

Research Brief

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Perception of Safety, and Trust in Police Officers, Police Department, and the Judicial System Including Courts

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The state of Mississippi has the largest number of municipalities with a majority African American population (<http://blackdemographics.com/population/black-state-population/>) and a majority African American representation among local elected officials (http://www.allcountries.org/uscensus/473_black_elected_officials_by_office_and.html). This majority is associated with a stronger representation of African Americans among police officers, police departments, and the judicial system including courts. At the same time, some of these cities have high rates of crime. Do these higher crime rates impact citizens' perception of safety and their trust in police officers, police departments, and the judicial system including courts? In collaboration with the City of Jackson, we conducted a survey of Jackson, MS to answer this and other questions. The current research brief is the second in a series to share findings from the survey.

Design. This study used a non-experimental, quantitative exploratory research design to collect primarily ordinal level perceptual and attitudinal data via a survey instrument. A self-designed survey instrument was administered to Jackson residents. Non-Jackson residents also had an opportunity to respond. The research period was from October 01, 2015 to February 28, 2016. Study participants consisted of persons responding to the invitation to complete a questionnaire online or hardcopy. The sample size calculator (www.surveysystem.com/sscalc.htm) indicated that 439 completed questionnaires would produce a 95% confidence level with a margin of error of +/- 4.67%.

Description of the Sample. The questionnaire was completed by $n = 578$ persons, however, $n = 439$ persons indicated that they live in Jackson, and $n = 98$ persons stated that they do not live in Jackson. Forty-one persons did not respond to the question "Do you live in Jackson?" Table 1 shows respondents' distribution across the Wards, which differed geographically and economically.

Table 1
Respondents' Distribution across the Wards

Wards	Frequency	Percent
1	90	15.6
2	49	8.5
3	61	10.6
4	63	10.9
5	51	8.8
6	52	9.0
7	37	6.4

Approximately 37.0% ($n = 201$) of the respondents were male and 63.0% were female ($n = 342$). Gender was missing for 35 respondents. Fifteen point nine percent ($n = 92$) were 15 to 24 years old, 12.8% ($n = 74$) were 25 to 34 years old, 15.2% ($n = 88$) were 35 to 44 years old, 16.1% ($n = 93$) were 45 to 54 years old, 19.6% ($n = 113$) were 55 to 64 years old, and 13.8% ($n = 80$) were 65 years old or older. Regarding race, 74.5% ($n = 404$) of the respondents were African Americans, 19.9% ($n = 108$), were White and those remaining were other race. Relative to total household income, 8.6% reported less than \$10,000; 5.1% reported \$10,000 to \$14,999; 9.7% indicated between \$15,000 to \$24,999; 11.3% received between \$25,000 and \$34,999, 17.3% reported between \$35,000 to \$49,999, 25.7% indicated between \$50,000 and \$74,999, 7.8% reported 75,000 to 99,999, 8.2% indicated between \$100,000 and \$149,999, 2.3% stated between \$150,000 and \$199,99, and 4.1% received \$200,000 or more into their household. Thus, household income is very diverse with 42.7% of the respondents indicating that their household income is \$50,000 or greater. Thus as described in a previous MURC publication (*MURC Digest*, 2012), while the City of Jackson's population has become "blacker," it is not necessarily poorer relatively speaking.

Results

For perception of safety, respondents used the scale: Very safe, somewhat safe, somewhat unsafe, not at all safe, and don't know. Don't know was excluded from the analysis. This scale was used to express perceived neighborhood's safety during the day and night, and perceived community's downtown safety during the day and night. Scores for neighborhood's safety during the day and night, and community's downtown safety during the day and night were combined to produce a composite score reflecting safety with higher composite scores indicating a perception of greater safety. Table 2 shows perception of safety by Ward (See Table 2). The greater perception of safety was associated with Wards 5 and 7, and the lowest perception of safety emerged for Ward 3 ($M = 15.03$). However, a statistically significant difference between the Wards did not emerge, $p = .243$. A rank ordering of the Wards regarding their perception of safety produced the following: Ward 5 (higher perceived safety), Ward 7, Ward 4, Ward 2, Ward 6, Ward 1, and Ward 3 (lowest perceived safety).

