Fairfax County. The selection of 6,000 households to receive the survey (as opposed to the 4,250 in 2015) was purposeful. According to previous survey research (see Van Bennekom, 2002), we hoped for between a 15% (typical for mail-out surveys) and a 25% response rate (typical for online surveys) for our survey. For a population of 400,000 households, we would need approximately 1,065 survey responses to achieve a 95% confidence level for a margin of error of 3%. If we expected, for example, 20% of the households to respond, this meant sending the survey to at least 5,325 households. Thus, we chose to survey 6,000 residents. In total, 1,218 individual households responded, resulting in a 20.3% response rate. This response rate was a significant improvement compared to the 15% response rate in 2015.

Second, the CEBCP over-sampled non-White or Hispanic households to try and obtain a more representative sample of the racial and ethnic mix of Fairfax County. The research team's oversampling of non-White or Hispanic households was a critical goal in the 2021 survey, given the lessons learned from the 2015 survey. Non-White or Hispanic residents comprise approximately 50% of Fairfax County's population. However, minority residents (and also younger people) are less likely to answer surveys in Fairfax County (a pattern seen in other jurisdictions). For example, in the 2015 survey, although the survey was sent to a random sample of racially representative households (thus reflecting the 50% non-White or Hispanic figure), only 24% of those who responded were non-White or Hispanic. Given this, in the 2021 survey the research team randomly drew a larger sample of non-White or Hispanic households (65%), compared to their White, non-Hispanic counterparts (35%). Even with this oversampling, the proportion of non-White or Hispanic residents who responded reached 37%. While still underrepresented, the proportion of residents who responded who identified as non-White or Hispanic significantly improved compared to the 2015 survey.

Protecting Respondent and Household Privacy

Protecting the privacy of respondents and households participating in surveys or any other research is a priority, responsibility, and requirement for any researcher conducting a study at George Mason University. Several actions are taken to ensure that these high standards are met. First, the research team applied for and obtained Human Subjects review and approval by the George Mason University Institutional Review

Board, the university accountability system that ensures respondent privacy and protection against any harm from answering the survey.² A cover letter (included in Appendix A) explaining the protection of respondent confidentiality and contact information for the research team was attached to each survey after being reviewed and approved by George Mason University's Office of Research Integrity and Assurance.³ In the survey, respondents were not asked for any information that could identify them. Additionally, all surveys were returned directly to George Mason University using business-reply envelopes that did not require the respondent's name or address to post. Completed surveys were kept in secured, locked offices (to be shredded after this project is complete). No completed paper survey or electronic data collected from those surveys were provided to the FCPD. Only aggregate results presented in this report are provided publicly or to FCPD.

Survey Administration

The printing and mailing of the survey were completed by a third-party vendor identified through the normal procurement processes of Fairfax County.⁴ A paper survey, a pre-paid business reply envelope, and the informational cover letter were mailed to 6,000 Fairfax households in mid-February, 2021. One week later, a postcard reminder was sent to the same addresses. In mid-March, 2021, the second round of survey packets was mailed to the same individuals, with specific instructions to discard the packet if the household had already filled out the survey. During this time, the survey team responded to personal letters, phone calls, and emails from community members regarding the survey. If a caller requested an additional copy of the survey because the original survey was not received or was lost, the research team first confirmed the individual's address had been randomly selected to receive the survey before resending the survey to the requestor. These requests for a missing survey happened rarely (8 households, in total).

Response Rate and Respondent Demographics

Completed surveys were returned from 1,218 of the 6,000 households that received them (20.3%). This return rate was a significant improvement from the 2015 survey response rate (15%). Figure 1 shows the demographic differences between those who answered the survey and the population of Fairfax County more generally in 2021. White and non-Hispanic residents continue to be overrepresented as respondents in

² For more information, see <https://oria.gmu.edu/topics/human-subjects/faqs/>.

³ See <https://oria.gmu.edu/>.

⁴ Master Print (see <https://www.master-print.com/>).

this community survey compared to their county population. However, oversampling non-White or Hispanic residents helped increase the survey’s representativeness. As already noted, in the 2021 survey, 37.4% of the respondents were non-White or Hispanic, compared to this group’s response in 2015 (24.1%). The increase in non-White individuals answering the survey is driven by an increase in the representativeness of residents of Asian descent in the survey, which doubled in 2021 compared to 2015 and became closer to population percentages. While modest increases in Black and Hispanic residents were achieved, both groups remain underrepresented in their participation in the Fairfax County survey. As with the 2015 survey, more older people answered the survey. In particular, all age categories aged 45 years and older were more likely to answer the survey than younger residents.

Figure 1. Characteristics of Survey Respondents (of those who responded to each question)

	Fairfax County estimates	% of respondents
White <i>AND</i> non-Hispanic	49.5%	62.6%
Non-White <i>OR</i> Hispanic	50.5%	37.4%
Black <i>AND</i> non-Hispanic	10.1%	6.5%
Asian/Pacific Islander <i>AND</i> non-Hispanic	20.4%	18.5%
Other/Multi-race/Native American <i>AND</i> non-Hispanic	3.7%	4.5%
Hispanic (may be of any race)	16.5%	7.9%
Female	50.4%	45.2%
18 to 24 years	8.3%	0.9%
25 to 34 years	13.2%	6.2%
35 to 44 years	14.4%	13.1%
45 to 54 years	14.0%	19.9%
55 to 64 years	12.8%	25.1%
65 to 74 years	8.2%	21.2%
75 years or older	5.3%	13.7%

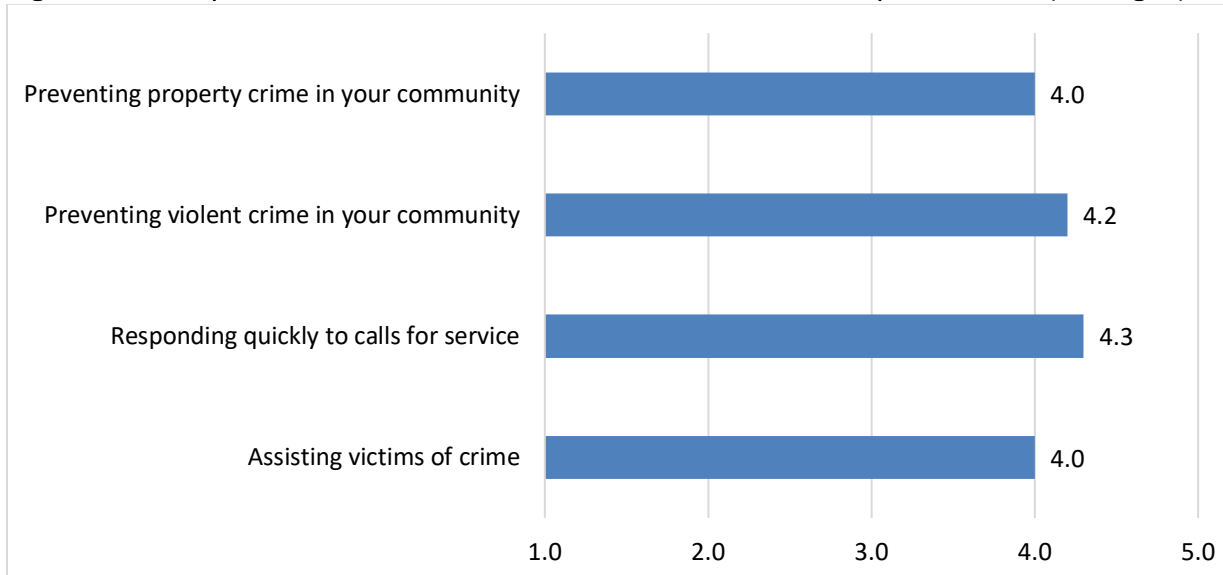
All estimates for Fairfax County are based on the 2020 U.S. Census population estimates. Non-response for race and ethnicity questions were 4.5% and 6.0%, respectively; non-response for age question was 7.0%; non-response for gender identification was 1.6%.

The results of the survey are provided next. For all statistics, the results reported include only those who responded to each question (the “valid” percentage) which may be fewer than the total number of overall respondents (given that some did not answer every question in the survey).

