

Examining the Determinants of Police Department Transparency: The View of Police Executives

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Abstract

Scholars know relatively little about why law enforcement agencies choose to share information with the public. Empirical research has shown that departments often do so to satisfy an external demand, whether in the form of a statute requiring information to be collected and disseminated, the presence of a consent decree, or some other similar pressure. There is also evidence that transparency is the product of a unique constellation of factors within agencies that lead certain departments to share more information than others. But this line of inquiry is underdeveloped, and questions remain about both the nature and degree to which these external and internal factors matter. This article focuses on the role of police executives in generating the agency's response to transparency demands, with a particular focus on such demands generated by civilian oversight agencies and the role that top leadership plays in establishing an organizational culture that values openness and transparency. To address these issues, we draw on the results of a series of Q-sorting exercises and the insights gleaned from several semi-structured interviews with municipal police chiefs and county sheriffs. Preliminary results suggest that the vision and goals of police executives are critical to his or her department's online transparency.

Keywords

police, transparency, leadership

Introduction

The August 2014 death of Michael Brown at the hands of Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson set off the latest national debate on police use of force, officer accountability, and

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police–community relations. Unsurprisingly, given the centrality of law enforcement to many of the country’s historical racial flashpoints, views on the issue vary widely between races. According to a recent Pew Research Center (2014) poll, 70% of African Americans surveyed believe that the police do a poor job of “holding officers accountable when misconduct occurs,” compared with 27% of White respondents. Similarly, 70% of Black respondents believe that the police do not treat “racial and ethnic groups equally,” a view shared by only 25% of Whites.

Such wide divergences in perceptions of equity and accountability are no doubt troublesome indicators for a society with “post-racial” ambitions. Equally concerning is what this means for police departments’ ability to maintain order and control crime. Research has shown a clear link between a citizen’s trust and confidence in the police and their willingness to voluntarily comply with the law or provide support to ongoing criminal investigations (Tyler, 2006).

Police reformers have met these concerns with calls for, among other things, increased transparency. Two high profile demands—wider use of police officer body-worn cameras (Hermann & Weiner, 2014) and the collection and dissemination of data on officer use of deadly force (Schmidt, 2015)—have already led to significant policy changes (Gomez, 2014; Jonsson, 2014).

These are positive developments. Governmental transparency is a clear signal of institutional strength and healthy democratic governance (Albalade, 2013; Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010; Piotrowski & Van Ryzin, 2007). Openness has the potential to promote dialog between government officials and the constituents they serve and has been shown to increase public participation in policy-relevant decision making (Coglianese, 2009; Contradie & Choenni, 2014). Transparency has also been shown to enhance accountability by reducing information asymmetries, in the process enabling public oversight and reducing corruption (Albalade, 2013; La Porte, Demchak, & De Jong, 2002). What is more, recent scholarship has established that citizen trust in government increases with access to information (Bertot et al., 2010; Shim & Eom, 2009).

Yet, despite these potential benefits—many of which are particularly salient in the context of the ongoing debate over police accountability and high levels of mistrust among minority communities—we know relatively little about police transparency, particularly from the perspective of law enforcement.

Recent empirical work suggests that transparency is a function of several external factors, including statutory and other legal requirements, and demand for information from a civilian oversight agency or a group like the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU; Chanin & Courts, n.d.). This external pressure gets at only part of the story, as there are internal differences that also help uncover why some agencies are more willing than others to share information with the public. Unsurprisingly, agencies that engage in “publicly facing” behavior, like the use of community policing strategies (Rosenbaum, Graziano, Stephens, & Schuck, 2011) or participation in academic research (Chanin & Courts, n.d.), are more likely to share information with the public.

As interesting as these findings are, they offer few explanatory insights. Scholars still lack a basic understanding of *why* police departments collect and disseminate

information online. We do not understand how law enforcement weighs the many costs and benefits of organizational transparency. To that end, this research focuses on the role of the police executive in an attempt to address the influence of individual values and preferences on department policy and culture. Specifically, we survey and interview several police executives in hopes of addressing two questions:

Research Question 1: How do police leaders feel about organizational transparency and civilian oversight?

Research Question 2: How do these views effect organizational decisions about data dissemination?

The article begins with a review of existing empirical literature on the determinants of police transparency and an examination of police leadership, followed by a description of the data and methods used to address our research questions. Next, we provide a description and analysis of our preliminary findings. The article concludes with a discussion of implications for both theory and policy.

Police Transparency

The arguments in favor of an open, transparent government are well known and easily applied to the police. Public access to information about how law enforcement agencies make key organizational decisions and the outcomes of those decisions has the potential to increase public and organizational accountability encourage citizen engagement, and promote trust between the police and the communities they serve. These potential benefits resonate loudly today, when so many Americans have lost confidence in the police to do their jobs within the bounds of the law. To that end, the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing (2015) recommended that police leaders work to "establish a culture of transparency and accountability in order to build public trust and accountability" (p. 11).

