

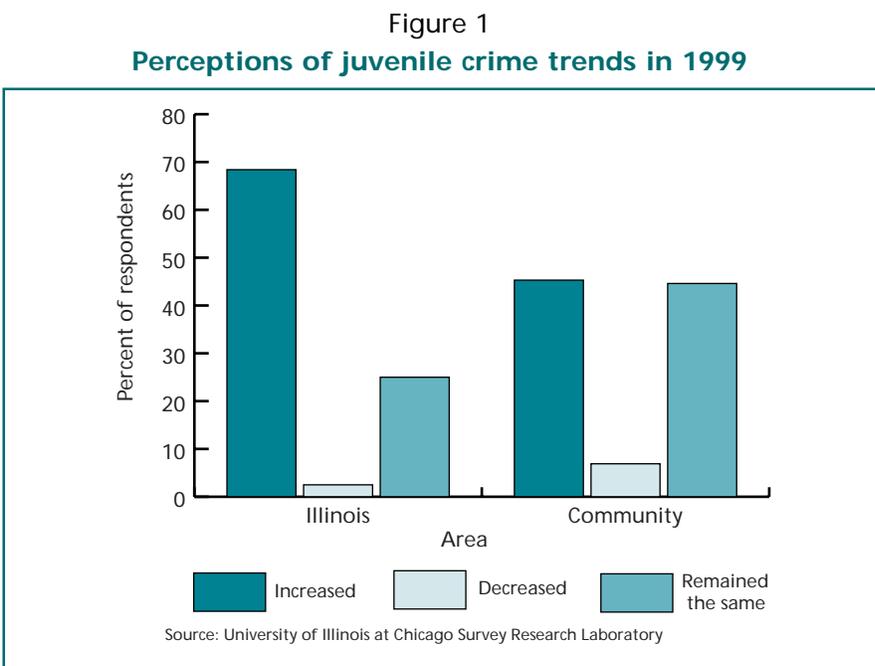
# Perceptions of crime trends in Illinois

By Megan Buurma Alderden

Over the past few years, the number of reported crimes has decreased in Illinois, suggesting that, like other states across the nation, crime in Illinois is declining. But according to the latest National Crime Victimization Survey on reported and unreported individual and household crime victimization, more than half of the crimes committed in the United States may not have been reported to the police. This suggests that criminal justice agencies may not be aware of a sizable portion of crimes occurring in many communities.

For years researchers have noted a discrepancy existing between crime rates and self-reported victimization rates. Many researchers attribute this to the fact that the criminal justice system is inherently reactive, something that many criminal justice agencies and politicians have been trying to change. In order to make these changes and to facilitate community involvement, criminal justice agencies may need to consider different types of criminal justice statistics, such as public opinion polls.

Public perceptions of crime may help criminal justice agencies determine which programs and services are needed, in addition to helping them gauge the impact of programs and services already available. This report explores citizens' perceptions of crime and satisfaction with the police and courts by analyzing Authority-sponsored questions in Illinois public opinion polls conducted in 1996,



1997, and 1999. Changes in citizens' perceptions of crime and their satisfaction with police and courts were examined.

Past research suggests that multiple factors have been found to have significant effects on perception of crime. News reports on crime, especially violent crime, have been found to increase fear and anxiety in individuals. In addition, research indicates a heightened level of fear in communities where a large portion of news media was devoted to crime reporting. Studies also have shown that neighborhood composition, prior victimization, and respondent demographics are key factors in increasing fear.

