National City Police Culture

Spring 2015 • Criminal Justice • CJ 497

Lloyd Mills

Professor Joshua Chanin  Criminal Justice
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About the Sage Project

The Sage Project is a partnership between San Diego State University (SDSU) and a city or government entity in the San Diego region. The mission of the program is to engage students from across the University in assisting a local government with projects that address their smart growth, quality of life, and sustainability goals. In the Sage Project, students have the opportunity to engage in meaningful real-world projects and make positive contributions to a community in SDSU’s service area. The program’s vision is to connect SDSU students and faculty with high-priority, high-need community projects, thereby generating interest and fresh ideas that create momentum and provide real service to the community. The Sage Project embodies the University’s commitment to serving local students, engaging alumni, and contributing to the public good by focusing thousands of hours of course-based student involvement with high-impact activities. The program is based on the highly successful and award-winning Sustainable City Year Program (SCYP) at the University of Oregon and is a part of the SCYP network. National City, California, is the Sage Project’s 2013-2014 partner city. Participating courses come from the following disciplines: Anthropology; Audiology; City Planning; Civil Engineering; Communication; Geography; Graphic Design; Homeland Security; International Security and Conflict Resolution; Marketing; Political Science; Public Administration; Public Health; and Speech, Language, and Hearing Sciences.

About National City

National City is a highly urban community of about 60,000 residents in south San Diego County. It is the second oldest city in the county and boasts a rich history, a diverse community, and is known as one of the most walkable cities in San Diego County. Located just south of downtown San Diego and just north of the US–Mexico border, the city is flanked by freeways and is home to large-scale industries. National City is a mid-size city that faces big city challenges, and, like many municipalities, the city is challenged to meet community needs and new demands of sustainability. By providing new ideas and human capacity, this partnership with the Sage Project will help National City implement sustainability concepts and practices into projects that will improve livability.

This report represents original student work and recommendations prepared by students in San Diego State University’s Sage Project for the City of National City. Text and images contained in this report may not be used without permission from the San Diego State University.
Executive Summary

This paper details the results of a partnership between Criminal Justice 497 at San Diego State University (SDSU) and the National City Police Department examining questions related to police leadership, culture, transparency, and oversight. Nationwide, police oversight and transparency have been recently called into question after several highly publicized incidents of alleged police misconduct. This study examines the views of National City police employees on transparency, oversight, and police culture within the department by administering a Q–sorting survey. Analyses of these results are discussed in the body of this report. Discussion of these analyses answers questions, such as the following: What is the relationship between the Police Chief’s views on police culture and the views of his subordinates? Is police culture centered around departmental unity or can it be divided by demographic criteria? Does education level play a role in views on transparency and oversight? Is there a perceived difference between transparency and oversight? Would the Police Chief’s self–described leadership style be confirmed by these findings?

The National City Police Chief describes himself as a transformational leader. A transformational leader advocates for group feedback and cooperation from everyone they are working with, regardless of rank. This type of leadership relies on belief in a common goal (shared by both leaders and subordinates). Conformity to the organization’s vision and belief in this common goal is believed to motivate employee performance and productivity. (Cockcroft, 2014). All employees share their team goals and thus have a voice in organizational culture. This is intended to create a working environment that enhances group cohesiveness and transparency in decision–making. In contrast to this leadership style, a transactional leader is one who leads with authority and rarely uses insight from lower officials. This type of leader makes decisions for the group and expects their staff to follow rules and directions. A transactional leader is also less visible to their workers, and, when they are present, they carry out a disciplinary role (Bass, 1990). Given these descriptions, we would expect a transformational leader to present with views on organizational culture that are in agreement with those of his or her subordinates. Conversely, we would expect a transactional leader whose beliefs on organizational culture differ from those of his or her subordinates. The study described in this report is designed to address these questions and assumptions about leadership in the National City Police Department.
Process/Method

