

## **Does Place Shape Perceptions of the Police? A Comparison of University Students and Community Members**

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### **Abstract:**

There is a long-standing criticism that attendance at universities liberalizes students and that students' perceptions of the justice system differ greatly from their community counterparts. We test that proposition by comparing the results of surveys about the local police from random samples of community members and convenience samples of university undergraduate collected in 2011 and 2013 ( $N = 1,544$ ). The community respondents rated the police service more favourably in terms of performance, but both community members and undergraduate students held similar perceptions of police professionalism. Our results reveal that perceptions toward the police are the result of a complex interplay of contextual and demographic factors in addition to university attendance. The implications of our findings for investigators using university students to reflect community sentiments about policing are discussed, especially in terms of how place shapes these students' perceptions.

### **Introduction**

When it comes to learning and working, Canada's colleges and universities have been described as highly differentiated places with distinctive personalities (Toohey, 2014). On March 31, 2014, these institutions enrolled more than two million students (Statistics Canada, 2015) and in July 2016 employed almost 375,000 persons (Statistics Canada, 2016). Put another way, about one in fifteen Canadians are either attending or working in places of higher learning, making them important social institutions. Sangaramoorthy and colleagues (2016, p. 29) observe that "scholars have long documented the deep and substantial connections between people and environments, and in particular psychosocial conceptions and

meanings of place, individual and collective attachment to particular places, and the formation of identities strongly linked with place.”

There is an intuitive conceptual appeal to the notion that places play a powerful role in shaping the identities of their residents (Brown-Saracino, 2015; Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983). It has long been proposed, for example, that college has a liberalizing effect on students (Farnworth, Longmire, & West, 1998). The public, however, has been critical that universities, with their promotion of progressive ideals, have become somewhat disconnected from the rest of society in recent years (Kay, 2015). The media echoes those sentiments and reports how some students have become captivated with issues such as cultural appropriation, micro-aggressions, safe spaces, and trigger warnings that do not resonate much beyond the university’s boundaries (Amenabar, 2016). One question that follows that observation is whether students are as different from the rest of the public as some contend. That proposition can be evaluated by examining student perceptions of controversial issues and comparing those perceptions with their counterparts in the community. There are few more contentious issues than policing, and a 2014 *Global News* poll of Canadians revealed that the top US news stories were the deaths of Black men such as Eric Garner and Michael Brown after confrontations with US police officers (Logan, 2014).

Nearly everybody has an opinion about the causes of crime, the treatment of wrongdoers, and the manner in which criminal and juvenile justice systems ought to operate. That observation is true for respondents in both community and university samples. Because they are so convenient, investigators in the social sciences have regularly used undergraduate students as an indicator of public opinion about issues related to crime and justice. Whether university student populations really reflect the true community population has been debated by scholars in the disciplines of communication (Basil, 1996; Potter, Cooper, & Dupagne, 1993), consumers (Cunningham, Anderson, & Murphy, 1974; Ok, Shanklin, & Back, 2008; Tih, Ennis, & Poon, 2008), the criminal justice system (Diamond, 1997; Keller &

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Weiner, 2011; Payne & Chappell, 2008; Wiecko, 2010), public education (Porter, 2011), organizations (Greenberg, 1987), political science (Kam, Wilking, & Zechmeister, 2007), and psychology (Henry, 2008; Sears, 2008).

The current research examines whether their current presence in a distinctive place, an institution of higher learning, shapes student perceptions toward the police. We test this proposition by comparing student samples with their community counterparts. Specifically, attitudes about a local police service in a mid-size Canadian city were collected from community and university samples surveyed in 2011 and 2013. Our goal is to determine if perceptions of police performance and professionalism differ between community and university samples, and if so, whether demographic and contextual variables (such as contact with the police or prior victimization) drive these differences.

### **Procedural Justice and Perceptions of the Police**

There is an increasing desire on the part of government policymakers and police executives to better understand how the public perceives their services (Bradford, Stanko, & Jackson, 2009). As Nair, Luqman, Vadeveloo, Marimuthu, and Shanmuggam (2012, p. 113) observe, “It is essential that the public should have a positive perception of the police force so that the force may be able to count on public cooperation in their efforts to combat crime and maintain public order.” The public’s feelings toward the police are also relevant as an increasing body of scholarly commentary speaks to the importance of procedural justice, which is our “subjective evaluations of the justice of procedures—whether they are fair or unfair, ethical or unethical, and otherwise accord with people’s standards of fair processes for social interaction and decision-making” (Tyler & Mentovich, 2011, p. 2). When the public perceives that the police and the justice system operate in a fair, professional, and just manner, they are more likely to comply with the law (Tyler, 2006). This proposition suggests that a greater degree of legitimacy increases trust in the police and results in a greater likelihood of voluntary

public cooperation (Bradford, Jackson, & Hough, 2014; Murphy & Cherney, 2012; Murphy, Mazerolle, & Bennett, 2014; Papachristos, Meares, & Fagan, 2012).