Past research also suggests that people living in and near neighbor-

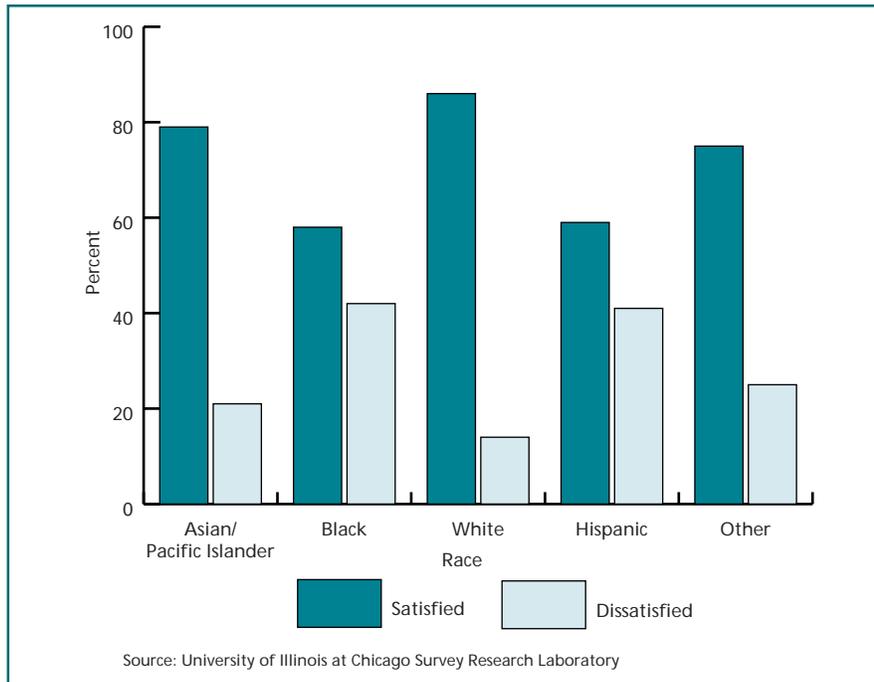
hoods with a large proportion of minority residents reported fearing crime more often than people living in neighborhoods with few or no minority residents. African Americans have been found to report high levels of crime and victimization and report less satisfaction with police and the courts than any other racial group. In addition, victims and those closely related to victims were more likely to have distinctive perceptions, fears, and concerns about crime. Both victims and those closely related to victims tended to believe there were higher instances of victimization than any other group.

## Methods

The data used in this article were taken from three different Illinois polls

Figure 2

## Levels of satisfaction with police by race, 1997\*



\*Respondents who did not answer related questions or stated they did not know were excluded from this analysis.

administered in 1996 by Northern Illinois University and in 1997 and 1999 by the University of Illinois at Chicago. The surveys collected information regarding respondents' perceptions of crime in Illinois and in their communities, and their satisfaction with police and the courts. In 1996, 800 respondents were surveyed, 1,251 were surveyed in 1997, and 605 were surveyed in 1999. Respondents in each survey were selected at random and interviewed by telephone. Answers were weighted based on census information, which made it possible to make generalizations to all of Illinois.

Two methods were used to analyze the data. First, the changes in perceptions of crime and satisfaction with police and courts among respondents surveyed during 1996, 1997, and 1999 were examined. Second, an analysis was used to determine whether a statistically significant difference existed between racial groups in their level of satisfaction with the way police and courts dealt with crime in their neighborhoods. A similar analysis was conducted to

examine whether a significant difference in satisfaction levels existed between victims and non-victims. Data reported in this article represent statewide statistics and cannot be generalized to specific communities.

### Perception of crime

Results from these surveys suggest that fewer respondents in 1997 and 1999 perceived that crime in Illinois had increased when compared to 1996 respondents. In 1996, 60 percent of citizens surveyed said that crime in Illinois had increased within the past three years, while only 41 percent in 1997 and 1999 believed that crime had increased. Almost 35 percent of respondents in 1999 perceived that crime had increased in their communities, an 11 percent drop from 1996. A similar decline also was present for perceived illegal drug use. In 1996, 75 percent of respondents perceived that illegal drug use had increased, while 57 percent of respondents in 1997 and 54 percent in 1999 reported illegal drug use had increased in the past three years. A slight decrease was shown between 1997 and 1999 in the number

of respondents who believed that violent crime had increased.

These statistics do not necessarily show that more respondents in 1997 and 1999 thought crime had decreased. At least 80 percent of the respondents reported that crime had increased or stayed about the same in all three surveys. The differences between the surveys were the result of more respondents in 1997 and 1999 reporting that crime had stayed about the same.

Nearly 70 percent of respondents surveyed in 1999 said they believed juvenile crime had increased in Illinois within the past three years. Twenty-five percent believed juvenile crime in Illinois stayed the same. In addition, almost half of the respondents believed that juvenile crime increased in their community. Also, more respondents believed instances of juvenile crime increased more than instances of general crime. Data on perceptions of juvenile crime were not available to make comparisons with earlier years (Figure 1). Respondents were more likely to perceive an increase in both general and juvenile crime in the state than in their communities.

### Satisfaction with police and the courts

In each survey, almost 80 percent of the respondents reported feeling very satisfied or satisfied with the way the police were dealing with crime in their communities. Less than one-quarter said they were somewhat to very dissatisfied with the police.

