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Public-Safety Concerns Among Law Enforcement Agencies in Suburban and Rural America

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Contingency theory argues that the performance of an organization is contingent on how well it fits the context within which it is embedded. This study explores the public-safety concerns of nearly 6,000 law enforcement agencies serving populations less than 50,000. Property offenses, domestic violence, and drugs were the most frequently reported concerns, whereas gangs and violent crimes were often ranked lower. Rankings of public-safety concerns varied across agencies and were affected by population density, violent and property crime, type of agency, department size, and region. Findings suggest that the context in which police organizations are located plays a role in shaping public-safety concerns, which is an important step in broadening our knowledge about the priorities, goals, and behaviors of police organizations.

Keywords: community policing; public safety; crime; small towns; law enforcement

In the early 1990s, some crimes in small-town America appeared to be on the rise (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], 1996b). Reports of car thefts, gangs, muggings, parking lot robberies, and other acts of violence made their way into suburban and rural towns across the country. The perceived increases in crime across the entire country became an issue for both politicians and the media. Many of the federal anti-crime policies forged during the Clinton administration focused on these matters. As President Clinton noted, "The crime rate has hit every American community from our oldest cities to our smallest towns to our newest suburbs" (Clinton, 1993a), and "the crime wave has now reached small towns and rural areas, and we can't leave them out of our solution" (Clinton, 1993b).

As a result of the increased focus on rising crime in the United States, Congress passed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994. The Crime Act represented the largest federal investment in local American criminal justice in history, authorizing $8.8 billion to add 100,000 police officers to the streets, $9.7 billion for prisons, and $6.1 billion for prevention programs (U.S. Department of Justice,

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1994). Most notably, the Crime Act made special provisions for small and rural com-munities.[1] Of the federal monies allocated to law enforcement, half was to be dis-tributed to agencies serving populations less than 150,000 and the other half to agencies serving populations more than 150,000 (U.S. Congress, 1994). As of April 2004, the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) had awarded $2.4 billion to police agencies in jurisdictions with a population less than 50,000 compared to $3.8 billion to jurisdictions serving more than 50,000 people.[2] According to the COPS Office, smaller agencies received funding to hire or redeploy 42,619 police officers compared to 68,050 officers among larger agencies (Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2003).

An underlying assumption behind these federal crime initiatives was that small local law enforcement agencies, and those serving nonurban areas, needed federal funding to augment limited local budgets for preventing and responding to crime and disorder. Although there was anecdotal evidence to suggest that crime in suburban and rural America was a serious problem, little research had been conducted in these areas. This study explores the public-safety concerns expressed by law enforcement agencies serving populations less than 50,000 throughout the United States.[3] It seeks to understand the kinds of problems these agencies view as most important to their communities and to identify some of the factors responsible for shaping these per-ceptions. Most research in criminology and criminal justice had focused on urban areas, rather than the kinds of communities and agencies examined here. This study is an effort to begin closing the knowledge gap so that we can better understand law enforcement needs in smaller cities, towns, and counties (Moody, 2000; Reiss, 1992; Weisheit, Wells, & Falcone, 1995).

Public-Safety Concerns of Police Agencies

Compared to urban departments, far less is known about smaller agencies and departments serving rural and suburban areas (Cordner, 1995; B. Maguire, Faulkner, Mathers, Rowland, & Wozniak, 1991). There are nearly 18,000 publicly funded, full-time, state and local law enforcement agencies in the United States (E. R. Maguire, Snipes, Uchida, & Townsend, 1998; Reaves & Hickman, 2002). Although many offi-cers work for large departments, 75% of the state and local law enforcement agencies employ fewer than 25 sworn officers (Reaves & Hickman, 2002). Unfortunately, past research in both criminology and policing has typically ignored these agencies (Crank, 1990; Weisheit et al., 1995). Weisheit et al. (1995) began a review of crime and policing in small-town America with the following comment: "To describe the volume of literature on rural crime and rural policing as scant would be too generous" (p.1). Moody (2000) described the research on crime in rural areas as "politically naive, methodologically simplistic, and philosophically unengaged" (p. 15).

