

Factors affecting Public Confidence in the Thai Police

By

Prapon Sahapattana, Ph.D.
Associate Professor & Director of Executive Master Program (Songkhla)
Graduate School of Public Administration
National Institute of Development Administration, Thailand
Tel. (668) 1911-5907 Email. prapons@gmail.com

Sutham Cobkit, Ph.D.
Professor of Criminal Justice &
Director, Master of Science in Criminal Justice Program
Department of Sociology & Criminal Justice
Kennesaw State University
1000 Chastain Road, MD#2204
Kennesaw, GA 30144
Tel. (770) 420-4734
Email. SCobkit@kennesaw.edu

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Abstract

There have been very few empirical studies conducted in Thailand on public confidence in the Thai police. Almost all of the surveys on this topic have been done only as part of the organization's annual report. This study examined the data deriving from a survey of 9,900 Thai people throughout the country to investigate what factors have the most impact on public attitudes toward their confidence in police. The study's findings were discussed, and police policies were recommended to increase the level of public confidence in police.

Keyword: confidence in police, police-citizen contact, victimization, Thailand, public attitudes toward the police.

Introduction

Even though the citizen expectations from police have not much changed in the recent years, the police roles in societies have been modified and changed considerably. In many countries, public expect police organization mainly to perform their job in order to maintain law and order, protect persons and property, control crime in the society within an acceptable level, and solve crime incidents, especially the one that attracts public attention. Other functions conducted by police such as controlling road traffic, and responding to non-crime incidents including providing security in special events, controlling crowds, mediating in domestic violence, giving lecture for drug resistant programs, etc. are also seen (Lyman, 2005; Terrill, 2003). Traditionally, police organization used their resources mainly on police patrol to fulfill these tasks. Many police organizations had gone further with so called a strategic policing approach aiming to increase police capacity in dealing with incidents, both criminal and noncriminal, more efficiently. This strategy focuses on how to manage the limited resources of police organization to meet with the demanding from the society. Patrols, for example, are planned to dispatch for only the urgent incidents but not for calls for service in general. Strategic policing also embraces proactive enforcement techniques such as electronic surveillance and criminal intelligence to enhance the police capability (Lyman, 2005). However, this approach is criticized in that it does not solve the cause of the problems in communities.

Police in countries such as the U.S. and many countries in Europe have also adopted a strategy called community policing. One of the main reasons for police organizations in the U.S. to take this approach was to improve the relationship between police and their citizens in the 1970s (Ren et.al., 2005). Countries in the East such as Thailand also have exercised community policing concept in its police force. Like other countries, police in Thailand have tried to improve the relationship with their citizens and at the same time tried to find the way to reduce crime. Community policing is now a good hope for police organization to answer those significant needs and has been implemented in many locations in the country. For the police administration's point of view, the shift of police roles in society from crime fighting to community policing requires a proper way to evaluate the performance of the officers. Same as other countries, Thailand adopted community policing approach to their police organization policy while the organization still needs to evaluate its work. Public confidence in the police receives attention recently as it fits appropriately for this condition (Ren et.al., 2005). There are a lot of studies in the past show that in general people expressed positive attitude toward their police (Apple & O'Brien, 1983; Cao, Frank, & Cullen, 1996; Dean, 1980; Erez, 1984, Furstenberg & Wellford, 1973; Hindelang, 1974; White & Menke, 1978, Zamble & Annesley, 1987), however there is very few study done in the context of the Thai police. Since police have changed their concept and routine work from crime fighting alone to do more work on seeking for citizen participation both for controlling crime and maintaining good relationship with public, confidence in the police can be another good indicator to gauge both crime situation and the feedback from the citizens on how good the police have done their work. Hence, it is significant to understand the factors affecting confidence in the police. Many studies have investigated this issue and most of them revealed that variables related to this type of confidence include demographic, contextual, and police-citizen contact categories. These factors are important for police management to build public confidence in their police. It is interesting to investigate that if police work very hard for crime prevention and suppression both through traditional and community policing approaches, people in different communities with different crime rate will express high confidence in the police or it depends on the crime situation in each area. This study

argues that public relates their confidence in the police to the perception of police performance in crime prevention and crime suppression regardless of the actual crime occurrences in the communities.