Jackson ($n_{\text{Jackson}} = 439$) and non-Jackson ($n_{\text{non-Jackson}} = 98$) residents were included in trust in police officers, police departments, and the judicial system including the courts. A significant difference was not observed for trust in police departments, and the judicial system including courts, however, Jackson residents displayed greater trust in police officers, $t(407) = 2.34$, $p = .02$, $M_{\text{Jackson}} = 6.75$ versus $M_{\text{non-Jackson}} = 6.00$. However, when feeling safe was investigated, Jackson residents displayed a significantly lower level of feeling safe at night than non-Jackson residents, $F(1, 433) = 5.21$, $p = .02$, $M_{\text{Jackson}} = 7.18$ versus $M_{\text{non-Jackson}} = 7.58$. There was not a significant difference for feeling safe during the day. Thus, the perception was expressed that Jackson is safer during the day than the night.

Table 2
Perception of Safety

<u>Ward</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Standard Deviation</u>
1	15.15	2.52
2	15.40	2.17
3	15.02	2.78
4	15.53	2.26
5	16.10	1.99
6	15.23	2.49
7	16.03	2.32

^a Safety ranged from 8 to 20 with a higher score representing a perception of feeling safer.

In addition to investigating trust across the Wards, trust expressed by Jackson residents was compared to a national sample surveyed by the Institute of Government, Jackson State University (See Table 3). Jackson residents clearly displayed more trust in police officers, police departments, and the judicial system including courts than the national combined sample. However, they experienced less trust in the judicial system including courts than African Americans from the national sample. Thus, respondents have a higher level of trust in Jackson police officers, the police department, and the judicial system including courts when compared to a national sample, but a lower level of trust in the judicial system when compared to an African American national sample. Notwithstanding, only 49% of the respondents indicated that they know a police officer, and 53.3% affirmed a non-law enforcement interaction with a police officer.

Table 3
Comparative Statistics for Trust in Police Officers and the Judicial System

Variable	Means			Standard Deviations		
	City	Nat-AA^a	Nat-Total^b	City	Nat-AA^a	Nat-Total^b
Trust in police officers	6.60	5.40	4.33	2.36	2.93	2.70
Trust in police department	6.59	5.39	4.38	2.38	2.93	2.64
Trust in the judicial system including courts	5.42	5.66	5.04	2.47	2.84	2.59

^aNat-AA = National sample of African Americans

^bNat-Total = National Sample

Discussion

Clearly, Jackson, MS is a predominantly African American city. Also, African Americans comprise a majority of the elected official, police officers, and persons engaged with the judicial system including courts. At the same time, crime is a major challenge. Furthermore, the crime rate is not consistent across the Wards (<http://www.neighborhoodscout.com/ms/jackson/crime/>). Yet, citizens' perception of safety did not differ significantly across the Wards. Notwithstanding, small differences in safety perception exist across the Wards.

When comparing Jackson and non-Jackson residents, Jackson residents definitely displayed a lower level of feeling safe at night, but not during the day. Regarding trust in police officers, police departments, and the judicial system including courts, Jackson and non-Jackson residents tended to report the same level of trust in the police department and the judicial system, but Jackson residents reported greater trust in police officers. The level

of trust across police officers, police departments, and the judicial system was greater than a national sample surveyed by the Institute of Government. Thus, trust appears to have a level of insulation from crime rates.

In looking at the results of this research brief, a big picture perspective emerges. Jackson residents appear to have a strong level of trust in police officers, police departments, and the judicial system including courts. Also, there appears to be a reasonable level of feeling safe during the day. While knowing these perceptions can be helpful to local officials, there is a need for additional research to elucidate these findings.

It is recommended that city officials and other interested parties use these initial findings to launch additional inquiry. Citizens' views can be investigated to identify factors contributing to feeling of safety, and trust in police officers, police departments, and the judicial system including courts.

Commentary

The JSU National Polling Center fall 2105 survey concluded that over a two-year period of polling, overall positive ratings for local police departments declined to 55.4% from 68.6% while the overall positive ratings for local police officers moved to 54.4% from 68.2%. Similar to overall ratings, trust in local police officers, their departments and the judicial system all appear to have declined from the previous year of polling. Trust in police officers: 53.5% - down from 67.8%; Trust in police departments: 53.1% - down from 66.0%; and Trust in the judicial system: 40.3% - down from 55.6%.

The MURC study is important to this national conversation about local policing and in particular its interaction with minority populations. The Jackson community, like a good number of urban and small municipalities in the south, has a large African American population where elected officials and the bureaucracy better represent those they serve. Also, the Hispanic population is growing. Racial profiling, racial tension and other causes of minority distrust to police officers and police departments may not parallel the magnitude of interactions and perceptions with other urban communities where the representation and policing operations are different. As the MURC study suggests, trust and confidence is considerably higher. However, what a more concentrated study of such type communities may reveal is that the focus here may be in fact on more policing and responsiveness that brings crime down and helps ensure the safety and comfort of neighborhoods, schools, and public places in general.