Even when nonurban police agencies are acknowledged in publications, these departments are either treated as comparable to large departments or ascribed a

lower status than their urban counterparts. For example, Patrick Murphy (Murphy & Plate, 1977), former police commissioner in several large U.S. cities, argues

> A great many American communities are policed by a farcical little collection of untrained individuals who are really nothing more than guards. These genuinely small departments (fewer than 25 sworn officers), to begin with, tend not to have much of a franchise by and large; with small territory and limited clientele, they do not face much of a crime problem. (pp. 71-72)

Proponents of police agency consolidation, a cause that generated substantial attention in the early 1970s, shared Murphy's view. However, the limited research examining the effects of agency size showed that bigger did not necessarily mean better when it came to delivery of police services (Ostrom, 1973; Whitaker, 1983).

Reiss (1992) argued that most scholarly studies of the police focus disproportionately on "large metropolitan police departments from the Eastern region of the United States" (p. 54). As a result, some scholars suggested that research on American policing tends to suffer from an urban bias (Crank, 1990; Weisheit et al., 1995). Moody (2000) describes criminology's focus on urban areas as a case of rural neglect. Dingwall and Moody (1999) lament the myopia that leads criminologists to focus on the mean streets to the exclusion of the green fields. In summary, there is no shortage of evidence that the academic study of criminology and criminal justice tends to ignore, or at least downplay, the importance of studying police and public safety in small-town and rural America.

Weisheit, Falcone, and Wells (1996) conducted one of the most comprehensive studies of rural crime and policing. They examined rural and small-town police needs by surveying members from the executive board of the National Sheriffs Association, municipal police chiefs, and sheriffs. Using a stratified random sample of agencies in nonmetropolitan counties across the United States, they received 267 usable surveys (a response rate of 47%). Respondents were asked to rank priorities from a list of 22 areas of concern, including crime, crime-related issues, and organizational challenges. The respondents were also asked to choose the five areas they deemed most important and then rank those areas using a five-point ordinal scale. There were two major findings from this study. First, the top two areas of concern were drugs and domestic violence (60% of the sample ranked drugs as the top concern and 58% ranked domestic violence as their main concern). This finding is important because the top two issues represented broader social problems rather than specific aspects of police operations. Second, none of the areas were universally ranked as the highest priority. Although drugs and domestic violence were the most commonly mentioned top priorities, approximately 40% of the respondents did not rank these as their most prominent concern. The findings of this study suggest that although there are some reasonably consistent patterns in the public-safety problems faced by nonurban police agencies in the United States, there is also significant variation

across jurisdictions. Research is just now beginning to describe variation in public-safety priorities across agencies; almost nothing is known about the factors that explain that variation.

Some research has begun to shed light on the importance of organizational context—the environments in which police organizations are situated—in understanding variation across nonurban police agencies. E. R. Maguire, Kuhns, Uchida, and Cox (1997) explored the impact of several contextual features on the adoption of community policing in thousands of small and nonurban police departments throughout the United States. They found substantial variation in patterns of community policing across agency size and region, with larger and western agencies adopting more community policing practices. Recent research has also discovered that the effects of federal community policing grants (through the COPS) on crime also vary by context. For example, Zhao and his colleagues (Zhao, Scheider & Thurman, 2002; Zhao & Thurman, 2001) found that COPS hiring grants generated significant crime reductions in cities with populations more than 10,000 but not in cities with populations ranging from 1,000 to 10,000.[4] Worrall and Zhao (2003) found strong regional influences in their examination of the effects of federal funding on the adoption of community policing. All of these studies highlight the importance of contextual variables, such as department size and region, in understanding variations across police organizations.

Contingency Theory and Police Organizational Context

Some researchers have turned to organization theory as a framework for understanding variation across police organizations (Langworthy, 1986; E. R. Maguire, 2003). Although organization theory represents a diverse array of intellectual perspectives and examines many types of organizations, one of the most enduring questions is how the context of an organization influences its structure and behavior. The principal theory underlying most research on the relationship between organizations and their context is contingency theory (Langworthy, 1986; E. R. Maguire, 2003). At its core, contingency theory argues that the performance of an organization is contingent on how well it fits the context within which it is embedded. This simple proposition has led to more than three decades of research on the relationship between various features of organizations and their environments. One of the principal questions within this body of research is whether the context or environment of an organization constrains or influences its behaviors, practices, structures, goals, and priorities. According to E. R. Maguire (2003),

> the environment consists of all that is external to an organization. Funding agencies, raw materials, clients, potential employees, the media, politicians, rumors, legislation, and employee unions all reside in an organization's environment. Since the birth of the open systems perspective, organizational scholars have tried to deconstruct, measure, simplify, and otherwise come to grips with the enormity of the environmental construct. (p. 26)

The discovery of the importance of organizational environments was a significant achievement in the study of organizations, but conquering their overall complexity remains one of the greatest challenges in scholarship on organizations in general and police organizations in particular.