Maguire and Johnson (2010) noted that the outcomes of studies of perceptions toward the police are often difficult to summarize given the wide variety of research questions posed, the different indicators examined, the eras in which the research was conducted, the methodological approaches taken in these studies, and the varied populations examined. However, Brown and Benedict (2002, p. 567), in summarizing the findings from over one hundred studies, reported that “age, contact with police, neighborhood and race have a significant impact on attitudes towards police.” They also found that “the effects of education, gender, socioeconomic status, victimization or fear of victimization” are inconclusive (Brown & Benedict, 2002, p. 567).

One universal trend is that respondents in western democracies are expressing decreasing trust and confidence in all government services and, in particular, the police (Sherman, 2001). Paradoxically, this decline in trust and confidence in the police is occurring at the same time that police operations are becoming more transparent, with an increased number of citizen advisory boards, better access to information about local policing, and more citizen education and engagement activities such as founding programs for volunteers in policing, placing officers in schools, and establishing community outreach centres. The police are also increasingly reaching out to the media and the public by hiring media relations specialists and incorporating computer-based methods of sharing information through departmental websites as well as social media such as Facebook and Twitter (Brainard & Edlins, 2015; International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2015). Prior research into self-reported perceptions of the police has focused on respondents’ fear of crime, victimization, residential location, demographic factors (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, age, level of education), satisfaction with police services, trust and confidence in the police, service quality, and

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law enforcement effectiveness (Cao, 2011, 2014; Chow, 2010, 2011; Dowler, 2003; Gainey & Payne, 2009; Kusow, Wilson, & Martin, 1997; O'Connor, 2008; Vogel, 2011).

Canadian scholars have found demographic differences in self-reported attitudes toward the police. Members of visible minorities, younger respondents, respondents with less education, unmarried respondents, and male respondents have lower levels of confidence in the police (Cao, 2011). O'Connor's (2008) study revealed "young people, visible minorities, those who perceived their neighborhoods as having high levels of crime, those who had been victims of crime, and those who were not satisfied with their levels of safety were found to hold negative views of the police" (p. 590). Research looking at the relationship between gender and perceptions of police has produced mixed results; some studies suggest no gender relationship, other studies imply higher satisfaction among both females and males (see Gainey & Payne, 2009).

Younger and minority Canadians have less trust and confidence in the police (Cao, 2011, 2014; Chow, 2010, 2011). A review of national data from the 2014 GSS showed that respondents with the most favourable perceptions of the local police were over sixty-five years of age (Cotter, 2015). A similar series of analyses were conducted for respondents based on their ethnicity, and while the perceptions of visible minority and non-minority respondents were very similar, Aboriginal respondents expressed less favourable perceptions of the police (Cotter, 2015).

### **Student Perceptions of the Police**

While many researchers solicit perceptions about the police from community samples, fewer scholars have focused on university students' perceptions of the police. There is also a paucity of research that compares the general community perceptions of police with university student perceptions. Assessing university students' perceptions of the police is important as they may experience what has been referred to as the *liberalizing college effect* (Farnworth et

al., 1998) based on the cultural influence associated with their post-secondary education (Williams & Nofziger, 2003). This effect is argued to result in “less punitive views toward criminal sanctioning and strategies for maintaining public order” (Farnworth et al., 1998, p. 40) as well as an anti-authority stance toward the police (more so than other authority figures) that involves a “greater degree of cynicism than those of adults” and youth in the same age group not attending university (Williams & Nofziger, 2003, p. 127). Williams and Nofziger reported that university students, when compared to youth of the same age from the wider population, assessed the police as having lower performance ratings, suggesting that university attendance, and not solely being youthful, influenced perceptions of police. Thus, the place where these young people study and associate with their peers may shape their views of social institutions, including the police and the justice system. One limitation in our knowledge is that we do not know whether these values are shaped by the students’ interactions with their professors, peers, or both.

The extant literature reveals that students’ perceptions of police often vary according to their demographic characteristics (Brown & Benedict, 2005; Webb & Marshall, 1995). While minority respondents express less favourable perceptions of the police in various studies (Cotter, 2015; Hurst & Frank, 2000; Mbuba, 2010; Williams & Nofziger, 2003), Brown and Benedict (2005) could not find a statistically significant effect for race in their research. The effect of gender on perceptions of police is also mixed. Males report lower levels of satisfaction with police (Hurst & Frank, 2000; Mbuba, 2010; Wu, 2010), but lower levels of satisfaction may also depend on other variables such as contact with the police (Brown & Benedict, 2005; Williams & Nofziger, 2003). Wu (2010) reported that students with higher socioeconomic status reported more favourable perceptions of police.

