



Ipsos Public Affairs

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Police Sector Council: Secondary Research

Trends in Youth Perception of the Police and Police Recruitment (2007, 2009, 2010)

August 20th, 2010

Introduction

Dating back to 2005, the Police Sector Council (PSC) has participated in several studies with Ipsos Reid that includes both our syndicated studies, by way of *Reconnecting with Youth*, in addition to several more recent custom studies. These studies shared several common themes in that similar questions were asked of the youth being polled. However, due to changes in methodology and sampling the studies conducted for the PSC can essentially be grouped into two categories: Reconnecting with Youth, and the custom studies. While the former category provides interesting insights into the general trend of youth perceptions they cannot be accurately compared to the more recent custom studies. As such, this report uses the custom studies from 2007, 2009, and 2010 (including a study of current community college students) to identify notable trends in youth perceptions on police forces, their recruitment campaigns, and the general attitudes towards policing as a career.

What follows is first an overview of the results from 2010 organized in the manner that they will appear later in this report. This will provide a solid starting point from which to begin identifying trends. In order to make the general overarching trends clearer, and rather than focusing on trends in regards to specific questions, this report has organized recurring questions into four categories: 1. Youth Consideration of a Policing Career, 2. General Perceptions of the Police, 3. Perceived Attributes of Potential and Current Police Officers, 4. Views on the Working Conditions and Benefits of a Policing Career. Next, this report will move onto the trends that have been identified over the three aforementioned studies in each of these broad categories. Additionally, there will be a section dedicated to analyzing all trends together to provide a sort of broad look at the current state of police recruitment and Canada and its potential future course. Finally, this report will begin to provide recommendations based on its findings for how the PSC should react and adapt to the clear and continued alterations in youth perceptions of the police in Canada.

Methodology

This report is based on secondary research. What is provided here is a summary and analysis of four primary studies conducted by Ipsos Reid on behalf of the Police Sector Council in 2007, 2009, and 2010. These reports can be referenced as *Focus on Career in Policing (2010)*, *Community College Student Survey (2010)*, *Perceptions and Attitudes about Police and Policing as a Career (2009)*, and *Views on Policing (2007)*. Some reference may be made to *Reconnecting with Youth (2005, 2006, 2007)* but at no point are the statistical results from these reports included in the analysis.

1. Overview of 2010

The study for 2010, unlike in the past, had a strong focus on the perceptions youth held in regards to policing as a career. While the reports from 2007 and 2009 included questions about youth attitudes towards the police in general, this more focused report allows for a much clearer picture of particular impressions youth had in the past that were particularly notable. This is to say that while youth perceptions of the police overall is certainly a worth while area to explore, the more interesting and important trends have emerged in regards to policing as a career choice. As in 2009, the most recent study was conducted online between May 4th and 27th, 2010 among a sample of 1580 youth aged 16-27. The regional breakdown is: BC, n=201; Alberta, n=188; Saskatchewan/Manitoba, n=111; Ontario, n=606; Quebec, n=366; and the Atlantic Provinces, n=108. It is also worth noting here, as it will become increasingly important as the report progresses, that the study broke the age groups down into those aged 16-17, 18-20, 21-24, and 25-27. All cited statistics in this section are from the custom study conducted in 2010.

1.1 Youth Consideration of a Policing Career

In 2010, like in 2009, participants were asked to select from a list the career fields they felt they would be most interested in pursuing. Healthcare was the most often mentioned garnering 17% of all responses. Similarly, Internet and high technology (13%), education (13%), and skilled trades (12%) all garnered roughly the same levels of interest. Policing, however, did not fare nearly as well as it was the primary choice for only 3% of respondents. Those most likely to select this path were respondents aged 16-17, male, and those with a current or former police officer in their family. While this may not be particularly promising on the surface it is offset later in the study when only 15% of respondents described policing as something they would pursue only after all other options were exhausted. Moreover, like in the first question those aged 16-17 were again the least likely to agree with this statement.

