



# The changing context of Canadian policing: An examination of the public's perceptions after 2020

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## ABSTRACT

The positive perceptions of Canadians towards their local police had been relatively stable between 2000 and 2019, but survey results show those positive feelings dropped throughout the country after the start of the pandemic in March 2020 and the murder of George Floyd by an American police officer 2 months later. These changing perceptions have significant consequences for police services as lower levels of trust, confidence, and legitimacy reduce the public's willingness to cooperate with them. While too soon to determine whether these decreased favourable perceptions will persist, they indicate the vulnerability of local police services to factors beyond their control. Implications for further research and policy are identified considering these findings.

**Key Words** Public mood; policing the pandemic; police legitimacy; satisfaction with the police.

## INTRODUCTION

Canadians have historically expressed very positive perceptions of the police. National-level studies carried out by Statistics Canada show consistently high levels of confidence in the police. Respondents indicating a great deal or some confidence in the police in the General Social Survey (GSS), for example, fluctuated between 85% of respondents in 2009 and 90% in 2019 (Cotter, 2015, p. 15; Ibrahim, 2020, p. 4). Roberts's (2004) examination of the public's perceptions of the justice system between 1980 and 2004 reveals that Canadians have historically had more confidence in the police than in the courts or corrections (see also Fraser, 2013), although those national averages mask some variation in the public's perceptions over time and between jurisdictions. Researchers from the Angus Reid Institute (2020a) report that the percentage of Canadians expressing complete or a lot of confidence in the police decreased in national polls conducted after 2014, although this number was still higher than the public's confidence in the criminal courts or the Supreme Court of Canada. A substantial drop in the public's positive perceptions of the police became evident after 2020, and Ruddell and Jones (2022) describe this decrease in trust, confidence, and support for the police in Canada's largest municipalities.

Decreasing public trust and confidence has implications for a police service's crime reduction strategies, as lower perceptions influence an individual's willingness to obey the law, report crimes, seek help when victimized, provide

information to the police, and cooperate with officers (Cotter, 2015; Jonathan-Zamir & Weisburd, 2013). King (2014) contends that a police service's sustainability is also dependent on its public and political support, and agencies unable to successfully manage those factors are in jeopardy of disbanding. The city of Surrey's decision to terminate its contract with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and found its own municipal police service is an outcome of the police losing political support.

Losing the public's trust and confidence can impact a police service's crime reduction efforts and the police's ability to manage the external environment. The results of a series of Canadian polls in 2020 reveal significant public support for defunding the police (Angus Reid, 2020b; Ekos, 2020; Ipsos, 2020). Police budgets in some Canadian census metropolitan areas (CMAs; urban areas of more than 100,000 residents) were subsequently cut as their municipal governments sought to reallocate police funding to community-based services, although in some cases that funding was restored. It has been posited that redistributing police funding would reduce crime, improve outcomes in interactions with people in crisis, and produce more just and fair outcomes between the police and the public, including members of Indigenous and Black communities (see for example Board of the Police Commissioner's Subcommittee to Define Defunding the Police, 2022).

Decreasing public support for the police after 2020 was not limited to Canada. Polls conducted in the United Kingdom

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and United States showed similar drops in trust, confidence, and satisfaction. For example, Gallup polls show that Americans expressing a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the police dropped from 53% to 48% between 2019 and 2020, although this increased again in 2021 (Brenan, 2021). Quarterly surveys of residents of London, England, reveal a similar drop in confidence in the police—what they define as agreeing the police can be relied upon to be there when needed—dropped from 71% in March 2019 to 59% in December 2021 (Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime, 2022).

A research question emerging from these observations is whether there was a broad change in the public's perceptions of their local police services after March 2020. These comparisons are somewhat difficult to make as few police services regularly collect and report information about the public's perceptions. Moreover, few small police services undertake this type of research at all. Even when these perceptions are reported, it is difficult to make comparisons because there is no standardized set of survey items researchers use in these studies. In addition, since few questions are asked consistently over time within or between jurisdictions, it is difficult to assess long-term trends (see Giacomantonio et al., 2019).

