

Public Confidence in Police Competency to Combat Crime

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Abstract

In recent times, the Malaysian public has expressed fears of increasing crime rate. However, the authorities have tried to dispel public fears by stating that crime rate has actually taken a dip and public worry is more a matter of perception rather than a fear caused by a real and genuine basis. The police point out that there will be a time gap between reduction of crime rate and a raise in public confidence as public confidence does not go up immediately when there has been an improvement in the crime situation. This paper investigated the level of fear of the public pertaining to being a victim of crime. Additionally, this paper investigated the factors that influenced the public opinion of the police such as police effectiveness in combating crime, corruption, brutality and personal links between police and the public. It is essential that the public should have a positive perception of the police force so that the force may be able to count on public cooperation in their efforts to combat crime and maintain public order. A sample size of 407 was taken for this study. The sample was stratified according to age groups and the level of education. It was found that most of the educated members from urban areas were not happy with the police as they felt that the police could be more effective in combating crime. This group also registered a higher fear level of being a crime victim. Fear of becoming a crime victim amongst the respondents. The respondents also felt that the recently repealed Emergency Ordinance (EO) which enables detention without trial should be reinstated. The public also felt that the police need more formidable intelligence gathering and the courts should mete out heavier punishment.

Keywords: crime, public cooperation, police force, public opinion, police performance

1. Introduction

Of late, the public has been rather critical of the police force. The public perceive the police as being corrupt, abusing their power and ineffective in carrying out policing work. Recently, an online newspaper reported some allegations from purportedly a retired policeman who claimed that the police have been manipulative with crime statistics in order to portray a more rosy picture of the state of crime and civil order in the country (Malaysiakini, 23rd August 2012).

Navaratnam (The Star, 4th September 2012) called for a revision in the system of crime data classification. He called upon the Inspector General of Police to give an assurance that lower level police officers classify crime data properly and reliably. Navaratnam expressed fears some police officers and police stations who may have come under severe pressure to meet the stipulations of the National Key Result Area (NKRA), could have succumbed to a manipulative manner of crime classification. According to the allegations made by the alleged retired policeman in Malaysiakini, some police officers may have resorted to labeling serious crimes as a non-indexed crime so that there are a smaller number of serious crimes which come under the category of indexed crimes and which are reflected in the statistics.

ACP Ramli Mohamed Yoosuf (The Star, 6th September 2012) of the Police Headquarters at Bukit Aman in the Federal Capital, reiterated that the practice of collecting and classifying crime statistics has been adopted from the UCR (Uniform Crime Reports) of the United States and is an international standard adopted by other

countries. The Inspector General of Police, Ismail Omar (Malaysiakini, 29th August 2012), stressed that the crime statistics are a true reflection of the state of crime and "It is a big sin to manipulate crime figures." He further added that when the report is typed into the computer, the data is automatically recorded and therefore no cops at any station have the facility to meddle with the figures.

Whatever may be the truth behind the retired policeman's allegations, there is no denying that such allegations whether with proper basis or otherwise has the potential to erode the public's trust and perception of the police force. The police need the cooperation of the public in their effort to combat crime and reduce the fear factor of crime amongst members of the public. In most communities the police are unable to get the desired cooperation from the public largely due to the public having an adverse opinion of the police, (Gopala Krishnan Sekharan Nair, Azyanee Luqman, Thenmolli Vadeveloo and Saravanan Shanmugam, March, 2012). However, if the public has a negative perception of the police, such cooperation may not be so readily forthcoming.

Lim Teck Ghee (Malaysiakini, 24th July 2012) claimed that there is severe escalation of serious crime in the country and the public are not convinced by the assurances given by the authorities. An unconvinced public may not be cooperative with the police.

It is essential that the public should have a positive perception of the police force so that the force may be able to count on public cooperation in their efforts to combat crime and maintain public order. In view of this, this study intends to find out the factors that would influence the public perceptions of the police force. This paper investigated qualitatively and quantitatively whether the public perceptions of the level of crime and disorder in the country were instrumental in shaping the public perceptions of the police. In addition investigation was also carried out to find out whether the public perceptions of the prevalence of corruption in the police force were a factor in shaping their negative perception of the police force.

These researchers also investigated whether the public opinion of the efforts taken by the police force to curb corruption helps in creating a better perception of the police force. Also investigated was whether the public believed that there was brutality in the police force and whether this believes played a part in shaping the public perception of the police.