Taken together these questions provide an interesting look into how youth view policing as a career. While it would appear to indicate a largely negative perception of policing the breakdown of demographics provide some indication that there are, perhaps, some misconceptions about the career that are turning respondents away. Specifically, there is some indication that younger respondents hold a much more favorable perception of policing than those who are older. This, at the very least, may present the PSC with an opportunity to change the minds of Canadian youth in the future.

1.2 General Perceptions of the Police

While not the focal point of the study in 2010, the perception youth hold towards the police in general is still quite important to understand as it greatly shapes their view of it

as a career. Overall youth view the police in a somewhat neutral way in that it is neither positive nor negative. When asked if they believe police play a positive role in society 31% of respondents strongly agreed, with Alberta, Ontario, and the Atlantic provinces being more likely to agree than those in Quebec. While this is a rather positive result, it is offset by a significant drop to 24% when respondents are asked if the police's role is positive in their community. Additionally, when asked if police should be more active in their communities only 18% of youth strongly agreed. However, when the questions were turned to perceptions of individual officers the results were somewhat better.

Respondents were asked whether they believe that becoming a police officer means that one also has to become a role model for others. A solid 55% of respondents strongly agreed with this statement which places officers in a rather high position of respect from youth, at least in the ideal. Furthermore, youth were asked if they believe that becoming an officer means that one is no longer allowed to think for themselves. Only 6% of respondents strongly agreed with this statement which can be interpreted in both positive and negative ways. Further qualitative research can shed light on how youth view this perceived ability to think for oneself relative to the extrapolated minority opinion of police strictly following the letter of the law/their instructions. Curiously, youth with a current or former officer in their family were twice as likely to agree with this statement as those without.

1.3 Perceived Attributes of Potential and Current Police Officers

This section provided some of the more interesting results as displayed by the resoundingly positive perceptions of what sorts of personal attributes police forces seek when evaluating new candidates. Respondents were asked to indicate, from a list, which characteristics were the most important when it came to obtaining a job as a police officer. The most common responses were conditioning level (57%), mobility (34%), physical attributes (29%), and academic achievement (22%). The characteristics respondents selected as the least important were related experience (19%), ethnicity (7%), gender (6%), and sexual orientation (6%). Further questions were asked, in a different style, which confirmed this perception among youth that the most important qualities sought by forces for new candidates were essentially bona fide occupational requirements. Only 1 in 10 youth believe that someone's race can affect their likelihood of obtaining employment as a police officer, 8% believe religion can play a role, and a mere 6% think coming from a less affluent neighborhood has an impact on one's chances. Finally, 11% of youth believe that knowing a current officer can improve one's chances at being hired.

While youth view ethnicity as being a relatively unimportant factor for the hiring process the study for 2010 nevertheless looked at their perception of how ethnic communities and police forces should relate to one another. Not surprisingly, only 19% of youth think a police force's ethnic make-up needs to reflect the community it serves and 20% think that some cultural communities reject policing as a positive career path. All together, in 2010 it is apparent that importance youth place on a police force's ethnic make-up is

changing. It is possible that youth view police more homogenously with less regard to ethnicity or that hiring practices in previous years has resulted in ethnicity being less of an issue among youth. To really know with any degree of certainty, though, a qualitative element in future research would be necessary.

1.4 Perceptions of the Working Conditions and Benefits of a Career in Policing

This section was the centre of the study for 2010 and, later in this report, will provide the basis for some of the more important findings. That being said, the perceptions youth hold in 2010 on the benefits and conditions of a policing career can be described as mixed. When asked whether or not they agree that police receive good pay and benefits 1 in 4 youth strongly agreed while 1 in 5 strongly agreed that there are a wide variety of career options. While this is not a particularly poor result, it may not entirely fit with the reality of the type of benefits officers actually receive. Interestingly, when this same question is asked of those currently attending community college for a police related program, the responses are quite different. Slightly more than half (56%) of these respondents strongly agree the pay and benefits are good while 73% strongly agree that there are a variety of career options. Interestingly, when general public respondents were asked if they agree that police face limited opportunities to advance in the careers 6% strongly agreed compared to 4% community college students.