Respondents rated the courts less favorably. In both 1996 and 1999 about 60 percent of respondents reported being satisfied or very satisfied with the court system, while 35 percent reported that they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. In 1997 fewer respondents reported satisfaction with the courts (53 percent) and more reported being dissatisfied (41 percent).

An in-depth analysis of race and satisfaction of respondents surveyed

in 1997 revealed a significant difference among specific racial groups and their levels of satisfaction with the way police dealt with crime in their neighborhoods. Overall, African Americans and Hispanics were found to be significantly different from Asian or Pacific Islander and white respondents. On average, African Americans and Hispanics reported feeling less satisfied with the way police dealt with crime in their communities, while Asian or Pacific Islander and white respondents said they were more satisfied (Figure 2). African Americans were found to be significantly different from Asian or Pacific Islander and white respondents regarding the way courts dealt with crime, with African Americans on average reporting less satisfaction.

Of those surveyed in 1999, only African-American and white respondents were significantly different. African-American respondents on average reported less satisfaction than whites regarding the way police dealt with crime in their neighborhoods. No other racial groups were found to be different with regard to their satisfaction levels with police. Significant differences also were not found between racial groups and levels of satisfaction with the courts.

Respondents surveyed in 1997 and 1999 were asked if they or a close family member were victims of violent crime. In both surveys, respondents who reported being a victim or who had a family member that was a victim of crime were found to be significantly different from those who did not report prior victimization. Analyses indicated that on average victims of crime were less satisfied than those who had not been victimized (Table 1). The results discussed in this section also are similar to those found in other studies.

### Data limitations

Several data limitations may have influenced the results reported in this article. First, it was not known if the

Table 1  
Percent of victims and non-victims satisfied with police and the courts, 1997 and 1999\*

			Level of satisfaction with police and the courts			
Year	Agency	Victim	Very satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
1997	Police	Yes	16 %	46%	20%	19%
		No	33%	48%	13%	6%
	Courts	Yes	7%	35%	30%	29%
		No	11%	47%	28%	14%
1999	Police	Yes	20%	48%	24%	9%
		No	32%	52%	11%	5%
	Courts	Yes	5%	39%	30%	27%
		No	11%	54%	25%	10%

\*Respondents who did not answer related questions or stated they did not know were excluded from this analysis. Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

sampling strategy in each survey was similar, making it difficult to determine whether the results were due to actual changes in crime perception. Another limitation may exist due to the ineligibility of anyone under 18 and those who did not speak English. Finally, respondents without a telephone or with unlisted numbers were not able to participate in this study.

### Interpreting the data

Based on the findings, the following issues should be considered:

- **An increasing number of citizens said crime remained the same despite the current decreasing trends implied by crime rates.** An individual's perception of crime can be a result of different resources and experiences. Researchers suggest that criminal justice agencies consider these perceptions when trying to foster relationships with community members or when encouraging community participation.
- **Juvenile crime was perceived to be increasing in Illinois.** While this perception cannot be compared to previous years, it parallels similar

concerns portrayed across the United States. Although national statistics have indicated that juvenile crime is down, Americans continue to believe that juvenile crime is a significant problem. Criminal justice officials should collect more information to understand the extent of juvenile delinquency in communities. This could include involving citizens in identifying at-risk and delinquent youths.

- **Certain racial groups reported feeling less satisfied with both the police and the courts.** The development of new approaches may be required by criminal justice agencies when dealing with minority populations, especially if those agencies are trying to foster relationships or to increase the level of participation. Criminal justice agencies may want to develop partnerships with local agencies that work directly with minorities in addition to requiring personnel to attend periodic cultural sensitivity classes.
- **Crime victims, and those close to crime victims, reported feeling less satisfied with both the police and the courts.** Research suggests

that over time victims begin to forget past experiences. However, due to the amount of time it can take for an offender to be arrested, tried, and convicted, victims continually relive these experiences. Criminal justice agencies may benefit from becoming more involved with victim advocacy groups to learn more about the needs of victims.

## Conclusion

The recent good news of decreasing reported crime rates overshadows issues that still concern many citizens. Increasingly criminal justice agencies and professionals are realizing the need to understand public perceptions. Recently, criminal justice professionals in Illinois have launched initiatives to improve community involvement, a strategy that would make the criminal justice system both proactive and reactive. Surveys such as the polls examined here can help officials in their efforts to understand and

consider public perceptions on crime and the criminal justice system.

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