In addition to the above investigations, these researchers also sought information on the public's level of fear of becoming a crime victim. Further, information was also sought on what the public felt about the recent repealing of the emergency ordinance (EO) which gives the police the power to detain criminals without trial when there is an overriding suspicion of someone being involved in crime.

A more positive opinion of the police would result in a greater level of cooperation thus resulting in more effective policing on the part of the police. A high level of fear amongst the public of becoming a crime victim would also jeopardize the public opinion of the police. Besides, trust in the police may also be eroded if the public feels that the police are not transparent and reliable in classifying crime into indexed and non-indexed categories. An ineffective police also causes the public to be disillusioned with the government of the day as they blame police ineffectuality on the government's inability to institute a viable police force.

1.1 Objectives

- 1) To determine whether the public perceptions of the level of crime and disorder in the country was instrumental in shaping the public perceptions of the police.
- 2) To determine the public's level of fear of becoming a crime victim.
- 3) To determine whether the public favored the use of Emergency Ordinance (EO) which enables the police to detain suspected criminal elements without trial.
- 4) To determine whether the public thought that intelligence gathering is a very important aspect in combating crime.
- 5) To determine the public satisfaction with the adequacy of the sentences given out by the courts.

2. Literature Review

In most communities the police are unable to get the desired cooperation from the public largely due to the public having an adverse opinion of the police, (Hennigan et al., 2002; Skogan 1990). In many cases the chiefs of police have tried in vain to improve ties with the public but often facing disappointment.

Lack of a symbiotic relationship between the public and police may curtail police efforts at reducing crime (Skogan and Harnett., 1997; Robert and Stephen 1999; Robert et al. 1999). The police are often frustrated that their efforts to improve ties with the public are not yielding much results. Often a disgruntled police force blames

the public and labels them as ingrates for failing to appreciate police overtures towards a better relationship. Such a case often results in a demotivated crime fighting force (Maxson et al., 1999; Hennigan et al. 2001). Often the police failed to realise that the public opinion of the police force is a crucial factor in fostering ties between the two (Kansas City Police Department, 1977).

Poor cooperation from the public may be interpreted as public apathy towards crime. According to federal CID director Comm Datuk Seri Mohd Bakri Zinin (The Star, 12th July 2012), public apathy is among the reasons why criminals have become more brazen. He further added that criminals would think twice if they knew that the general public was looking out for each other. However, it is the opinion of the researchers that poor cooperation may be the result of the public not being overly keen on cooperating with the police.

Poor public opinion of the police results in poor public response towards police efforts at friendship (Brown & Coulter 1983). Failed efforts at friendship results in the police getting demotivated as they perceive the public to be uncooperative and ungrateful. Demotivation among the police force results in more crime as a result of uninspired enforcement. When crime rate goes up there is a further dip in the public perception of the police resulting in a greater antagonism towards the police on the part of the public (Carter 1985).

This reduced opinion of the police would result in more difficulty in securing public cooperation. Thus a vicious circle prevails where lack of public cooperation leads to a demotivated police force and more crime, increased crime then creates a further dip in the public opinion of the police and an increased reluctance towards better ties with the police (Jesilow et al. 1995).

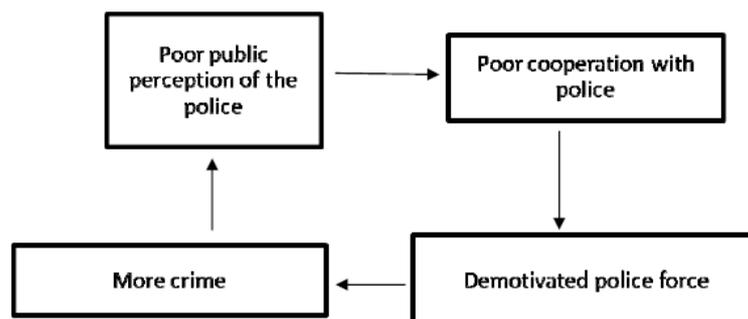


Figure 1. Depiction of the vicious circle as envisaged by Jesilow et al. 1995

In Malaysia too there has been a lot of antagonism between the public and the police although the police have made efforts to build ties with the public. However public perception is best improved by a reduction in the crime rate. Thus far there has been no suggestion of this kind of multi-pronged approach in Malaysia. It is hoped that this new model of approach would result in greater cooperation between public and the police and the consequently more effective crime control as such an approach has worked elsewhere (Sampson 1998).

2.1 Crime Situation in Malaysia

According to Idris Jala (StarBiz, 13th August 2012), crime has actually gone down but an anxious public still perceives a high rate of crime.

