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Juvenile Attitudes Toward the Police

An Examination of Rural Youth

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The past three decades have seen an increase in research on the attitudes of juveniles toward the police. This research suggests that juveniles are generally less positive in their attitudes toward the police than are adults. However, most research on juvenile attitudes has focused on youth residing in metropolitan areas, ignoring the role of geographical location in explaining perceptions. Using survey data, the present study examined the attitudes of rural youth toward the police. The findings suggest that although the level of support among rural teenagers did not mirror the levels found within the adult literature, rural teenagers may be more supportive of the police than their metropolitan counterparts. Furthermore, whereas White teenagers were generally more positive in their perception of the police than were Black teenagers, race was not a significant predictor of attitudes toward the police. Still, many of the variables identified as theoretically relevant in the existing literature were significant predictors of the attitudes of juveniles residing in rural areas.

Keywords: *juveniles; attitudes; police; rural youth*

Within recent years, researchers have explored the attitudes of juveniles toward the police. This line of research, in part, is driven by the awareness that juveniles have a high level of contact with the police, which may potentially affect attitudes toward police as well as willingness to engage in behaviors supportive of the police. In general, research suggests that support for the police is not widespread among juveniles and is much lower for juveniles than for adults. Most research on juvenile attitudes toward the police has, unfortunately, focused on teenagers residing in metropolitan communities. The purpose of this study is to examine the attitudes of rural youth toward the police.

The urban setting has largely been the focal point of most criminal justice research. Because of this urban emphasis, some of the least understood topics in criminal justice and criminology are issues related to the impact of a rural setting on crime and justice. Weisheit and Wells (1996) contend that because the rural setting has been ignored by researchers, policy makers, and the media, there is the belief that the concept "rural" is no longer relevant. The trend in social science research is to view the city as the location "where the action is" and to view rural areas as "curious and less informative deviations." Indeed, a misconception has been to study urban areas and assume that rural areas are similar. These types of generalizations ignore the distinctiveness of the rural environment.

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Decker (1979) identifies important reasons for expanding criminal justice research to include rural areas. First, to produce more comprehensive research, a broader range of situations and occurrences must be included. Second, expanding criminal justice research to include the rural environment provides a better opportunity to explore questions of validity in research. Moreover, the rural environment is different from the urban environment in ways that could affect policing, crime, and public policy (Weisheit, Wells, & Falcone, 1995).

Following this line of reasoning, the distinct characteristics of the rural setting also may affect how one sees the police. Research suggests that similar to their metropolitan counterparts, adults residing in rural areas generally hold positive attitudes toward the police (see Baird-Olson, 2000). Yet, little is known about the attitudes of juveniles residing in rural areas concerning the police. Although variables such as gender, race, and type of police contact all have been explored as possible explanations for less favorable attitudes among teenagers, research has not adequately addressed the role of geographical location in explaining attitudes toward the police.

Given the existing research, this study seeks to expand the literature by addressing two research questions. First, what is the overall level of support for the police among rural teenagers? Second, do variables commonly found to be statistically significant determinants of metropolitan youths, attitudes also explain the attitudes of rural youth?

Conceptual Framework for Analysis

Reisig and Parks (2000) identify three conceptual models that explain variables related to attitudes toward the police. The first, described as an experience with the police model, suggests that cumulative experiences with the police shape one's view of them. Particularly, the type of contact (citizen vs. police initiated) and perceived treatment by the police during these contacts should affect attitudes. Reisig and Parks assert that much of the attitudinal research to date has been guided by this conceptual model.

The second model links attitudes toward the police to perceptions of the quality of life in the community. The underlying premise behind this model is that citizens often hold the police accountable for the problems in their neighborhoods. Therefore, perceived problems with neighborhood incivility, crime, and fear of crime have an effect on how one views the police.

Third, the neighborhood context model associates attitudes toward the police with the social conditions within a community. Similar to the ecological perspective, this macrolevel model suggests that residents in areas with high concentrations of crime and/or poverty are more likely to negatively assess the police.

Sampson (1986) argues that theoretical models that assume that determinants of crime apply across geographical location may be misguided. In his study on the effects of urbanization and neighborhood characteristics on victimization, Sampson found that whereas poverty was correlated to criminal victimization in urban areas, housing density explained victimization in suburban and rural areas.

Following Sampson's (1986) logic, although several variables have been theoretically linked to attitudes toward the police, these variables have largely been explored in urban areas. Therefore, whether these factors hold true in rural environments is less clear. For example,

structural variables such as poverty have been shown to be related to crime in urban areas. Rural areas have historically had less of a problem with crime even though poverty has been common (Weisheit et al., 1995). Rural residents are more likely to informally control behavior in their community and may therefore be less likely to hold the police responsible for problems within their neighborhoods. More important, there are qualitative differences in the rural setting that make the relationship between the residents and the police distinguishable from that of urban residents and the police.

Police–Citizen Relationships: The Distinctiveness of the Rural Environment

Rural residents seem to have different expectations of the police. In their study on the job functions of rural police, Maguire, Faulkner, Mathers, Rowland, and Wozniak (1991) conclude that rural policing is "qualitatively distinct" in that it does not neatly fit any one style of policing. Police officers in these areas have a style of policing that encompasses a wide range of duties in the community. Although citizens in urban areas are more likely to believe that the police should focus on enforcing criminal law, citizens in rural areas expect the police to perform a wider range of duties.

Still, when examination of a rural setting takes place, research typically focuses on the organizational style of rural police departments as compared to urban departments, not on citizen perceptions of rural police. For example, Weisheit, Wells, and Falcone (1994) suggest that the practices of rural police departments mirror the principles of community policing. Key to these principles is a connection between the police and the community, which already exists in rural areas because local citizens often are hired by the police department. These findings are supported by Chambers (2000), who found a strong bond between rural citizens and the police, all of whom resided in the community and had been in the community nearly all of their lives.