This study examines the relationship between the public-safety concerns expressed by local law enforcement agencies in small communities and the contexts in which these agencies are embedded. A number of contextual influences may be important to examine, including jurisdictional characteristics, local crime patterns, the nature of the agency, and the region in which it is located. Within each of these conceptual constellations is a series of more specific variables. Unfortunately, although it is possible to conceive of an infinite number of contextual influences that might affect public-safety concerns, measures were only available in this study for some of the important dimensions. Outlined later are some important sources of contextual influence that merit scholarly attention in studies of police organizations in small-town America. Although this study is able to draw some inferences about the effects of specific contextual features on the public-safety concerns expressed by police agencies, it cannot draw sweeping conclusions about the role of context overall.

Population Density

The phrase *small town* is often associated with rural areas that are sparsely populated. When discussing small towns, it is important to remember that small towns can be urban, suburban, or rural areas (Cordner, 1995). In addition,

> they can be adjacent to, within commuting distance of, or far removed from central cities. The towns themselves can be more or less densely populated (some towns are so spread out that they resemble rural areas, whereas others are as compact as city neighborhoods) and they can vary widely in terms of land use, demographics, etc. (pp. 3-4)

Any attempt to understand contextual influences should account for the distribution of the population within the jurisdiction. The density-pathology hypothesis suggests that communities with greater population densities suffer from increased pathologies including crime and other risks to public safety (Choldin, 1978; Milgram, 1970). In this study, we include a measure of population density as a crude indicator of urbanization, thereby enabling us to test whether density influences the public-safety concerns of police officials in smaller jurisdictions.

Reported Crime Rates

Common sense suggests that actual crime should influence perceptions of public-safety concerns, particularly in smaller jurisdictions where crime is an important priority. However, we are unaware of any studies that have examined the impact of local crime trends on shaping public-safety perceptions among small-town police leaders.

Therefore, we used measures of reported violent and property crime from the Uniform Crime Reports (FBI, 1995, 1996b, 1999) to examine the extent to which locally reported crime shapes perceptions of public-safety problems.

Type of Agency

Different types of law enforcement agencies often have very different roles. Falcone and Wells (1996), for instance, highlighted important cultural and structural differences between sheriffs' agencies and other forms of police organizations. County sheriffs are often responsible for policing unincorporated rural areas. In such areas, they may be expected to provide a wider range of services because traditional social service agencies are either nonexistent or more remote than in incorporated or less rural areas traditionally served by local police agencies (Weisheit et al., 1995). Similarly, Native American tribal police often face very different challenges than municipal police departments and sheriffs. Arrest rates on Indian reservations are twice as high as those of the overall population (Peak & Spencer, 1987); and arrests for alcohol-related offenses, for example, are often higher for Native Americans than for other racial groups (Greenfield & Smith, 1999). Including a measure of agency type will help us capture these various forms of unobserved heterogeneity.

Agency Size

The number of sworn police officers can affect public-safety concerns in a number of different ways. First, smaller law enforcement agencies may be easily overwhelmed due to a lack of manpower. Under this premise, any increase in a type of crime or public-safety issue can quickly develop into a significant resource concern. As an example, domestic violence has traditionally been an offense that law enforcement agencies tried to handle informally. However, evolving mandates have forced police to become more directly involved in these crimes (McEwen, 1995). This increased involvement can create additional manpower and training needs for many departments with few officers and limited training resources and scheduling flexibility. Second, Flanagan (1985) found that citizens from smaller communities preferred that police perform a wider variety of functions, whereas those from larger jurisdictions preferred that police restrict their activities to enforcement of criminal laws. To the extent that public opinion influences police practices, one might expect law enforcement agencies in smaller communities to have different public-safety priorities than larger departments. The community-policing era may also serve to expand these expectations, particularly in smaller jurisdictions where officers serve many functions. In this study, we include two measures to account for the size of the official crime control and public-safety apparatus within each community: absolute size and relative size. Absolute size is simply the number of full-time sworn officers in the police agency. Relative size is represented by the number of citizens per full-time sworn officers (B. Maguire et al., 1998). It might also be useful to include a

measure of the population within each community, but agency size and population are too highly correlated to isolate their relative effects (Langworthy, 1986; E. R. Maguire, 2003).