Traditionally, police organizations have seen transparency as a public relations tool. Information about an ongoing criminal investigation or agency staffing levels was released only as needed to manage the narrative and protect the department's reputation (Mawby, 2002). Mistrust of the media and skepticism about the motivations of the information-seeking public drove this long-standing preference for reticence.

There is evidence to suggest, however, that police departments have begun to recognize the value of communicating more proactively with the public on a more expansive set of issues (Chermak & Weiss, 2005). Web-based social media platforms such as *Facebook* (e.g., Unsworth, 2014) and *Twitter* (e.g., Crump, 2011; Haverin & Zach, 2010) are a large part of this change in thinking (Brainerd & Edlins, 2014; Mawby, 2010). Language in two recent, high profile reports emphasizes the centrality of online transparency to robust police–community relations. Action Item 1.3.1 of the Interim Report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing (2015) advised that

[t]o embrace a culture of transparency, law enforcement agencies should make all department policies available for public review and regularly post on the department's website information about stops, summonses, arrests, reported crime, and other law enforcement data aggregated by demographics. (p. 11)

Similarly, in a March 2015 report documenting a pattern or practice of unconstitutional behavior among members of the Ferguson, Missouri, police department, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) made it clear that more robust use of the city's official websites was a critical piece of the change "necessary to remedy Ferguson's unlawful law enforcement practices and repair community trust" (p. 90). More specifically, the DOJ urged the city to "make available online and regularly update a complete set of police policies" (p. 96) and "[m]ake public—through a variety of means, including prominent display on the City, police, and municipal court web pages—all court-related fines, fees, and bond amounts . . ." (p. 97).

Despite these changes in the way information is shared, scholars still know relatively little about how the shift came about and *why* police departments are now more frequently choosing to engage. Is the end goal still to control the message and burnish the department's reputation? Or are there other potential benefits to be had? The two-way nature of social media and the Internet in general suggests that even if the goal continues to be controlling the narrative, there are other factors at play.

There is both theoretical and empirical support for the idea that police agencies are more likely to disseminate information when facing "applied and persistent" demand for its release (Michener & Bersch, 2011). In their content analysis of 350 city and county websites, Chanin and Courts (n.d.) found substantial justification for this demand-centered theory. Agencies facing specific legal requirements to collect and release information, either in the form of statutory or court-based requirements, are more likely to provide information to the public. So too are departments operating in jurisdictions that maintain some form of civilian oversight. This is not surprising; requiring agencies to produce and share information—and, critically, establishing costs for not doing so—is likely to generate more data sharing.

Demand for information is not the only factor driving online transparency. Circumstances or conditions of operation may incentivize the proactive supply of information, even in the absence of acute demand (Michener & Bersch, 2011). If true, data dissemination would generate organizational benefits, either tangible (e.g., economic) or intangible (e.g., reputational, political), that outweigh opacity.

Along those lines, Rosenbaum et al. (2011) reviewed the contents of 261 U.S. law enforcement websites and found that departments that have implemented community-oriented policing (COP) principles were much more likely to communicate with and provide relevant information to constituents through their official website (see also Chanin & Courts, n.d.). The increased recognition among police executives that crime control is facilitated in large part by police legitimacy (Tyler, 2006) seems to buttress the idea that sharing information not only provides strategic gains in the form of community familiarity and trust, but aids in promoting organizational legitimacy as well. Chanin and Courts (n.d.) found that two additional "supply-side" indicators¹— (a) department participation in a longitudinal research study on

police behavior² and (b) the pursuit of national accreditation through the Committee for Accreditation of Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA)—were predictive of increased transparency.

However, these findings seem to bear out relatively simple logic: For some agencies, the benefits of publishing information online outweigh the costs of doing so. Whether these benefits are transactional, symbolic, or value driven, agencies reaching this particular calculation also find a similar value in other pro-social, non-mission-based choices, like voluntarily engaging with the research community.

Despite these advancements, much of what we know about why police departments share information remains largely theoretical. Scholars have yet to incorporate the view of the police. Of particular relevance is the degree to which the views of police executives on transparency shape the decision to share information with the public.

The Influence of Leadership

Public agency leaders have the legal authority and organizational capacity to establish policy priorities (Berry, 1994), implement strategic and operational foci (Engel & Worden, 2003; Santos & Santos, 2012), promote and sustain reforms (Buchanan et al., 2005; Fernandez & Rainey, 2006), and influence the behavior of staff at all levels of the agency (Engel, 2000). Police chiefs are no exception; in fact, given the hierarchical, centralized nature of most law enforcement agencies, the power vested in a police executive is arguably greater than most other appointed executive branch leaders (Mastrofski & Willis, 2010).