There were two major concerns to be addressed in the development and administration of the survey. First, participants’ confidentiality needed to be considered. To encourage honest answers and protect the identity of participants, demographic questions were limited and selected carefully. The second concern dealt with the type of survey that would be used. A Q–sorting system (ranking items from least to most important) was selected instead of a Likert scale survey because a Q–sorting system is better at measuring people’s perception of the world from the vantage point of self–reference (Ratcliffe et al., 2014). The Q–sorting method was also selected because it eliminated the possibility of extreme scoring that can result from a typical 1–5 Likert scale survey. The survey was divided into three different sections that addressed police leadership, oversight, and transparency. There were 18 different words to choose from for the first question pertaining to police leadership, 12 different phrases for the second question pertaining to police oversight, and 16 phrases for the final question pertaining to transparency.

Participants placed response choices on a gradient from “Most important” to “Least important.” Responses placed near the center of the gradient were labelled as Neutral (see Figure 1 for the survey layout). Each participant’s arrangement of response words or phrases was considered descriptive of their views on the survey topics. All surveys were anonymous, though they ended with some demographic questions that were limited and carefully selected to prevent linking the identity of participants to their survey answers.

1. In your view, your department should be ________________________________

![Q-sorting survey layout](image)

**Figure 1**: Q–sorting survey layout.
The survey was conducted in the conference room at the National City Police Department across four different days. During data collection, there were three to ten respondents of varying rank and position. Respondents were seated in every other chair for comfort, anonymity, and honest responses. During every data collection session, there were also two to four students and either the professor or his teaching assistants to supervise the process. Before the survey was given to the respondents, one student gave opening comments about the Sage Project and the captain’s request that they fill out the survey completely and honestly. Then they were briefed on how to complete the survey and fill in the answers accurately. To avoid any confusion, all questions were answered before the start of the survey to make sure every respondent understood the instructions entirely.

**Results/Findings**

The survey collected data from sixty-five different members of the National City Police Department. Demographics were divided into subgroups and later compared to each other in an effort to identify patterns. These subgroups were: age, race, gender, shift, tenure length, rank, and education level. The age groups were: 24 years and younger (2), 25–34 (15), 35–44 (23), 45–54 (19), and 55 and older (6). Race and ethnicity was divided into African-American (3), Caucasian (27), Hispanic (25), Asian (4), other (4), and 2 people did not fill out a response. The next demographic was gender with males (50) and females (15). The shift demographic was categorized as day (33), swing (15), graveyard (8), business (6), and other (3). Tenure length was divided into less than 3 years (19), between 4–9 years (12), between 10–14 years (15), between 15–24 years (14), and 25+ years (4). Next, the ranks were Police Officers (22), Corporals (14), Sergeants (7), Lieutenants (3), Captains (2), Civilians (14), and other (1). Finally, education level was divided into high school (3), college (51), and post graduate (11). Each of these demographics are general level numbers (See Figure 2 for a summary of demographic information).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Age (Yrs)</th>
<th>Tenure (Yrs)</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Uncompliant</th>
<th>Shift</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female: 15</td>
<td>Asian: 4</td>
<td>25-34: 15</td>
<td>10-24: 29</td>
<td>Captain: 2</td>
<td>Mistakes: 10</td>
<td>Swing: 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian: 27</td>
<td></td>
<td>35-44: 23</td>
<td>25+: 4</td>
<td>Lieutenant: 3</td>
<td></td>
<td>Grave: 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic: 25</td>
<td></td>
<td>45-54: 19</td>
<td>N/A: 1</td>
<td>Sergeant: 3</td>
<td></td>
<td>Business: 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other: 4</td>
<td></td>
<td>55+: 6</td>
<td></td>
<td>Corporal: 14</td>
<td></td>
<td>Other: 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P.O.: 22</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civilian: 14</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other: 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A: 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 2: Number of participants in different levels of demographic categories.*
Participants completed the survey by arranging words or phrases in a meaningful order in response to each survey question. Words or phrases identified for each question were assigned numerical values based on the position they were given on the gradient from most important to least important.