Similar mixed effects for experiential variables—contact with police, victimization, perceptions of neighbourhood crime, or fear of crime—were reported amongst students with regard to their



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perceptions of police. Experiencing negative contact with police generally reduces favourable perceptions (Chow, 2010, 2011; Hurst & Frank, 2000), although some studies incorporating these contact indicators report no effect (Williams & Nofziger, 2003). Barker and colleagues (2008) emphasized that police “accommodativeness,” defined as “dignified and respectful treatment” (p. 94) in their interactions with students, increases trust, which has a “strong positive relationship ... [with] attitudes about compliance” (p. 104).

With regard to victimization, Williams and Nofziger (2003) found no effect, while a number of other investigators have reported crime victims expressing less favourable attitudes toward police (Brown & Benedict, 2005; Chow, 2010; Cotter, 2015; Hurst & Frank, 2000; Wu, 2010). Students who perceive a decrease in crime in their neighbourhood (Williams & Nofziger, 2003), as well as those who are less fearful of crime, also have more favourable perceptions of the police (Chow, 2011; Wu, 2010).

Given the mixed results of the extant research on the perceptions of university and community populations, it is plausible that there are substantial differences in the perceptions of police performance between these groups. Understanding these differences is important as it might help us better comprehend why some university students have a greater negativity toward authority figures (Williams & Nofziger, 2003). The initial interactions may have lasting effects on students’ future perceptions and behaviour, which is important given their societal positioning as “offenders, victims, and witnesses of crime, and as future leaders” (Williams & Nofziger, 2003, p. 130).

### **Data and Methods**

The present research compared perceptions of community members and university students toward their local police, the Regina Police Service (RPS), who serve a population of approximately 210,000 residents. The RPS employs approximately 500 persons, almost 400 are police officers. With respect to the community, Regina had the highest crime severity index (CSI) of all census metropolitan areas

(CMA) in Canada between 1998 and 2014 (Boyce, Carter, & Perreault, 2014, p. 11)<sup>1</sup> and consistently ranks as having one of the highest homicide rates of all CMA, although the CSI has subsequently declined (Allen, 2016; Boyce, 2015).

The survey instrument consisted of fifty items that solicited information from respondents about the following themes: (a) police visibility/presence (e.g., Officers are a visible presence in my community); (b) trust/confidence in the police (e.g., I would have confidence in calling 911 if I were in an emergency situation); (c) crime and fear of crime (e.g., Overall how safe do you consider Regina to be?); (d) overall satisfaction with the RPS; and (e) quality of service. Questions pertaining to professionalism and quality of service were used as outcome measures, and gender, victimization, contact with police, ethnicity, and sample (student 2011 and 2013, community 2011 and 2013) were predictor variables.

Data for this study were collected in two waves. First, 504 surveys were completed using a random telephone sample of community residents during a two-week period in September 2011, and 347 surveys from a convenience sample of undergraduate students administered in group settings using a pen-and-paper version of the same survey instrument were collected during a one-week period in April 2012. Second, 450 completed surveys of community residents were collected during a two-week period in September 2013, and 243 surveys from a convenience sample of undergraduate students were collected during a one-week period in October 2013 using the same methods as 2011. Excluded from the community and university samples were police officers, civilian employees of the police service, or anyone residing in households with police officers. All of the university students who participated in the study were undergraduates attending first- and second-year courses offered by the Faculty of Arts.

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<sup>1</sup> The crime severity index (CSI) is a measure of both the volume and seriousness of crimes reported to the police.



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**Sample Characteristics**

Altogether, responses were collected from 954 community residents and 590 university students ( $N = 1,544$ ); Table 1 presents the characteristics of these samples. There were several key differences found between the community and university samples collected in 2011 and 2013. In regard to the performance outcome measure, respondents in the 2011 university sample expressed less favourable perceptions ( $M = 2.15$ ) of police performance than the 2013 university sample ( $M = 2.30$ ) whereas the two community samples did not differ ( $M_s = 2.53$  and  $2.55$ ). In regard to professionalism, the 2011 university sample ( $M = 3.83$ ) expressed less favourable perceptions than their 2013 counterparts ( $M = 4.06$ ) and the 2013 community sample ( $M = 4.06$ ). The 2011 community sample ( $M = 3.96$ ) did not differ from the other three samples. The latter result may be attributed to the fact that 68.8% of the outliers on the professionalism score were from the 2011 university sample. Nonetheless, the four samples were collapsed into two groups: community and university.