Policing scholars have carefully documented the organizational influence of police chiefs, beginning with their effect on the behavior of patrol officers. Discretionary decisions, ranging from the use of force (Hunt & Magenau, 1993; Perez & Muir, 1996; Skolnick & Fyfe, 1993) to traffic enforcement (Johnson, 2006), are shaped by how the rank and file view leadership priorities (Skogan & Frydl, 2004; Wilson, 1968). Clearly, this influence is on some level a function of formal administrative policy. Shift schedules, patrol assignments, rules of engagement, and so on are established under the authority of department leadership.

Yet, a chief's most profound influence may be cultural. The myriad norms and informal rules that exist within a department—"this is the way we do things here"—are to varying degrees a function of agency leadership, beginning with the chief. As Skolnick and Fyfe (1993) argued, the way an officer conceives of and performs his or her job is ultimately "determined by administrative definitions of *good* and *bad* policing and by the general tone that comes from the top" (p. 136; emphasis in original). Along the same lines, empirical evidence suggests that agencies that prioritize integrity and other non-mission-based values such as accountability and transparency do so as a result of "strong leadership at the very top of the organization" (Mastrofski & Willis, 2010, p. 107; see also Klockars, Ivkovic, & Haberfeld, 2006; Muir, 1977).

Agency culture, particularly when framed as a function of leadership and the value systems of individual chiefs, is often reflected in the willingness and capacity of an agency to pursue innovations that move away from the "standard model of policing" (Eck & Weisburd, 2004; Moore & Braga, 2003; Skolnick & Bayley, 1986). Scholars

have recognized the strength of this influence obliquely (Alarid & Montemayor, 2012; Goldsmith, 2001, 2005; Stone, Foglesong, & Cole, 2009), but have much work to do to articulate the specific effects that a chief's attitudes and influences have on an agency's willingness to prioritize non-mission-based values such as organizational transparency (Berry, 1994; Feeny & Welch, 2012).

Sample, Data, and Method

As the preceding review indicates, relatively little is known about the effects of organizational leadership and agency culture on police transparency. Our empirical strategy for this article was based on a combination of semi-guided interviews and a survey method known as Q-sorting. Q-sorting is an exercise that requires participants to rank order several statements on a particular issue. Unlike a Likert-type scale-based survey, the Q-sort forces respondents to make relative comparisons by fitting their rankings "onto a pre-defined quasi-normal" distribution, where every Q-sort results in a mean of 0 (McKeown & Thomas, 2013; Ratcliffe, Sorg, & Rose, 2014, p. 10; Watts & Stenner, 2012).

The Q-sort methodology was chosen instead of a more traditional survey approach for two primary reasons. First, it is considered the most effective method for identifying ". . . people's perceptions of their world from the vantage point of self-reference" (McKeown & Thomas, 2013, p. 1; Smith, 2001). Second, a Q-sort renders a more detailed, holistic articulation of a respondent's subjective viewpoint, which is particularly valuable with a population, like the respondent police executives, who are accepted experts in their field and "whose viewpoints are established as being of considerable importance to a particular subject matter" (Watts & Stenner, 2012, p. 175).

Social scientists (e.g., Curry, Barry, & McClenaghan, 2013; Siddiki, Basurto, & Weible, 2012) have used this technique to analyze and compare highly subjective information, including perceptions of organized crime groups (Ratcliffe, Strang, & Taylor, 2014) and citizen views of police department performance (Rus, Ratiu, Vonas, & Baban, 2013). The data produced by Q-sort exercises effectively eliminates the possibility of extreme ranking (i.e., classifying everything as similarly important) and promotes inter-rating reliability (Ratcliffe, Sorg, & Rose, 2014), thus allowing the researcher to comprehend respondent views "holistically and to a high level of qualitative detail" (Watts & Stenner, 2012, p. 4).

The police executives included in this research were identified through purposive sampling. Because of our interest in analyzing the Q-sort findings in the context of established agency transparency scores, we began by targeting departments included in the Chanin and Courts (n.d.) sample, focusing specifically on those overseen by civilian review agencies.³ A total of 63 agencies were contacted initially by email between December 2014 and March 2015. They were asked to complete a Q-sorting exercise containing statements on (a) civilian oversight of the police and (b) the determinants of organizational transparency (see Q-sorting protocol in Appendix A). Follow-up phone calls were then placed to confirm participation (Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Included Agencies.