The word or pair of words valued the highest was given a value of +3. The word or pair of words valued the lowest was given a value of –3. Words placed in intermediate positions received scores of 2, 1, 0, –1, and –2. The mean score was calculated for each word and used to indicate the department’s views on each survey question.

Departmental Leadership

The first question in the survey pertained to police leadership. The results showed that the top four words, on average, were trusted (1.78), lawful (1.48), professional (1.33), and accountable (1.22). On the contrary, the four words with lowest average scores were risk averse (–1.84), representative (–1.60), creative (–1.44), and diverse (–1.29). Grouping results by participant rank provides additional insight. The chief wanted his staff to value trusted (3), responsive (3), respected (2), and professional (2) as their top four words and efficient (–3), risk averse (–3), disciplined (–2) and diverse (–2) as their bottom four words. Captains valued trusted (2.5), accountable (2.5), professional (2), and responsive (1) as their top four and risk averse (–3), creative (–2), transparent (–2), and respected (–1.5) as their bottom four. The lieutenants valued trusted (3), lawful (1.67), effective (1.67), and professional (2) as their top four and rated creative (–3), diverse (–2.33), risk averse (–2.67), and representative (–2) as their bottom four. The sergeants valued lawful (2.14), professional (2.14), trusted (1), and responsive (1) as most important and rated creative (–.57), risk averse (–2.14), diverse (–2), and representative (–2.43) as their bottom four. Education level was also used to examine differences in response types. Participants with a high school education level valued trusted (2.33), intelligent (1.33), accountable (2), and professional (1.67) as most important and rated risk averse (–3), representative (–2.33), effective (–1), and creative (–1) as least important. Those with some college education valued trusted (1.87), accountable (1.12), lawful (1.59), and professional (1.38) and rated risk averse (–1.66), creative (–1.35), diverse (–1.25), and representative (–1.55) the lowest. Participants with a four–year degree believed the most important words were trusted (2), accountable (1.45), lawful (1.22), and professional (1.63) and the least important words were creative (–1.78), diverse (–2.20), risk averse (–2.36), and representative (–2). There was no influence of gender on highest–rated and lowest–rated words. Both genders viewed trusted, accountable, lawful, and professional as most important and creative, diverse, risk averse, and representative as least important.

After all participants completed the survey, answers were reviewed and placed into categories. For this question in particular we see that many participants filled out the survey incorrectly. Out of 65 participants, 10 either did not place a word in a blank or placed the same word in two different slots. We were interested in seeing if surveys
filled out incorrectly accounted for different responses. There was no difference in the four lowest-rated words. However, views differed on one of the top four positively viewed words. Those who filled out the surveys correctly most valued trusted, accountable, lawful, and professional, whereas those who filled out the surveys erroneously most valued trusted, fair, professional, and lawful.

![Figure 3: A comparison of average scores for response words by participants who completed the survey correctly and by participants who completed the survey incorrectly.](image)

Transparency Findings

The next question in the survey was about transparency in the department. For this part of the survey the respondents were shown 16 different sentences, and they were required to rank the sentences in respect to each other. The sentences represented a range of positive, negative, and neutral views on transparency. The data showed the average top four sentences in response to transparency: "helps to improve police–community relations" (1.64), "promotes organizational accountability" (1.09), "promotes trust in police" (.96), and "promotes police accountability" (.84). These were the only four responses with an average score greater than .50. Five responses received an average score of −.50: "annoys rank and file" (−1.14), "is impeded by red tape" (−1.00), "is a drain of our limited resources" (−.86), "is not something the public cares much about" (−.75), and "makes policing more difficult" (−.69). There were also words given a neutral label: "makes the department more effective" (−.42), "helps reduce misconduct" (.16), and "helps keep the public safe" (−.39).
Data for males and females showed a similar distribution of negative and positive responses. As for neutral responses, females rated two sentences higher than males: “makes the department more effective” (.87) and “helps reduce police misconduct” (.53). However, interpretation of these results must take into account that there are more males than females in the department, affecting the weight of an individual score towards results sorted for gender.

