

# Trust in Police: An Empirical Study of Chinese Older Citizens in Hong Kong

By

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## *Abstract*

While a substantial amount of research studies have investigated the perception of trust of citizens in general and college students toward the police, little has been done with respect to elderly people in this regard. Bearing this in mind, the population of the Asia-Pacific region has been aging at a relatively fast pace. China is expected to double its older population from 10% to 20% between 2000 and 2027 (Chan, Cheng, & Phillips, 2007). In Hong Kong, which has a total population of 7 million, 17.5% (1,226,900) of people were age 60 or older in mid-2009 (Census & Statistics Department, 2010). With this growing trend of an aging population, and the general perception that the elderly are prime targets of crime, senior citizens' perceptions and confidence in the police is an important topic for investigation. Using questionnaire interview data collected from 1,061 elderly people aged 65 or above in 2013, the current study is intended to empirically examine the overall level of trust of senior citizens toward the police, and the seniors' perception of police performance in specific areas including fairness, effectiveness, and integrity. The findings of the study will not only advance our understanding of the association of involvement in crime prevention activities, and the senior citizen evaluations of the police but also provide insights for promoting police-senior citizen relationships in different communities.

Keywords: Chinese senior citizens, police, Hong Kong

## **Introduction**

Public attitude toward the police has been the main focus of policing study in the West. Although increasing empirical work has been done on Chinese samples, such as college students (Wu & Sun, 2009), immigrants (Wu, Ruth, & Sun, 2012), and urban citizens (Sun, Hu, & Wu, 2012), very little research has been found on Chinese older people. Hong Kong is undergoing an aging trend and senior citizens have become the prime target of fraud and deception. The trust and collaboration of the elderly are of great value for police officers executing their jobs. Demographic characteristics, involvement in crime prevention initiatives, and community variation in terms of the crime rate and income level of residents are believed to play a part in shaping people's satisfaction and perception of the police. This paper is intended to address the above question specifically with respect to Chinese senior citizens.

## **Methods**

### *Data collection and sample*

Survey data were collected from Hong Kong—a Chinese coastal city that, until 1997 was under the colonial rule of the British government for almost one hundred years. Hong Kong society has been influenced by both Eastern and Western culture. In spite of this cultural diversity, of the total population of Hong Kong's 7 million people in 2009, 95% were of Chinese descent (Hong Kong Government, 2010), so citizens' attitudes and perceptions toward the police under the influence of the Chinese traditional culture are by no means identical to those identified in the West. A survey questionnaire containing approximately 90 items was developed based on a literature review by the researchers. An expert panel meeting and a pilot test of 50 Chinese elderly people were undertaken to ensure the construct validity of the measurements and the understandability of all questions. Minor amendments were made afterward. The survey interviews adopted quota sampling methods to draw data from approximately 1,090 respondents aged 65 years and over who fall into three main types: (a) socially active older persons who are living alone, (b) socially active older persons who are living with others, and (c) socially inactive older persons in four selected districts (diverse in terms of crime rate and the income level of residents). These are: (a) a community with a high crime rate and a high income level (HC/HI), (b) a community with a high crime rate and a low income level (HC/LI), (c) a community with a low crime rate and a high income level (LC/HI), and (d) a community with a low crime rate and a low income level (LC/LI).

### *Procedures and Measures*

A team of trained interviewers conducted face-to-face interviews with consenting elderly persons with a questionnaire composed of around 90 items, including two opening questions that explored their successful and unsuccessful practice(s) in dealing with crime. Each interview was completed in 60 minutes and conducted in the social service centers of the respondent's residence. In order to increase the incentive for participation, a cash coupon

with a value of HK\$100 was offered to every respondent who attended the interview. As a result, the study collected responses from approximately 1,090 older people, of which 1,061 cases were included in the analysis. The invalid cases (aged less than 65) and questionnaires containing too many incomplete items were excluded from statistical analysis.

### *Dependent variables*

This study has four dependent variables for measuring the respondents' perception of the police. Referencing a study conducted by Wu and Sun (2009) on Chinese colleagues, perception of the police consists of four dimensions: (a) global satisfaction, (b) perceived police fairness, (c) effectiveness, and (d) integrity (see Table 1). The first dependent variable—global satisfaction—is measured by a single item that invites respondents to rate their general satisfaction toward the performance of the Hong Kong police. The response categories include 1= very dissatisfied, 2=dissatisfied, 3=satisfied, and 4=very satisfied. The second variable concerns the perceived fairness of the police, which is measured by two items (with a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.52): "Police treat rich people better than the poor," and "Police can deal with citizen issues with fairness." The third variable concerns the work effectiveness of the police, which is measured by five items (with a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.82): "Responds quickly to calls for help and assistance," "Does a good job in solving crime," "Does a good job in preventing crime," "Does a good job in responding to crime victims," and "Are able to maintain order on the streets in the neighborhood." The last dependent variable, perception of police integrity, is made up of three items (with a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.70). The respondents were asked if they agreed with the statements "Police are honest," "Police are corrupt," and "Police often abuse power." Responses to the questions of the three scales ranged from 1= strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3= agree, and 4= strongly agree.