Literature review

Early studies found many factors related to confidence in the police. These factors can be grouped into three categories: demographic, contextual, and police-citizen contact. In demographic category, race, age, gender, education, marriage, and socioeconomic status were found the predominant predictors of confidence in the police. The positive relationship between age and confidence in the police was found in many studies (Cao, Stack, & Sun, 1998, Cao & Solomon Zhao, 2005; Correia, Reisig, & Lovrich, 1996; Reisig & Parks, 2000; Ren et al., 2005; Stack & Cao, 1998). The explanation of confidence in the police was based on the status quo of people. For those people who were high in the conservatism tend to conform to the authority and would have high confidence in the police (Cao et al., 1998). Older people tend to have higher confidence in the police than younger people. The effects of gender, education, and other socioeconomic status on confidence in the police were found mixed (Cao & Solomon Zhao, 2005). Some studies (for example Cao et al., 1998) did not find the relationship between gender and confidence in the police. However, many studies (Correia et al., 1996; Reisig & Parks, 2000; Sampson & Bartusch, 1998) found the effect of gender on confidence in the police but with mixed results, i.e., males were found both higher and lower confidence in the police than females depending on the studies. Education and other socioeconomic status variables were also explained in the same way using status quo reason. In this study, employment was included in the analysis because people with employment and without employment in Thailand were much different in social status. Thus, employed persons tend to be a part of society more than unemployed people and consequently would be more confidence in the police. Marriage, on the other hand, was input in the models studying in some study (for example Cao & Solomon Zhao, 2005) and found a significant relationship with confidence in the police. High education and high income also give more freedom to the person so will have negative effect to confidence to the police.

Previous studies have examined variables in contextual category, i.e., race, victimization, and fear of crime. Variables in this group implied the disorder in the community and made people feel that police could not control the situation well, thus led to the lower level of public confidence in the police (Cao et al., 1996; Convington, & Taylor 1991; Ren, et al., 2005). The variable race was not included in this study because the mixture of race in the neighborhood did not mean the condition of disorder at all in Thai society so it was not applicable to Thai communities of which citizens mainly are Thai and the concept was only relevant to the U.S. society (Cao & Solomon Zhao, 2005). Studies (Apple & O'Brien, 1983; Cao et al., 1996, Homant, Kennedy, & Fleming, 1984; Koeing, 1980) had examined victimization and found the effect of this variable on public confidence in the police. Persons who had been victimized before would have lower confidence in the police. Also earlier studies (Benson, 1981; Cao et al., 1998; Davis, 1990; Murty, Roebuck, & Smith, 1990) found the relationship between fear of crime and confidence in the police. Persons with a high level of fear of crime tended to express low level of the confidence. However, some studies (Marenin, 1983; Thomas, & Hyman, 1977) did not find the significant relationship of these two variables. The variable police contact was investigated in earlier studies (Correia et al., 1996; Dean, 1980;

Mastrofski, 1981; Scaglione, & Condon, 1980) and found significant relationship with confidence in the police even though the effect was not strong.

This study argues that it is not necessary for the police organization to receive high level of confidence from their citizens even though they work so hard. However, it is the perception of the hard work or performance in crime prevention and suppression that is matter to determine the confidence of public in the police. As Tyler (2002) and Ren et al. (2005) confirm that only the quality of police performance is not adequate for the public to gain the public support for the police organization. Since citizens may not see the police while working, they might have negative attitude toward police. Thus, police need to create the positive image in crime control in order to attain support from their citizens. This study adds the perception of police performance, crime prevention and crime suppression, to the model. This new category of variables will be a great contribution to the study of public confidence in the police since its results can lead to the useful policy implication for the police administration to implement their policies while gaining support from the public. Thus, this study argues that people who are old, male, employed, with low education and low income tend to have high level of confidence in the police. People who have experience in victimization, high in fear of crime, and never contact with police before tend to have low level of confidence in the police. Finally, people who perceive that police do a good job in crime prevention and crime suppression will have high level of confidence in the police.