Not surprisingly, the organization of the police in rural areas seems to be governed by a higher amount of interpersonal relationships and informal social control than is found in metropolitan areas. Freudenberg (1986) speaks of a "density of acquaintanceship" wherein people in rural communities know each other personally, share similar goals and values, and are much more likely to be watchful of crime. Moreover, the police in these areas are considered a part of this acquaintanceship. Police officers are likely to share a similar value system with the residents and are more likely to know the citizens they protect and serve. This high level of intimacy suggests that laws are often informally enforced (Chambers, 2000). It is probable that the officer often not only knows the victim and the offender but also their families. Consequently, police know and appreciate the history and culture of the people in the area and can use such information to guide their work (Weisheit et al., 1994).

The distinctiveness of the rural environment also means that the community has a greater impact on how officers behave and on what laws are enforced. Decker's (1979) qualitative piece on a rural setting referred to as "Pine County" illustrates this point. Illegal acts considered to be petty in the community were handled informally. However, those acts that the community perceived as problematic were more formally addressed by the Sheriff's

Department. Similar results were found in another qualitative piece conducted by Chambers (2000), wherein the community effectively controlled officer behavior by registering complaints to the police chief who, in turn, exerted formal measures of social control over his officers.

It is important to note that both metropolitan and rural citizens may hold certain assumptions concerning how the police should behave and may voice complaints when these assumptions are violated. However, the greater levels of informal social control and administrative control found in rural areas means that rural citizens may be able to more effectively change officer behavior.

Attitudes Toward the Police: Expanding the Literature

A seldom addressed question is how the organizational style of policing in rural communities affects the attitudes of its citizens toward officers. Given Freudenberg's (1986) work examining density of acquaintanceship, it would seem logical that rural residents would have a positive attitude concerning the police. Research, although limited, seems to support this contention. For example, in her case study of rural policing, Baird-Olson (2000) found that 90% to 95% of surveyed citizens rated local police as very effective in areas such as reducing crime and enhancing community trust. Along similar lines, in surveying citizens in rural Illinois on their attitudes concerning police functioning, Maguire et al. (1991) found that the majority of respondents rated the police as either good or average in their job performance. Moreover, it has been found that although there is a large degree of mistrust for the government among many rural residents, this sentiment does not extend to the local police, who are considered to be a part of the community and not outsiders (see Decker, 1979; Weisheit et al., 1994). Research also suggests that police officers in rural areas perceive a stronger sense of support and respect from community members than their metropolitan counterparts (Kowalewski, Hall, Dolan, & Anderson, 1984).

Of interest, other research suggests that the positive relationship shared between rural police and citizens changes when variables such as race and age are considered. Both rural and metropolitan police officers report tense relations between themselves and persons of color (Kowalewski et al., 1984). Rural police officers often single out young, Black men as being the most disrespectful. Rural police officers are also more likely to believe that a "rough lexicon" is necessary when dealing with young citizens and to believe that the community supports such a tough stance with the young (Kowalewski et al., 1984). Thus, it appears that as with youth residing in the city, teenagers in rural areas may have experiences that could lead to less positive attitudes toward the police. This hypothesis, however, has not been fully tested.

Determinants of Attitudes Toward the Police

Although the adult population seems to be supportive of the police, recent research suggests that support for the police is not widespread among juveniles (see Leiber, Nalla, & Farnsworth, 1998). Several variables have consistently been found to be predictors of both juvenile and adult attitudes. Chief among these variables are demographic characteristics (i.e.,

race, gender, and age), crime-related variables (i.e., victimization and perception of neighborhood crime), and police conduct variables (i.e., personal and vicarious encounters).

Demographic Variables

Race is perhaps one of the most frequently studied variables as related to attitudes toward the police. The literature suggests that persons of color are less favorable in their assessment of the police than are Whites (e.g., Erez, 1984; Jacob, 1971). However, the degree to which race affects attitudes may vary. For example, Thomas and Hyman (1977) and Lieber et al. (1998) found race to be the best predictor of evaluations of police performance; African American adults and juveniles were more critical. However, Peek, Lowe, and Alston (1981) found that race was, at best, only a weak predictor of attitudes. In a comparison of the attitudes of Black and White youth toward the police, Hurst, Frank, and Browning (2000) found that Black teenagers were more negative in their overall assessment of the police, even though their evaluations of police treatment during personal encounters were similar to those of White teenagers.

Findings concerning the link between gender and attitudes seem to be varied in both the adult and juvenile literature. Some research suggests that females (women and girls) are more positive in their ratings of the police then are males (Apple & O'Brien, 1983; Taylor, Turner, Esbensen, & Winfree, 2001). Other research has found that females are more negative in their rating of the police (Hurst & Frank, 2000; Thomas & Hyman, 1977) or that gender is unimportant as a predictor of attitudes (Murty, Roebuck, & Smith, 1990). It has been noted that girls, particularly African American females, are more likely to report seeing and hearing of police mistreatment aimed at a third party. This vicarious mistreatment has been offered as an explanation as to why girls may be less positive in their assessment of the police (see Hurst, McDermott, & Thomas, 2005).

Age seems to have a positive correlation with attitudes toward the police. Most notably, younger persons are more negative in their assessment of the police (Apple & O'Brien, 1983; Scaglion & Condon, 1980; Smith & Hawkins, 1973). It is important to note that many studies exploring the relationship between age and attitudes compare younger and older adults. Few studies in the juvenile literature domain examine age as a determinant of attitudes. This omission may be due in part to the fact that there is less variability in age among teenagers than adults. Still, when studies on adolescence examine age as a possible determinant, similar to the adult literature, age is positively related to attitudes toward the police (Hurst & Frank, 2000).