Results (Part I): All Survey Respondents

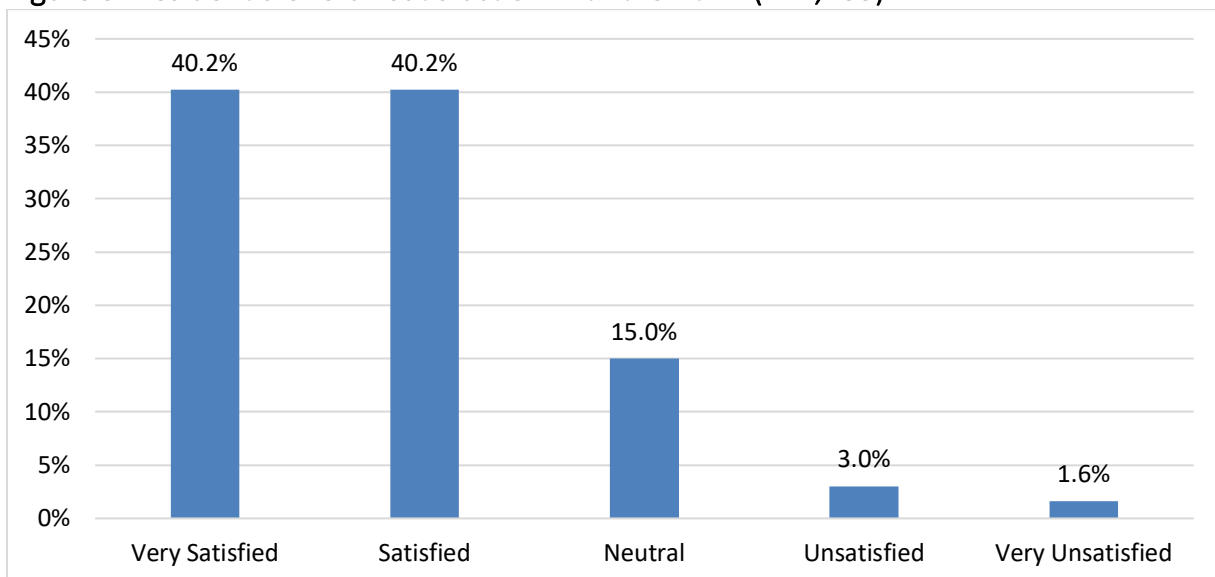
Figures 2 and 3 show that when analyzing all survey responses, residents perceived the FCPD as effective in preventing crime, responding promptly to calls for service, and assisting crime victims. In addition, the majority of respondents expressed general satisfaction with the police (over 80% were “satisfied” or “very satisfied”).

Figure 2. Perceptions of effectiveness of the FCPD in various responsibilities (averages).



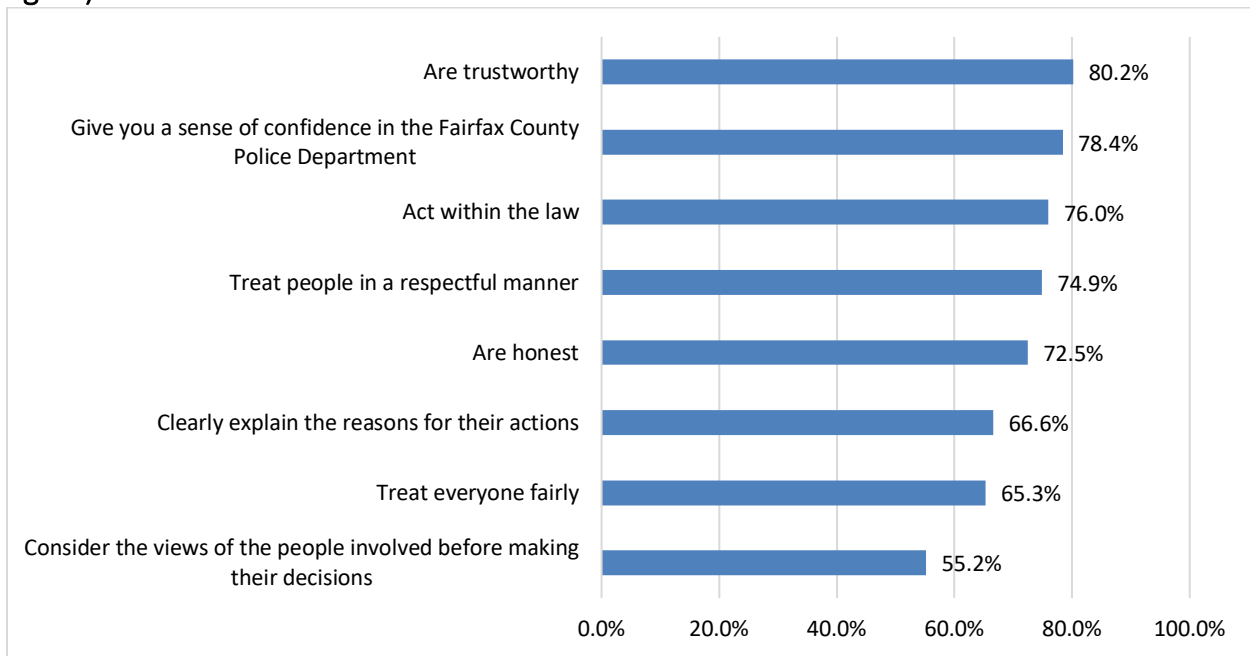
Question choices: 1=Very Ineffective; 2=Somewhat Ineffective; 3=Neutral; 4=Somewhat Effective; 5=Very Effective. Standard deviation (s.d.) range: 0.945 – 1.029. Missing responses for these four questions ranged from 2.2%-4.8%.

Figure 3. Resident’s Overall Satisfaction with the FCPD (n=1,183)



The survey then asked respondents for their perceptions about Fairfax County police officers more specifically. Figure 4 shows the percentage of respondents who “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with numerous statements about several legitimacy-based qualities of Fairfax County police officers, including whether they were trustworthy, lawful, and treated people equally. Generally, across all eight questions, the majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with each statement. However, as Figure 4 shows, respondents were more likely to agree or strongly agree that FCPD officers are trustworthy, generate a sense of confidence in the police department, and are lawful, respectful, and honest. The consistency of agreement was lower for perceptions that officers clearly explain the reasons for their actions, treat everyone fairly, or consider people’s views before making decisions.

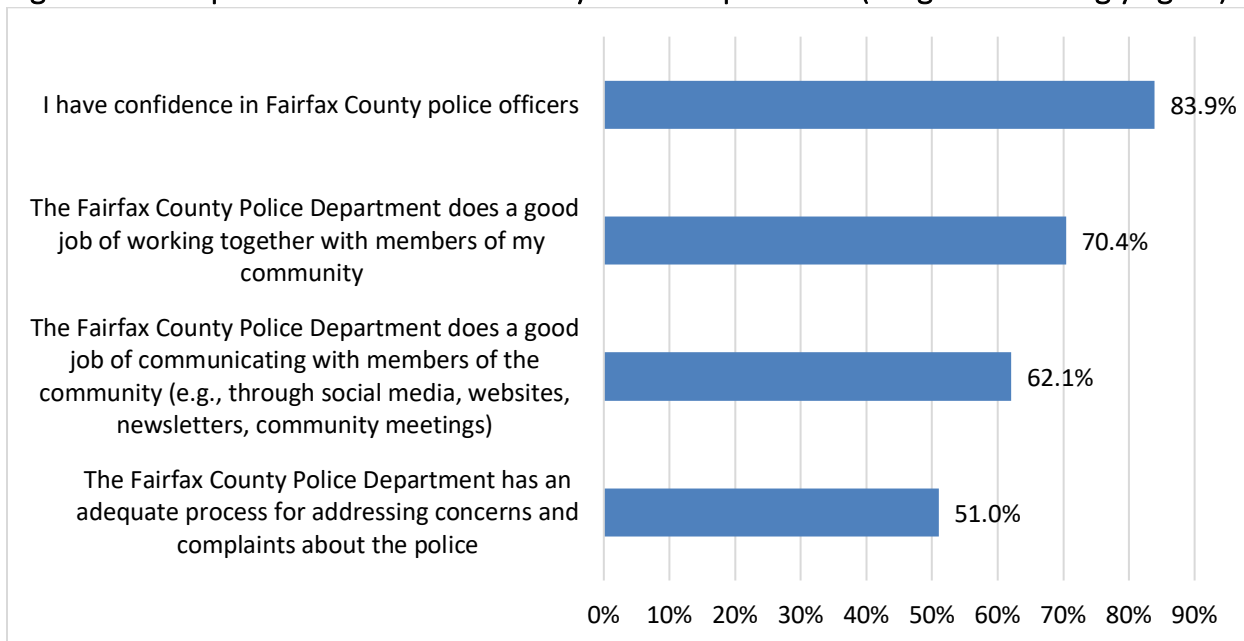
Figure 4. Perceptions of Fairfax County Police Department Officers (% agree or strongly agree)



Choices included “Strongly Agree”; “Agree”; “Neutral”; “Disagree”; and “Strongly Disagree.” Missing responses for these eight questions ranged from 1.9% - 3.7%.