In regards to the working conditions police face, a third of respondents believe they face tough hours, 18% think stress related burnout is common, and 13% think it would be difficult to balance work and family. More importantly, though, is that 35% of all respondents strongly agree that policing is a dangerous career choice. This is not an entirely surprising result but these numbers together do point to a perception among youth of policing being a rather difficult career choice. This may, in fact, play a part in the perception among youth that personal support would be low if they decided to pursue a career in policing; when asked only 23% of respondents believed they would receive support from family and friends. Moreover, only 9% of respondents strongly agreed that they would encourage people they know to go into policing.

Finally, the study turned to what is involved in the hiring process and what experience would be viewed as helpful. 30% of respondents believe it is much easier to be hired as a police officer if you have completed a community college certificate in policing, while 24% believe military experience is helpful, and 10% think that previous work as a security guard is useful. Generally speaking, between these three questions it is safe to say that youth believe some sort of related experience is useful when seeking a career in policing. However, there are indications that the single biggest deterrent of those interested in policing is not their resume but rather the hiring process itself. A majority of respondents believe the process should take no more than three months while a plurality (28%) think it should take no longer than a month. As will be discussed later, this is severely out of touch with the reality of the process and may need to be addressed.

2. Notable Trends between 2007, 2009, and 2010

As previously mentioned the most recent study in 2010 shares many of the same questions and themes as the surveys from 2007 and 2009. This enables some secondary analysis of the reports to be conducted and particular trends and themes are able to emerge. Comparing data across individual studies is not necessarily accurate, given that fielding methodologies, question wording, and study audiences vary from year to year, but is certainly useful for identifying larger trends in perception. So while it will not be possible to say, for example, that X% of youth have changed their mind on a certain topic it is definitely possible to indicate that an increasing number of youth are changing their minds. The implications for the PSC will be covered in the next section when a recommended course of action for addressing the trends identified here will be provided.

2.1 Trends in Youth Consideration of a Policing Career

Relative to the other sections covered in this report discovering trends that can be considered accurate or valid in this area has proven slightly more difficult due to changes in questions, question wording, audiences, and methodologies. Nevertheless, several indicators for the general movement in attitude among youth towards the consideration of a career in policing can be found. Specifically, there is a recognizable pattern of falling interest in the field of policing among youth. While the 2010 report pointed out a slight decrease in the number of respondents selecting policing as their primary career choice compared to 2009, there have been indicators interest is falling since the first *Reconnecting with Youth* were tabulated in 2005. As mentioned, specific numbers are not compatible but there is an overall trend in this direction. At the same time, though, there is another discernable trend that seemingly points towards an apparent contradiction.

Even though policing as the primary career choice has trended downward among respondents, so to have the percent of respondents who strongly agree that policing is an avenue they would pursue only if all other options were exhausted. In 2007 27% of respondents were of this opinion, in 2009 it was 17%, and in 2010 it is 15%. While it would certainly be ideal if the number of respondents who strongly agree with this statement continued to drop below the current 15% mark there is, nevertheless, some positive conclusions that can be drawn from these numbers. It is certainly reasonable to posit that when taken together these trends indicate that rather than being the last resort or least desired career path that policing is seen as more of a “middle of the pack” type career. Youth may not be particularly enthusiastic about a career in policing but they apparently do see some merit or benefits to the career. This indicates the need for qualitative exploration to better ascertain factors / motivations that are contributing to this perception, as such information would be invaluable when trying to improve the number of youth who see policing as a potential career path.

2.2 Trends in the General Perception of the Police

Generally speaking, it is reasonable to surmise that the overall perception an individual has in regards to a particular career is important when determining whether one wants to pursue that career. The police, for their part, have the added benefit/burden of being highly visible in society and their community. While many careers share this quality, policing has the added factor of the specific role they play in society and therefore the greater potential to sow negative perceptions in the minds of particular individuals. Findings suggest that youth's perceptions of the police and the role they play has been trending downward.