The next demographic examined was education level as compared to rank. There were two people in the department with only a high school diploma, and their ranks were civilian and corporal. 32 department employees had some college education but did not complete a four–year degree. Their ranks were: six civilians, eight corporals, 13 police officers, four sergeants, and one other. 19 department employees graduated from a four–year university, and their ranks were: one chief, six civilians, one corporal, one lieutenant, seven police officers, and three sergeants. Finally, 11 received a post–graduate degree: two captains, one civilian, four corporals, two lieutenants, and two police officers.
Oversight Findings

The last question in the survey dealt with police oversight, defined as citizens’ ability to voice their opinions on police misconduct, behavior, and policies. This question provided 12 response sentences for the participants to rank. Most of the sentences used for this question were identical to those used in the transparency question, allowing for a comparison of results across both oversight and transparency questions. In this particular question about oversight, on average, the highest rated sentence was “promotes community trust” with a score of 2.0. The next two highest rated responses were “improves police–community relations” (1.61) and “promotes transparency” (.88). Police oversight is aimed at improving the community and police relationship, the results showed that 82% of respondents believed that police oversight did, in fact, have a positive impact. Only 5% of the National City Police Department felt that it did not improve relations between both parties and 13% felt neutral about the topic. On the contrary, the lowest rated response on average was “is a distraction” at –1.32. The next two lowest rated responses were “annoys the rank and file” at –1.14 and “makes policing more difficult” with a rating of –.97. There was an even split with six responses being rated positively and six responses being rated negatively.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Oversight response choices</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is a necessary part of policing in the US</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>0.428</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makes our department more effective</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>0.143</td>
<td>1.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is time consuming</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>-0.938</td>
<td>1.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improves police-community relations</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>1.609</td>
<td>1.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is a distraction</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>-1.323</td>
<td>1.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotes accountability</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>0.891</td>
<td>1.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is not as important as people make it out to be</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>-0.462</td>
<td>1.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makes policing more difficult</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>-0.969</td>
<td>1.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annoys the rank-and-file</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>-1.141</td>
<td>1.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotes community trust</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>2.000</td>
<td>1.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotes transparency</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>0.879</td>
<td>1.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps to reduce misconduct</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>-0.532</td>
<td>1.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5: Summary of oversight survey results.
Next, we examine the data for differences across demographic groupings. First, results were examined according to age and time in the department. Age groupings for each question were 24 years and younger, 25–34, 35–44, 45–54, and 55 years and older. Time in the service groupings were 3 years or less, 4 to 9 years, 10 to 14 years, 15 to 24 years, and 25 years or more. In more cases than not, the older a person is, the longer they have been in the department, though there are exceptions to this rule.

The first response we examined was "makes policing more difficult". The results showed that, as a department, this view was rated negatively. Looking at the different subgroups, there was one particular age group that rated this response as positive—those 24 years or younger. All of the other groups rated this question negatively. Next, we examined whether department employees felt oversight was an effective method. The results showed that, as an employee was in the department longer, their opinion on its effectiveness diminished. Those who were in the department for three years or less viewed it as more effective and those in the department 25+ years viewed it as the least effective.

Combining these two observations suggests that those new in the department believe oversight to be effective, yet they feel like it makes their job more difficult; on the other hand, those in the service the longest do not feel oversight is effective but also do not feel it makes their job difficult. Finally, all age groups in the department ranked oversight "promotes accountability" positively, though those younger in the force ranked it twice as high as any other age group.