### *Independent variables*

There are three sets of independent variables in this study including: (a) individual demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, age, highest level of education, level of vulnerability, and income), (b) level of community participation, and (c) perceived community safety in daytime and evening, respectively. Gender was measured by whether the respondent is female or not (0=no; 1=yes). Education level was categorized into 1=illiteracy to 5 = undergraduate or above. Vulnerability was measured by 1= no problem in daily routines, 2= cannot do it alone for 1-2 daily activities, 3= cannot do it alone for 3-4 daily activities, 4= cannot do it alone for at least 5-6 daily activities. Personal income (including wage, money from children/ relatives, pension, and the public assistance fund) was measured ranging from 1= less than HK\$1,000 (128 U.S. dollars) to 7= more than HK\$ 20,000 (252 U.S. dollars).

In this study, there are five levels of community participation in crime prevention: (a) level 1: being a member of any elderly service, (b) level 2: receiving crime prevention messages from mass media, (c) level 3: attending program activities, (d) level 4: attending

meetings to discuss crime issues in the neighborhood, and (e) level 5: taking part in the activities promoting crime prevention messages in the neighborhood.

The perceived community safety was measured by two typical questions: (1) “How safe do you feel when you are walking alone during the day in your district?” and (2) “How safe do you feel when you are walking alone during the evening in your district?” Responses for these questions include 1= very unsafe,” to 4 = “very safe.”

## **Results**

To understand the level of satisfaction of elderly people toward the police and how far these three sets of independent variables can predict the four dependent variables, descriptive statistics were shown and multiple regressions were tested. Table 2 indicates that a majority of the respondents were female with a mean age of 78.61. Most of them did not suffer from vulnerability (compromised physical movement) and had monthly incomes at a mid-range level.

### *Overall satisfaction and perceptions of police*

Table 2 shows that respondents were generally satisfied with the overall performance of the police (M=3.17, SD=0.46). Specifically, their perception of police “fairness” was not high comparatively (M=5.81; SD=0.92), while their perception of police “effectiveness” (M=15.60; SD=1.90), and “integrity” (M=6.01; SD=1.07) was at a satisfactory level, respectively (see Table 2). Comparing the situation in four different communities, it was found that people living in a community with low income and a low crime rate claimed to have a higher level of satisfaction of the overall performance of the police (M=3.23; SD 0.49), while those who were living in a high income and low crime rate community had the lowest satisfaction (M=3.11; SD=0.40).

### *Factors that shape the perception of the elderly*

Data generated from multivariate regression models indicate that age exerted a significant effect on the perception of police integrity, while people with a higher education level were comparatively less satisfied with the overall performance and effectiveness of the police. Attending meetings to discuss crime issues in a neighborhood may have a positive influence on older people’s appraisals of police effectiveness and integrity. It is interesting to learn that those elderly people who feel safer during the daytime in a community can predict a positive response to evaluating police effectiveness. Meanwhile, those respondents who feel safe at night in the community may find that the police have been doing a great job in preserving the principle of “fairness.”

## **Discussion**

This study confirmed that Chinese older citizens (aged 65 and older) are inclined to give

positive comments on the performance of the Hong Kong police in general and on their fairness, integrity, and effectiveness, specifically. Age and education can predict the level of satisfaction toward police. It is noteworthy that better educated older citizens may be more critical in rating the overall performance of the police and their effectiveness. Thus, officers serving in a community with better educated senior citizens may need to put a greater effort in building rapport. Attending meetings to discuss neighborhood crime problems seems to facilitate a positive interaction between older citizens and the police. Bearing in mind, the self-reported data in this study contain bias because of possible distortion in memory. Also, the cross-sectional data used in this study means that the results only uncover the association, rather than the causations, between the independent and dependent variables.

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**Table 1: Construction of Dependent Variables**

Variable	Survey Items	Response Categories	Cronbach's alpha
<i>Global Satisfaction</i>	1. How satisfied they were with the police officers	1= Very dissatisfied 2= Dissatisfied 3= Satisfied 4= Very satisfied	NA
<i>Fairness</i>	1. Police treat wealthy people better than poor people 2. Police handle the cases with fairness	1= Disagree strongly 2= Disagree 3= Agree 4= Agree strongly	.52
<i>Effectiveness</i>	1. Police respond quickly to calls for help and assistance 2. Police do a good job in solving crime 3. Police do a good job in preventing crime 4. Police do a good job in responding to crime victim 5. Police are able to maintain order on the streets in the neighbourhood	1= Disagree strongly 2= Disagree 3= Agree 4= Agree strongly	.82
<i>Integrity</i>	1. Police are honest 2. Police are corrupt 3. Police often abuse their power	1= Disagree strongly 2= Disagree 3= Agree 4= Agree strongly	.70

**Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Variables in Analysis**

Variables	Whole (N=1061)			LI/ LC Community (N=317)			HI/HC Community (N=247)			LI/HC Community (N=251)			HI/LC Community (N=246)			
	Mean	SD	Range	Mean	SD	Range	Mean	SD	Range	Mean	SD	Range	Mean	SD	Range	
<b>Dependent Variables</b>																
Global satisfaction	3.17	0.46	1-4	3.23	0.49	1-4	3.18	0.48	1-4	3.14	0.44	2-4	3.11	0.40	1-4	
Fairness	5.81	0.92	2-8	5.85	0.97	2-8	5.82	0.91	2-8	5.71	0.97	2-8	5.86	0.83	3-8	
Effectiveness	15.60	1.90	7-20	15.79	2.05	7-20	15.65	1.94	7-20	15.39	1.91	7-20	15.51	1.58	10-20	
Integrity	6.01	1.07	2-8	6.07	1.13	2-8	5.99	1.14	2-8	5.89	0.99	3-8	6.08	0.98	2-8	
<b>Independent Variables</b>																
<i>Demographic characteristics</i>																
Female	0.74	0.44	0-1	0.75	0.43	0-1	0.70	0.46	0-1	0.71	0.45	0-1	0.79	0.41	0-1	
Age	78.61	7.23	65-99	78.87	7.30	65-98	78.38	7.32	65-95	77.97	7.50	65-99	79.17	6.74	65-95	
Education	1.59	0.94	1-5	1.82	0.92	1-5	2.09	0.99	1-5	1.95	0.91	1-5	1.97	0.93	1-5	
Vulnerability	1.09	0.37	1-4	1.14	0.52	1-4	1.04	0.26	1-4	1.08	0.28	1-3	1.09	0.31	1-3	
Income	3.41	1.18	1-7	3.45	1.11	1-7	3.41	1.36	1-7	3.36	1.09	1-6	3.41	1.17	1-7	
Living alone																
<i>Community participation</i>																
Level 1	0.92	0.27	0-1	0.98	0.15	0-1	0.91	0.29	0-1	0.86	0.35	0-1	0.91	0.29	0-1	
Level 2	2.45	0.79	0-3	2.43	0.80	0-3	2.41	0.83	0-3	2.43	0.82	0-3	2.55	0.68	0-3	
Level 3	1.63	1.11	0-3	1.74	1.12	0-3	1.52	1.13	0-3	1.56	1.08	0-3	1.69	1.09	0-3	
Level 4	1.01	1.09	0-3	1.10	1.12	0-3	0.81	1.04	0-3	0.99	1.05	0-3	1.11	1.13	0-3	
Level 5	0.87	1.08	0-3	0.97	1.12	0-3	0.73	1.03	0-3	0.77	1.02	0-3	0.98	1.12	0-3	
<i>Perceived community safety</i>																
Perceived safety (Day)	3.15	0.52	1-4	3.18	0.47	2-4	3.16	0.61	1-4	3.11	0.50	2-4	3.12	0.48	2-4	
Perceived safety (Night)	2.91	0.60	1-4	2.97	0.50	1-4	2.94	0.69	1-4	2.80	0.61	1-4	2.92	0.57	1-4	

\*p <.05; \*\*p <.01; \*\*\*p <.001.

Remarks: Level 1= Being a member of any elderly service;  
 Level 2= Receiving crime prevention message from the mass medium;  
 Level 3= Attending programme/ activity on crime prevention;  
 Level 4= Attending meeting to discuss about crime issues in neighbourhood;  
 Level 5= Taking part in the activities promoting crime prevention message in neighbourhood



**Table 3: Multiple Regression Summary (N = 1061)**

Variables	Global satisfaction		Fairness		Effectiveness		Integrity	
	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.
<i>Demographic characteristics</i>								
Female	-0.045	0.03	0.006	0.068	-0.029	0.135	0.047	0.077
Age	0.035	0.00	0.057	0.004	0.060	0.008	0.117***	0.005
Education	-0.127***	0.02	-0.073*	0.034	-0.139***	0.066	-0.025	0.038
Vulnerability	0.013	0.04	-0.005	0.076	-0.008	0.151	0.006	0.087
Income	0.024	0.01	0.019	0.024	0.020	0.048	0.029	0.028
<i>Community participation</i>								
Level 1	-0.084**	0.05	0.035	0.105	-0.027	0.207	-0.062*	0.119
Level 2	0.065*	0.02	0.033	0.037	0.068*	0.074	0.070*	0.043
Level 3	0.034	0.02	0.069	0.032	0.024	0.063	0.077*	0.037
Level 4	0.099*	0.02	0.056	0.033	0.114**	0.066	0.119**	0.038
Level 5	-0.020	0.02	-0.014	0.033	0.028	0.066	-0.049	0.038
<i>Perceived community safety</i>								
Perceived safety (Day)	0.087*	0.03	0.036	0.070	0.146***	0.139	0.035	0.080
Perceived safety (Night)	0.018	0.03	0.109**	0.061	0.072	0.120	0.096*	0.069
R <sup>2</sup>	0.051***		0.046***		0.096***		0.066***	

\* p < .05; \*\* p < .01; \*\*\* p < .001.

Remarks: Level 1= Being a member of any elderly service;  
 Level 2= Receiving crime prevention message from the mass medium;  
 Level 3= Attending programme/ activity on crime prevention;  
 Level 4= Attending meeting to discuss about crime issues in neighbourhood;  
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