Region

Social scientists have identified strong and persistent regional differences in a variety of social phenomena, including attitudes, crime and violence, culture, politics, and religion (Abramson & Carter, 1986; Glenn & Simmons, 1967; Loftin & Hill, 1974; Weakliem & Biggert, 1999). Similarly, research on American police organizations has found consistent regional variations in structure, behavior, and innovation (Maguire & Uchida, 2000). Public-safety concerns among law enforcement agencies are likely to vary by region as well. One reason we might expect to find regional variations in public-safety concerns is that there are consistent regional variations in reported crime. For instance, in 1995 (the year in which the data were collected), the violent crime rate in the United States was highest in the West, followed by the South, the Northeast, and the Midwest respectively. Property crime rates were also highest in the West, followed by the South, the Midwest, and the Northeast (FBI, 1996b, p. 9). Regional crime rate patterns also change over time. For example, 2002 violent and property crime rates were higher in the South, followed by the West, Midwest, and Northeast (FBI, 2003, p. 12), although the general pattern of lower crime rates among smaller cities and towns continued (FBI, 2003, p. 209). To the extent that regional crime patterns might influence public-safety concerns in communities within the region, separate and apart from crime within the community itself, we might expect to find regional differences. Regional variations in culture, police unionization, the proportion of elected sheriffs, and politics might also produce regional effects. To detect these regional effects, we include measures of region in our models.

Data and Methods

Data for this study were obtained from the COPS Office, a component of the U.S. Department of Justice that is responsible for distributing federal community policing grants to police agencies throughout the United States and its territories. COPS collected data from at least 12,950 separate police agencies that submitted proposals for a number of community policing grant programs. The data used here were derived from applications to a police hiring program called FAST (Funding Accelerated for Small Towns). The grant application provided the applicants with a list of fifteen public-safety concerns and asked the agencies to rank order the concerns within their respective jurisdictions.

Sample

Of the nearly 6,000 FAST applications received, 5,791 (97%) contained data of sufficient quality for inclusion in this study. The majority of the surveys were from local police departments (4,774 surveys or 82%), followed by sheriff's offices (923 or 16%) and Native American tribal law enforcement agencies (94 or 2%).[5] The number of sworn police officers working at the sample agencies ranged from one part-time officer to 409 full-time officers, with a mean of 16.6 officers and a median of 9.5 officers.[6] These agencies served populations ranging from 106 citizens to 49,949 citizens (with a mean of 11,199 and a median of 6,389).

Because of the nature of the data collection effort, the data used in this research are not assumed to be representative of all law enforcement agencies serving populations less than 50,000 in the United States. The agencies represented in this study include those that have provided either evidence of or a desire to practice community policing and applied for federal grants to initiate or enhance those activities. Agencies completing this application may have perceived some incentive (e.g., federal grant dollars) to exaggerate their public-safety problems. Therefore, it is possible that the reported results may suffer from two inherent biases: (a) Results may be based on a sample of agencies that claim to practice community policing activities, and (b) respondents may have exaggerated their public-safety problems to obtain federal grant monies. However, some external evidence suggests that these potential biases may be very limited.

A 1995 U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) study looked at crime rates of all the police agencies that were eligible for the FAST program and examined the reasons why some agencies did not apply for the grants. The study found that approximately 49% of all eligible agencies in the United States applied for the FAST program and that agencies applying for FAST had higher crime rates than nonapplicant agencies. The GAO study has some implications regarding the external validity of this study. First, the COPS made it clear that a large number of agencies would receive FAST grants and that grant decisions would not be based on reported public-safety concerns. Second, the GAO study found that agencies chose not to apply for a FAST grant-based primarily on financial considerations, not due to crime or public-safety concerns.[7] Finally, the sample included here is one of the largest samples of small police agencies ever examined. Most policing scholars are content to study several hundred police agencies. Our sample contains nearly 6,000 departments, representing about half of the agencies in the entire population of small police departments in America.