Methods

Samples

This study used data from a country-wide survey in Thailand conducted in 2012. This survey was done by the National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA) for the Royal Thai Police (RTP). This type of survey is regularly done annually and sponsored by the RTP. The samples of this study came from stratified sampling method from ten areas according to the police administrative areas as well as from Bangkok metropolitan. Thailand has ten police administrative areas and one Bangkok area. The survey respondents in the amount of 9,900 gave answers in the questionnaires collected by the research team. The target areas to collect the data were designed to include three provinces in each police administrative area which included three areas under three police stations' jurisdictions in each province. Thus, samples in this study came from every region of the country. When compared the demographic of the population with the samples, the ratio between male and female in the study (.99: 1) was very close to the statistics (.98:1.) of the whole country.

Measures

Dependent variable

The dependent variable in this study came from the question that asking survey respondents what level they feel confident in police: (0) not confident at all (1) not quite confident (2) quite confident (3) high confident. Apparently, a higher score indicated higher confident in the police.

Independent variables

The independent variables were grouped into four categories: demographic, contextual, contact, and police performance. The independent variables in demographic category included age,

gender, employment, education, and income. Age was measured in ratio scale. Both gender and employment were dummy variables. Gender was coded 1 for male and 0 for female. Employment was coded 1 for employed and 0 for unemployed. Both education and income were measured in ordinal level. Education ranged from 1 (less than high school) to 6 (more than bachelor's degree) and income ranged from 1 (lower than 5,000 Baht) to 4 (more than 25,000 Baht).

The contextual category included victimization and fear of crime. Victimization was a dummy variable and coded 1 for respondents who ever been victimized or had relatives been in the situation and 0 for those who never and did not have relatives been victimized. Fear of crime was a composite variable composing of five questions. The respondents were asked to rate the fear of crime level in each question from 1 to 10: 1 meant lowest and 10 for highest. The questions regarding fear of crime were as follow: (1) feeling unsafe for personal or property which belong to oneself or relatives, (2) fear of becoming crime victim such as theft, robbery, assault, rape, etc. outside the residences during the day, (3) fear of becoming crime victim such as theft, robbery, assault, rape, etc. outside the residences at night, (4) fear of becoming crime victim such as theft, robbery, assault, rape, etc. in the residences during the day, (5) fear of becoming crime victim such as theft, robbery, assault, rape, etc. in the residences at night. The answers for these five questions were from 1 to 10 (1 indicating very unsafe; 10 denoting very safe).

The contact category has one variable, police contact, which was a categorical variable. This variable was coded 1 for respondents which had contacted or obtained service from police before. The last category was police performance including two composite variables: prevention and suppression. Both variables prevention and suppression had the answers for survey respondents to choose from 1 to 10: 1 meant strongly disagree and 10 for strongly agree. The police performance in crime prevention variable included the following five questions: (1) police regularly set up check points for crime prevention, (2) police are capable of controlling crime in dangerous areas, (3) police are regularly patrolling their area, (4) police go out to visit people and conduct community policing work continuously, (5) police give instructions to their citizens on how to protect their property and themselves. The police performance in crime suppression variable include four questions: (1) police come to crime scene promptly and be able to intercept the incident, (2) police have enough knowledge in investigation, (3) police are capable of investigation until arresting the suspect, and (4) police are capable of control the drug problem.

Findings

The information of the independent variables as well as dependent variable is shown in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 here.

