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University Police and Public Safety Survey Findings

October 2019

# Executive Summary

In Fall 2019, Penn State conducted a University-wide anonymous survey of students and employees to determine their attitudes, opinions, and experiences related to University Police and Public Safety (UPPS). Nearly 30,000 community members were invited, and 2,671 usable responses were received, yielding a nine percent response rate.

Nearly half of all respondents (46%) reported interacting with a Penn State University Police officer at their primary campus in the last two years, most commonly when they attended an event where officers were present. Among these respondents, perceptions of University Police were very positive – 89% indicated that the UPPS employee’s knowledge was sufficient to assist them and 87% indicated that the employee handled their issue professionally. Overall, 90% of respondents rated UPPS performance as “good” or “very good.”

Fifteen percent of all respondents indicated that there were places on campus where they felt unsafe, most often on campus at night, either in general (22%) or in specific locations (14%), and their primary safety concerns were crimes against people. Fear of the possibility of an active attacker came up across comments provided in relation to multiple questions.

Most respondents (71%) were aware of the emergency public phones (71%). Eighty-six percent were signed up for the PSU Alert emergency system (86%) and 68% were familiar with the University’s Timely Warnings.

While most survey respondents held very positive perceptions of UPPS, it is worth noting that the perceptions of historically marginalized groups were often less positive. Only 77% of transgender, nonbinary, and genderfluid respondents (as a group), for example, indicated that they felt comfortable contacting University Police for assistance, compared to 86% of women and 83% of men. Similar gender differences were observed in terms of respondents’ feelings of safety on campus and between minority and nonminority respondents. Likewise, historically marginalized groups less often agreed that officers were respectful to “people like me.”

SURVEY AT A GLANCE

**Survey timing:** Fall 2019

**Target population:** students and employees at 22 campuses with University-provided police services

**Survey response rate:** 9%

**Overall perceptions:**

* 90% rate overall UPPS performance as good or very good
* 89% believe officers are professional
* 87% believe officers are courteous
* 79% believe officers are fair
* 24% find officers intimidating
* 87% believe officers are respectful to “people like me”

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# Background

In fall 2019, the Office of Planning, Assessment, and Institutional Research (PAIR) conducted an anonymous University-wide survey on behalf of University Police and Public Safety (UPPS) to gain an understanding of student and employee attitudes and opinions related to police services and programs. The results will be used to improve University Police services for all community members.

This voluntary, online survey is intended to be used as a platform for organizational learning, and by asking specific questions about the quality of policing in the community, to measure how policing in the Penn State community affects public trust. The survey was distributed via email to selected students and employees at the 22 Penn State campuses where University Police provides services. A random sample of students and employees at Penn State University Park, Abington, Altoona, Berks, Behrend, and Harrisburg, as well as all students and employees at the smaller campuses—29,713 people—were invited to complete the survey. Current and former employees of UPPS were excluded from the target population and sample, and a screening question was used to direct any current or previous employees inadvertently included in the sample out of the survey. University-wide, the survey response rate (not including those directed out of the survey) was nine percent.

The survey asked students and employees about University Police, the police department that provides services to 21 campuses[[1]](#footnote-2), regarding:

* overall performance;
* overall competency of agency employees;
* perception of officer attitudes and behavior;
* community concerns over safety and security within University Police’s jurisdiction; and
* recommendations and suggestions for improvements.

The findings will be used to improve services for all community members. The survey, which is part of the police department accreditation process, will be conducted biennially.

This report summarizes University-wide findings; detailed findings by campus are presented in a separate series of reports. Participant responses to the survey are confidential. Although the data were collected in an anonymous fashion, some respondents provided identifying information. For this reason, PAIR provides aggregate findings only. Reported percentages often do not add to 100% due to rounding. Many of the questions asked respondents to “select all that apply.” The findings for these responses are presented as a proportion of overall responses to that question. A summary of open-ended responses is provided where applicable.