Size	Region	Chief interviewed?	Chief tenure (months)	Civilian oversight?	Disclosure mandated?	Transparency score ^a	Accountability score ^a
Mid	West	Yes	42	—	—	4	1
Mid	West	Yes	23	—	—	3	0
Mid	West	Yes	81	Yes	—	9	2
Large	West	Yes	72	Yes	—	13	5
Mid	West	Yes	70	—	—	9	2
Small	West	Yes	24	—	—	7	1
Mid	West	Yes	61	—	—	5	0
Mid	West	Yes	25	Yes	—	4	0
Mid	Midwest	Yes	85	Yes	—	10	2
Mid	Midwest	—	89	Yes	Yes	7	1
Small	West	—	24	—	—	8	1
Mid	Midwest	Yes	12	—	—	10	4
Mid	Northeast	Yes	242	—	—	24	10
Mid	Midwest	Yes	108	Yes	—	7	1
Small	West	—	30	—	—	5	1
Small	Northeast	—	222	—	—	7	0
Large	Southeast	—	63	Yes	Yes	14	4
<i>M (SD)</i>						8.59 (5.0)	2.05 (2.5)

Note. Small: population <50,000; midsize: 50,001-250,000; large: >250,001.

^aSee Appendix B for details.

In all, 17 Q-sorting exercises were completed, for a response rate of 27.0%. Although some believe that a viable Q-sort can be conducted with as few as 5 or 6 participants (Brown, 1980), the general rule of thumb for similar studies is somewhere between 15 and 20 (Watts & Stenner, 2012). We consider that the number of participants recruited for this study was sufficient to craft a reliable narrative on police perceptions on transparency and the role of civilian oversight.

We also conducted in-depth interviews with 12 of the 17 respondents (6 face-to-face, 6 over the phone). The interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed using the ATLAS.ti software. These interactions allowed interviewees the opportunity to expound on their Q-sort responses and discuss in more depth their vision of civilian oversight and police transparency. Open-ended questions were designed to elicit participant views on organizational values, the import of transparency, the effects of external pressures to disseminate information, and other factors that shape the decision to publish information online.

Findings

This section begins with a review of the results from our two Q-sort exercises and an analysis of associated interview data. Table 2 presents results from a 12-statement

Table 2. Summary Results From Q-Sort on Civilian Oversight.

In your view, external (civilian) oversight _____.	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Is a necessary part of policing in the United States	0.00	1.66
Makes our department more effective	0.06	1.60
Is time-consuming	-0.88	1.36
Improves police–community relations	1.24	1.35
Is a distraction	-1.53	1.46
Promotes accountability	1.47	1.01
Is not as important as people make it out to be	-0.88	2.00
Makes policing more difficult	-0.94	1.14
Annoys the rank and file	-1.76	1.30
Promotes community trust	1.94	0.97
Promotes transparency	1.41	1.18
Helps to reduce misconduct	-0.18	0.88

Note. Participants were asked to place the above statements into one of seven categories ranging from “strong agreement” (+3) to “weak agreement/disagreement” (-3). Neutral responses were coded 0.

Q-sort designed to elicit the views of police executives on civilian oversight. The statements comprising the Q-sort were drawn from the leading scholarship on civilian oversight of the police, including Walker (2001), Goldsmith and Lewis (2000), and Noble and Alpert (2009).

Mean scores listed suggest that the interviewees view civilian oversight as a largely positive force. Respondents believe fairly strongly that civilian oversight promotes confidence that the police are accountable and transparent, as well as offers the potential for strengthened police–community relations. To that point, a chief in a mid-sized city noted that the agency overseeing his department had built “trust within the community that at least somebody else outside the department is looking at what [we are] doing.” Another found that oversight “adds transparency and trust” among members of the community. There was also some recognition that civilian oversight agencies carry with them considerable symbolic value. To one respondent, oversight “can be useful . . . [O]ptically it helps with some of your more anti-police people.”

Respondents’ disagreement with statements such as “annoys the rank and file,” “is a distraction,” and “is not as important as people make it out to be,” which carry negative connotations, seems to support the point. These results are somewhat unexpected in that they appear to belie the conventional wisdom that the police fundamentally oppose civilian oversight and see external review as an affront to the authority of the chief, an intrusion on his or her ability to manage the department, and in violation of the long-standing norm of self-regulation (More, 2008).

Yet, respondents were neutral on the notion that civilian oversight “makes our department more effective” and tended to disagree with the sentiment that it “helps to reduce misconduct.” In other words, police executives see the value of civilian oversight in the message it sends to members of the public, not necessarily in what it actually helps accomplish. Relatedly, several respondents questioned the legitimacy of oversight models

Table 3. Summary Results From Q-Sort on the Determinants of Agency Transparency.