## Data

O'Connor et al. (2020) identified 50 municipal police services serving CMAs, and information was collected from or solicited from 30 of them. Twelve police services in Quebec were excluded as information in English was unavailable, and eight communities policed under contract by the RCMP were also excluded. The limitations of restricting this sample were addressed as French-speaking jurisdictions were included in the second source of data used in the analyses. In addition, the RCMP conduct annual client surveys in the communities they police and those results are reported below.

Two strategies were used to collect information on the public's perceptions. The first was to access online reports on the public's perceptions of the police. In the absence of those documents, the city websites were reviewed to determine whether police-related information was published in surveys of municipal services. Studies funded or conducted by police services were more comprehensive—as they usually included dozens of survey items soliciting information about trust, confidence, and satisfaction with the police—while the municipal surveys typically included only two or three survey items soliciting information about satisfaction with the local police. To determine whether the public's perceptions were changing, survey results were needed for both the pre- and post-2020 eras. If no information was available online, these agencies were contacted by email or phone, and several organizations provided information not available on their websites. Altogether, these efforts resulted in pre- and post-2020 data from 11 police municipal services and the RCMP.

Data were also Retrieved from: Advanis Research (2021); a firm that carried out two policing-related surveys of Canadian adults from February to April 2020 and from May to July 2021 with sample sizes of 19,455 and 17,599 respondents. In addition to conducting surveys of 24 CMAs (including police services in Quebec), Advanis surveyed rural respondents throughout the country. Personal communication with representatives of the firm reveal that one goal of conducting these surveys was to examine the impact of George Floyd's

death on the public's perceptions of the police. The results are presented in five tiers of similarly sized cities, but the data were not disaggregated by city.

## RESULTS

A review of the data collected by the investigator and by Advanis (2021) shows a clear and consistent decrease in positive perceptions of the police across Canada between 2020 and 2021. First, the results from the 11 police services that had conducted pre- and post-2020 surveys reveal that:

- The proportion of Calgary respondents who report being very satisfied with the police dropped from 49% to 44% between 2020 and 2021: this proportion was down from the 57% of respondents who said they were very satisfied in 2019 (City of Calgary, 2021).
- Edmonton respondents rating the overall job of policing as good or excellent dropped from 64% in 2020 to 57% in 2021 (Advanis Research, 2021). Between 2020 and 2021, there was also a decrease in the public's perceptions in seven metrics describing positive police behaviours (such as treating people with respect or fairly, and the police dealing with things that matter), and three indicators of support for the police.
- Respondents indicating the Ottawa Police Service did a good or excellent overall job of policing declined from 63% in 2020 to 60% in 2021 (Advanis Research, 2021). The Advanis researchers used the same seven indicators of police behaviours and support for the police as the Edmonton results reported above, and there was a similar decline in all those indicators between 2020 and 2021.
- Respondents ranking the overall quality of the Regina Police Service as very good or excellent dropped from 79% to 70% between 2019 and 2021. The overall satisfaction with the police also decreased from 77% in 2019 to 72% in 2021 (Ruddell & Jones, 2022).
- Saskatoon residents indicate that overall satisfaction with the Saskatoon Police Service ([SPS], 2021) dropped from 93% in 2017 to 87% in 2021. There was also a decrease in agreement that the SPS responded to people fairly (from 78% in 2017 to 66% in 2021), and a decline in public trust from 83% in 2017 to 71% in 2021. Fewer respondents indicated that SPS officers used force appropriately, declining from 83% in 2017 to 77% in 2021.
- Pollara Strategic Insights carried out five waves of surveys in 2020 and 2021 in Surrey, British Columbia. Their results show that respondents ranking the RCMP (who contract with the city to provide local policing) as very or somewhat favourable dropped from 83% in April 2020 to 77% in January 2021 (Pollara Strategic Insights, 2021).
- The proportion of Vancouver respondents indicating they were very satisfied with the police dropped by 16% between 2019 and 2021, and overall satisfaction decreased from 89% in 2019 to 78% in 2021 (City of Vancouver, 2021).
- Researchers in a Victoria Police Service (2021) study report that satisfaction with the police decreased from 86% in 2020 to 82% in 2021. In 2021 Victoria respondents indicated that officers were less approachable, less committed to their jobs, less courteous and polite, less accountable, more likely to use their authority and force

inappropriately and were less proud of the agency than they were in 2020.