Many of the analyses presented in this report compare the responses of demographic groups. It is important to note that some of these demographic groups (e.g., transgender, non-binary, genderfluid and LGB) contain only a relatively small number of respondents (see Additional Respondent Demographics, p. 22) that answered the relevant questions. Respondent groupings commonly used in this report include:

* Minority respondents are those that self-reported as Black or African American, Hispanic or Latinx, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, or as two or more races including any of the previous groups listed.
* LGB respondents are those that self-reported as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. The survey did not offer “Queer” as an option for sexual identity, although respondents did have the opportunity to self-identify.
* Transgender male, transgender female, nonbinary, and genderfluid individuals are reported as a single group.

# Overview of Findings

## Who were the Respondents?

The 2,671 respondents to the survey were categorized as students (60%) or employees (40%), based on their primary role at Penn State. Table 1 presents the demographics of the target population in comparison to that of the survey respondents. Representativeness of the survey respondents cannot be accurately calculated, however, due to the substantial number of respondents that chose not to provide their affiliation (29%), gender (29%), age (29%), and/or race (31%). Table 2 provides the number of respondents and response rates by primary campus location. Additional respondent demographics are available beginning on p. 22.

Table 1. Respondent demographics compared to the target population

| Demographics | Target population | Survey Respondents |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Affiliation |  |  |
| Employee | 20% | 40% |
| Student | 80% | 60% |
| Gender identity[[2]](#footnote-3) |  |  |
| Women | 47% | 58% |
| Man | 53% | 41% |
| Transgender woman | -- | <1% |
| Transgender man | -- | <1% |
| Nonbinary/genderfluid | -- | 1% |
| Other | -- | <1% |
| Age |  |  |
| Under 18 | 1% | 2% |
| 18—24 | 70% | 52% |
| 25—34 | 11% | 10% |
| 35—44 | 6% | 11% |
| 45—54 | 6% | 14% |
| 55—64 | 5% | 10% |
| 65 or older | 1% | 3% |
| Race/ethnicity[[3]](#footnote-4) |  |  |
| American Indian or Alaska Native | <1% | <1% |
| Asian | 6% | 3% |
| Black or African American | 5% | 4% |
| Hispanic or Latinx | 6% | 2% |
| Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander | <1% | <1% |
| Two or more races | 3% | 2% |
| White | 65% | 52% |
| Unknown | 4% | 31% |
| International | 11% | 6% |

Table 2. Number of respondents by campus[[4]](#footnote-5)

| Campus location | Survey Respondents | Sample  Size | Campus  Response Rate |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Abington | 191 | 2,100 | 9% |
| Altoona | 163 | 1,774 | 9% |
| Beaver | 75 | 747 | 10% |
| Behrend, Erie | 185 | 2,390 | 8% |
| Berks | 134 | 1,448 | 9% |
| Brandywine | 127 | 1,572 | 8% |
| Carlisle, Dickinson Law | 25 | 319 | 8% |
| DuBois | 62 | 677 | 9% |
| Fayette, The Eberly Campus | 77 | 717 | 11% |
| Great Valley | 52 | 537 | 10% |
| Greater Allegheny | 73 | 575 | 13% |
| Harrisburg | 197 | 2,827 | 7% |
| Hazleton | 61 | 836 | 7% |
| Lehigh Valley | 93 | 1,165 | 8% |
| Mont Alto | 87 | 911 | 10% |
| New Kensington | 67 | 676 | 10% |
| Schuylkill | 69 | 768 | 9% |
| Scranton | 100 | 1,148 | 9% |
| Shenango | 35 | 496 | 7% |
| University Park | 579 | 6,570 | 9% |
| Wilkes-Barre | 37 | 495 | 7% |
| York | 73 | 965 | 8% |
| Unknown | 109 | -- | -- |
| Total | **2,562** | **29,713** | **9%** |

## Respondents’ Interactions with Police

Nearly half (46%) of respondents reported having interacted with a Penn State University Police officer at their primary campus in the last two years. Employees more often interacted with police (69%) than did students (34%). Among respondents who had interactions with police, the most common interactions occurred while attending an event where police officers presented (20%) and calling University Police for non-emergency assistance (19%; Table 3).

“[Officers] go out of their way for the students, faculty, and staff, and always present themselves with a smile to let us know that we are safe.”