Similarly, mixed findings were evident in responses to four additional questions shown in Figure 5. For example, while confidence in Fairfax County police officers was widespread and residents felt the police department worked well with community members, residents were less consistently agreeing that the FCPD communicated well with the public or had a good process for resolving complaints.

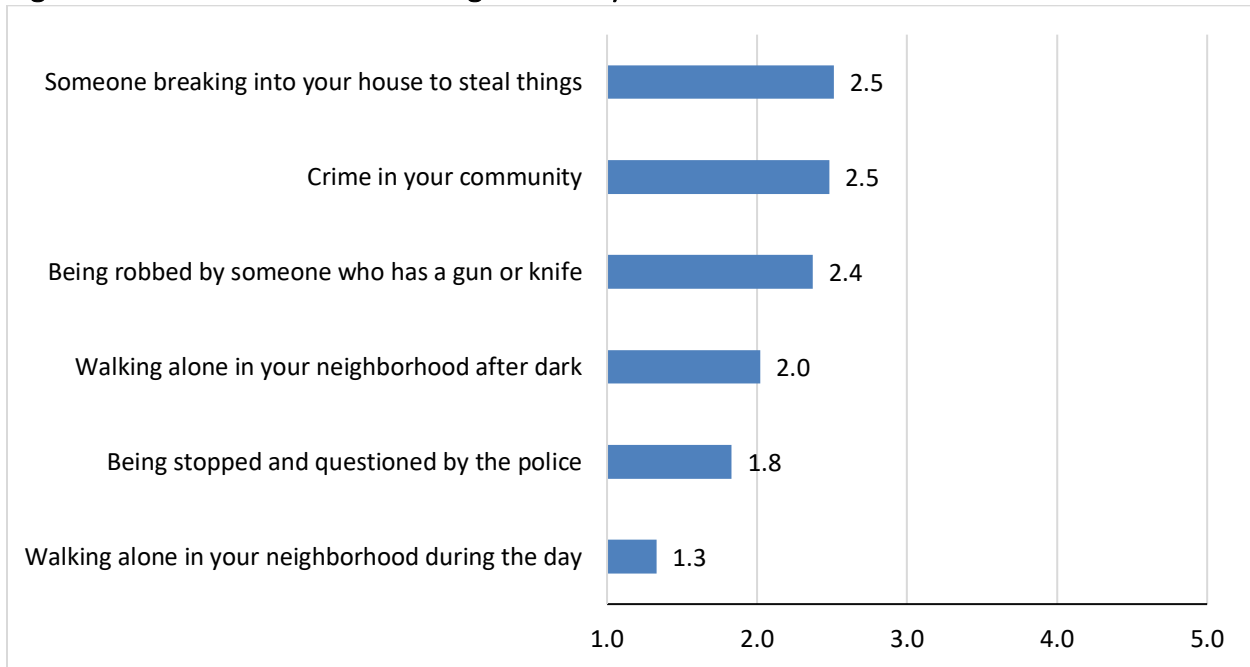
Figure 5. Perceptions of the Fairfax County Police Department (% agree or strongly agree)



Choices included “Strongly Agree”; “Agree”; “Neutral”; “Disagree”; and “Strongly Disagree.” Missing responses range: 1.8% - 3.9%.

One gauge of police agency effectiveness is the ability to make people feel safe. As Figure 6 shows, respondents, on average, were “not too fearful” about crime generally, although they tended to have some fear about being burglarized or robbed. Fairfax County residents also feel the safest when walking alone during the day. In general, residents were also minimally fearful of being stopped by the police. We will examine racial differences in these findings in the next section.

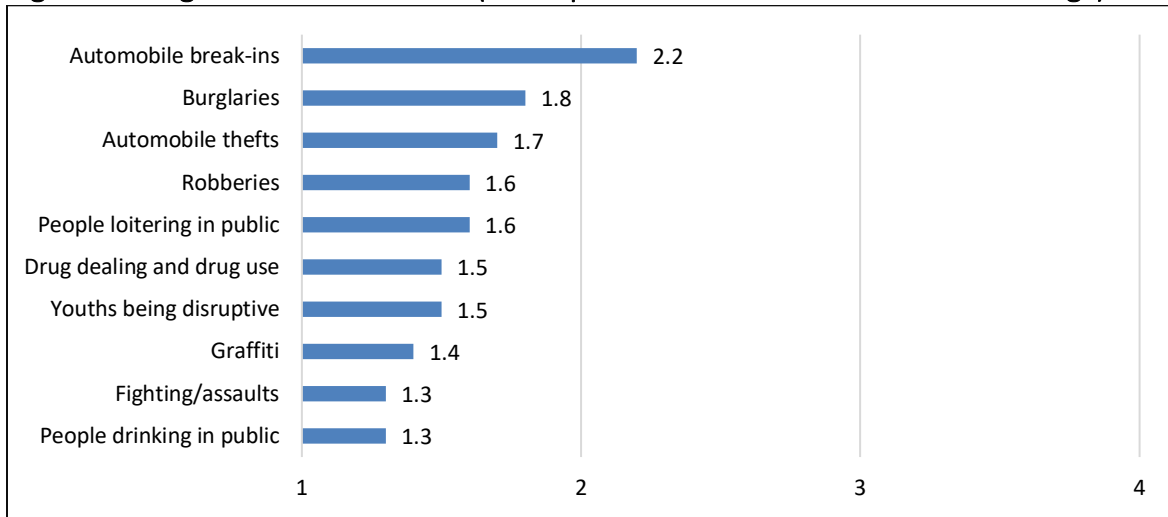
Figure 6. Fear of Crime and Feelings of Safety



All items except for the “walking alone” questions use a scale of 5=“very fearful”; 4=“somewhat fearful”; 3=“neutral”; 2=“not too fearful”; 1=“not at all fearful” (s.d. range: 1.117 - 1.308; missing responses range: 1.2% - 1.5%). The “walking alone” questions for day and dark use a scale of 5=“very unsafe”; 4=“unsafe”; 3=“neutral”; 2=“safe”; 1=“very safe” (s.d. range: 0.631 and 0.991, respectively; missing responses range: 1.1% and 1.4%, respectively).

We asked respondents to more specifically consider how much of a problem certain crimes and disorders were in their neighborhood (Figure 7). Most respondents did not feel the various crimes listed were a serious problem in their neighborhoods. However, the three crimes of greatest concern to residents were thefts from vehicles, burglaries, and automobile thefts. These results suggest that respondents in Fairfax County believe they are generally safe from violence, but that property crimes are a concern (albeit minor).