Table 1. Index crime - incidents

Year	Total	Daily Average
2009	209,817	575
2010	177,520	86
2011	157,891	433
2012 (January to May)	76,242	416

Source: Pemandu (as reported in StarBiz, 13th August 2012)

Jala cited a case in UK reported in The Economist (<http://www.economist.com/node/21556288>) where the crime rate in the United Kingdom had actually gone up but the public perception was that crime was declining in numbers. Jala pointed out that perception and crime rates do not go up and down in tandem. Crime may fall but an anxious public may yet think that crime is going up based on previous high rates of crime. There would

always be a gap between public perception and the actual crime situation. An interview with various respondents revealed that many members of the public are not completely reassured by the explanation given by Idris Jala.



Figure 2. Disparity between perception level and actual crime level in the United Kingdom
 Source: The Economist, 2nd June 2012, Fear of Crime Is Falling When Crime Itself Is Not

Table 2. Fear of crime

Date	% of people polled who fear crime
Dec 2009	58.5
May 2010	55.1
Sep 2010	52.8
Jan 2011	52.0
May 2011	48.9
Oct 2011	56.4
Dec 2011	52.8
June 2012	54.6

Source: Pemandu (as reported in Malaysiakini, 24th July 2012, Why Police Are Impotent in Dealing with Growing Crime)

Table 3. National crime index

	Jan - Feb		Figures	%
	2011	2012		
Violent crime				
Murder	80	83	3	3.8
Rape	451	408	-43	-9.5
Armed robbery with accomplice	192	9	-183	-95.3
Robbery with accomplice	2,530	2,234	-296	-11.7
Armed robbery	28	3	-25	-89.3
Robbery	624	474	-150	-24
Assault	983	1,001	18	1.8
Total	4,888	4,212	-676	-13.8
Property theft				
Theft	5,098	3,708	-1,318	-25.9
Car theft	2,563	2,260	-303	-11.8
Motorcycle theft	7,965	8,062	97	1.2
Heavy vehicle theft	509	565	56	11
Snatch theft	649	437	-212	-32.7
Burglary	4,992	3,941	-1,051	-21.1
Total	21,776	19,045	-2,731	-12.5
Crime index total	26,664	23,257	-3,407	-12.8

Source: PDRM (as reported in Malaysiakini, 1st August 2012, Police Not 'Impotent' in Tackling Crime)

3. Methodology

The study was carried out by using an online questionnaire. A total of 407 respondents from both the East and West coast states of Peninsular Malaysia responded. In addition, the researchers conducted interviews among members of the public. The sample consisted of both the better educated and the less educated members of society. The majority of the respondents had a Master's degree while 15% of the sample comprised of those with school certificate qualifications. It was ensured that at least half the sample would consist of educated members of the public such as degree holders whilst the other half would comprise those less educated, such as those manning clerical post and menial jobs at offices.

Basically this study is quantitative and qualitative in nature. This sample would represent the West coast and East coast population of Malaysia. The sample was randomly selected. The sample would be nonetheless stratified so that it reflects both the educated and the less educated sector of the nation.

An instrument consisting of interview questions and an online questionnaire was formulated to gather data which was analyzed to answer the research questions as well as fulfill the objectives of the study. Based on the data collected from the interviews and the online questionnaire, the researchers would come up with the new concept of enhancing ties between the public and the police and also suggested new approaches to crime management.

The data obtained from the interviews and the online questionnaires were analyzed to meet the objectives of the study. The findings will be used for reframing the current approach so that new strategies can be deployed for greater public and police cooperation. The implications of the findings, recommendations and suggestions for further research would also be given.

4. Findings and Discussion

Is the public perception of the level of crime and disorder in the country instrumental in shaping their perception of the police?

Table 4. Public perception of the level of crime in their neighbourhood

	Very low	19	5%
2		43	11%
3		55	14%
4		60	15%
5		81	20%
6		51	13%
7		51	13%
8		27	7%
9		11	3%
10 -	Very high	9	2%
	Total	407	100%

58% of the respondents felt that the level of crime in their neighbourhood was high.

Table 5. Public satisfaction with the job performance of the police

1 -	Very high	11	3%
2		21	5%
3		38	9%
4		33	8%
5		83	20%
6		55	14%
7		62	15%
8		62	15%
9		27	7%
10 -	Very low	15	4%
	Total	407	100%

75% of the population has low level of satisfaction with the police.