Crime-Related Variables

Issues surrounding crime and safety also may shape citizens' attitudes. Homant, Kennedy, and Fleming (1984) studied the effects of victimization on attitudes among Detroit residents. In comparing the attitudes of victims to those of nonvictims, they found that persons who had been victimized were less satisfied with police services. The impact of neighborhood conditions also may affect attitudes. Citizens who live in high crime areas or perceive that crime is higher in their neighborhoods than others are less positive in their assessment of the police (Albrecht & Green, 1977; Decker, 1981; Hurst & Frank, 2000; Murty et al., 1990).

Police Conduct Variables

Encounters, and the manner in which these exchanges are handled, have consistently been found to affect attitudes. Most studies have found that citizen attitudes are influenced by actual contact with officers (see Dean, 1980; Hero & Durand, 1985; Murty et al., 1990). Moreover, perceived treatment during personal encounters has been found to significantly influence attitudes. For example, Brandl, Frank, Worden, and Bynum (1994) compared specific attitudes about police performance during contacts to more general attitudes toward the police. They found that the positive or negative manner in which contacts are perceived was a determinant of attitudes toward the police and not necessarily the type of contact. Similar findings have been reported by Hurst and Frank (2000), who reported that those juveniles experiencing police-initiated contacts in which they perceived poor treatment were more critical of the police.

Knowledge of negative police-citizen encounters also tends to be related to attitudes toward the police. Dean (1980) found that knowledge of police mistreatment strongly influenced evaluations of the police. In the study by Hurst and Frank (2000), vicarious police misconduct was the strongest predictor of less positive attitudes toward the police. Thus, it seems that for both juveniles and adults, knowledge of negative contact between the police and someone other than themselves influences attitudes.

Although it appears that literature on attitudes toward the police and the knowledge of what influences these attitudes is increasing, little is known about the attitudes of rural teenagers toward the police. One notable exception is the research by Taylor et al. (2001), who as part of a larger study examined the attitudes of juveniles toward the police. They found that whereas juveniles were indifferent in their attitudes toward the police, the most favorable ratings of officers were in smaller rural areas with predominantly White respondents. The researchers suggest that future studies consider the contextual effect that city of residence may play on attitude development.

With this point in mind, the current study attempts to expand the existing literature on juvenile attitudes in several ways. First, to more fully understand the context in which attitudes may be formed, this study not only explores the perceptions of rural teenagers toward the police but also explores the influence of those variables that the existing literature suggests are determinants of these perceptions. Second, the current study includes in its sample rural students attending both predominantly White and non-White high schools, allowing for the exploration of race as a determinant the attitudes of rural teenagers. Third, the current study assesses the attitudes of 9th through 12th graders, which not only allows for the exploration of age as a determinant of attitudes but also allows the population of teenagers more likely to have contact and informed opinions about the police to be surveyed.

Method

Study Sample

Data for this study were collected using self-administered surveys distributed to high school students from four rural towns in Southern Illinois. Specifically, the sample consisted of 9th through 12th graders enrolled in four public high schools. The population of the high schools ranged from 125 to 800 students. One of the public high schools was

located in a predominantly African American town with 93% of the student population classified as Black American. The other high schools were located in towns where the racial composition was predominantly White American. As such, the population of students classified as White American ranged from 85% to 98%. Of the 750 surveys distributed, a total of 639 were returned usable, making the response rate 85.2%.

After preliminary meetings with the principals of each high school, surveys were administered in the spring of 2002 by homeroom teachers (or in one case the gym teacher) of 9th through 12th graders. Prior to administering the survey, each teacher was asked to read a letter introducing and explaining the project. Moreover, the same letter was attached to every survey distributed.

Sample and Town Characteristics

The characteristics of the study sample were 66% White, 24% Black, 5% Other, and 1% Hispanic; 42% male and 55% female; and the mean age of respondents was 15.

At the time of data collection, general demographic characteristics also were compiled for each town. These descriptions came from the U.S. Census Bureau and The Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO). It is also important to note that the amount of available information on each town varied and that what follows is a uniform description of each site under study.

Town A has a population of approximately 3,632 and is located within a county of about 9,590 residents. In 2002, the median household income for the county in which Town A is seated was $20,807, well below the state average of $41,179. Approximately 10% of the county was unemployed and the primary source of employment for the county was listed as nonmanufacturing jobs. Specific to Town A, 62% of the population was classified as Black, 36% was listed as White non-Hispanic, and the remaining 2% was classified as either two or more races or Hispanic. Town A has its own law enforcement agency, which at the time of the study employed 16 full-time officers. There was one public high school in the town with an enrollment of 216 students. The student population was 93% Black, 7% White; 52% male and 48% female.

Town B has a population of approximately 6,448 and is located within a county of about 23,094 residents. In 2002, the median household income for the county in which Town B is seated was $30,674, well below the state average of $41,179. Approximately 9% of the county was unemployed and the primary source of employment for the county was listed as nonmanufacturing jobs. Specific to Town B, 90% of the population was classified as White non-Hispanic; 7% was listed as Black; and the remaining 3% was classified as either two or more races, Hispanic, or American Indian. Town B also had its own law enforcement agency that employed 10 full-time officers and 6 volunteers. There was one public high school in the town with an enrollment of 454 students. The student population was 90% White, 9% Black; 51% female and 49% male.

Town C has a population of approximately 9,500 and is located within a county of about 59,612 residents. In 2002, the median household income for the county in which Town C is seated was $27,109, well below the state average of $41,179. Approximately 4% of the county was unemployed and the primary source of employment for the county was listed as nonmanufacturing jobs. Specific to Town C, 79% of the population was classified as White

non-Hispanic, 16% was classified as Black, 3% was classified as Hispanic, and the remaining 2% were classified as two or more races. Town C has its own law enforcement agency, which at the time of the study employed 14 full-time and 7 part-time officers. There was one public high school in the town with an enrollment of 800 students. The student population was 85% White, 13% Black, and 1% Hispanic; 51% female and 49% male.