In 2007, youth were asked if they believed becoming a police officer required one to also act as a role model for others and an impressive 76% of respondents strongly agreed with the statement. In 2009, though, that number had dropped to 64% and in 2010 it is down to 55%. Moreover, this trend towards an increasingly negative perception of police officers is dovetailed by a downward trend in the number of respondents who believe police play a positive role in society and their community specifically. In 2007, 53% and 45% of respondents strongly agreed that the police play a positive role in the society and community, respectively, while in 2010 this has dropped to 31% and 24%. Furthermore, the desire to see police play a more active role in their community has gone down from 34% in 2007, to 25% in 2009, and finally 18% in 2010.

The potential impact on police recruitment efforts this particular trend could have cannot be downplayed. In fact, given the drop from 2009 to 2010 in the overall desire to pursue a career in policing it may well already be affecting the drive among youth to become an officer. If potential and qualified candidates for a policing career dismiss the notion of this career path immediately due to negative perceptions of the police's role in society then any sort of recruitment campaign will be severely hindered. However, given that the descent of perceptions among youth appears to have occurred rapidly within the past several years there is definitely the opportunity for it to be corrected. Again, these findings point to the need for further qualitative research.

2.3 Trends in the Perceived Attributes of Potential and Current Police Officers

In all five studies being looked at in this report the participants were asked to essentially rate what they perceived as being the most important factors considered during the hiring process for police officers. The characteristics posed to the participants included both bona fide occupational requirements, such as conditioning level, and other characteristics such as ethnicity and gender. Impressively, year over year respondents consistently rate factors such as conditioning level, mobility, physical attributes, and academic achievement over other characteristics like ethnicity, gender, and sexual

orientation. Moreover, there are very few fluctuations, sometimes none at all, in the percentage of respondents who strongly agree they are necessary. Similarly, since 2007 there has been little change in the rather small pool of respondents who see an individual's race, religion, or personal connections as playing an important role during the hiring process.

There is, though, one trend that when coupled with those above begin to reveal a very positive alteration in perception of police among youth in recent years. In 2007, 36% of respondents strongly agreed that the ethnic make up of police forces should be an accurate reflection of the community that it serves. In 2009, this changed to 24% and in 2010 to 19%. A related question asked respondents if they believed some cultural communities view policing as a negative career choice for which 34% of respondents strongly agreed in 2007, 24% in 2009, and 20% in 2010. Taken in the broader context, this appears to indicate that the ethnicity of a police officer is becoming much less relevant among youth. The general perception of hiring practices demonstrate that youth see police as being hired based on merit without regard to a candidate's ethnicity. It would appear this is spilling over to the notion that people want their police to be a particular ethnicity depending on the community they serve in that youth are indifferent to an officer's ethnicity. To phrase this in simple terms, it appears as though youth are increasingly viewing police officers as just that without much regard to what ethnic background the individual officer is.

2.4 Trends in the Perceptions of the Working Conditions and Benefits of a Career in Policing

Overall the views youth hold in regards to their perceptions on policing as a career has remained relatively stable with the notable exception of support from family and friends. When respondents were asked if these groups would support them if they chose a career in policing only 23% strongly agreed in 2010 as compared to 30% in 2009 and 39% in 2007. Moreover, when asked if they would encourage people they knew to enter policing only 9% agreed in 2010 compared to 11% in 2009 and 19% in 2007. The cause of this is unclear but the implication is definitively negative in that this would certainly be a dissuading factor for most candidates looking at policing. It should be noted that the perception that policing is a dangerous career returned to 2007 levels in 2010 at 35% after spiking in 2009 with 50% of respondents strongly agreeing it.