Most of the educated respondents expressed anxiety over the level of crime in society. The educated fraternity appears to be reading newspapers and also alternative online media. The high incidence of crime in society makes them feel that the police force could do more in reducing the level of crime. Members of the educated fraternity stated that they have constant fear of being victims of crime. They admitted that their opinion of the police force is influenced by the prevalence of the crime in the society.

They also stressed that their opinion of the police would certainly be a lot higher if the police are more effective in combating crime. They stated that they frequently come across cases of rape, robbery and murder in newspapers. Some of them are frightened of crime statistics; they stated that no less than one person gets murdered, raped or robbed daily. Members of the educated fraternity also stated that they do have some apprehension of being robbed as they retire to sleep every night.

Additionally members of the public have also expressed anxiety over the accuracy of the statistics given by the police. Certain members of the public feel that the lower police personnel may categorize some serious crimes into the non-indexed category in order to meet the stringent standards demanded by their superiors who are trying their best to achieve the goals at laid out in the Government Transformation Programme (GTP). The GTP came about in 2009 and crime was amongst the National Key Result Area (NKRA). The Key Performance Index (KPI) set for the police on 27th July 2009 under the NKRA was to reduce crime by 20% (Malaysiakini, 23rd August 2012).

What is the public's level of fear of becoming a crime victim?

Table 6. Public's level of fear of becoming a crime victim

1 -	Very low	3	1%
2		6	1%
3		17	4%
4		12	3%
5		44	11%
6		26	6%
7		52	13%
8		78	19%
9		68	17%
10 -	Very high	101	25%
	Total	407	100%

91% of the respondents registered a high level of fear of becoming a crime victim. Clearly the efforts by the police to rationalize public fears as being just a matter of perception have not been convincing. This may erode the police image in the minds of the public and thereby public cooperation may not be forthcoming. Lack of public cooperation may be interpreted by the police as public apathy towards crime.

Does the public favour the reinstatement of Emergency Ordinance (EO) which enables the police to detain suspected criminal elements without trial?

Table 7. Reinstatement of the emergency ordinance (EO)

1 -	Strongly agree	53	13%
2		56	14%
3		51	13%
4		29	7%
5		76	19%
6		26	6%
7		27	7%
8		39	10%
9		19	5%
10 -	Strongly disagree	31	8%
	Total	407	100%

The majority or 55% of the respondents favoured the return of Emergency Ordinance (EO) in order to quell what is perceived as a rising crime rate.

Do the public think that intelligence gathering is a very important aspect in combating crime?

Table 8. The importance of intelligence gathering

1 -	Strongly agree	125	31%
2		82	20%
3		55	14%
4		31	8%
5		25	6%
6		11	3%
7		15	4%
8		23	6%
9		16	4%
10 -	Strongly disagree	24	6%
	Total	407	100%

73% of the respondents felt that intelligence gathering is a vital aspect of policing. Thus, the police must impress on the public that the police are really competent in intelligence gathering. Police omnipresence may not really allay public fears of the prevalence of crime.

Is the public satisfied with the adequacy of the sentences given out by the courts?

Table 9. Adequacy of the sentences given out by the courts

1 -	Very adequate	8	2%
2		18	4%
3		34	8%
4		26	6%
5		66	16%
6		45	11%
7		51	13%
8		60	15%
9		49	12%
10 -	Very inadequate	50	12%
	Total	407	100%

63% of the respondents felt that the sentences imposed by the courts could have been heavier. Interviews revealed that in many instances, the public felt that the prosecution should have appealed the sentence. Recently the courts have been asking the Victim Impact Statement (VIS) from the victims. Victims are asked to give their opinion on the nature of punishment to be meted out on the perpetrator of the crime. This is a welcome development.

On the whole, those who are more educated appear more critical of the police force. This could be due to being more aware of the prevalence of crime through newspapers and other sources.

5. Conclusion

It is evident that the public perception of the police is related to their perception of the police performance in combating crime, curbing corruption and brutality. If the public perception of the police is improved, then the public and the police would become partners in combating crime. There would be less mistrust and more beneficial collaboration.

The public fear factor of being a victim is high. The police should address this. Merely stating that the prevalence of crime is just a matter of perception and that crime is actually on the decline is not a convincing

way of building up public confidence in the police.

The recently repealed Emergency Ordinance (EO) should be reinstated so that police can neutralize those criminal elements who cannot be charged in courts due to lack of evidence. The courts also should impose heavier sentences in view of the fact that crime is rising (perceived or otherwise) and society on the whole appears to be getting more violent. There appears to be no fear of the consequences of law among the law breakers while among the decent citizens the fear of being a crime victim remains high.

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