With respect to demographic characteristics, not surprisingly the university respondents were younger; 87.7% were between 18 and 24 years of age while only 3.6% of the community sample was of the same age group. Most of the university (67.3%) and community (55.6%) respondents were female, and the gender differences between the two samples were statistically significant,  $\chi^2(1, N = 1,502) = 19.91, p < .001, OR = .61$ . A greater proportion of the university sample (19.2%) were members of a visible minority compared to the community sample (10.8%),  $\chi^2(1, N = 1331) = 16.98, p < .001, OR = .51$ .

**Table 1: Sample characteristics**

Variable	Community		University		
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
Age					
	18 – 24	34	3.6	498	87.7
	25 – 34	136	14.3	56	9.9
	35 – 44	151	15.9	9	1.6
	45 – 54	211	22.2	4	0.0
	55 – 64	207	21.7	0	0.0
	65 – 74	130	13.7	1	0.0
	Over 75	83	8.7	0	0.0
Gender					
	Male	422	44.4	180	32.7
	Female	529	55.6	371	67.3
Ethnicity					
	Caucasian	834	89.2	320	80.8
	Visible Minority	101	10.8	76	19.2
Victimization					
	No	665	70.0	449	78.0
	Yes	285	30.0	127	22.0
Contact with Police					
	No	522	55.0	342	59.1
	Yes	428	45.0	233	40.5

In terms of their experiences with the justice system, a larger proportion of the community sample (30.0%) reported being crime victims in the past compared to the university sample (22.0%),  $\chi^2 (1, N = 1526) = 11.50, p < .001, OR = .66$ . Furthermore, over two-fifths of the respondents had some contact with the police in the previous two years although that contact did not differ between the university (40.5%) and community samples (45.0%),  $\chi^2 (1, N = 1525) = 1.82, p < .18, OR = .87$ . In terms of visible minority status, there was no difference in either their likelihood of victimization (27.9% compared

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with 27.1% of Whites) or frequency in their contacts with the police compared with Whites (43.3% and 44.5%, respectively).

### **Outcome Variables**

Two outcome variables, *police performance* and *police professionalism*, were created by collapsing a number of survey items relating to respondents' perceptions of the police<sup>2</sup>. This strategy was based on previous research suggesting that individuals may respond differently to specific questions rather than general questions regarding police performance (Brandl, Frank, Worden, & Bynum, 1994; Brown & Benedict, 2005; Hurst & Frank, 2000; Kaminski & Jefferis, 1998).

The performance indicator was comprised of responses to seven specific questions about whether the police do a poor, average, or good job of (i) cooperating with the public to address their concerns; (ii) treating people fairly; (iii) ensuring the safety of citizens in their area; (iv) being approachable and easy to talk to; (v) supplying information to the public on ways to reduce crime; (vi) responding to calls; and (vii) enforcing the law. For each question, participants had the option to respond "don't know". Given the performance indicator was comprised of the average of responses to seven questions, any "don't know" response rendered that participant's performance indicator score as missing, reducing the overall number of usable responses. There were 1,039 valid responses to the performance indicator and 505 missing values (67.3% valid responses). As a result, 28.5% of the community participants' responses were missing and 39.5% of the university cases were missing. Cronbach's alpha for the responses on the set of seven items ( $M = 2.43$ ,  $Mdn = 2.57$ ,  $SD = .49$ ) was  $\alpha = .87$  for the combined community and university samples.

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<sup>2</sup> The performance scores were divided by seven and the professionalism scores were divided by four, reflecting the number of items in each measure. Lower scores on these measures reflect a less positive view of the performance and professionalism of the police.

Police professionalism measured the participants' responses on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) to four general statements: the RPS is an organization with (i) integrity and honesty, (ii) demonstrates professionalism, (iii) is sensitive to the needs of my ethnic group, and (iv) understands community issues. Again, there was the option for "don't know". There were 1,183 valid responses to the performance indicator and 361 missing values (76.7% valid responses). For the community sample, 14.4% of participants' responses were missing; for the university sample, 37.9% of participants' responses were missing. Cronbach's alpha for the response on the set of four items ( $M = 3.98$ ,  $Mdn = 4.25$ ,  $SD = .90$ ) was  $\alpha = .86$  for the combined community and university samples.

To better understand the relationships between performance and professionalism, a factor analysis—employing principal axis factoring—was conducted for all eleven survey items used to construct the performance and professionalism scores. Two factors emerged that mirrored the constructed measures. Scores on the performance and professionalism measures were correlated,  $r(906) = .583$ ,  $p < .001$ . The correlation between the scales for the community sample was  $r(626) = .63$ ,  $p < .001$ ; the university sample was  $r(278) = .51$ ,  $p < .001$ .<sup>3</sup>

Two groups of predictor variables were included in the analyses: demographic characteristics and experiences with the criminal justice system. Demographic characteristics included sample (0 = community sample, 1 = university sample), gender (0 = male, 1 = female), and ethnicity (0 = White, 1 = visible minority). Experience with the justice system dichotomous variables included prior victimization (0 = no, 1 = yes) and contact with police in the previous two years (0 = no, 1 = yes).