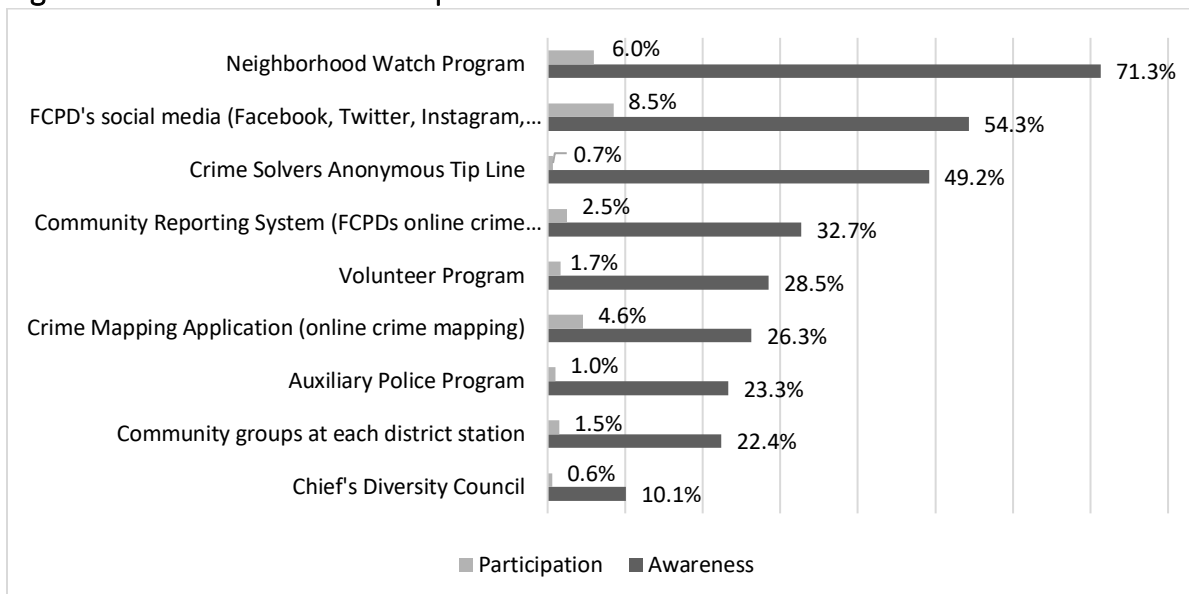
Figure 7. Neighborhood Problems (“How problematic are each of the following”):



Question choices were: 1=Not a Problem at All; 2=A Minor Problem; 3=A Moderate Problem; and 4=A Major Problem. S.d. range: 0.576 – 0.981; missing responses range: 1.7% - 2.4%.

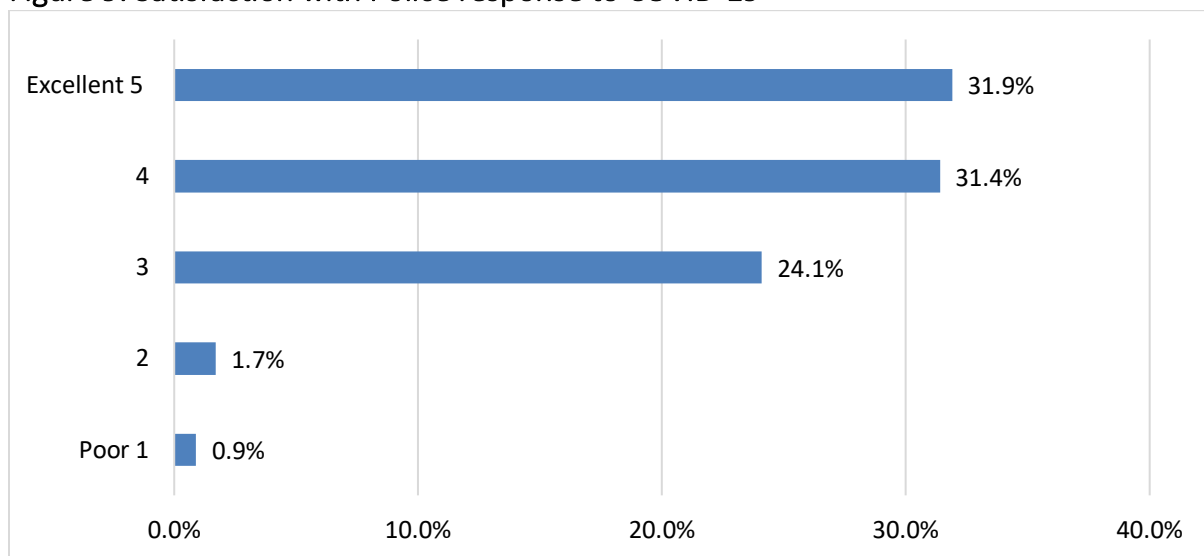
The FCPD was particularly interested in understanding resident awareness and use of specific services the department provides to county residents. The research team, therefore, asked respondents if they were aware of (yes or no) or participated in (yes or no) the services and activities listed in Figure 8. The gap between awareness and use is stark, as would be expected. While most residents were aware of the neighborhood watch program, FCPD’s social media, and the crime solvers tip line, they were much less aware and unlikely to use or participate in programs such as the Chief’s Diversity Council or community groups at district stations.

Figure 8. Awareness and Participation in Police Services



Given the timing of the survey, respondents were also asked about FCPD's response to COVID-19. Figure 9 shows respondents' overall rating of the FCPD's response to the COVID-19 pandemic from poor (a rating of "1") to excellent (a rating of "5"). A majority (63.4%) of respondents rated the police response as excellent or good. Another 24.1 gave a neutral rating of the FPCD's performance. Overall, most respondents approved or were neutral about the department's response to COVID-19. However, 10% of respondents chose not to answer this question, which would be considered a sizeable missing response rate within the survey.

Figure 9. Satisfaction with Police response to COVID-19



Comparison with 2015 Community Survey

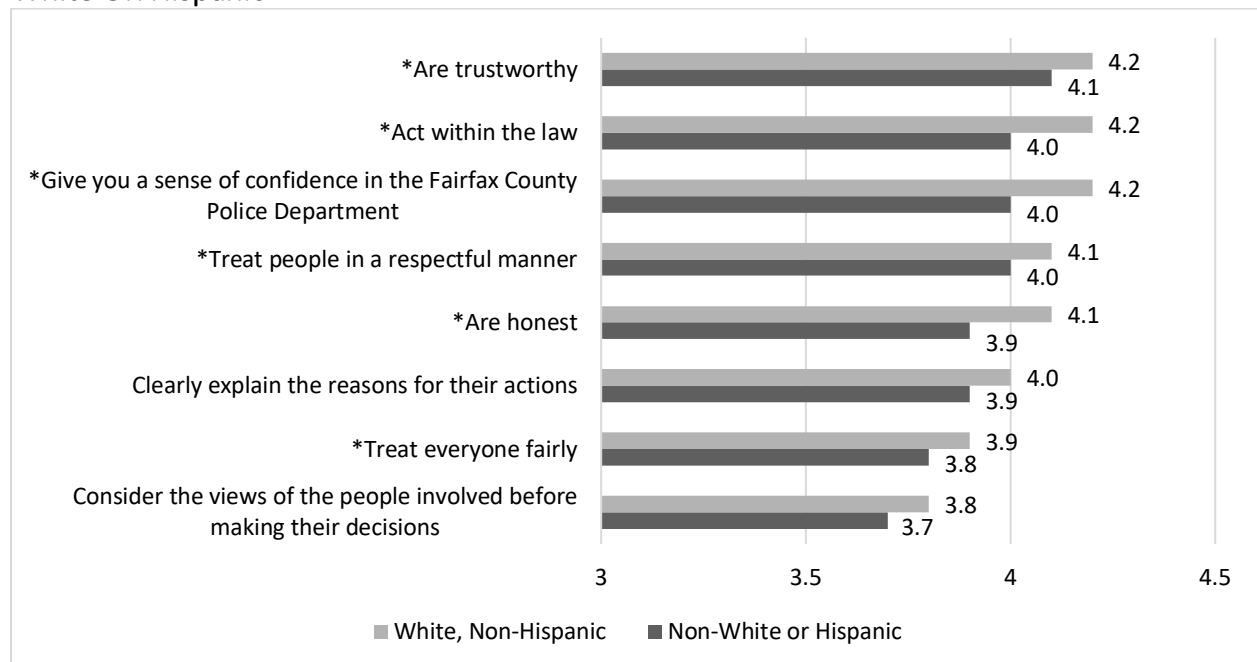
The overall findings in Figures 4 through 8 are similar to the 2015 survey. We caution making direct comparisons between the surveys with the simple descriptive analysis provided here, given that the respondents from 2021 were more representative of the racial and ethnic makeup of the population than in the 2015 survey. However, a couple of differences are worth noting. First, in 2021, more people agreed or strongly agreed that the FCPD does a good job communicating with residents compared to 2015. Although this is still one of the lower ratings in Figure 5, this measure increased from 54.1% in 2015 to 62.1% in 2021. The second difference was in the problems that people reported in their neighborhood. In 2021, automobile thefts replaced "loitering" as the third greatest concern in their neighborhood. We note that this survey was conducted during COVID, which may have altered crime patterns and perceptions of neighborhood problems.