Table 3. Respondents who reported interacting with Penn State Police:   
Nature of contact(s) - check all that apply

| In what ways have you had direct contact? | Employees | Students | All Respondents |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Called University Police/911 | 4% | 4% | 4% |
| Called University police for non-emergency assistance | 23% | 12% | 19% |
| Victim of a crime | <1% | 1% | 1% |
| Witnessed a crime | 1% | 1% | 1% |
| Interviewed about a crime/incident | 3% | 2% | 3% |
| Received warning/citation | 2% | 7% | 4% |
| Pulled over | 1% | 3% | 2% |
| Arrested | <1% | <1% | <1% |
| Involved in traffic accident | <1% | 1% | 1% |
| Required medical/crisis assistance | 1% | 1% | 1% |
| Requested service/information for myself | 11% | 13% | 11% |
| Request information/presentation for others | 8% | 3% | 6% |
| Attended an event where officers presented | 21% | 20% | 20% |
| Utilized Police service such as Victim Services | <1% | 1% | <1% |
| Officer spoke to me | 11% | 13% | 12% |
| Officer questioned me | 1% | 2% | 1% |
| Other[[5]](#footnote-6) | 13% | 17% | 14% |

Among respondents who had interacted with police, a majority agreed (somewhat or strongly) with the following statements about the employee (Figure 1).

* Knowledge was sufficient (89%)
* Was able to refer me to the appropriate resources (85%)
* Handled issue in a timely manner (86%)
* Handled issue with professionalism (87%)

In general, employees were slightly more positive in their perceptions of Police than students (Figure 2).

Figure 1. Respondents’ interactions with University Police officers and staff

Figure 2. Comparison of percentage of employees’ and   
students’ perceptions of University Police employees

## Campus Safety

Among all respondents, 82% agreed (somewhat or strongly) with the statement, “I feel comfortable contacting University Police for assistance” and 85% agreed that “I feel a sense of safety on my campus.” Women and men, nonminority respondents, and heterosexual respondents more often agreed with these statements than their transgender, nonbinary, or genderfluid; minority; and lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB) counterparts (Figures 3—9).

Figure 3. Sense of Safety and Comfort Contacting Police

Figure 4. Comfortable contacting University Police for assistance – by gender

Figure 5. Comfortable contacting University Police for assistance – by minority status

Figure 6. Feel comfortable contacting University Police for assistance – by LGB status

Figure 7. Feel a sense of safety on my campus – by gender

Figure 8. Feel a sense of safety on my campus – by minority status

Figure 9. Feel a sense of safety on my campus – by LGB status

Among all respondents, 15% indicated that there were places on campus that they felt unsafe. The most commonly reported unsafe spaces (Table 4) were anywhere at night (22%), parking garages and decks (17%), and parking lots (15%). Specific building locations noted were most often at University Park and included outside of Willard and Katz Bldgs., the library stacks, Old Main lawn, Innovation Park, Hammond, Nittany Apartment, Hort Wood Childcare parking area, tennis courts near East Halls and crossing E. Park Ave. General locations included drunk gatherings, fraternity houses, and dark areas. Respondents’ primary safety and security concerns (Table 5) were crimes against people such as an active attacker, assault, hate crimes, and robbery (20%).

“Sometimes lights aren’t working properly, and nobody is around when I arrive at work.”

“There is no police/safety presence on campus after 11pm.”

Table 4. Respondents who reported feeling unsafe:   
Campus locations perceived as unsafe (check all that apply)

| Where do you feel unsafe? | Responses |
| --- | --- |
| Anywhere at night | 22% |
| At a specific location at night | 14% |
| Academic building | 3% |
| Athletic facility | 6% |
| Arts/entertainment facility | 1% |
| Dining area | 1% |
| Library | 2% |
| My office | 1% |
| Parking lot | 15% |
| Parking garage/deck | 17% |
| Residence hall | 2% |
| Student union center/community area | 2% |
| University Park Airport | 1% |
| Walking between locations on campus | 14% |