Your department shares data and information with the public (via the website) because_____.	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
It is required by law	-1.38	1.53
It satisfies public desire for information	0.75	0.92
It satisfies media demand for information	0.19	0.88
It satisfies demand from civilian oversight agency	-1.13	0.75
It satisfies demand from groups like the ACLU or the NAACP	-1.56	1.33
Other law enforcement agencies do it	-0.81	1.09
It is required by CALEA (or another accrediting agency)	-2.25	0.86
It is required by a court decision or other judicial mandate	-1.63	0.80
It enhances the reputation of the department	1.50	0.94
The public deserves to know how we make strategic decisions	0.50	0.62
The public deserves to know how we are performing as an agency	0.81	1.20
It helps educate the public	1.38	0.99
It allows our department to communicate directly with the public	2.06	1.25
I personally think it's important	1.69	1.06

Note. NAACP = National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; ACLU = American Civil Liberties Union; CALEA = Committee for Accreditation of Law Enforcement Agencies.

that encroach on a chief's ability to manage his or her department. The views of a chief from a mid-sized agency in the western United States are representative:

And so no police department functions that well when you have an oversight agency that [has the capacity to say], "This is what you should do." It takes leadership out of play in some cases . . . I think can create that organizational distrust because the chief can't make a damn decision.

Table 3 documents the results of a second Q-sort exercise, which asked respondents to rank in terms of importance several statements related to the decision to share information via the department's official website. The included statements were derived largely from the Chanin and Courts (n.d.) study on the determinants of agency online transparency.

Several findings are noteworthy. First, respondent police executives view the Internet and the official department platform as a valuable tool for communicating with their constituents. Not only do a majority of chiefs acknowledge that the web is important for interfacing with the public, but many see their website as a useful way to alert people to police activity, operational decision making, and agency performance.

Second, that the statement "I personally think it's important" scored very high indicates fairly clearly that respondents believe that their own preferences and value systems have a direct effect on the information shared with the public. Although it is not entirely surprising that police executives have a healthy sense for their own influence on organizational policy priorities and decision making, it does lend credence to our

decision to focus on the views of police executive as a way of unlocking questions about why departments choose to disseminate information publicly.

Finally, it is very clear that respondents see the decision to post data online as a less about satisfying external demand and more a function of internal, “supply-side” factors.⁴ In fact, when taken together, the most highly rated statements suggest that these decisions are made as a result of perceived intangible departmental benefit (e.g., educating the public, enhancing the department’s reputation), not as a means of satisfying acute demands for information or an external legal or political requirement.

Triangulating Q-Sort Results and Transparency Index Scores

What follows is an effort to triangulate respondents’ views on civilian oversight and the relationship such outcomes have with the agency’s online transparency. It is important to mention two relevant limitations before proceeding. First, we are not attempting to use these data to make direct causal claims about the relationship between a chief’s personal opinion and specific information shared with the public online. The content of a department website is a function of several elements, many of which, including state legal mandates and pre-set jurisdictional policy, fall out of the chief’s control. What follows should be read with the assumption that all data collected and disseminated online is done so with the chief’s approval, either tacit or overt. Second, the nature of our inquiry places significant limitations on the extent to which these conclusions can be generalized to other jurisdictions with confidence.

Figure 1 displays the correlation between a respondent chief’s rankings of the statement “External (civilian) oversight enhances transparency” and his or her department’s online transparency. An agency’s online transparency is measured using a 26-point index developed by Chanin and Courts (n.d.) in an effort to determine what data and information law enforcement agencies make available to the public via their official website (hereinafter referred to as the Chanin/Courts transparency index). Department websites were analyzed for the presence of certain information, ranging from the names and contact information of department staff, current and historical crime rates, and annual reports, to statistics on officer use of force, arrest rates, and traffic stops. Agencies were awarded 1 point for each piece of data found, with total scores combined and ranked against a possible score of 26. These scores were then used to test several hypotheses on the determinants of web-based transparency. The full transparency index is found in Appendix B.

Figure 2 displays the relationship between a respondent chief’s ranking of the statement “External (civilian) oversight promotes accountability” and his or her department’s score on the Chanin/Courts accountability sub-index. The sub-index is a collection of 12 data points designed to enable external accountability (e.g., citizen complaint data or officer disciplinary outcomes).