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<sup>3</sup> Both the performance and professionalism scores were negatively skewed. Additionally, there were a number of outliers on the professionalism scale, reflecting exceedingly low perceptions of the police by a few individuals.

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## **Analyses and Results**

Independent sample *t*-tests were conducted to determine whether there were differences between the university and community samples with regard to their perceptions of police performance and police professionalism. With respect to police performance, there was a statistically significant difference in the mean scores between the university students ( $M = 2.21$ ,  $SD = .48$ ) and community members ( $M = 2.54$ ,  $SD = .46$ ),  $t(1037) = 10.81$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .70$ , suggesting a moderate<sup>4</sup> sized effect. However, there was not a statistically significant difference between the university sample and community samples when it came to professionalism ( $M = 3.93$ ,  $SD = .90$ ,  $Mdn = 4.01$ ,  $SD = .90$  respectively).

## **Factorial ANOVA Results**

A series of factorial ANOVAs were run to facilitate further interpretation of the perceptions of police performance and professionalism. This strategy enabled us to assess multiple dependent variables as well as to test for interactions between predictor variables. The next two sections report the results of these analyses.

## **Police Performance**

A 2 (sample) by 2 (gender) by 2 (ethnicity) factorial ANOVA was run on performance scores. The results revealed statistically significant main effects<sup>5</sup> for sample,  $F(1, 905) = 42.29$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .045$ , ethnicity,  $F(1, 905) = 6.29$ ,  $p < .012$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .007$ , and the three-way interaction of sample, gender, and ethnicity,  $F(1, 905) = 5.48$ ,  $p < .02$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .006$ . Community members reported that the police had better performance than students ( $M = 2.50$  and  $M = 2.19$ , respectively). Whites viewed the police as having better performance

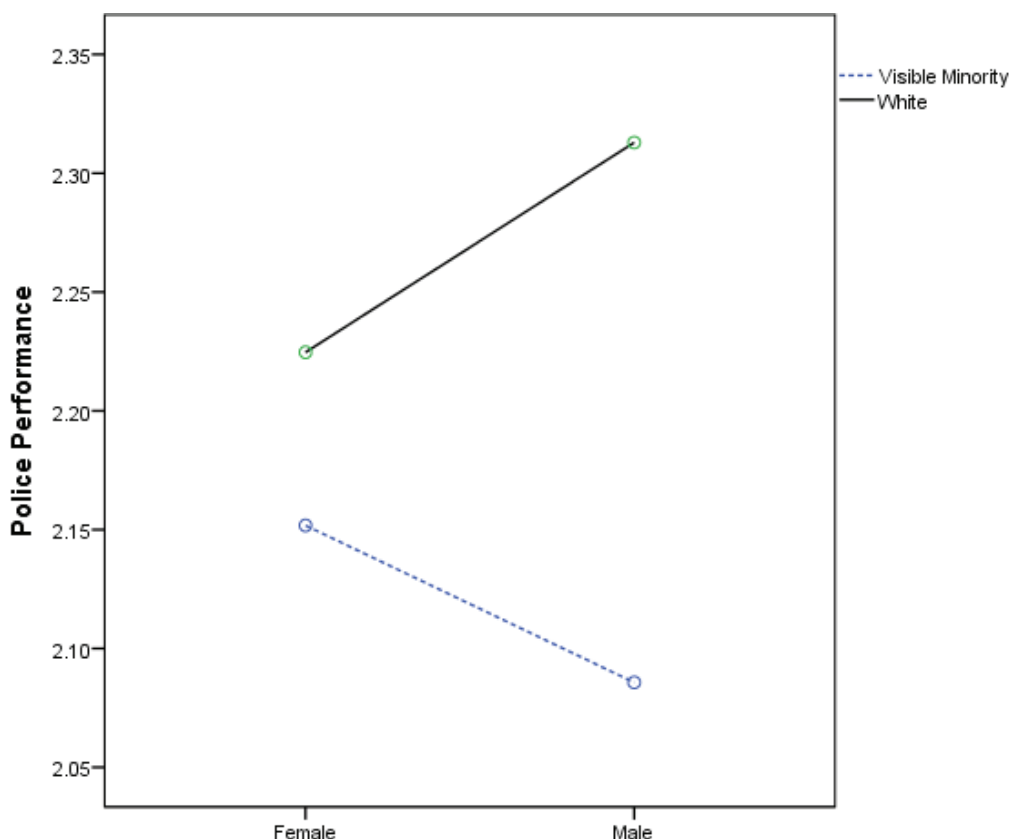
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<sup>4</sup> According to Cohen (1988), Cohen's *d* is interpreted as follows: small = 0.20, medium = 0.50 and large = 0.80.