- Seventy-four percent of residents in communities served by the Waterloo Regional Police Service ([WRPS], 2021) in October 2020 rated the WRPS as good or average, which was down from 84% satisfaction in 2017.
- A survey of Winnipeg residents reveals that public satisfaction with traffic enforcement, crime prevention, and responding to 911 calls was lower in 2021 than in 2020 (City of Winnipeg, 2021).

The drop in positive perceptions was not universal. The Delta Police Service (2022) reports that a comparison of the results of 2018 and 2021 community surveys revealed a non-significant difference in 12 indicators of police performance including police visibility, the value of policing, and timely responses to calls for services.

The RCMP (2020; 2021) report a 10% decrease in public satisfaction with keeping Canadians safe from 72% in 2020 to 62% in 2021. Public trust and confidence also declined from 69% in 2020 to 60% in 2021, and less than two-thirds (65%) of their respondents perceived their officers to be professional in 2021, which was a 10% drop from the previous year. The public's sentiments on the professionalism, integrity, and satisfaction with the RCMP were at the lowest levels since they started reporting the results of their national client surveys in 2003.

Tables I through III present the survey results of the Advanis (2021) study of perceptions towards the respondents' local police, the police in the entire nation, and whether the police treat all citizens equally. These results include responses from 37,054 individuals in two waves of a survey conducted in 2020 and 2021 in 24 CMAs and include responses from rural and small-town residents. The CMA results are grouped

according to population size although their findings are not disaggregated by city; that information is not available.

With respect to the perceptions towards their local police, all five groups showed an increase in the unfavourable perceptions of the police (the proportion rating them as doing a poor or very poor job) and these results are presented in Table I. Those favourable impressions decreased for every population group although there were differences in the magnitude of these changes. For example, the greatest drop in positive perceptions was in CMAs of between 500,000 and 900,000 residents, which decreased from 73% in 2020 to 64% in 2021. Residents of the smallest CMAs—between 200,000 and 375,000 residents—had the lowest drop in positive perceptions. The results in the table also show a corresponding decrease in the proportion of respondents who indicated the police were doing a good or excellent job.

Table II presents the results of the respondents' perceptions towards the police for the entire country. A review of these results shows each group expressed less favourable perceptions for the police in the rest of the country than their local police service. The proportion of respondents indicating the police in the entire country were doing a poor or very poor job increased in all five groups between 2020 and 2021. That change came at the expense of the proportion of respondents indicating the police in the rest of the nation were doing a good or excellent job. Similar to the results presented in Table I, the greatest drop in positive perceptions occurred in CMAs of between 500,000 and 900,000 residents: from 69% in 2020 to 55% in 2021.

The results from one other survey item were available: whether the respondent believes all citizens receive the same quality of service from the police. The proportion of respondents who disagreed or strongly disagreed with that

**TABLE I** Perceptions of overall job of police in your community: changes 2020 to 2021<sup>a</sup>

Group	City Size Range (Residents)	Poor/Very Poor Job (2020)	Poor/Very Poor Job (2021)	Avg. Job (2000)	Avg. Job (2021)	Good or Excellent Job (2020)	Good or Excellent Job (2021)
Tier 1	900,000 +	10	16	25	23	65	61
Tier 2	500,000–900,000	8	15	19	21	73	64
Tier 3	375,000–500,000	12	17	22	21	66	63
Tier 4	200,000–375,000	9	15	27	24	65	62
Tier 5	Rural	7	14	19	17	74	69

<sup>a</sup>Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

**TABLE II** Perceptions of overall job of police in your country: changes 2020 to 2021<sup>a</sup>

Group	City Size Range (Residents)	Poor/Very Poor Job (2020)	Poor/Very Poor Job (2021)	Avg. Job (2000)	Avg. Job (2021)	Good or Excellent Job (2020)	Good or Excellent Job (2021)
Tier 1	900,000 +	15	21	25	22	60	57
Tier 2	500,000–900,000	10	21	21	24	69	55
Tier 3	375,000–500,000	12	21	27	28	61	51
Tier 4	200,000–375,000	9	17	32	29	58	54
Tier 5	Rural	9	13	28	25	63	62