Town D has a population of approximately 1,327 and is located within a county of about 61,296 residents. In 2002, the median household income for the county in which Town D is seated was $31,147, well below the state average of $41,179. Approximately 5% of the county was unemployed and the primary source of employment for the county was listed as nonmanufacturing jobs. Specific to Town D, 98% was classified as White non-Hispanic and the remaining were classified as Black (0.3%), American Indian and Alaska Native (0.5), or Asian (0.1). Law enforcement duties were the responsibility of the County Sheriff's Department, which at the time of the study employed approximately 40 full- and part-time officers. Finally, students from Town D attended a public high school in the county seat. There were 125 students enrolled at this high school. The student population was 98% White, 2% Black; 53% female and 47% male.

Measures

The objectives of this study were to determine the attitudes of rural juveniles toward the police and to explore whether those variables that the existing literature suggests are predictors of attitudes likewise applied to rural teenagers. In accordance with these objectives, the survey was designed to not only measure the attitudes of juveniles toward the police but also determinants of these attitudes. An overview of the dependent and independent variables used in the analysis follows.

Dependent Variables: Attitudes Toward the Police

To assess juvenile attitudes toward the police, 11 survey items were asked. Following the lead of the existing literature (see Brandl et al., 1994; White & Menke, 1982), both global attitudes and attitudes about specific police functions were measured. Specifically, there were four questions designed to tap general attitudes about the police. These questions were as follows: (a) In general, I like the police; (b) In general, I trust the police; (c) In general, I am satisfied with the police in my neighborhood; and (d) In general, police officers do a good job. Using a Likert-type scale, response categories ranged from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Responses to these questions were then summed to create a scale measuring general attitudes toward the police, with higher scores indicating more positive attitudes (Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$).

The same process was taken to measure attitudes toward specific police functions. Juveniles were asked seven questions related to police functioning. These questions were as follows: (a) If the police see someone who is sick and needs help, they will do their best to help them; (b) The police will help you if your car is broken down and you need help; (c) The police do a good job of stopping people from selling drugs; (d) The police do a good job of stopping people from using drugs; (e) The police do a good job of stopping crime; (f) The police do a good job in keeping my neighborhood quiet at night; and (g) The police do a good job in stopping people from hanging around on street corners and causing

trouble. Again, responses to these questions were summed to create a scale measuring attitudes toward specific job functions (Cronbach's α = .87). A final scale was created to measure the overall attitude of juveniles toward the police. This scale included both global and specific questions concerning the police (Cronbach's α = .92).

Independent Variables

Prior attitudinal research suggests that there are several theoretically relevant variables related to attitudes toward the police. Below is a description of those variables explored in the current study.

Respondent Characteristics

Data were collected on four demographic characteristics. First, race was recoded as 0 = *White* and 1= *non-White*.[1] Second, gender was coded as 0 = *male* and 1 = *female*. Third, age was measured as the juveniles' age in years at the time the survey was completed. Fourth, a school/community variable was created so that 0 = *community/school that was predominantly African American* (Town A) and 1 = *community/school that was predominantly White, non-Hispanic* (Towns B, C, and D).

Police Conduct Variables

A series of questions were asked to assess whether respondents had personal encounters with the police and to assess their perception of how they were treated during these contacts. Specifically, juveniles were first asked if, during the previous year, they had contact with the police due to (a) victimization, (b) asking for information, (c) asking for help in a noncriminal matter, (d) being stopped while standing on the street, (e) driving or riding in a car, and (f) being arrested. Second, juveniles who experienced any of these contacts were then asked to rate how they were treated, with response options being *very poor*, *poor*, *good*, and *very good*.

Next, four variables were created to measure contact with the police. The first measure was personal contacts initiated by the juvenile, wherein police treatment was perceived as *good* or *very good* (juvenile-initiated positive contact). Juvenile-initiated negative contact, the second measure, was contact initiated by the teen wherein police treatment was perceived as *poor* or *very poor*. Third, police-initiated positive contact was any encounter initiated by the police that the juvenile perceived as *good* or *very good*. The fourth measure of contact was police-initiated negative contact; those contacts were initiated by the police and were perceived to be *poor* or *very poor*.

Vicarious police contact also was measured as a possible determinant of attitudes. This variable was measured by asking juveniles a series of questions concerning the police and a third party. Specifically, juveniles were asked if they had seen or heard the police (a) being rude or impolite, (b) treating citizens unfairly during an arrest, (c) covering up another officer's wrongdoing, (d) taking sides in an argument between citizens, or (e) not performing required duties. Affirmative answers were summed to measure the respondents' extent of vicarious information about police misconduct.

Crime-Related Variables

Five questions were asked in relation to crime and the perception of crime. First, juveniles were asked to compare crime rates in their neighborhoods to other neighborhoods. The possible response options for this question were *lower than most*, *about the same*, and *higher than most*. A second question asked juveniles if they felt that crime in their neighborhoods had increased, stayed the same, or decreased within the last year. Third, juveniles were asked how often they saw the police in their neighborhoods and, fourth, were asked about the likelihood of seeing an officer outside of their neighborhoods. The response categories for both of these questions were *very likely*, *somewhat likely*, *somewhat unlikely*, and *very unlikely*.

The fifth, and final, crime-related measure addressed victimization. Specifically, juveniles were asked, "During the last year, from March of last year to now, have any of the following crimes been committed against you personally? Someone broke into your house . . . You had property stolen from your house or yard . . . Someone stole, broke into your/the family car . . . Someone took your purse or wallet while you were on the street . . . Someone threatened to beat you with a knife, gun, or other weapon . . . Someone actually beat you up . . . Some other crime not mentioned here happened to you." Affirmative responses were summed to create a measure of the extent of victimization.