**Analysis/Discussion**

**Departmental Leadership**

As previously described, our initial hypothesis regarding leadership style in the National City Police Department proposed that, as a transformational leader, the Police Chief would present with views similar to the views of his subordinates in the department. When considering the average respondent scores, one must consider variation in sample size for each group. In this study, there are some differences in sample sizes across groups and, thus, a greater margin of error. Given that there is only one chief in the department, there is a greater chance of the Police Chief presenting results that differ from other groups because he stands alone. All other groupings had larger sample sizes, and, therefore, their average scores were more robust to the influence of a single outlier with differing views.

The data showed some disagreement among the four highest valued and lowest valued words. Comparing ranks in a stepwise fashion—chief compared to captain, captain compared to lieutenant, and so forth—the differences between responses became smaller. This countered our expectation that differing views would increase at the lower levels of the department.
One interpretation of these results suggests that, because lower ranked employees spend more time together interacting on a personal level, they are more likely to share similar views on police culture. This is supported by the groupthink theory, which states that the more individuals in groups spend time with each other, the greater the likelihood of them sharing the same views and ideas (Rose, 2011).

The lowest ranked employees in the department presented views that were most different from those of the Police Chief, suggesting that there may be a disconnect between leadership at the top and employees at the bottom of the department’s organizational hierarchy. Because a transformational leader relies on shared views throughout the organization, regardless of rank, this disconnect may present a challenge to the implementation of this type of leadership.

**Transparency Analysis**

Views on transparency that received the highest average ratings were: “helps to improve police-community relations,” “promotes organizational accountability,” and “promotes police trust.” These views are aligned with the principal reasons for transparency in the police department. A positive connection between the police department and the citizens they serve enhances the community’s trust in the police force and provides the department with a checks and balances system. The responses that received the lowest average ratings were: “annoys rank and file,” “is impeded by red tape,” and “is a drain on our limited resources.” These negative views on transparency received the lowest rankings, providing evidence for a generally positive view of transparency across the National City Police Department.

The Police Chief’s top responses were: “helps to improve police–community relations,” “promotes trust in the police,” and “is an essential part of the American democracy.” Two of his top choices coincide with the average top choices of the rest of the department. This suggests that the Police Chief and his subordinates share similar views on what is most important for police transparency. Similarly, the Police Chief’s bottom three responses were: “annoys rank and file,” “is something the public cares much about,” and “can mislead the public about what we do.” Though there is only one similarity here with the rankings made by his subordinates, all the views marked as least important by the Police Chief and his subordinates were ranked negatively across the board, with the exception of “is an essential part of the American democracy” (the Chief rating was 2; the departmental average was –.11). These results reflect positively on leadership in the department and provide evidence for successful implementation of a transformational leadership style.

**Oversight Analysis**

Age and length of time in the department were selected as the best indicators of views on police oversight. The younger, less senior officers may believe that oversight is effective because it promotes accountability among department members.
They have to answer to the public’s concerns and demonstrate that they are doing their job correctly. The younger members are watched more closely because they still lack experience and must build trust. As for those who have been in the department for quite some time, they may not understand as clearly the importance of oversight because they have already gained the trust of the community and the department.

They may see their tenure in the department as an indicator of their job performance more so than oversight from the community. However, these examples do not take into consideration those officers who have received numerous infractions by the department or the community.

Closing Comments

This study aimed to describe leadership and views on transparency and oversight within the National City Police Department with a focus on identifying groups with shared views and comparing across these groups. The data reflected that there were group differences as well as a unified component to police culture. It has been shown that those who are around each other in a particular group start to think and act similarly, which aligns with the observed differences in survey results across different in two different areas. This would allow researchers to compare leadership styles across groupings based on rank within the department.

An examination of police transparency and oversight is currently relevant considering recent reports of police misconduct and abuse of authority across the country, but this timing may have had an effect on survey results. Department members voiced their knowledge of these current events, indicating that these incidents were fresh in their minds and may have influenced their opinions. Understanding that these events may have had an impact on survey responses, replication of this study could provide different results. Another possible study would be to compare survey results from two different police departments, providing additional insight and potential for improvement of leadership practices.

References