The dependent variable, confidence in the police, had the range from 1 to 4, same as in the study of Cao et al., 1998. One good aspect of this type of answer was it can avoid the neutral score in the middle range. It did not have a number in the middle, such as 3 in the 1 to 5 range, which

sometime meant not sure or undecided. The average score of this variable was 1.70, comparable to 2.13 in the 1 to 5 scale. This score seemed to be quite low but if compared to the score for confidence in other organizations or institutes, the mean score for confidence in the police was not low. The mean score for the confidence in the political system, congress, and other service governments were 1.26, 1.46, and 1.70 respectively. Unfortunately, there is no score for the confidence in the police from other surveys in Thailand to compare. However, if compared the score with the one from the U.S., it was quite a bit low. The mean score of confidence in the police from the survey by Cao, Stack, & Sun, 1998 was 1.84 for Japan and 1.98 for the U.S.A., with the same scale. The study in 2005 by Ren et al. (2005) showed a higher score for the confidence in the police, 3.44 in the 1 to 5 scale which comparable to 2.75 in the 1 to 4 scale. The respondents had average age of 37.41 year olds, with the ratio of female a bit higher than male, mostly employed with bachelor degree background.

This study utilized the ordinary least square (OLS) regressions to analyze the data to understand the factors affecting confidence in the police. Table 2 shows the results based on four equations.

Insert Table 2 here.

In equation 1, we first included demographic variables in the model. Second, the contextual variables were added in equation 2. Then the police-citizen contact and police performance variables were added into the equation 3 and 4 respectively. The standardized coefficients in the four models were reported. For equation 1, three out of four independent variables were found significantly related with the dependent variable. These variables were age, employment, education, and income. One independent variable, gender, was found not statistically significant. The results indicated that the older the age, the more confidence in the police the respondents reported. Respondents with employment reported more confidence in the police than those who were unemployed. The higher the education of the respondents, the less confidence they had for the police. Finally, the higher income the respondents earned, the less the less confidence they had for the police. The model in equation 1 explained 4 percent of the variation in the confidence in police. After the contextual variables were included into the model in the equation 2, the model remained statistically significant. The demographic variables in the model expressed the same relationship with the dependent variable. Age, employment, education, and income still showed the significant relationship with confidence in the police in the same directions. One out of two contextual variables showed significant relationship with the dependent variable. Fear of crime variable did not show a significant relationship with confident in the police. Respondents reporting victimization experience had lower confidence in the police. The model in equation 2 explained more variation, 5 percent, in the dependent variable.

The police-citizen contact variable was included into the model in equation 3. The demographic and contextual variables still showed the same relationship with the dependent variable. The relationship between gender and fear of crime variables and the dependent variable did not change, still not significant. The police contact variable showed significant relationship with confidence in the police. Respondents who have contacted with police before reported higher confidence in the police. The whole model explained 6 percent of the variation of confidence in police. The police performance variables then were added into the model in equation 4.

Interestingly, two variables in the previous which did not express a significant relationship with the dependent variable model turned to be statistically significant. One of these two variables showed the opposite direction of the relationship compared to the previous equation. Gender and fear of crime variables turned to express the significant relationships. In equation 4, gender expressed negative relationship with the dependent variable although it has never significantly related with the dependent variable in any previous model. That meant female showed higher confidence in the police than male. The other independent variables in demographic category remained the same relationship with confidence in the police. The older the age of the respondents, the more confident they were in the police. Employment which showed significant relationship with the dependent variable in the three previous equations turned out to be not significant. Education and income still showed negative relationship with confidence in the police.

Both two variables in contextual model, victimization and fear of crime, remained the negative relationship with confidence in the police. Respondents with experience of victimization and higher level of fear of crime reported lower confidence in the police. Police contact showed positive relationship with the dependent variable, i.e., respondents with prior contact with police tended to express higher confidence in the police. Both two variables in the police performance category showed significant relationship with the dependent variable. The perception of the police performance in crime prevention and crime suppression increased the confidence in the police. Among all independent variables in the equation 4, police performance in crime suppression (Beta = .30) and police performance in crime prevention (Beta = .17) were the strongest predictor. Adding of police performance in the model in equation 4 significantly increased the explained variation in the dependent variable from 6 percent to 25 percent or increased 76 percent.