Findings

Descriptive Analysis

Table 1 presents the distribution of responses to the police conduct and crime-related variables. Concerning the police contact variables, the majority of the juveniles, 65.1% to 87.8%, reported no police or citizen-initiated contact during the previous year. However, 74.4% of the respondents reported seeing the police mistreat a citizen and 84.8% reported hearing of police mistreatment aimed at a third party. A fairly large percentage of juveniles (61.5%) reported being the victim of some sort of crime during the previous year. Whereas 86.7% of those surveyed believed that they were *very likely* or *somewhat likely* to see the police outside of the neighborhood on a normal basis, a smaller percentage (51.3%) routinely saw the police in their neighborhood (see Table 1). Finally, most juveniles perceived crime to be lower in their neighborhoods compared to other areas (66.3%) and also believed that crime in their neighborhood had stayed the same within the last year (65.2%).

To explore the attitudes of rural youth toward the police, frequency distributions to the 11 attitude questions were first examined. Second, to determine whether previous variables found to be predictors of attitudes toward the police likewise apply to rural teenagers, a multivariate analysis was performed.

Overall Attitudes Toward the Police

Table 2 presents the distribution of responses to the 11 measures on attitudes toward the police. The responses indicate that there is not overwhelming support for the police by rural teenagers. Still, their attitudes are slightly more favorable than their metropolitan counterparts. For example, although only 35.7% of those surveyed *agreed* or *strongly agreed* with the statement, "In general, I like the police," close to half (47.3%) reported trust in the

Table 1
Police Conduct and Crime-Related Variable

Variable	Value	*N*	*%*
Police conduct			
Police-initiated positive contact	No	416	65.1
	Yes	223	34.8
Citizen-initiated positive contact	No	454	71.0
	Yes	185	29.0
Police-initiated negative contact	No	446	69.8
	Yes	193	30.3
Citizen-initiated negative contact	No	561	87.8
	Yes	78	12.2
Seen officer mistreating citizens	No	145	23.6
	Yes	475	74.4
Heard of officer mistreating citizens	No	82	13.1
	Yes	542	84.8
Crime related			
Victimization during the last year	No	239	38.0
	Yes	383	61.5
On a normal day, how likely will you	(1) *very likely*	174	27.4
see an officer in your neighborhood?	(2) *somewhat likely*	152	23.9
	(3) *somewhat unlikely*	115	18.1
	(4) *very unlikely*	195	30.7
On a normal day, how likely will you see	(1) *very likely*	319	50.2
an officer outside your neighborhood?	(2) *somewhat likely*	232	36.5
	(3) *somewhat unlikely*		49.0
	(4) *very unlikely*	35	5.5
What has happened to crime in your	(1) *decreased*	135	21.5
neighborhood?	(2) *stayed the same*	409	65.2
	(3) *increased*	83	13.2
How high is crime in your neighborhood	(1) *lower*	417	66.3
compared to others?	(2) *about the same*	164	26.1
	(3) *higher*	48	7.6

police. Similarly, 43.6% of the respondents either *agreed* or *strongly agreed* with the statement, "In general, police officers do a good job." As a point of comparison, Hurst and Frank (2000) found that only 39.8% of juveniles in and around Cincinnati, Ohio, reported trust in the police. Moreover, only 38% of this sample believed that the police do a good job.

There was not widespread support among rural teenagers concerning the ability of the police to perform specific job functions. When asked to respond to statements about officers' ability to stop people from hanging out and causing trouble, a mere 31.8% of respondents *agreed* or *strongly agreed.* Only 34.1% responded in the affirmative to statements concerning the ability of the police to stop crime, and an even lower perception of police performance was reported in areas concerning drug use and sales. Specifically, 16.9% of juveniles believed the police did a good job in stopping the sale of drugs and 15.1% believed that the police did a good job in stopping use of drugs. Still, the perceptions rural teenagers had were more positive than those found among metropolitan youth, where less than 10% believe the police do a good job of stopping drug use or sales (see Hurst & Frank, 2000).

Table 2
Juvenile Level of Support for the Police

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	X
General						
In general, I trust the police	11.9	13.6	26.2	33.2	14.1	3.16
In general, I like the police	16.9	12.4	34.6	25.7	10.0	2.92
In general, I am satisfied with police in my neighborhood	14.6	16.3	29.4	26.4	12.7	3.00
In general, police officers do a good job	8.6	14.1	32.7	33.3	10.3	3.15
Specific						
The police do a good job of stopping crime	12.2	20.2	32.6	26.0	8.1	2.88
The police do a good job of stopping people from using drugs	34.0	29.9	20.0	11.7	3.4	2.11
The police do a good job of stopping people from selling drugs	32.2	27.9	22.1	11.4	5.5	2.20
The police do a good job of keeping my neighborhood quiet at night	13.0	15.8	30.7	25.7	14.1	3.04
The police will help you if your car is broken down and you need help	8.3	13.6	22.2	37.7	14.4	3.34
If the police see someone who is sick and needs help, they will help them	4.7	13.5	31.6	36.0	13.3	3.30
The police do a good job of stopping people from hanging out and causing trouble	18.9	18.2	30.4	23.2	8.6	2.76

Note: $N = 639$. Numbers represent percentages.

Of interest, rural teenagers were positive in their view that the police would perform service-related duties. For example, 52.1% of respondents believed that the police would help citizens if their car was broken down and 49.3% believed that the police would help citizens who were ill.

One issue that should be addressed concerns the large number of juveniles who responded in a neutral manner to survey items. This finding could reflect what Taylor et al. (2001) report as an indifference among juveniles toward the police. At first glance, it would appear that, at best, juveniles were indifferent and, at worst, not overwhelmingly positive in their assessment of the police. Therefore, to more closely examine the level of support for the police, the responses to the questions concerning attitudes were reexamined, excluding those juveniles who were neutral.

According to Table 3, a majority of teenagers agreed with the attitudinal statements, although the extent of agreement ranged from slightly half (50.6%) to almost three fourths (72.1%). It was still in the service-related areas that the police received the most support. For example, 70.8% of the rural teenagers agreed that the police would help citizens whose cars were broken down. Likewise, it was still in crime-related areas that the police received the least amount of affirmative responses. Most respondents (79.8% and 77.1%, respectively) disagreed with statements concerning the police doing a good job in stopping the use and sale of drugs. In addition, 53.3% of those surveyed disagreed with the statement, "The police do a good job of stopping people from hanging out and causing trouble."