Results (Part II): Variations in Perceptions by Race/Ethnicity and Contact with the Police

Because those who responded to our random-sample survey did not mirror the county’s demographic characteristics (see Figure 1), and because research has uncovered differences in perceptions of the police by race, we report differences in survey responses by race and Hispanic ethnicity of respondents. We divided our respondents into “White AND non-Hispanic” and “non-White OR Hispanic” respondents. The “non-White or Hispanic” category includes anyone who identified as Black, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American, Hispanic (including White Hispanics), or other/mixed race. The small sample size of specific groups within this category precludes a more fine-grained analysis by racial/ethnic background. However, we do specifically compare Black versus White respondent answers when possible.

Figure 10 reports on the same questions as Figure 4 but compares two groups: White *and* non-Hispanic, with non-White *or* Hispanic. While both groups are likely to agree or strongly agree with the statements, statistically significant differences (denoted by an asterisk) are found across almost all questions, with non-White or Hispanic respondents reporting less positive perceptions of the police than their White counterparts.

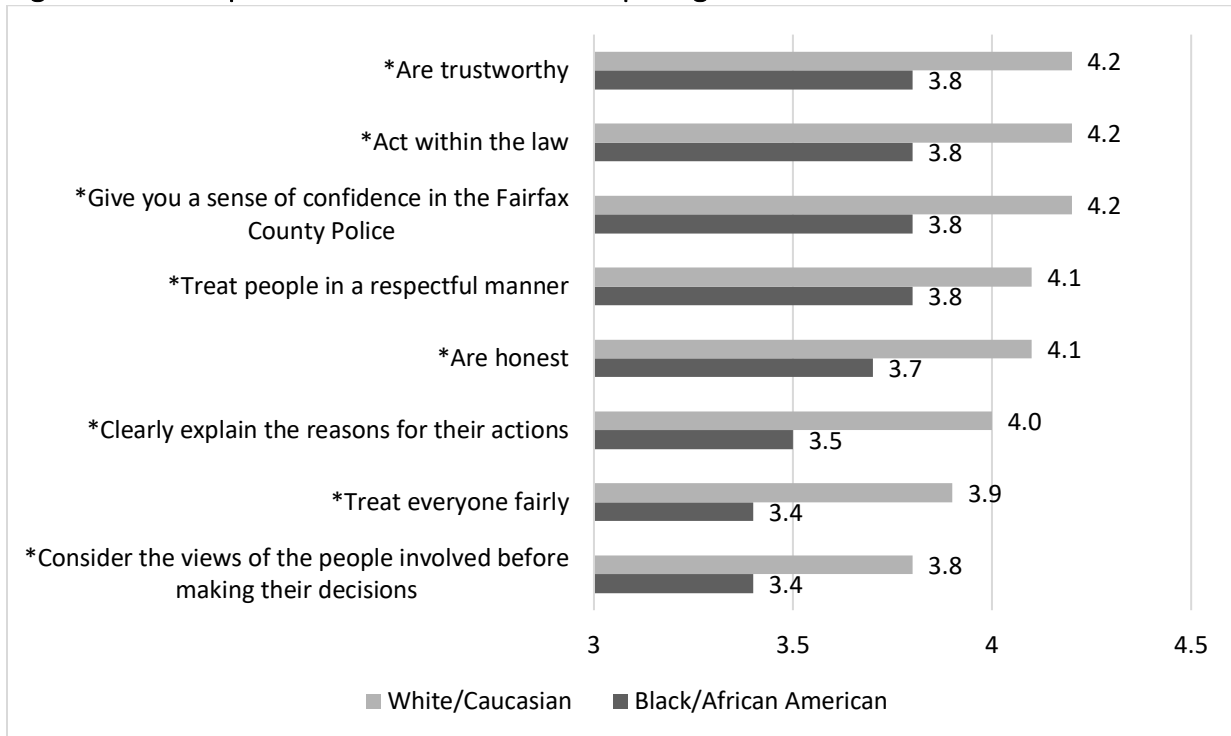
Figure 10. Perceptions of Police Officers Comparing “White AND Non-Hispanic” with “non-White OR Hispanic”



*Difference was statistically significant at the p= 0.05 level. Respondent choices were 1=Strongly Disagree; 2=Disagree; 3=Neutral; 4=Agree; and 5=Strongly Agree.

Figure 11 reports on the same questions as Figure 4 and 10, but compares White and Black residents (regardless of their Hispanic ethnicity). White residents have significantly better perceptions of Fairfax County police officers for all items than Black residents.

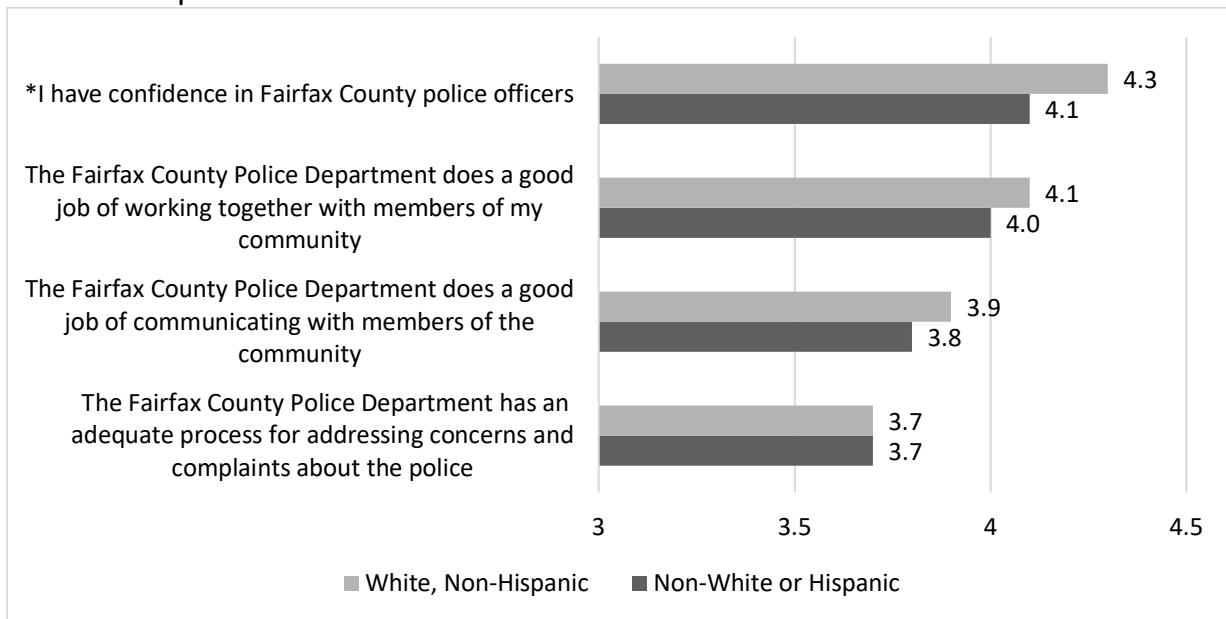
Figure 11. Perceptions of Police Officers Comparing White vs. Black Residents



*Difference was statistically significant at the $p = 0.05$ level. Respondent choices were 1=Strongly Disagree; 2=Disagree; 3=Neutral; 4=Agree; and 5=Strongly Agree.