Taken together, these results suggest that agencies overseen by executives who see civilian oversight as conducive to transparency and accountability are more likely to collect and disseminate information online, which is consistent with the acknowledged relationship between civilian oversight, organizational transparency, and

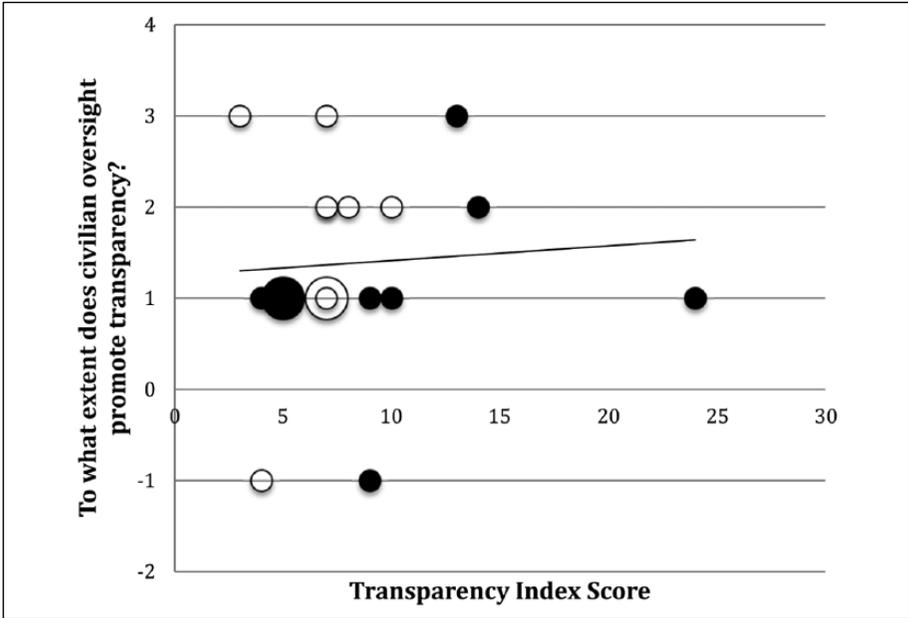


Figure 1. Triangulating Q-sort ratings and agency transparency scores.
 Note. Black markers indicate the presence of civilian oversight in respondent’s jurisdiction. Two departments are found at the 5, 1 and 7, 1 points.

agency accountability (Chanin & Courts, n.d.; Ferdik, Rojek, & Alpert, 2013; Walker, 2001). They also lend support to the notion that the value systems of individual police executives—that is, the relative value of transparency—can have a direct effect on organizational policy outputs.

In fact, agencies overseen by respondent executives, most of whom report finding value in transparency and accountability and acknowledge the necessity of an active web presence, received an average score of 8.59 on the 26-point Chanin/Courts transparency index or 33.0% of the available total. Interestingly, those agencies operating in jurisdictions with civilian oversight scored on average 11.0/26, whereas those in non-oversight jurisdictions had a mean of 6.44/26. It must be said, however, that despite the positive correlation documented in Figures 1 and 2 and the comparatively high mean score (8.59 is considerably higher than the 7.10/26 reported by the mean agency in the Chanin and Courts, n.d., sample [$N = 350$]), this set of findings highlight the relatively low level of web-based transparency among American law enforcement agencies.

Perhaps this disconnect provides a window into the difference between sharing information with the public to strengthen police–community relations and doing so to give the public true insight into the department’s operational decision making and facts about the outcomes of those choices. Consistent with the distinction between civilian oversight as a means of promoting police–community relations, but not as a

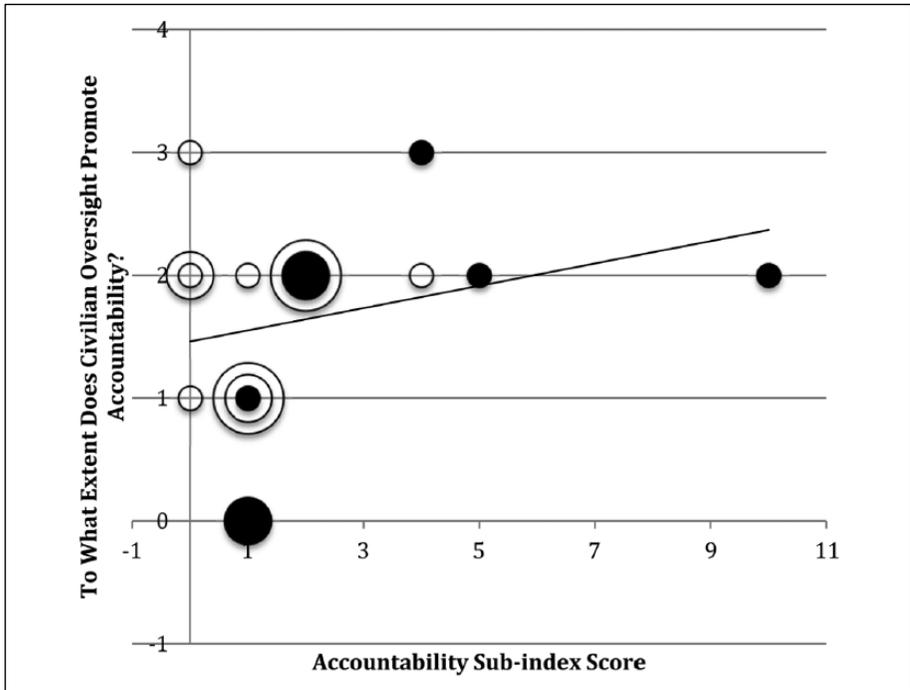


Figure 2. Triangulating Q-sort ratings and agency accountability-related transparency scores.