Measuring Public-Safety Concerns

COPS developed a list of 15 public-safety concerns for the FAST application.[8] The questionnaire requested that respondents rank order their primary concerns from

the most to least important. The items listed on the questionnaire included the following:

1. Violent crimes against persons
2. Property crimes
3. Vandalism
4. Gangs
5. Weapons
6. Drug crimes
7. Domestic violence
8. Alcohol-related crime, including DWI
9. Disorderly conduct
10. Traffic violations
11. Agricultural crimes
12. Wildlife crimes
13. Hate crimes
14. Motor vehicle theft
15. Prostitution

These items were originally ordered so that the highest ranked concern was given a rank of *1*, the second most pressing concern a rank of *2*, and so on. For analytical purposes, we reverse coded the ranks for each public-safety concern so that the highest number represents the greatest concern (e.g., the most significant problem was coded as a *15*, the second most significant concern was coded as a *14*, etc.). The questionnaire instructions asked agencies to rank only those public-safety issues that were a concern within their local communities. Therefore, items that were left blank were assigned a 0. This interpretation seems reasonable given the application instructions. Furthermore, there was no expectation that all of the listed public-safety concerns were local problems for all responding jurisdictions.

Findings

The data used in this study are useful for expanding our knowledge of public-safety issues in small police agencies and determining whether the concerns expressed by representatives of these agencies are consistent with the broader perceptions that small-town and rural police agencies do address serious public-safety problems. In addition, we explore the independent effects of a series of contextual influences on public-safety concerns. We begin by providing a summary of the public-safety concerns expressed by the respondents. Next, we explore the bivariate effects of a number of contextual influences on public-safety concerns. Finally, we examine the stability of those effects in a series of multivariate models.

Table 1
Summary of Public-Safety Concern Rankings

Public-Safety Concern	#1 Rankings		Mean Rankings	Agencies Not Ranking This Concern	
	%	N		%	N
Property crimes	32	1,822	12.6	2	132
Domestic violence	11	612	11.6	3	175
Drug offenses	17	973	10.9	6	332
Alcohol offenses	8	48	10.6	5	284
Vandalism	3	196	10.2	5	315
Violent crimes	16	896	9.5	12	718
Traffic offenses	7	403	8.3	10	600
Disorderly conduct	1	66	7.9	12	675
Weapons	1	43	6.6	19	1,086
Motor vehicle theft	1	27	6.4	18	1,016
Gangs	2	113	5.2	28	1,637
Hate crimes	0	1	2.2	44	2,531
Prostitution	0	2	1.8	49	2,857
Wildlife crimes	0	2	1.7	49	2,814
Agricultural crimes	0	3	1.6	51	2,929

Summary of Public-Safety Concerns in Small Towns

We begin by summarizing the public-safety concerns of all 5,791 police agencies in the full sample. The first column in Table 1 lists the number of agencies selecting each public-safety issue as its number one concern. The primary public-safety concerns listed by agencies serving populations less than 50,000 were property offenses (32%), drug-related crimes (17%), violent crimes (16%), and domestic violence (11%). Less than 1% of the sample considered motor vehicle thefts, prostitution, hate crimes, agricultural crimes, weapons, and wildlife crimes to be their top concerns.

Although property crimes, drug-related crimes, and domestic violence were most often considered the top public-safety issue, the order of important safety issues differed when looking at the average ranking for individual items. The second column in Table 1 presents the average ranking for each public-safety concern. Average rankings were calculated by summing the values for each category and dividing by the number of respondents: the higher the average ranking, the more important the concern was for the entire sample. Property offenses were the primary concern (12.6), followed by domestic violence (11.6), drug-related offenses (10.9), alcohol-related offenses (10.6), and vandalism (10.2). Although gangs and violent crimes against persons are commonly mentioned in the media as major concerns for police

agencies nationwide, violent crimes were ranked sixth (9.5), and gang-related problems were ranked tenth (5.2) within this large sample of small departments.

Another method of considering public-safety concerns is to examine which concerns were essentially unranked or deemed unimportant. The third column in Table 1 provides the percentage of agencies that did not consider each concern to be a local problem. Only 2% or 3% of the sample did not believe that property offenses and domestic violence were a concern within their jurisdictions. Of special interest was the percentage of agencies that were not concerned with violent crimes and gang problems. Twelve percent of the agencies (or 718 departments) did not believe violent crimes were a problem and, 28% (1,637 departments) indicated that gangs were not a pressing local issue. Violent crimes and gangs were also unranked for a higher percentage of departments than vandalism (5%), traffic problems (10%), and disorderly conduct (12%).[9]

Bivariate Relationships

There are compelling reasons to believe that public-safety concerns will fluctuate across various population categories, across different types of law enforcement agencies, among departments of different sizes, and across various regions of the country. Local crime patterns should also have some impact on such perceptions. Previous studies have determined that some of these contextual factors influence policing practices as well (B. Maguire et al., 1998; Worrall & Zhao, 2003; Zhao & Thurman, 2001; Zhao et al., 2002).