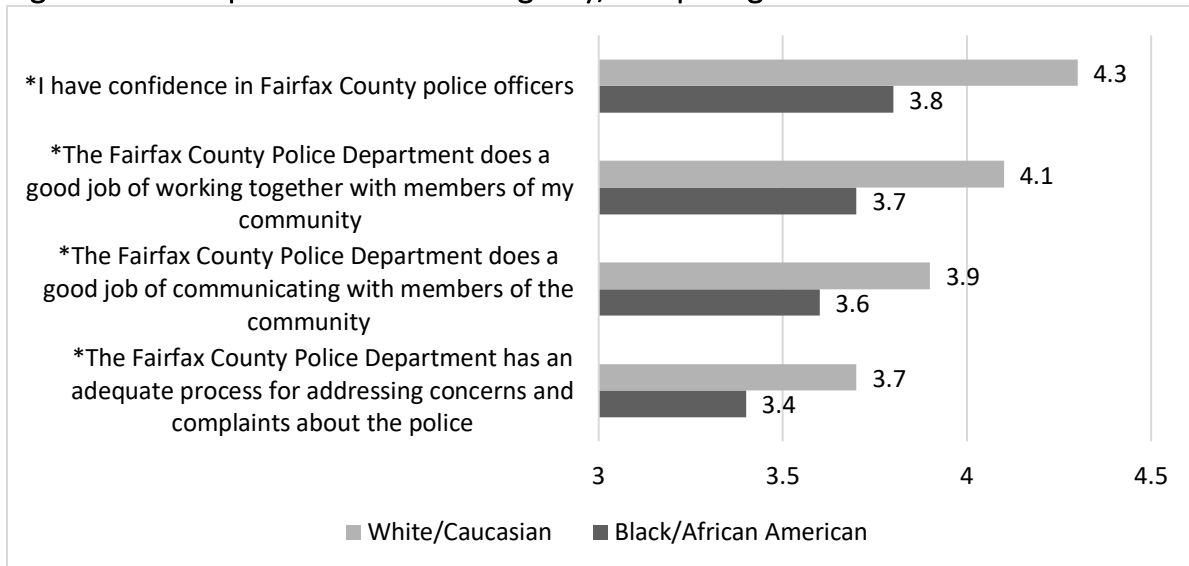
Similarly, Figures 12 and 13 report on the same questions as Figure 5, asking respondents about their perceptions of the agency more generally (as opposed to officers more specifically). Figure 12 shows no significant differences between White and non-Hispanic and non-White or Hispanic respondents for three of the four items. However, White and non-Hispanics tend to agree more about having confidence in the FCPD than non-Whites or Hispanics. When comparing White and Black respondents (regardless of Hispanic ethnicity), there were statistically significant differences for every item; Black respondents have poorer perceptions of the FCPD than White respondents (Figure 13).

Figure 12. Perceptions of the Police Agency, Comparing White and Non-Hispanic with Non-White or Hispanic



*Difference was statistically significant at the p= 0.05 level. Respondent choices were 1=Strongly Disagree; 2=Disagree; 3=Neutral; 4=Agree; and 5=Strongly Agree.

Figure 13. Perceptions of the Police Agency, Comparing White versus Black Residents



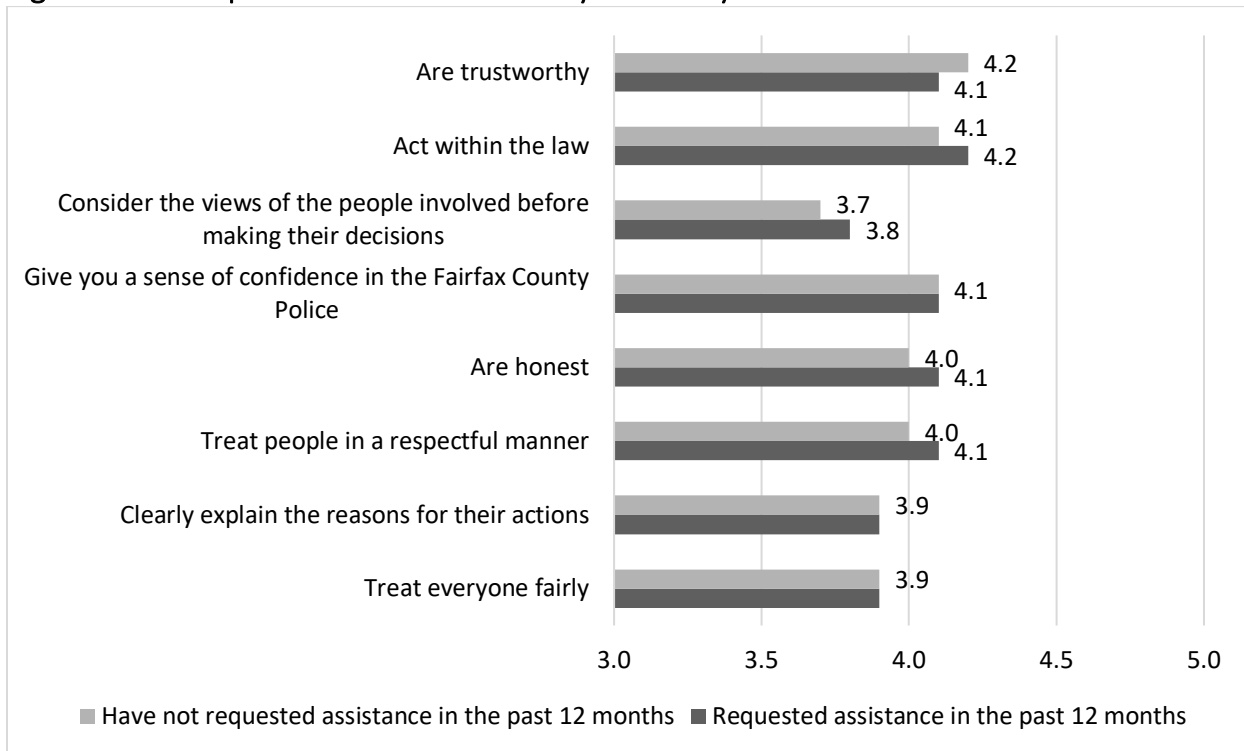
*Difference was statistically significant at the p= 0.05 level. Respondent choices were 1=Strongly Disagree; 2=Disagree; 3=Neutral; 4=Agree; and 5=Strongly Agree.

Research shows that contact with the police can influence perceptions of the police (either positively or negatively) and that the effects of police contact often depend on whether the contact was voluntary (requesting assistance from the police) or

involuntary (being stopped by police). As such, we examined whether Fairfax residents’ views of the FCPD varied due to police contact within 12 months of the survey. We made two comparisons. First, we compared survey responses between those who recently requested assistance from the police and those who had not. Twenty percent (n=243) of respondents had requested some help or service from the police in the last 12 months before the survey administration. Second, we compared survey responses between those who had been involuntarily stopped by the police while driving, walking, or cycling versus those who had not. The police had stopped 7% of respondents (n=88). We note that for the 2021 survey, 12 months before would have been during the pandemic, when police-public contact would have declined significantly.

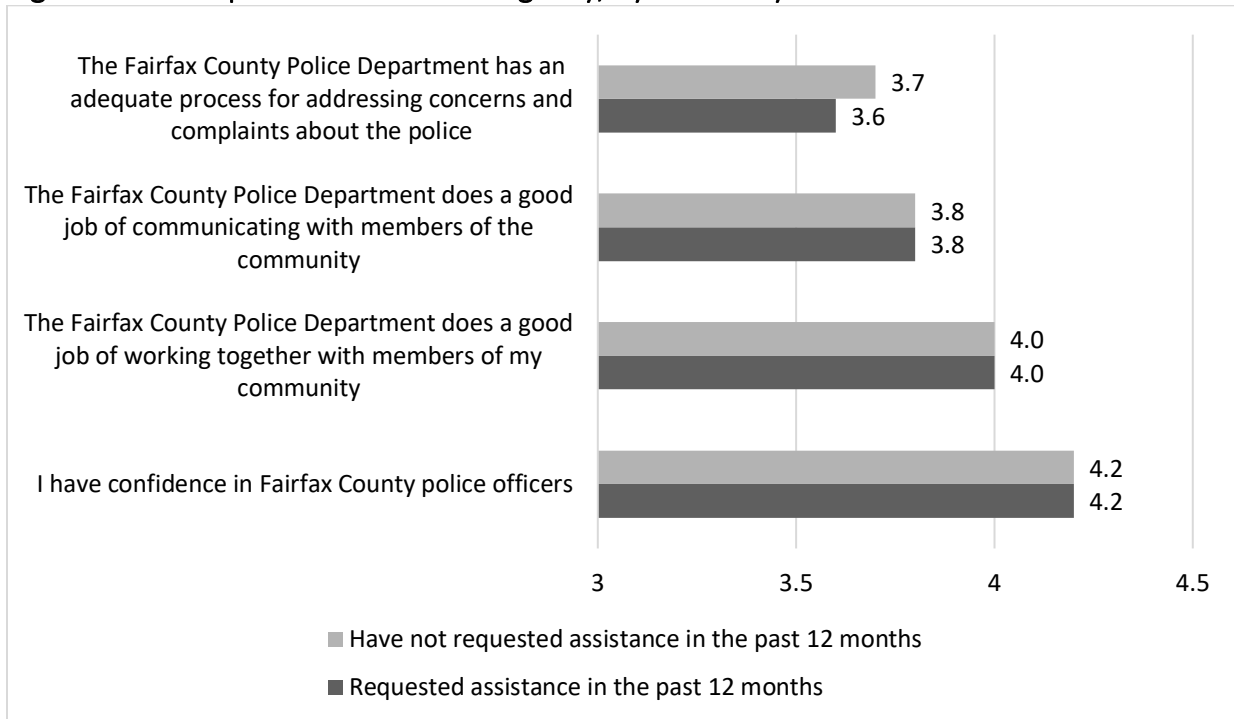
Figure 14 shows responses to the same questions as Figures 4, and Figure 15 shows the same questions as Figures 5, but this time comparing those who had requested assistance from the police in the last 12 months (“voluntary contact”). We did not find any statistically significant differences in responses between these two groups on questions related to perceptions of FCPD police officers (Figure 14) or on perceptions of the police agency more generally (Figure 15).