Note. Black markers indicate the presence of civilian oversight in respondent’s jurisdiction. Two departments are found at the 0,2, and three each at 1,1 and 2,2.

way of reducing misconduct or improving department performance, there seems to be a tangible difference between what online transparency looks like when framed as a mechanism for helping the police achieve their strategic goals and that which can facilitate external accountability.

Implications for Theory and Practice

This research offers several valuable insights for policing scholars and interested practitioners. First, it is clear that there is great potential in the use of Q-sort exercises to examine the views of police executives. In follow-up interviews, many respondents reported being intrigued by the process and surprised at the nuance with which they were able to communicate their perspective on subjective, value-driven issues. Although relatively new to the discipline and largely untested in this specific context, these data suggest methodological promise.

To wit, from both our Q-sort data and interviews, it is clear that police executives hold complex, widely variant, yet largely positive views on both civilian oversight and transparency. There was a consensus among respondents that civilian oversight

promotes strong police–community relations, as evidenced by high mean scores of phrases such as “Civilian oversight promotes community trust” (1.94/3.0), “. . . improves police–community relations” (1.24/3.0), “. . . promotes accountability” (1.47/3.0), and “. . . promotes transparency” (1.41/3.0). Our triangulation of these findings with department scores on the Chanin/Courts index suggests that the stronger these feelings are held, the more likely it is that a department will release information to the public.

Relatedly, there seems to be a corresponding view that such oversight (and by extension the gains in police–community relations) offers few instrumental benefits. In fact, respondents were neutral on the statement “Civilian oversight makes our department more effective” (0.06/3.0) and negative on the notion that “civilian oversight helps to reduce misconduct” (−0.18/3).

Respondent executives were similarly unified in their response to prompts on the determinants of online transparency. Supply-side factors, including “I personally think [sharing data and information] is important” (1.69/3.0) and “It allows our department to communicate directly with the public” (2.06/3.0), received the highest mean scores, whereas demand-side indicators, including “It is required by law” (−1.38/3.0) and “It is required by CALEA” (−2.25/3.0), were some of the lowest rated.

It must be noted that as it stands, only two respondent executives face transparency-related statutory mandates (e.g., a state law requiring the collection and dissemination of particular data); none have dealt with a pattern or practice investigation or have operated under a court-appointed monitor; and only 8 of 17 respondents are subject to formal civilian oversight. This is to say that demand-side indicators may be underrepresented.

The study’s findings also lend some insight into the nature of the internal factors shaping the decision to post data/information on the Internet. It is particularly interesting that respondents felt so strongly that doing so “enhances the reputation of the department” (1.50/3.0). In follow-up interviews, chief after chief suggested that choosing not to release information sent the message that the department had something to hide or was not being completely forthright with the public (e.g., “You can’t look as if you’re hiding behind the curtain . . .”). Clearly, respondents find value in the public holding a strong view of the department and are willing to engage in behavior that may create instrumental costs to avoid negative perceptions.

Conclusion

This research represents an attempt to understand how police executives view two key issues: civilian oversight and organizational transparency. We have drawn on the results of two Q-sort exercises and semi-structured interviews to address this issue, as well as connect the views of respondent chiefs to pre-existing data on the extent to which their departments share data and information publicly. This analysis suggests that members of our sample see important symbolic value in the presence of civilian oversight and believe that external regulation has the capacity to strengthen police–community relations. Respondents expressed very similar views of transparency. The chiefs we spoke with also made it clear that the choice to share information online was

not necessarily a response to external demands for information but a function of personally held views on the importance of doing so.

Perceptions of inequitable uses of force and a lack of accountability in the wake of several high profile incidents have returned to the national conversation long-standing issues of mistrust of the police among minority communities. Police departments across the country face a crisis of legitimacy. This research indicates that police executives are acutely aware of the challenges they face and see increased civilian oversight and transparency as a key part of the solution. It also raises questions about the extent to which their goals align with those held by reformers, many of whom see transparency not as a symbolic gesture made to signify trustworthiness but as a set of data and information used to hold police departments accountable.

Appendix A

Q-Sort Instruments

Survey on Police Leadership. Chanin and Espinosa

San Diego State University School of Public Affairs

This research is an attempt to learn about your views on police department priorities, external oversight, and transparency. We will do so by having you rank several words or phrases in terms of their importance compared with the other words or phrases listed. The example below illustrates how the process works.