<sup>5</sup> According to Cohen (1988), partial eta squared effect sizes can be interpreted as follows: small = 0.01, medium = 0.06 and large = 0.14.

than visible minorities ( $M = 2.41$  and  $M = 2.28$ , respectively). When it came to the three-way interactions within the university sample (Figure 1), White males had the most positive view of the performance of police officers, visible minority males had the least favourable view, and females fell between these two groups. The findings from the community sample (Figure 2) were conflicting: White females had the most positive perceptions of the performance of police officers, visible minority females had the least positive view, and males fell between the two female groups.

**Figure 1: Mean ratings on police performance by sex and ethnicity for the university sample**

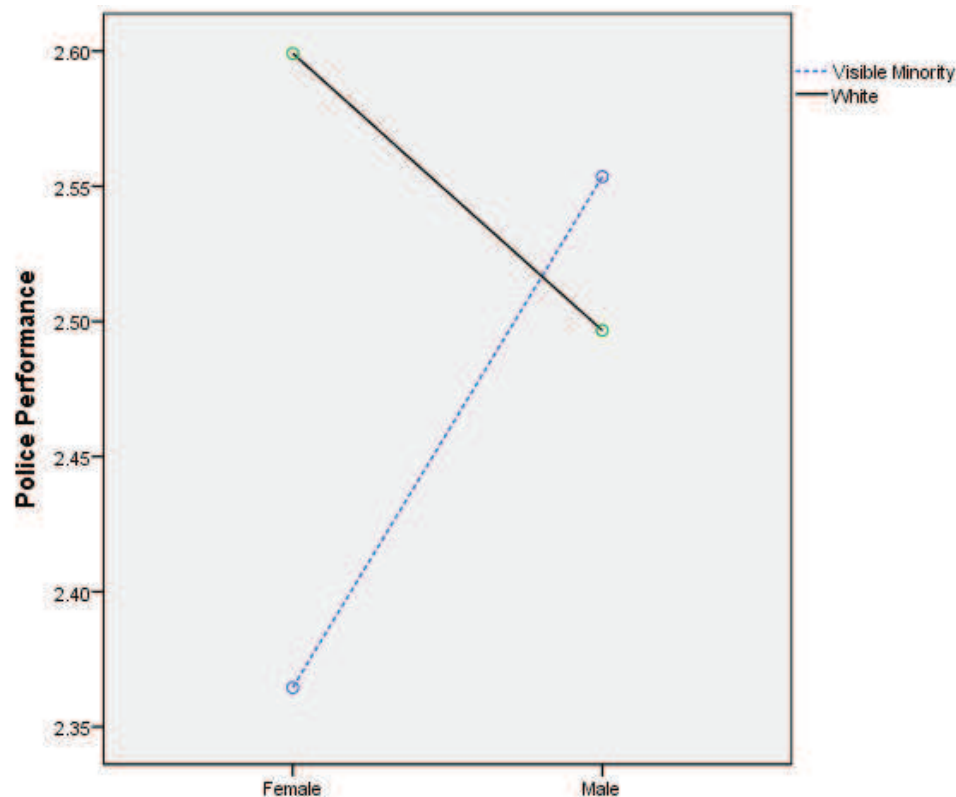


Secondly, a series of 2 (sample) by 2 (victimization, gender, ethnicity, or contact) factorial ANOVAs were run on the performance scores. The findings were parallel to those reported above. In



addition, there was a statistically significant difference regarding victimization,  $F(1, 1028) = 35.53, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .033$ . Crime victims had lower perceptions of police performance than non-victims ( $M = 2.24$  and  $Mdn = 2.44$ , respectively).