Figure 14. Perceptions of Police Officers by Voluntary Police Contact



*No statistically significant differences at the p=0.05 level were found. Respondent choices were 1=Strongly Disagree; 2=Disagree; 3=Neutral; 4=Agree; and 5=Strongly Agree.

Figure 15. Perceptions of the Police Agency, by Voluntary Police Contact



* No statistically significant differences at the p=0.05 level were found. Respondent choices were 1=Strongly Disagree; 2=Disagree; 3=Neutral; 4=Agree; and 5=Strongly Agree.

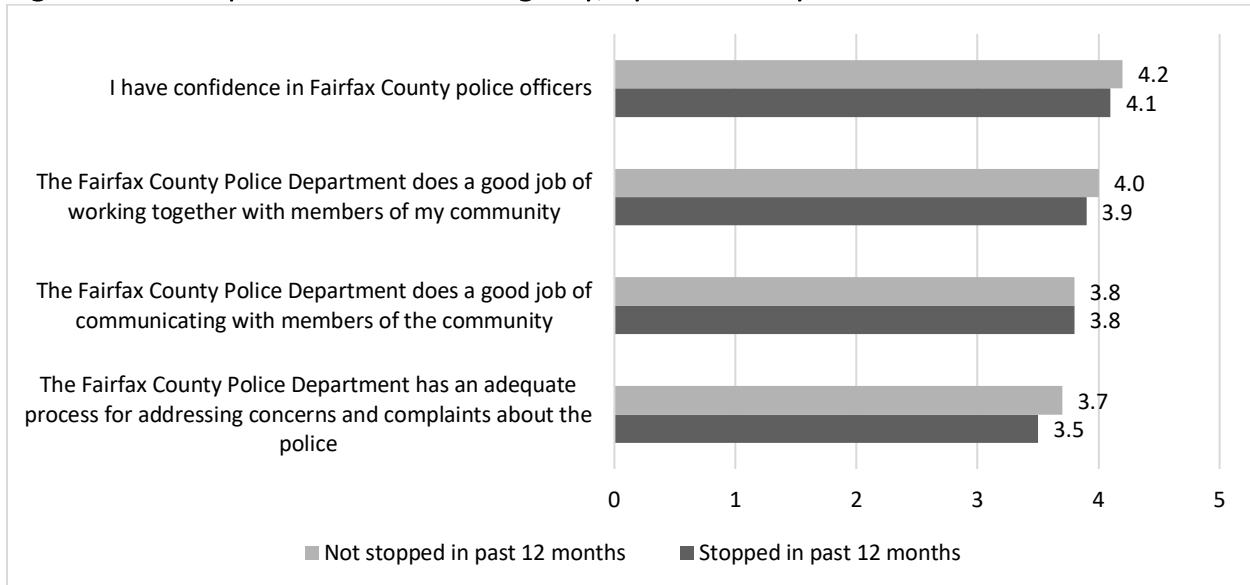
Similarly, we compared responses of those who were stopped (or not) by the police in the past 12 months (“involuntary contact”). Overall, 6.5% of the White and non-Hispanic respondents in the survey reported being stopped by the police in the last 12 months, compared to 8.1% of the non-White or Hispanic respondents. As with voluntary contact, Figure 16 shows no significant differences in perceptions of police officers, although, as with the 2015 survey, those who have been stopped reported lower ratings. There were also no statistically significant differences between perceptions of the agency by those stopped or not stopped (Figure 17).

Figure 16. Perceptions of Police Officers, by Involuntary Police Contact



* No statistically significant differences at the p=0.05 level were found. Respondent choices were 1=Strongly Disagree; 2=Disagree; 3=Neutral; 4=Agree; and 5=Strongly Agree.

Figure 17. Perceptions of the Police Agency, by Involuntary Police Contact

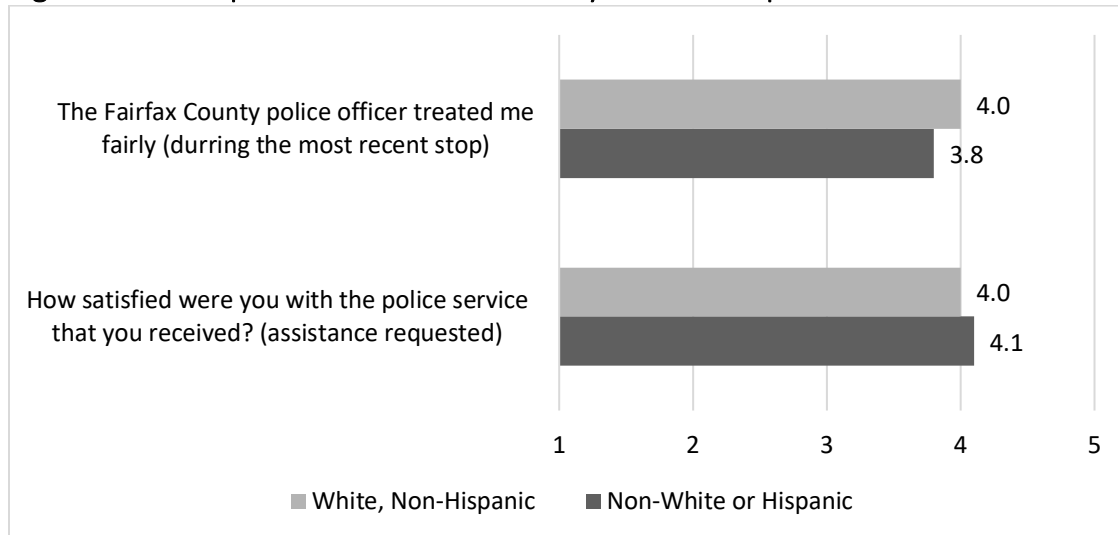


*Difference was statistically significant at the p= 0.05 level (none found). Respondent choices were 1=Strongly Disagree; 2=Disagree; 3=Neutral; 4=Agree; and 5=Strongly Agree.

In addition to their general views of the FCPD or its officers, individuals who reported that they had requested police services or had involuntary contact with the police were

also asked about their perceptions of fair treatment in their specific encounter. We found no statistically significant racial/ethnic differences in perceptions of fair treatment between whites and non-whites who were stopped by police or requested assistance from the police (see Figure 18).