The first box lists the nine words to be sorted—in this case, the characteristics of basketball players. You may choose one word to rank as “most important,” two between “most important” and “neutral,” three as “neutral,” and so on.

Basketball Players Must Possess _____ to Succeed.

Height	Speed	Vision
	Jumping ability	
Strength	Stamina	Quickness
	Coordination	Unselfishness

Most important	Neutral		Least important	

The figure below is an example of what a completed sort may look like.

Most important Neutral Least important

Height	Jumping ability	Quickness	Stamina	Strength
	Coordination	Speed	Unselfishness	
		Vision		

**You may enter your answers directly in the boxes provided below. Please remember to use each term only once. When you are finished, please save the document and return it by email.

1. In your view, external (civilian) oversight _____.

Is a necessary part of policing in the United States		Is a distraction
Improves police–community relations	Makes policing more difficult	Annoys the rank and file
Promotes accountability	Helps to reduce misconduct	Makes our department more effective
Promotes transparency	Promotes community trust	Is time-consuming

Strong agreement Neutral Weak agreement/disagreement

2. Your department shares data and information with the public (via the dept website) because _____.

It is required by law	It is required by an accrediting agency (e.g., CALEA)		
	It enhances the reputation of the department		
It satisfies media demand for information	It is required by a court decision or other judicial mandate		It satisfies public desire for information
		The public deserves to know how we make strategic decisions	
It satisfies demand from a civilian oversight agency	I personally think doing so is important		The public deserves to know how we are performing as an agency
Other police agencies do it		It allows our department to communicate directly with the public	
	It satisfies demand from groups like the ACLU or the NAACP		It helps educate the public

Note. CALEA = Committee for Accreditation of Law Enforcement Agencies; ACLU = American Civil Liberties Union; NAACP = National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Strongly agree	Neutral	Weak agreement/disagreement
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Appendix B

The Chanin/Courts Transparency Index.

Public outreach (14)	Accountability-related (12)
Social media	Citizen complaint data
News feed/press release	Current (2012 or 2013) use of force data
Citizen satisfaction survey	Historical use of force data
Branch/bureau contact info	Pedestrian stop data
Chief contact information	Pedestrian stop data by race
Leadership contact information	Arrest data
Current (2012 or 2013) annual report	Arrest data by race
Historical annual reports	Traffic stop data
Records request information	Traffic stop data by race
Use of force policy	Civil litigation information
Racial profiling policy	Officer disciplinary decisions
Other department policy	Citizen complaint filing
Current crime statistics	
Historical crime statistics	

The Chanin/Courts transparency index was developed to describe and analyze the contents of official websites maintained by a nationally representative sample ($N = 350$) of American law enforcement agencies. As detailed above, department websites were analyzed for the presence of 26 elements, divided into two broad categories: elements related to public outreach and those designed to promote public accountability. The higher an agency's score, the more information being shared with the public.

The coding process began with the development of a detailed coding rubric, which included detailed descriptions of each index item and specific guidance on how to identify the presence or absence of each data point. Upon completion of the draft rubric, each of the two study authors coded an initial sample of 35 websites. The results yielded a convergence rate of 86.88%. The discrepancies were then reconciled, with necessary changes made to the coding rubric to clarify divergences and incorporate concrete examples of specific coding decisions. A second sample of 12 websites was then coded by both authors, with the reliability rate improved to 91.67%. After reconciling and updating the coding rubric a second time, the researchers coded a third sample, with the final 10-site comparison generating a 94.76% convergence. The remaining 293 sites were evenly divided between researchers and coded using the third and final iteration of the rubric. See Chanin and Courts (n.d.) for further details.

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Notes

1. Used to denote unique organizational characteristics or behavior predictive of an agency's willingness to supply information to the public in the absence of specific legal requirements or other "demand-side" pressures.
2. The *National Police Research Platform* is a longitudinal data collection and analysis effort initiated in 2009 by a research team led by scholars at the University of Illinois–Chicago. Participant agencies have agreed to grant researchers access to personnel and pertinent records in pursuit of "a deeper understanding of the contextual factors that help to explain the differences between and within [police] organizations" (New Funded Research, n.d.).
3. The non-random nature of our recruitment efforts highlights important distinctions between the Q-sort technique and a more traditional survey method. In most cases, scholars rely on a randomized sample to generalize their survey results to a wider population. The goal of a Q-sort is not generalizability. Instead, researchers draw on Q-sort data to make narrow claims about a specific respondent population.
4. We recognize that participation in research was used by Chanin and Courts (n.d.) as a "supply side" indicator, and that a chief's willingness to complete the Q-sort and/or grant our interview request may reflect a "publicly-minded" value set and bias our sample to a certain unknown extent.

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