Table 3
Juvenile Level of Support for the Police
Excluding Neutral Responses

	Disagree[a]	Agree
General		
In general, I trust the police	34.6	64.1
In general, I like the police	44.3	54.5
In general, I am satisfied with police in my neighborhood	43.7	55.4
In general, police officers do a good job	33.7	64.9
Specific		
The police do a good job of stopping crime	48.0	50.6
The police do a good job of stopping people from using drugs	79.8	19.0
The police do a good job of stopping people from selling drugs	77.1	21.7
The police do a good job of keeping my neighborhood quiet at night	41.5	57.3
The police will help you if your car is broken down and you need help	28.2	70.8
If the police see someone who is sick and needs help, they will help them	26.5	72.1
The police do a good job of stopping people from hanging out and causing trouble	53.3	45.6

Note: Numbers represent percentages.
a. The disagree category includes *strongly disagree* and *disagree*, whereas the agree category includes both *strongly agree* and *agree*.

To more clearly explore the role of race on attitudes, a series of chi-square tests were computed. Table 4 shows that there were significant differences by race for all attitude statements; non-Whites were generally less positive in their attitude toward the police.

Specifically, more than half of White teenagers reported trust in the police (57%), whereas only one third (30%) of non-White teens reported trust in the police. A similar pattern was found in overall satisfaction with the police. Forty-six percent of the White respondents were satisfied with the police in their neighborhood, whereas less than one third (27%) of non-White respondents were satisfied. Although a general like for the police was not widespread among the sample, non-White teenagers were still significantly less positive in their assessment. Also, most teenagers did not agree with statements concerning police effectiveness in stopping the sale and use of drugs. However, non-Whites actually agreed more with these statements than did Whites (see Table 4). For example, 25% of non-White respondents agreed that the police do a good job of stopping the sale of drugs as compared to only 14% of White respondents. A near similar pattern was found in response to stopping the use of drugs: 21% of non-White respondents agreed with the statement as opposed to 13% of White respondents. Black teenagers, however, were less likely to answer in the affirmative to statements related to the police willingness to engage in service functions. Although 60% of White juveniles believed the police would help citizens whose car was broken down, only 46% of Black juveniles agreed with the same statement. As previously noted, the responses

Table 4
Juvenile Level of Support for the Police by Race

Variable	Value	White		Non-White		χ^2	p Value
		N	%	N	%		
I trust the police	1. *Strongly disagree*	38	9.0	34	17.8		
	2. *Disagree*	37	8.7	45	23.6		
	3. *Neutral*	105	24.8	54	28.3	51.551	.000
	4. *Agree*	172	40.7	38	19.9		
	5. *Strongly agree*	70	16.5	19	9.9		
In general, I like	1. *Strongly disagree*	50	11.8	50	26.0		
the police	2. *Disagree*	49	11.6	26	13.5		
	3. *Neutral*	139	32.9	74	38.5	34.924	.000
	4. *Agree*	131	31.0	31	16.1		
	5. *Strongly agree*	53	12.5	11	5.7		
Satisfied with the	1. *Strongly disagree*	50	11.8	39	20.3		
police in my	2. *Disagree*	61	14.4	36	18.8		
neighborhood	3. *Neutral*	116	27.4	65	33.9	22.491	.000
	4. *Agree*	134	31.6	33	17.2		
	5. *Strongly agree*	62	14.6	19	9.9		
In general, police	1. *Strongly disagree*	25	5.9	26	13.6		
do a good job	2. *Disagree*	45	10.6	40	20.9		
	3. *Neutral*	133	31.4	67	35.1	35.196	.000
	4. *Agree*	163	38.4	48	25.1		
	5. *Strongly agree*	56	13.2	10	5.2		
Police do a good job	1. *Strongly disagree*	41	9.7	33	17.3		
of stopping crime	2. *Disagree*	80	18.9	46	24.1		
	3. *Neutral*	140	33.1	60	31.4	13.333	.017
	4. *Agree*	125	29.6	37	19.4		
	5. *Strongly agree*	36	8.5	15	7.9		
Police do a good job of	1. *Strongly disagree*	136	32.1	74	38.9		
stopping drug use	2. *Disagree*	137	32.3	44	23.2		
	3. *Neutral*	94	22.2	32	16.8	13.802	.014
	4. *Agree*	41	9.7	33	17.4		
	5. *Strongly agree*	15	3.5	7	3.7		
Police do a good job of	1. *Strongly disagree*	129	30.5	71	37.2		
stopping drug sales	2. *Disagree*	132	31.2	36	18.8		
	3. *Neutral*	102	24.1	37	19.4	19.140	.001
	4. *Agree*	40	9.5	31	16.2		
	5. *Strongly agree*	19	4.5	16	8.4		
Police do a good job	1. *Strongly disagree*	40	9.5	40	20.8		
keeping neighborhood	2. *Disagree*	57	13.5	42	21.9		
quiet at night	3. *Neutral*	126	29.8	60	31.3	33.609	.000
	4. *Agree*	127	30.0	34	17.7		
	5. *Strongly agree*	72	17.0	19	8.3		
Police will help with	1. *Strongly disagree*	30	7.1	20	10.4		
broken down car	2. *Disagree*	50	11.8	33	17.2		
	3. *Neutral*	87	20.6	50	26.0	12.400	.025
	4. *Agree*	179	42.3	56	29.2		
	5. *Strongly agree*	76	18.0	33	17.2		

(continued)

Table 4 (continued)

Variable	Value	White		Non-White		χ²	p Value
		N	%	N	%		
Police will help someone	1. *Strongly disagree*	13	3.1	16	8.3		
who is sick	2. *Disagree*	45	10.7	35	18.2		
	3. *Neutral*	146	34.6	50	26.0	24.322	.000
	4. *Agree*	169	40.0	57	29.7		
	5. *Strongly agree*	48	11.4	34	17.7		
Police do a good job of	1. *Strongly disagree*	69	16.3	45	23.4		
stopping hanging on	2. *Disagree*	67	15.8	45	23.4		
street corners and	3. *Neutral*	140	33.0	51	26.6	13.949	.013
causing trouble	4. *Agree*	112	26.4	34	17.7		
	5. *Strongly agree*	35	8.3	17	8.9		

to the attitudinal questions show that there were significant differences in the perceptions of Black and White teenagers concerning the police. Moreover, with the exception of statements related to crime control, White teenagers were significantly more likely to positively rate the police as compared to non-White teenagers.