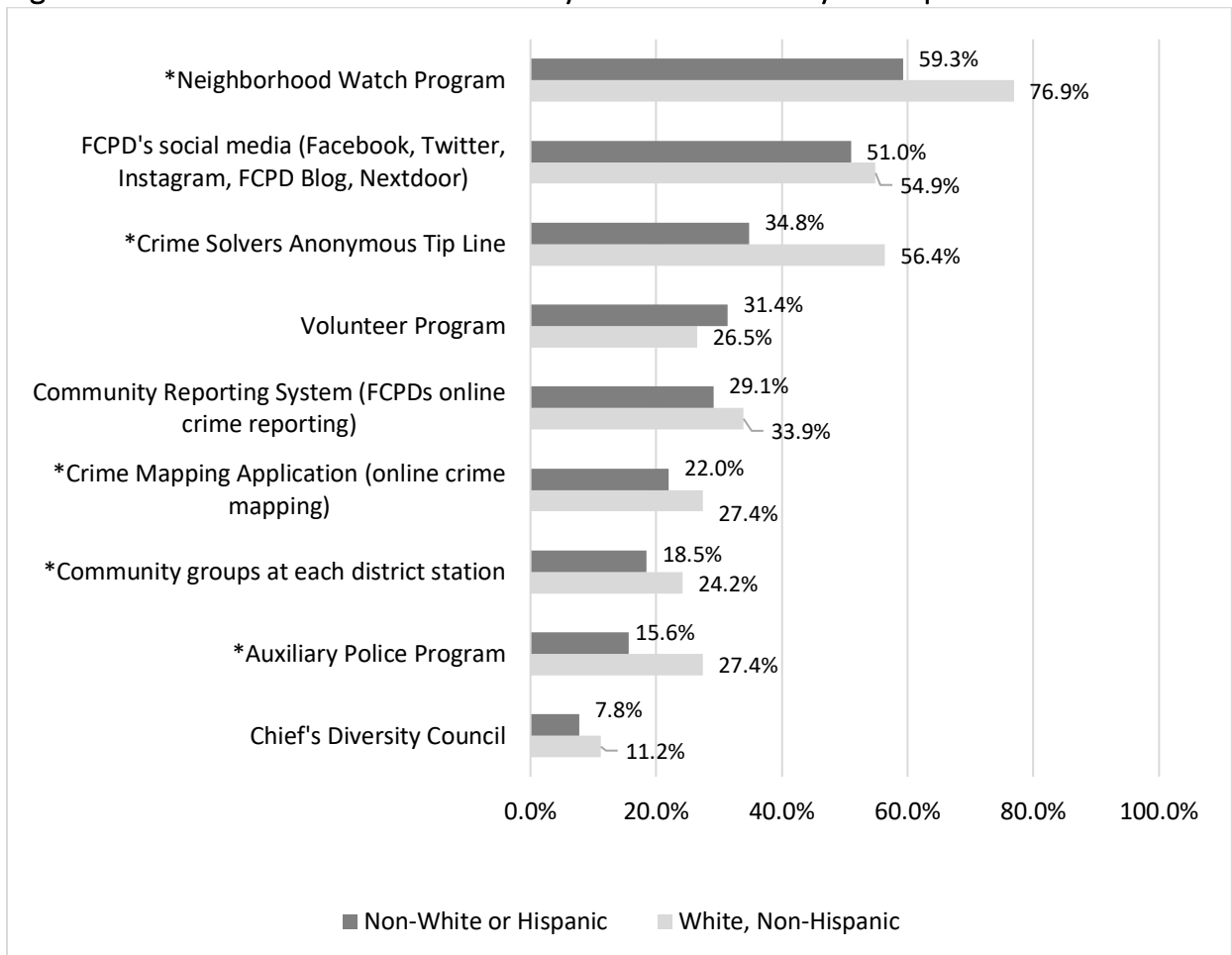
Figure 18. Perceptions of Fair Treatment by Race of Respondent



* No statistically significant differences at the $p=0.05$ level were found. Respondent choices were 1=Strongly Disagree; 2=Disagree; 3=Neutral; 4=Agree; and 5=Strongly Agree. Only seven Black respondents said they had been stopped by the police. Given this low number, we only made comparisons between White *and* Non-Hispanic, and Non-White *or* Hispanic.

White AND non-Hispanic and non-white OR Hispanic respondents also differed in their awareness of some police department programs, as shown in Figure 19. White, non-Hispanic respondents were significantly more likely to be aware of Neighborhood Watch, Crime Solvers Anonymous Tip Lines, online crime mapping, community groups at district stations, and the Auxiliary Police program than non-White or Hispanic respondents. Non-White or Hispanic respondents were only more likely to be aware of the volunteer program than Whites and non-Hispanics (and this difference was not significant).

Figure 19. Awareness of Police Services by Race and Ethnicity of Respondent



*Difference was statistically significant at the p= 0.05 level.

Comparison with 2015 Community Survey

These findings are similar to the 2015 community survey in that White AND non-Hispanic respondents had more positive overall perceptions of FCPD officers and the agency than non-White OR Hispanic, and/or Black respondents. White and non-Hispanic respondents were also more likely to be aware of FCPD's community services. However, unlike in 2015, there were no significant differences between those who had been stopped by the police and those who had not been stopped on several measures. Again, we note that the demographic make-up of the respondents in this survey are different from in 2015, which may have led to this difference.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The 2021 community survey of Fairfax County residents did not produce surprising results compared to the 2015 community survey and other national community surveys about the Fairfax County Police Department and its officers. As with the 2015 survey, residents generally have a positive opinion of the Fairfax County Police Department and its officers. Most respondents express confidence in FCPD's officers and the agency to address crime and are satisfied with their services. In addition, the levels of fear of crime (or the police) in the county are low.

However, there are important caveats, which were also found in the 2015 survey. While most citizens express confidence in FCPD police officers' abilities to address crime problems and believe officers are trustworthy, honest, respectful, and lawful, fewer are likely to agree or strongly agree that officers treat everyone fairly or consider the views of people involved before making their decisions (although a majority still agree). Interestingly, a greater proportion of respondents in the 2021 survey believe the FCPD does a good job communicating with residents compared to the 2015 survey.

There are differences in perceptions of police treatment and perceived police legitimacy between White AND non-Hispanic compared to non-White OR Hispanic respondents. This is a concerning finding that consistently appears across U.S. communities in multiple collections of the Bureau of Justice Statistic's *Police-Public Contact Survey*.⁵ In Fairfax County, these findings generally emerge when comparing responses from White AND non-Hispanic to non-White OR Hispanic residents. But the differences are most stark when comparing Black and White residents, regardless of Hispanic origin (i.e., Figures 11 and 13). Although the proportion of non-Whites answering the survey increased in 2021, this increase was primarily due to an almost doubling of the proportion of residents of Asian descent answering the survey (as well as an modest increase in the proportion of Hispanic individuals answering the survey). Thus, the more muted differences between White AND non-Hispanic and non-White OR Hispanic respondents compared to differences between Blacks and Whites regardless of Hispanic ethnicity may be due to an increase in Asian and Hispanic respondents, rather than Black respondents, to the survey. In 2015, 5.1% of the survey respondents were Black, which increased to 6.5% in 2021. Both Black and Hispanic respondents continue to answer the survey at lower rates than their counterparts, despite our oversampling of these groups.

⁵ See <https://bjs.ojp.gov/data-collection/police-public-contact-survey-ppcs>.

Discerning perceptions between groups may be more useful when surveys are collected from those who have contact with the police. These may include victims, suspects, witnesses, those who call the police, those who are stopped by the police, or juveniles, partner agencies, or specific groups that are more likely to see or interact with the police. The police agency could also engage in targeted assessments and evaluations of impacts and resident perceptions after different interventions are applied in specific places. However, we note that targeted and more purposeful surveying of the most appropriate population group for specific knowledge gathering requires a much more significant financial investment by Fairfax County. While much of the work on this (and the 2015) community survey was done using pro bono efforts of faculty and students at George Mason University, more targeted surveys (and their analysis) require greater investment by the County or the FCPD that would need to be sustained over time.

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Appendix A: Survey and Cover Letter Sent to Fairfax County Residents



GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY & FAIRFAX COUNTY POLICE DEPARTMENT COMMUNITY SURVEY



Dear Fairfax County Community Member:

Enclosed is the 2021 Fairfax County Police Department (FCPD) community survey independently conducted by George Mason University (GMU). Your household has been randomly selected from all households in Fairfax County to complete this survey. We ask that only one adult member of your household completes this survey. Your participation is anonymous and voluntary, and you must be at least 18 years of age to participate.

The survey asks for your opinions about the Fairfax County Police Department and crime and safety in your neighborhood. Understanding community views of the police is important for developing appropriate law enforcement and social service responses to problems in Fairfax County and improving police-community relations. Your answers are anonymous, and no individual responses will be identified in any reports produced from the survey. Do **not** write your name or other personal information on this survey.

If you agree to participate, please answer the following questions in your own opinion and to the best of your knowledge. The survey should take less than 15 minutes to complete, and there are no foreseeable risks or benefits to you for participating in this research. Once you have completed the questionnaire, please return it in the pre-paid business reply envelope provided.

We thank you in advance for completing this important survey.

CONTACT

This research study is being conducted by George Mason's University's Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy (CEBCP), in partnership with the Fairfax County Police Department. The research team is led by Professor Cynthia Lum, Director of the CEBCP, who may be reached at 703-993-3421 or clum@gmu.edu for questions or to report a research-related problem.

Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy
George Mason University
4400 University Drive, MS 6D12
Fairfax, VA 22030
www.cebc.org