When asked how they perceive the pay and benefits police receive, 23% strongly believe that police officers are well remunerated, which is down slightly from 2009 (27%) and 2007 (26%). Similarly the perceived number of career options within policing is down slightly while the potential for career advancement has remained essentially stable. However, there is an absolutely striking difference when the sample is reduced solely to those already enrolled in a community college policing program. In regards to whether police receive good pay and benefits, 56% of these respondents strongly agree and a full 73% believe there are a wide variety of career options. While this may simply indicate that those who already have chosen a career in policing have accepted the rate

of pay as being suitable, it may also indicate a severe level of miscommunication among youth as a whole. If the latter situation proves true, which can be investigated in a future study, this may in fact be a significant contributing factor to the low rates of interest in policing as a career.

Finally, each study since 2007 has asked participants what they view to be an acceptable amount of time for the hiring process to take, from application to job offer. Even though for 2010 the general view for how long this process should take has increased, a majority still believe it should not last longer than three months. Even with the trend towards accepting a longer timeframe this is extremely out of touch with the reality of the process. According to the RCMP, their recruitment process can take upwards of 6-18 months while the Police Foundations college certificate at Humber College, for instance, is a full 4 semesters (16 months). Moreover, those that were previously identified as being the most likely to select policing as their primary career choice (respondents aged 16-17) were also the most likely to be completely unsure of what the timeframe ought to be. While this may be mere correlation and not causation, nevertheless it is worth investigation as there is evidence to suggest that the process of applying or becoming a police officer is turning away youth once interested in the career. It is very important to remember, particularly in this case, that it is the respondents on the younger end of the scale (16-17, 18-20) are the respondents presently in the process of selecting their career paths by virtue of the post-secondary education they plan on selecting or have selected.

3. The State of Youth Perceptions on Policing

Thus far, what has been presented in this report has been a compartmentalized analysis of the various facets that create the overall picture of how youth view the police and policing as a career. This section is intended to give a succinct summation of the most important trends uncovered in order to provide a solid understanding of what youth are thinking and the ramifications this is and will have on police recruitment campaigns and general perceptions of the police.

You are No More Likely to Express Interest in Policing Now than in 2005.

Studies dating back to 2005 have consistently shown low levels of interest among youth to pursue a career as a police officer. Moreover, what little interest existed is being eroded year over year. However, there are concurrently indications that show youth also do not outright reject the notion of becoming an officer or even rank it necessarily as a last resort. Rather, it is possible to hypothesize that youth view policing as something they would like to do, but not something they will do. This is to say that there are many youth who find elements of policing appealing but whatever is drawing them to the career is being negated by the perceived downfalls of it. As previously mentioned, there is a clear opportunity for further research into this trend.

Positive Impressions of Policing Continue to Trend Downward.

There are several separate, recurring questions that enabled tracking to be done on the way youth perceive police and their role in society. In each case the trend has shown that youth are losing the once very positive view they had towards police. In fact, if the trend continues at even half the pace it has in recent years than a plurality, if not a majority, of youth may in fact have an overall negative perception of police. It cannot be stressed how much potential this trend has to compromise the ability of police forces to recruit the best and most qualified candidates. While it is impossible to say for sure why this trend is occurring, there is no doubt that it is there.

Youth Understand that they Could Become Qualified to be an Officer...if they Wanted.

One of the most positive trends to emerge from the research conducted to date is that youth appear to genuinely understand what the qualifications are to become police officers. In each study, with little fluctuation in results, youth rejected the notion that characteristics such as ethnicity, sex, and sexual orientation could help or hinder one's ability to become an officer. Instead, youth pointed towards physical conditioning/attributes, mobility, and academic achievement as being the most sought after characteristics among potential recruits. What is interesting about these specific characteristics is that they are essentially merit based and capable of being attained by

anyone who genuinely wishes to have them. Taken in context of the falling interest in policing, youth appear to understand they could become an officer if they desired to be.

Youth, and their Family & Friends, See More Cons than Pros in Regards to a Policing Career.