**Figure 2: Mean ratings on police performance by sex and ethnicity for the community sample**

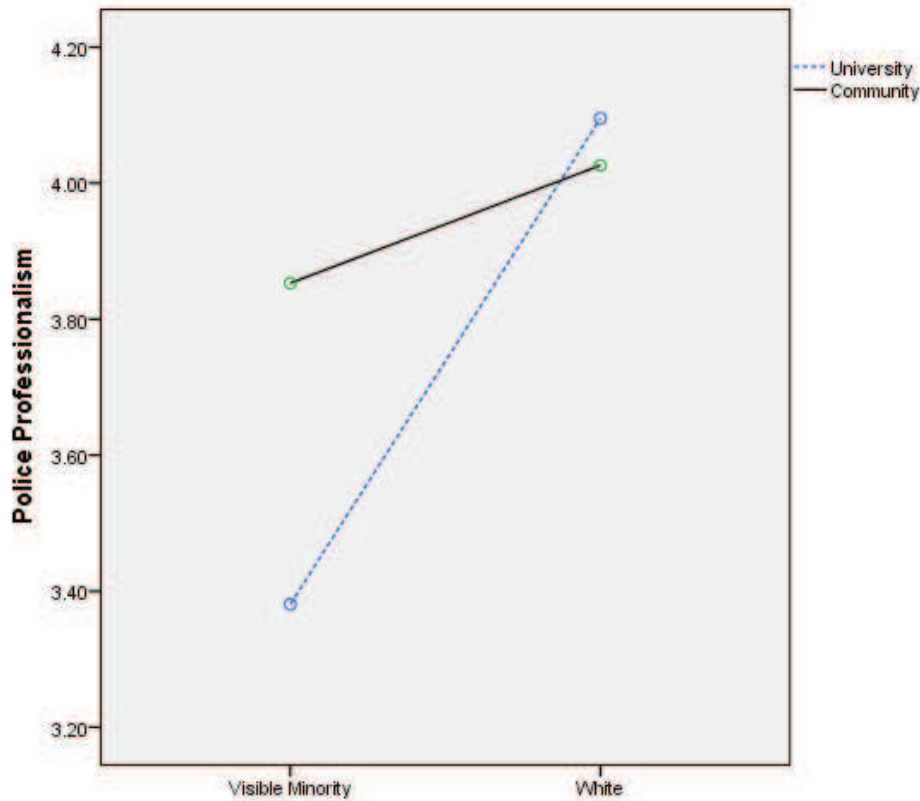


### Police Professionalism

Parallel with the analyses reported above, factorial ANOVAs were conducted for the same independent variables with professionalism as the dependent variable. Consistent with the prior findings, there was a statistically significant difference between the university students and community members in terms of their perceptions of professionalism ( $M = 3.74$  and  $3.94$ , respectively),  $F(1, 1045) = 5.32, p < .021, \eta_p^2 =$

.005. There was also a statistically significant main effect for ethnicity, wherein White participants ( $M = 4.06$ ) viewed the police as being more professional than visible minorities ( $M = 3.61$ ),  $F(1, 1045) = 25.84$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .024$ . A two-way interaction effect of sample and ethnicity was also observed (Figure 3), revealing that visible minority students had the least positive view of the professionalism of police,  $F(1, 1045) = 9.61$ ,  $p < .002$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .009$ .

**Figure 3: Mean ratings on police professionalism by ethnicity and sample**



Additional 2 (sample) by 2 (victimization, gender, ethnicity, or contact) factorial ANOVAs were also conducted on the professionalism dependent variable. Participants who reported being victimized had lower perceptions of police professionalism ( $M =$

3.76) than those who had not been a victim of crime in the previous two years ( $M = 4.08$ ),  $F(1, 1173) = 37.96$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .031$ . Participants' perceptions of police professionalism also varied by ethnicity. Visible minorities reported lower perceptions of police professionalism ( $M = 3.57$ ) than did Whites ( $M = 3.98$ ),  $F(1, 1055) = 28.14$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .026$ . Last, contact with the police was also associated with lower rankings of police professionalism,  $F(1, 1167) = 12.91$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .001$ . Respondents who had contact with police reported lower levels of professionalism ( $M = 3.89$ ) than those who did not have contact with police in the previous two years ( $M = 4.06$ ).

## **Discussion**

Although most college and university students spend only a few years in these places, their presence on campus has a long-term impact on the formation of their social identities and their views toward issues such as justice (Knox, Lindsay, & Kolb, 1993). A key question in this study was determining the extent to which the place where one spends much of their time shapes their attitudes toward the police, a controversial issue in an era where the activities of the police are under increasing scrutiny. Altogether, we found that both students and community members were generally quite positive with regard to their views of police professionalism and performance. However, when we took a closer look at the results, some noteworthy differences emerged. For the student sample, for instance, the mean value for police performance was lower than that for professionalism; the community residents expressed the opposite sentiments (police performance was higher than professionalism).

Similar to previous research on the relationships between global and specific attitudes toward police (Brandl et al., 1994; Brown & Benedict, 2005; Hurst & Frank, 2000), there was empirical support for an asymmetrical reciprocal relationship wherein those who demonstrated more positive support for the police on the global measure (professionalism) also had more favourable perceptions of the specific measure (performance). It is plausible that as one grows

older, one's perceptions might change such that specific attitudes toward the police more closely align with the mainstream attitudes of their older counterparts. Thus, an important follow-up question is to determine whether the attitudes, values, and beliefs that form while associated with the university persist over time.