Table 5. Primary safety and security concerns

| Which are your primary safety concerns (select up to 3)? | Responses |
| --- | --- |
| No concerns | 20% |
| Alcohol violations | 6% |
| Bicycle law violations | 2% |
| Building design | 7% |
| Crimes against people | 20% |
| Crimes against property | 10% |
| Drug violations | 5% |
| Emergency phone access | 4% |
| Landscaping | 2% |
| Outdoor lighting | 9% |
| Pedestrian law violations | 4% |
| Traffic law violations | 7% |
| Other[[6]](#footnote-7) | 4% |

Approximately one in four respondents found officers intimidating, 12% believed them to be biased, and 6% believed that they violated citizens’ rights (Figure 10). Overall, however, respondents’ perceptions of police officers were very positive. A substantial majority of respondents agreed (somewhat or strongly) with a series of positive statements about University Police officers (Figure 11). A substantial majority (87%) of respondents agreed (somewhat or strongly) that University Police offers were respectful to “people like me.” Transgender, minority respondents and LGB respondents, however, agreed at a lower rate than their majority counterparts (Figures 12—16).

Figure 10. Respondents’ negative perceptions of University Police officers

Figure 11. Respondents’ positive perceptions of University Police officers

Figure 12. University Police officers are respectful to people like me - by gender

Figure 13. University Police officers are respectful to people like me – by minority status

Figure 14. University Police officers are respectful to people like me - by LGB status

Figure 15. University Police officers are respectful to people like me - by international status

Figure 16. University Police officers are respectful to people like me - by disability status

A majority of respondents indicated that they had not personally (95%) nor did they know of anyone (83%) who had experienced being stopped, pulled over, watched or questioned by University Police when they had done nothing wrong. While comparable proportions of minority and non-minority respondents reported having had a similar type of experience (Figure 17), a greater proportion of minority respondents than non-minority respondents knew of someone who such an experience (21% compared to 15%; Figure 18).

Figure 17. I have been stopped, pulled over, watched or questioned by University Police when I had done nothing wrong

Figure 18. I know someone that has been stopped, pulled over, watched or questioned by University Police when they had done nothing wrong

Among all respondents, only one to two percent reported feeling targeted due to their gender, race/ethnicity, LGBQ status or disability (Figure 19). Minorities, disabled, and transgender individuals particularly, however, more often felt targeted due to their identity (Figure 20). Twenty-seven percent of transgender respondents reported rarely (18%), sometimes (5%), or often (5%) having felt targeted by University Police due to their gender identity.

Figure 19. Frequency with which respondents felt targeted by police due to group membership

Figure 20. Percentage of potentially marginalized groups that rarely, sometimes, or often   
felt targeted by University Policy due to their group status

## Awareness of Campus Safety Services

A set of survey questions asked respondents about the PSU Alert system and Timely Warnings. These are two different things:

* The PSU Alert system is the emergency notification system used to alert registered members of Penn State’s campus communities of ongoing emergencies, campus closings and other urgent information sent via email and text message.
* Timely Warnings are notifications that go out via email and text to the University community to alert of a potential or ongoing threat or incident. For example, if a crime occurs, and police have not yet apprehended a suspect, a Timely Warning may be issued to notify the campus community. The Timely Warning is intended to inform the community so that members can protect themselves from becoming victims of similar incidents.

A majority (71%) of respondents were aware of the emergency public phones (“blue-light” phones) located on campus, but of these only one percent indicated having used them. Despite this, 76% of respondents believe that the phones are an essential part of campus security.

Eighty-six percent of respondents were signed up for the PSU Alert emergency system. Of these, 88% agreed (somewhat or strongly) that the alerts were useful and 45% agreed that they had changed plans due to an alert. Still, 12% indicated that they do not typically pay attention to the Alerts (Figure 21). Reasons given for not signing up for PSU Alerts included not knowing about them, not wanting to receive them, not using a cell phone, alerts not being relevant, and not feeling that the Alerts were useful. A small number of respondents referred to specific situations in their community (e.g., an active shooter) that were not communicated via the Alerts when they felt that they should have been.

Roughly two-thirds (68%) of respondents indicated that were familiar with the University’s Timely Warnings prior to taking the survey. Of these, 78% found the Warnings useful, 35% had changed plans due to a Warning, and 16% indicated that don’t pay attention to Warnings (Figure 22).