Determinants of Attitudes Toward the Police

First, a correlation matrix was computed. Analysis of the correlation matrix indicates that few of the observed relationships were strong. The strongest relationships were between the race and school/community (–.71) and gender and age (.71). Non-Whites were more likely to attend and live in predominantly African American communities and females were older than males (see Table 5).

Second, to more fully explore the attitudes of rural teens toward the police, three ordinary least squares (OLS) regression equations were estimated. Consistent with previous research, an overall equation was first estimated using all attitudinal measures of the police as the dependent variable. Two additional equations were then estimated, one using the scale of attitudes toward the police in general as the dependent variable and the other using the attitudinal scale concerning specific job functions as the dependent variable. Findings from these estimations are reported.[2]

The community/school in which the juvenile was located was significantly related to his or her attitude toward the police. Specifically, those juveniles from Town A (predominantly African American) were significantly more likely to negatively assess the police across all models. However, race was not statistically significant in any of the models. Thus, it appears that the area in which juveniles reside is related to attitudes toward the police, not their race/ethnicity. None of the other demographic measures was found to be a predictor of attitudes toward the police (see Table 6). Two of the five variables related to crime and the perception of crime were consistently significant across the models.

Juveniles who believed crime in the neighborhood had increased during the past year were less positive in their ratings of the police across all three models. Beta coefficients for this variable indicate the second strongest effect on attitudes toward police ability (or inability)

Table 5
Correlation Matrix of Variables in Analysis

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Race	1.00													
2. Age	−0.07*	1.00												
3. Gender	0.00	0.71**	1.00											
4. School	−0.71	0.00	0.06	1.00										
5. Victimization	0.13**	−0.11**	−0.04	−0.05	1.00									
6. Crime comparison to other areas	0.16**	−0.10**	0.00	−0.11**	0.25**	1.00								
7. Crime in neighborhood	−0.08*	−0.00**	0.07	0.09*	0.08*	0.16**	1.00							
8. Visibility within neighborhood	−0.19*	0.09*	0.09*	0.22**	−0.11**	−0.19**	−0.00	1.00						
9. Visibility out of neighborhood	−0.10**	0.09*	0.13**	−0.01	0.38	0.10**	0.01	0.34**	1.00					
10. Vicarious conduct	0.19**	−0.10*	−0.07	−0.11**	0.38**	0.18**	0.10*	−0.12**	−0.09*	1.00				
11. Citizen-initiated negative	0.10**	0.00	−0.04	−0.02	0.23**	0.14**	0.03	−0.02	0.00	0.22**	1.00			
12. Police-initiated negative	0.16**	0.00	0.01	−0.10*	0.29**	0.19**	0.06	−0.04	0.00	0.37**	0.45**	1.00		
13. Citizen-initiated positive	−0.07	0.05	0.05	0.01	0.13**	0.01	0.02	−0.06	−0.03	0.00	−0.07	0.01	1.00	
14. Police-initiated positive	0.00	0.02	−0.01	−0.03	0.04	−0.01	0.05	−0.07*	0.01	0.04	−0.01	−0.15**	0.19**	1.00

*$p \leq .05$. **$p \leq .001$.

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Table 6
Determinants of Juvenile Attitudes Toward the Police

	Overall		General		Specific	
	B	β	*b*	β	*b*	β
Demographic						
Race	0.299	.016	–0.470	–.060	0.975	.082
Age	–0.085	–.035	–0.043	–.043	–0.062	–.040
Gender	–0.179	–.016	–0.075	–.016	–0.245	–.036
School	2.932*	.140	1.060**	.122	1.972**	.150
Crime-related victimization	–0.320	–.057	–0.132	–.057	–0.180	–.052
Crime comparison to other areas	–0.754	–.053	–0.268	–.046	–0.423	–.048
Crime in neighborhood	–2.361***	–.156	–1.015***	–.162	–1.547***	–.164
Visibility within neighborhood	–0.057	–.008	–0.066	–.023	–0.028	–.007
Visibility out of neighborhood	–0.589	–.063	–0.269*	–.069	–0.445**	–.076
Police conduct						
Vicarious conduct	–0.939***	–.336	–0.352***	–.304	–0.575***	–.330
Citizen-initiated negative	–1.791*	–.104	–0.778**	–.108	–1.304**	–.121
Police-initiated negative	–2.724***	–.206	–1.260***	–.230	–1.139**	–.139
Citizen-initiated positive	0.816	.067	0.378*	.075	0.162	.021
Police-initiated positive	0.188	.013	0.040	.007	0.257	.027
Adjusted R^2	.366		.382		.291	
N	572		580		575	

*$p < .05$. **$p < .005$. ***$p < .001$.

to perform specific job functions. Juveniles who did not routinely see officers outside of their neighborhood also were less positive in their view of police in general and in their view of police ability to perform specific job functions.

With regard to measures of police contact, three variables were consistently found to be statistically significant (see Table 6). Juveniles who had seen or heard of police misconduct toward a third party (vicarious misconduct) were significantly less positive in their assessment of the police. Beta coefficients indicate that this variable exerted the strongest influence on attitudes across all three attitude scales. Juveniles who perceived negative treatment during either citizen- or police-initiated contact also were significantly less positive in their attitudes toward the police. Moreover, the beta coefficients indicate that perceptions of negative treatment during police stops or arrests exerted the second strongest influence on overall and general attitudes toward the police.