As reported in previous research (Cao, 2011; Chow, 2010, 2011; Hurst & Frank, 2000; Williams & Nofziger, 2003), the youthfulness of the university students might provide one possible explanation for their less positive perceptions of police. As Hurst and Frank (2000) suggest, young people report attitudes toward police that are less favourable than the attitudes of older adults (see also Taylor, Turner, Esbensen, & Winfree, 2001). In addition, Williams and Nofziger (2003) posit that a general anti-authority orientation may exist where young people may feel less positive toward the police because they are subject to age-related laws, and more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviours as well as participate in activities that may be specifically targeted by police. The potential impact of the so-called college effect (Williams & Nofziger, 2003) or liberalizing effect (Farnworth et al., 1998) of university attendance may also explain differences between university students and the general community.

Previous research has produced mixed findings when it comes to the relationships between demographic and contextual variables, and perceptions of the police. With regard to race/ethnicity, visible minorities report less favourable perceptions (Hurst & Frank, 2000; Mbuba, 2010; Williams & Nofziger, 2003). The current study lends support to these findings as three of the four factorial ANOVA models reported race effects wherein visible minorities expressed less positive perceptions. The only model that did not report an effect of ethnicity included victimization, suggesting that being victimized in the previous two years might undermine the effect of ethnicity, a finding consistent with the work of Brown and Benedict (2005).

With regard to gender, only one of the factorial ANOVA models revealed a statistically significant effect. That finding is consistent with previous research wherein females generally reported more

favourable perceptions of the police than their male counterparts (Hurst & Frank, 2000; Mbuba, 2010; Wu, 2010). This model also included victimization as a predictor variable. While there was no interaction between gender and victimization in that model, the finding is consistent with previous research, suggesting that the inclusion of different variables in a model may assist in explaining the effect of gender on perceptions of police (Brown & Benedict, 2005; Williams & Nofziger, 2003).

One noteworthy result was that we found a statistically significant three-way interaction between sample, gender, and ethnicity. Among university students, White males reported the most favourable perceptions of police performance, while in the community sample White females reported the most positive perceptions. By contrast, the female visible minority community members reported the least favourable perceptions of police performance.

Our findings suggest that contextual variables—such as contact with police or prior victimization—are important in the study of perceptions of the police (see also Cotter, 2015). Although previous research had indicated that negative contact with the police influenced perceptions, the present research only addressed the occurrence of contact, and not the perceptions or the outcomes of these contacts. These analyses revealed a consistent negative effect of victimization wherein those who had been victimized in the previous two years reported less favourable perceptions of police. Examination of the interaction effects suggested that university students who had been victimized reported the least positive perceptions of police professionalism.

There are a number of limitations to this research that must be acknowledged. First, several months elapsed between the collection of the data in the community and student samples in 2011. However, during this period there were no news items or scandals that would have negatively influenced the perceptions of the second wave of respondents (e.g., no publicized cases of police misconduct), nor were there any major news items that were overly supportive of the

police. Another limitation is that some populations are under-represented in telephone surveys. Few younger adults, for example, have land line phone service, and it was not possible to randomly dial cellular phone numbers in the 2011 community survey. Access to cell phone numbers was made available in 2013. Nevertheless, telephone samples typically have a greater number of older and female respondents.

There was a number of limitations associated with the demographic characteristics of the samples. For instance, the data collected do not permit a comparison of the university and community sample participants in the same age category due to the low numbers in the community sample with regard to the predominant age category in the university sample. Furthermore, visible minority and Aboriginal populations were under-represented in both waves of this study. According to Statistics Canada (2011), visible minority and Aboriginal peoples accounted for 21.6% of the Regina population, while the collective representation of these groups was 7.8% in the 2011 community sample, 10.5% in the 2011 student sample, 14.0% in the 2013 community sample, and 19.4% in the 2013 student sample.

Last, the survey results collected do not specifically show us how place influences perceptions. While we find that the students are more like their community counterparts than we expected, we do not know whether those perceptions were formed before their admission to university or whether perceptions change over time. We cannot, for example, determine from the data whether the longer a student spends in university changes their perceptions. As such, further investigation into the place-perceptions relationship is required.

## **Conclusions**

The police are the most visible component of the justice system, and student perceptions toward their professionalism, as expressed by two waves of a survey of university students, were very similar to those reported by respondents in community samples. This is a noteworthy



finding as the attitudes and values we develop toward the justice system are highly associated with procedural justice, which encompasses notions of legitimacy, trust, and fairness. When the public perceives the police as legitimate, it is also likely that they will be more likely to abide by the law (Tyler, 2006). As a result, we find that despite the fact that Canadian colleges and universities are distinctive places, the perceptions of the students toward police professionalism are not fundamentally different from their community counterparts.

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