<sup>a</sup>Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

**TABLE III** Perceptions that the police provide the same quality of service to all citizens: changes 2020 to 2021<sup>a</sup>

Group	City Size Range (Residents)	Disagree/Strongly Disagree (2020)	Disagree/Strongly Disagree (2021)	Neutral (2020)	Neutral (2021)	Agree or Strongly Agree (2020)	Agree or Strongly Agree (2021)
Tier 1	900,000 +	36	40	21	16	42	45
Tier 2	500,000–900,000	28	37	21	16	50	47
Tier 3	375,000–500,000	30	40	26	16	43	44
Tier 4	200,000–375,000	30	33	25	19	45	49
Tier 5	Rural	21	26	20	15	59	58

<sup>a</sup>Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

statement increased in all five population groups: from 3% in CMAs with 200,000 to 375,000 residents to 11% in cities with populations between 500,000 and 900,000. Those agreeing or strongly agreeing that everybody receives the same quality of service were less consistent, and agreement increased in three of the five groups (the largest CMAs, CMAs of 375,000 to 500,000 residents, and the smallest CMAs—200,000 to 375,000 residents). These mixed results are difficult to explain and may be evidence of a polarization in perceptions, as the proportion of persons who indicated neutral feelings (neither agree nor disagree) decreased in all five tiers in 2021, while there was less variation in the neutral responses in Tables I and Table II.

### Changing Social Context for Canadian Policing

Altogether, an examination of the information Retrieved from: the individual police services and the grouped results disseminated by Advanis (2021) reveal a significant shift in the positive perceptions towards the police between 2020 and 2021. There are three plausible reasons for this change. The first is George Floyd's death in May 2020. The almost universal and short-term time frame of the drop described above suggests that incident influenced how Canadians view the police. A Leger (2020, p. 5) poll being carried out the weeks prior to and after his death, for instance, showed a visible decrease in trust in the Canadian police. This suggests the public might not distinguish the differences between American and Canadian policing. The Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police (2021, p. 6) observe that the perception of Canadian policing "is often influenced by incidents involving officers in other departments, other police services, other jurisdictions, and even in other countries." Canadians are interested in highly publicized use-of-force incidents by American police officers, and Logan (2014) reports that "the protests surrounding the deaths of black men at the hands of police was the top U.S. news story [in Canada] of 2014."

It is also likely that the public's perceptions towards all public institutions, including the police, changed after the March 2020 lockdowns in response to the global pandemic. A Leger (2022, p. 8) poll conducted in February 2022 reveals that 14% of their Canadian respondents were described as angry and opposed to mandates and government measures. Moreover, 40% of respondents in that survey were somewhat or very dissatisfied with the measures taken by the federal government to fight COVID-19, while 45% and 30% of them expressed dissatisfaction with their provincial and municipal governments, respectively (Leger, 2022, p. 25). Those unfavourable perceptions may also have been directed towards the police.

McClelland and Luscombe (2021) observe that some provincial governments criminalized public health responses to the pandemic and the police and other municipal officials became responsible for enforcing new restrictions and regulations. This expansion in police powers was not always seen by the public as legitimate, nor were these perceptions confined to Canada. Perry et al. (2021, pp. 5–6) summarized the results of surveys conducted in Israel, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom showing that indicators of public mood, such as trust in the police, decreased during the pandemic. Sheldon (2021) questions whether requiring the police to enforce public health restrictions may have reduced their legitimacy. Jones (2020) also speculates whether these new enforcement roles during the pandemic increased the divide between the police and the public. That divide may have widened after the police were required to implement public health restrictions at the same time as managing protests and social unrest directed towards them (Jiggeup-Akhtar et al., 2021).

A third possible explanation for our changing perceptions about policing in Canada exists: that there was an almost universal change in police conduct in 2020 that resulted in an unprecedented and rapid drop in favourable impressions of the police. That outcome is unlikely given the stability in positive perceptions of the police dating back to the 1980s (Roberts, 2004). Moreover, there is considerable variation in the degree of the decrease and some police services did not report any substantial drop in public trust, satisfaction, or confidence. Last, it is unlikely that the public would shift their perceptions in such a short period of time given that only about one-third of Canadians have any contact with the police in a given year (Ibrahim, 2020; RCMP, 2021).