Figure 21. Perceptions of the PSU Alert system   
(only respondents that indicated they were signed up for the alerts)

Figure 22. Perceptions of Timely Warnings   
(only respondents that indicated they were familiar with Timely Warnings)

## Overall Police Performance and Respondent Recommendations

Overall, respondents had a very positive perception of UPPS, with 90% rating performance as good or very good. Compared to law enforcement nationally, half of all respondents felt that University Police were more trustworthy, and 48% felt that they were comparable in terms of trustworthiness.

90% of respondents rated UPPS as “Good” or “Very Good” overall

Nearly one-third (31%) of all respondents offered comments related to their perceptions of University Police. These comments were analyzed using an emergent coding approach to identify common themes (Figure 23). Two-thirds (67%) of these comments focused on the professionalism, friendliness, trustworthiness, and usefulness of campus officers or on University Police as better than other police.

“All of the police officers I’ve interacted with over the years have been absolutely wonderful. They are always caring and compassionate people who have gone above and beyond to help others.”

“I feel more secure knowing they are here.”

“They are trustworthy, and I feel I’d be able to walk up to any of the police officers  
 on campus and ask for help.…”

Many respondents indicated that they had no interaction with police upon which to form any perceptions and some respondents observed that officers were not very visible or available on their campus. Some respondents felt that the police focused on the trivial (e.g., parking and alcohol violations) and not enough on what they viewed as more serious crimes. Other respondents felt that police were intimidating, dangerous or untrustworthy, and some saw UPPS as under-resourced at their campus.

Figure 23. Thematic analysis of respondents’ comments   
on their perceptions and opinions of University Police

A diagram for Figure 23. Thematic analysis of respondents’ comments on their perceptions and opinions of University Police. Several areas/types of perceptions are indicated by size as follows.
Helpful, trustworthy, friendly, effective: By far the largest areas, taking up approximately 66% of the diagram.
Compared to other police: Approximately 7% of the total area; divided into Better, Same, and Worse (with worse being the smallest, and Better and Same being the same size).
Not visible enough: Approximately 7% of the total area.
Focused on the trivial: Approximately 7% of the total area.
Not professional/trustworthy: Approximately 3% of the total area.
Other (see below): Approximately 1.5% of the total area.
Under resourced: Approximately 1.5% of the total area.
Biased: Approximately 1.5% of the total area.
Intimidating or dangerous: Approximately 1.5% of the total area.
Under-trained: Approximately 1.5% of the total area.
Generally bad: Approximately 1.5% of the total area.


\*Other comments included not being vigilant enough in terms of enforcement, slow to respond, not diverse, and constrained in their ability to do their jobs.

“They don’t seem like they worry about our safety and well-being, but instead just do what they have to do and catch people with drugs and alcohol.”

“I do wish they would patrol on foot at night, especially for those walking back late and [and] for females to feel safe.”

“…I wish they were a bit more visible on campus. I feel that if I could at least recognize one by sight, then I would feel better about going to them…”

The most commonly attended University Police programming reported by respondents was educational programming (48%; Table 6). In terms of additional or increased programming, respondents were most interested in self-defense (14%) and active attacker response/education (12%; Table 7). Students and employees had similar preferences regarding programming. In terms of improvement, respondents most wanted to see a more visible police presence on campus (21%) and increased diversity among police officers (18%; Table 8).

Table 6. Police programming attended by respondents

| Which types of University Police sponsored programming have you attended? Select all that apply. | Responses |
| --- | --- |
| Educational program | 48% |
| Ride along | 1% |
| Table event / general safety information distribution | 19% |
| Social event hosted by police officers | 29% |
| Other[[7]](#footnote-8) | 3% |