As a final point, the adjusted R^2 for the three equations indicate that between 29% and 38% of the variance in attitudes toward the police can be explained by predictor variables. The proportion of explained variation seems to be similar to findings reported in earlier research. Specifically, Hurst and Frank (2000) used the same models in their study of the attitudes of urban youth toward the police. Forty percent of variation in the overall attitudes of urban youth toward the police was explained in the model, compared to 37% of explained variation for rural youth; 46% of the variation in attitudes toward the police in general was accounted for in the study of metropolitan youth, compared to 38% in the current study; and 28% of the variation in attitudes toward police ability to perform specific job functions was explained, compared to 29% in the current study on rural youth. Thus, it appears that the amount of explained variation in the sample of rural youth is comparable to the proportions found in prior research on urban teens.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined the attitudes of rural teenagers toward the police. The rural population has largely been ignored within criminal justice research. This lack of focus is unfortunate because rural environments are distinctive from metropolitan environments in ways that may affect crime and justice. As such, the purpose of this study was twofold. First, the overall level of support for the police among rural teenagers was examined. Second, those variables commonly found to be determinants of attitudes were explored as possible predictors of rural attitudes toward the police.

Level of Support

Freudenberg (1986) and other researchers suggest that in rural settings, residents are more likely to know and thus appreciate the police. Although the level of support among rural teenagers does not mirror the levels found within the adult literature, rural teenagers may be more supportive of the police than their metropolitan counterparts. Close to half (47%) of those surveyed affirmatively responded to the statement, "In general, I like the police." Furthermore, approximately 43% of the sample believed that the police do a good job. The majority of teenagers surveyed also indicated that the police would aid citizens who were in need of help. Affirmative responses significantly decreased, however, when respondents were asked to consider police performance in areas related to crime control. For example, only 17% of those surveyed believed that the police did a good job of stopping the sale of drugs. Similarly, only 34% of juveniles believed that the police did a good job of stopping crime.

The current study also provides some support for the contention that non-White teenagers are more negative in their assessment of the police than are White teenagers. Specifically, whereas more than half of White teens reported trust in the police, only one third of non-White teens responded in kind. White juveniles were, overall, more satisfied with the police and were more positive in their assessment of police to perform service functions. However, Black teenagers were more likely to rate the police higher in crime control areas than were White teenagers.

Finally, the range of juveniles who were neutral in their assessment of the police was between 20% and 35%. This fairly high percentage of neutral responses could be an indication

of an overall indifference toward the police. When neutral respondents were excluded from examination, support for the police ranged from slightly half to almost three fourths of those surveyed.

Determinants of Juveniles' Attitudes

A second objective of this study was to explore possible determinants of attitudes toward the police. With this objective in mind, three regression equations were estimated that included variables suggested by previous research to be theoretically relevant to perceptions of the police. Contradictory to previous research, demographic variables were mostly inconsequential determinants of attitudes. One notable exception was the community/school variable. Those juveniles attending the predominantly African American school located in a non-White community were consistently less positive in their attitudes toward the police. Therefore, although cross-tabulations showed significant differences in the attitudes of White and non-White respondents, it is the area and school in which the juvenile is located that is of importance and not solely his or her race.

Findings concerning police contact variables were consistent with the findings from prior research. Specifically, juveniles who had seen or heard of police misconduct toward a third party were consistently less positive in their attitudes. In fact, this variable exerted the strongest influence on attitudes across all three models. Also, consistent with previous research, negative contacts with the police produced less positive attitudes toward the police. Police-initiated negative contacts exerted the second strongest influence on attitudes toward the police in each of the equations. The experience with the police model suggests that contact with the police and perceived treatment during these encounters may shape how citizens view the police. For rural teens, negative experiences, be they personal or vicariously, also appear to be worthy considerations when examining attitudes toward the police.

Likewise, quality of life issues also may shape how juveniles perceive the police. Hurst and Frank (2000) found that youth in metropolitan areas appeared to hold the police responsible for what they perceive as a worsening of neighborhood conditions. When examining the crime-related variables, the same seems to be true of youth in rural areas. Juveniles who believed that crime had increased within their neighborhood expressed little satisfaction with the police. Moreover, those juveniles who reported routinely seeing the police outside of their neighborhoods were less positive of the police in general and were more likely to negatively assess police ability to perform specific job functions.

Concerning future directions, this study was limited to the perceptions of a fairly homogeneous group of rural teenagers in the Midwest. Future studies need to expand the knowledge base concerning juvenile attitudes toward the police by geographical area. For example, the attitudes and experiences of teenagers in the rural South may differ from those of teens in the Midwest. Along similar lines, suburban teenagers may be different from rural or metropolitan youth.

Future research also could examine the role of socioeconomic status in explaining attitudes toward the police. One limitation of the current study, similar to other studies, involves the omission of measures of social class. The adult literature suggests that social-economic position is related to attitudes toward the police. Research needs to explore whether a meaningful relationship also exists for teenagers.

Finally, qualitative research would be useful for developing a more comprehensive view of juvenile attitudes toward the police. Such research would allow teenagers, in their own words, to describe how their perceptions toward the police might differ from adults and thus would allow the role of geographical location to be addressed more fully.

Notes

1. Respondents selecting the Hispanic and Other response categories were coded as non-White because the initial cross-tabulations indicated that their responses were similar to African Americans.

2. Debate exists as to whether regression-based statistics can be used when the dependent variable is categorical. Although Likert-type scales are categorical/ordinal in nature, many researchers treat them as continuous variables, particularly when there are five or more response categories and/or two or more Likert-type items are combined. Because both of these criteria were met, regression-based statistics were utilized (see Johnson & Creech, 1983; Long, 1997; Zumbo & Zimmerman, 1993).

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