As mentioned above, the number of youth who view policing as a potential or desired career path has dropped each year a study was conducted. Similarly, the perceived level of support from the family and friends of youth in regards to a potential policing career has also dropped. It is not unreasonable to posit that these groups are being exposed to the same sources as youth that are generating these increasingly negative views. However, the perception among youth of the pay and benefits was not poor in that it appears youth understand that police do in fact receive appropriate compensation. What is concerning, though, is that it simultaneously appears that this level of remuneration does not appear to outweigh the negative aspects, such as perceived danger, of the job. Moreover, there is a very significant difference between what youth see as an appropriate amount of time for the recruitment process to take and the reality of the process. It is possible that the youth that do see policing as an option are turning away from the career because, like before, the benefits of the career are being outweighed by the cons associated with the lengthy recruitment process.

4. Recommendations

One of the main focal points for this report has been to assist the PSC in understanding the challenges it faces in regards to its perception and image among youth. In order to address areas of concern and avoid real recruitment difficulties in the future the PSC requires more information collected in both similar and different ways. What follows are three recommendations for the PSC that will enable it to develop the tools necessary to reverse the increasingly negative perception it is gaining among youth.

4.1 The Addition of a Qualitative Element to Future Research

As demonstrated by this report, the PSC has accumulated a wealth of genuinely useful and applicable information through its participation in syndicated studies and as well as the various commissioned custom studies. While many conclusions and hypotheses have been effectively drawn from this data there have been several points where the answers are simply absent. To put it another way, thus far the PSC has been well informed about *what* is occurring but has hitherto been largely uninformed about *why* certain things are occurring. Answering both questions will be fundamentally necessary going forward. A qualitative element, by way of focus groups, that is synchronized with both existing and future quantitative elements can greatly enhance the ability of the PSC to understand, communicate, and above all recruit youth.

A simple way to communicate just how useful a qualitative element in future research can be, one need only look at the previous pages of this report. Repeated mentions have been made to the fact that youth are increasingly uninterested in pursuing a career in policing. Moreover, several attempts have been made at hypothesizing possible factors that are responsible, in whole or in part, for this trend. However, a qualitative exploration of youth views and attitudes towards the profession would provide insight into their thoughts that are impossible with rigid quantitative surveys. In this way there would be much less, if any, need to hypothesize about why youth hold the views they do as there would be concrete evidence to point to. In terms of being able to effectively understand and reverse the trends in youth perceptions of police there is no questioning that the first step must be the addition of this qualitative element.

4.2 Testing of Future Public Relations and Recruitment Strategies

The addition of a qualitative element to future studies will go a very long way toward fully informing the PSC about what needs to be done. However, it will not by itself produce a final strategy or means from which the negative trends in youth perception will be reversed. Rather, the PSC needs to embrace their future studies as invaluable tools in their effort to change the perception of policing youth currently hold. Potential and trial social marketing efforts and new methods of encouraging youth to consider policing can be tested qualitatively to ensure that the desired result is occurring. It is impossible to say what will and will not work when trying to target this demographic and

moving forward with an untested campaign may indeed exacerbate the trends that have been exhibited.

However, this report and the study conducted for 2010 can give the PSC a point from which to begin. Any campaign aimed at recruiting or altering youth perceptions will need to specifically promote the benefits of being a police officer. As mentioned there are indications, which can be explored, that for many youth the primary obstacle to selecting policing as a career is a sort of cost/benefit analysis that is presently not favouring the PSC. Youth need to understand the on-the-job benefits of being an officer in addition to the value of going through the lengthy recruiting process. The latter point is especially crucial because if youth fail to see a light at the end of the proverbial tunnel in regards to the recruitment process, they are much less likely to initiate the process to begin with. In any event, though, any strategy created by the PSC can be further refined and perfected through testing such that its effectiveness can be greatly enhanced.

4.3 Continued Tracking of Key Trends

Moving forward, it is very important for the PSC to continue using very similar questions such that a satisfactory level of tracking can be done. It is not, though, being suggested here that the PSC refrain from modifying there studies as new needs emerge and new areas need to be explored. Rather, if a group of questions could be developed that are similar in principal to previous questions and are directly related to the mandate of the PSC such that they would not need to change year over year, then this would accommodate both needs. On the one hand the PSC would have the ability to track trends and on the other hand it would have the flexibility to explore new areas of interest that did not exist before.