Discussion and conclusion

Studies in the past have examined factors affecting confidence in the police in many categories including demographic, contextual, and police-citizen contact and found significant relationships. Most of these research studies were conducted in the U.S. Few of them were done in Eastern countries and almost none of them examine the context of Thailand. Like other countries in many parts of the world, Thailand is a democratic society and its police organization has been finding the way to attract public support in order to perform its work. A lot of practical approaches from the West have been adopted into its policy and working guideline in the past, i.e., community relationship and community policing. To come up with the change and pressure from public expectation, police organization not only needs to control crime in the society by its personnel, but also needs to find the way to attract its citizens to participate in the work. In order to gain support from the public, police organization needs to assure that the public confidence in the police is always in a good condition. Thus, it is useful to understand what could affect the public confidence.

To understand the factors affecting public confidence in the police, this study followed earlier research using three categories of variables: demographic, contextual, and police-citizen contact. It also added another category, police performance variables, to better understand the dependent variable. The results reveal interesting findings. Most of them confirm the earlier studies. Like people in the West, Thai people who are more conservative tend to have high confidence in the police. That is older people, female, who have low education and low income tend to have high confidence in the police. People who have been victimized before and are high in fear

of crime tend to have low confidence in the police. Police-citizen contact has positive effect in confidence in the police.

Moreover, this study renders a significant finding. No matter how high the crime rates or how much crimes actually occur, if police try hard and successfully show their citizens the effort to impress the image of hard work in crime control, people will still have confident in the police. The findings from this study reveal that in all factors in the model, the perception in police performance in crime control is the strongest determinant. The policy implication from the findings is in order to gain confidence from the public, police not only need to perform their duty efficiently, but also need to assure that citizens understand the reasons of work and believe that police focus their time enough to prevent and suppress crime. It is possible for the public to have a blur picture of police in this regards because the roles of police in the present day are moving away from crime fighting as in the past. That means police organization need to communicate what they are doing to control crime with their citizens. Communication channel to be used to fulfill this task are plenty these days., for example social Medias which are very powerful and cost efficient to operate. Many programs or activities derived from community policing can increase the level of citizen participation in police work and enlarge the picture of crime control effort done by police in the view of the citizen. These kinds of practices are examples of the way to boot confidence in the police and there are more possible approaches for police to improve the public confidence in them.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics (N = 9,900)

Variables	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Confidence in the police	1.70	0.83	0	4
Age	37.41	12.79	17	80
Gender	0.49	0.49	0	1
Male (1)	(49.5%)			
Female (2)	(50.5%)			
Employment	0.84	0.36	0	1
Education				
<High school	(23.3%)			
Middle school	(19.6%)			
High school	(20.9%)			
Associate BA degree	(8.4%)			
BA degree	(24.5%)			
>BA degree	(3.2%)			
Income				
<5,000 Baht	(26.3%)			
5,001-15,000 Baht	(49.7%)			
15,001-25,000 Baht	(15.6%)			
>25,000 Baht	(8.3%)			
Victimization				
Yes (1)	(23.9%)			
No (0)	(76.1%)			
Fear of crime	25.80	10.47	5	50
Police contact				
Yes (1)	(58.5%)			

No (0)	(41.5%)			
Prevention	27.14	11.24	0	50
Suppression	21.39	9.11	0	40

Table 2

The factors affecting confidence in the police

Variables	Equation 1 Beta	Equation 2 Beta	Equation 3 Beta	Equation 4 Beta
<i>Demographic variables</i>				
Age	.08***	.07***	.07***	.05***
Gender	.000	.01	.00	-.02*
Employment	.03*	.03*	.02*	.01
Education	-.11***	-.10***	-.11***	-.06***
Income	-.08***	-.07***	-.08***	-.04***
<i>Contextual variables</i>				
Victimization		-.14***	-.16***	-.11***
Fear of crime		.02	.02	-.07***
<i>Police-citizen contact variable</i>				
Police contact			.08***	.05***
<i>Police performance variables</i>				
Prevention				.17***
Suppression				.30***
R-square =	.04	.05	.06	.25
F =	86.11	102.53	93.85	552.82
Significance =	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

N = 9,900; * p<.05; ** p<.01; *** p<.001

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