As few of us have much interaction with the police, our ideas about policing are shaped by the way that information is presented in the social and mainstream media we follow. George Floyd's death is the most visible example, although high-profile incidents involving Canadian officers also influenced the public's impressions. One of the foremost of these acts was the 2007 death of Robert Dziekanski in the Vancouver airport after being shot with an RCMP conducted energy device. Focus groups and discussion circles of Black and Indigenous participants conducted in Calgary reveal they "felt that the media negatively influences relationships with CPS [Calgary Police Service] by exacerbating the tensions felt between CPS and citizens" (Calgary Police Commission, 2021, p. 11). Those observations are consistent with the findings of researchers reporting that negative news accounts about the police affect the public's perceptions (Intravia et al.,



2018; Li et al., 2016). More research needs to be carried out on the relationships between what is portrayed in the media and how those messages shape our perceptions of all public institutions, including the police.

While acknowledging that the public's perceptions of the police are influenced by the media, the results of these analyses suggest they do not distinguish between their local police and the misconduct of officers in other jurisdictions, or in other nations. Jones (2020, p. 581) observes that "negative media has an impact on police legitimacy and the community as a whole does not differentiate one police agency from another." These negative perceptions may be heightened in places where the public sees the police as illegitimate. The challenge for police services is that highly publicized acts of misconduct occurring thousands of kilometers away may reduce the favourable perceptions their residents have towards their local police, which may in turn reduce their willingness to cooperate with them.

## DISCUSSION

The information presented above describes a drop in the positive perceptions of Canadians towards the police. The death of George Floyd in police custody appears to be the primary driver in this loss of the public's trust and confidence. A secondary reason for this decrease may be a growing antipathy towards all government institutions after the onset of the pandemic and making the police responsible for enforcing regulations that a significant proportion of the public perceives as illegitimate. A third possibility is that the conduct of the police changed over a short period of time and this resulted in a one-year drop in public trust. There might also be an interplay of these three factors that led to different outcomes in the public's perceptions across the country.

There are limitations in the data and analyses presented above. The foremost is the lack of demographic and city-level data for the Advanis (2021) results. As a result, their findings are presented in this study based on two snapshots of grouped results. With respect to the data collected for the individual CMAs by the investigator, one shortcoming is the lack of a common indicator of the public's mood for all these sites. Hu et al. (2020) remind us that different indicators of perceptions of the police—such as trust, satisfaction, and confidence—are distinct. The lack of information from police services in Quebec collected by the investigator was mitigated, as Advanis (2021) surveyed respondents from four Quebec CMAs as well as rural and small-town Quebec residents; the client surveys conducted by the RCMP also report the perceptions of Quebec residents. A further limitation is the difficulty in disentangling the effects of this drop in favourable perceptions arising from George Floyd's death and those caused by using the police to enforce the public health restrictions imposed during the pandemic. Each of these factors may have contributed to these changing perceptions in different ways.

What the public thinks about the police is important for police agencies in terms of gaining the public's assistance and cooperation in their crime-control efforts. Consequently, one question emerging from the results presented above is how police services can use this information. The first is that police services seeking to better understand the changing results of community surveys can place their local results within a larger, national context. That is important in informing

stakeholders—including the public—about these changing perceptions. Police leaders must also take a more active role in managing the public's perceptions through public education campaigns after highly visible acts of police misconduct or use of force occur. Public education campaigns in the social and mainstream media may prove fruitful.

## CONCLUSIONS

The public's positive perceptions towards the police in Canada as reported in the GSS show a long-term stability, and, while those perceptions have ebbed and flowed over time, they tend to be almost self-regulating. Gallup researchers in the United States also report that confidence in the police since 1993—when they first collected data on this issue—has been stable (Brenan, 2021). While it is too soon to tell whether the positive feelings towards the police will return to their historical norms, it is certain that these perceptions can exert a direct impact on police operations, one of which is that the public might be more reluctant to aid or support the police than they were prior to George Floyd's death.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

There are no conflicts of interest in this unfunded research, and the author received no direct help in the preparation of the manuscript. This paper has not previously been published in any form.

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