Table 7. Programming respondents would most like to see

| Type of programming | Employees | Students | All Respondents |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| None – no additional programming needed | 6% | 8% | 7% |
| Alcohol abuse education | 5% | 4% | 4% |
| Active attacker response/education | 13% | 11% | 12% |
| Bike safety | 3% | 2% | 2% |
| Driving safety | 3% | 4% | 4% |
| Drug abuse education | 5% | 4% | 4% |
| Civilians’ rights education | 9% | 10% | 10% |
| Pennsylvania law education | 7% | 9% | 8% |
| Pedestrian safety | 5% | 3% | 4% |
| Personal safety | 10% | 8% | 9% |
| Scam awareness/education | 8% | 7% | 7% |
| Self-defense | 12% | 15% | 14% |
| Sexual assault education | 8% | 9% | 8% |
| Theft awareness/education | 6% | 6% | 6% |
| Other[[8]](#footnote-9) | 1% | 1% | 1% |

Table 8. Recommendations to improve University Police

| Type of programming | Responses |
| --- | --- |
| Alternate patrols (foot, bike, etc.) | 10% |
| Hire more officers | 10% |
| Increase bicycle traffic enforcement | 4% |
| Increase crime prevention/educational presentations | 6% |
| Increase diversity among police officers | 11% |
| Increase engagement with the community | 16% |
| Increase pedestrian traffic enforcement | 4% |
| Increase vehicle traffic enforcement | 6% |
| Be more personable/approachable | 10% |
| Have a more visible presence on campus | 18% |
| Other[[9]](#footnote-10) | 5% |

## Additional Respondent Demographics

Table 9. Sexual identity

| Sexual identity[[10]](#footnote-11) | Survey Respondents |
| --- | --- |
| Straight/heterosexual | 91% |
| Lesbian | 1% |
| Gay | 1% |
| Bisexual | 4% |
| Asexual/not sexual | 1% |
| Questioning/not sure | 1% |
| Other | 1% |

Table 10. Disabled as defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act

| Disability status[[11]](#footnote-12) | Survey Respondents |
| --- | --- |
| Disabled | 6% |
| Not disabled | 90% |
| Not sure | 4% |

Table 11. Years affiliated with Penn State in all capacities (student and employee)

| Years[[12]](#footnote-13) | Survey Respondents |
| --- | --- |
| 0—5 years | 72% |
| 6—10 years | 8% |
| 11—15 years | 6% |
| 16—20 years | 6% |
| 21 or more years | 7% |

1. Abington, Altoona, Beaver, Behrend, Berks, Brandywine, Carlisle, DuBois, Fayette, Great Valley, Greater Allegheny, Harrisburg, Lehigh Valley, Mont Alto, New Kensington, Schuylkill, Scranton, Shenango, University Park, Wilkes-Barre, and York [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Gender identity is limited to male or female in University records. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. These categories replicate those used in Penn State’s Fact Book, https://factbook.psu.edu/Factbook/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Because of the large disparity in campus sizes, campuses were not proportionately sampled. For more information about the sampling design, contact PAIR. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. The most common types of other interactions were related to parking/parking permits and interactions as part of work. Other types of interactions included: officer escorts or checking in with individuals alone in buildings, coordinating events, lost items, locked buildings, casual conversation, gun lockers, requests for investigations, wellness checks, fire alarms, car trouble, picking up deposit bags, and reporting or questioning about a person of concern. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Other concerns included unavailability of police after hours, event traffic, parking issues, pedestrian safety, hazing and other forms of bullying/peer pressure, open spaces and buildings as a target for active shooters, motorized vehicles on sidewalks, not being taken seriously when a crime occurs, unsafe older buildings, phishing, snow/ice hazards, fear of police, careless driving, phishing, smoking violations, and rights to bear arms for self-protection. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Other reported events mostly fell into the educational program category and included active shooter training, Clery Act training, Citizens’ Police Academy, guest lecturers in class, informal and work-related meetings, student orientations, residence hall meetings, and various meet-and-greet activities. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Other types of programming included active attacker, campus safety, first aid, police transparency, risk management, self-defense, and sexual assault. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Other recommendations included increasing police visibility, officers or police resources, increasing or decreasing parking enforcement, increasing officer training, increasing interaction with the community, increasing enforcement of various laws/policies, decreasing the police presence, diversifying the force, revising gun policies on campus, spending less time on things like parking and drinking, increasing transparency, adding infrastructure (lighting & emergency phones), and doing more related to preventing sexual assault. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. This information is not available for the population. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. This information is not available for the population. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. This information is not available for the population. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)