Population Density

We first examined whether population density had an impact on the public-safety rankings. Nonparametric correlations (Kendall's tau-b) suggested that density had some influence on all of the public-safety rankings except prostitution and disorderly conduct. Although all of the other tests were statistically significant, none were particularly strong (ranging from .020 to –.220). Nevertheless, population density did have some effect on the rankings.

Type of Agency

Comparisons across department type were based on the premise that the responsibilities of local police agencies differ in some ways from county sheriffs and Native American tribal law enforcement agencies. Each type of department serves populations with different needs and expectations. Furthermore, sheriffs are elected officials and may be more influenced by the concerns of their constituents (citizens, local politicians, and business owners) than by local crime problems or other factors.

Table 2 presents the mean rankings for each category of public-safety concern across the three department types.[10] Analysis of variance tests were used to examine

Table 2
Mean Public-Safety Concern Rankings by Type of Agency (ANOVA)

Public-Safety Concern	Overall Mean	Police ($n = 4,774$)	Sheriffs ($n = 923$)	Tribal ($n = 94$)	F Value
Property crimes	12.6	12.6	13.3	10.2	12.8*
Domestic violence	11.6	11.6	11.8	11.9	10.3
Drug offense	10.9	10.7	11.9	8.7	102.1*
Alcohol offenses	10.6	10.5	10.8	12.4	11.8*
Vandalism	10.2	10.3	9.8	9.5	68.2*
Violent crimes	9.5	9.3	10.3	10.2	15.6*
Traffic offenses	8.3	8.6	6.7	7.5	35.1*
Disorderly conduct	7.9	8.0	6.9	9.9	33.2*
Weapons	6.6	6.6	6.6	7.0	40.3*
Motor vehicle theft	6.4	6.4	6.2	5.9	13.0*
Gangs	5.2	5.3	4.5	5.9	164.5*
Hate crimes	2.2	2.2	2.0	2.7	9.4*
Prostitution	1.8	1.7	1.8	1.7	.42
Wildlife crimes	1.7	1.4	3.1	3.4	1.3*
Agricultural crimes	1.6	1.2	3.5	1.7	14.4*

*$p < .01$.

significant differences between the three agency types.[11] Of the 15 crime categories, only 2 were not significantly different across all three types of agencies: domestic violence and prostitution. Domestic violence was a primary concern for a high number of law enforcement officials regardless of department type, whereas, prostitution was a low priority for all three agency types.

Independent samples *t* tests were also used to assess differences between pairs of department types. Local police departments had significantly greater vandalism, traffic offense, and motor vehicle theft concerns than sheriffs and tribal agencies. Sheriffs reported higher concerns with property crime, drug offense, and violent crime. Tribal agencies reported greater concerns with alcohol-related crimes, disorderly conduct, weapons, and wildlife crimes. Perhaps the most interesting observation was that concerns for violent crimes were significantly lower for police departments (which generally serve cities and towns) than for sheriffs and tribal agencies.

Agency Size

Public-safety concerns should also vary with the size of the police agency. Public-safety concerns among the larger agencies in this sample may be different than those of the smallest of these smaller agencies. For example, the smallest agencies may need to deal with different types of crimes, such as agricultural and wildlife crimes, whereas larger agencies may be more concerned with violent crime, gangs, and

Table 3
Mean Public-Safety Concern Ranks by Departmental Size (ANOVA)

Public-Safety Concern	Overall Mean	5 or Less (n = 1,812)	6 to 10 (n = 1,265)	11 to 20 (n = 1,197)	21 to 40 (n = 890)	More than 40 (n = 588)	F Value
Property crimes	12.6	11.9	12.7	13.1	13.2	12.9	43.1*
Domestic violence	11.6	11.7	11.7	11.8	11.5	10.9	9.2
Drug offenses	10.9	10.3	10.9	11.1	11.1	11.4	14.8*
Alcohol offenses	10.6	11.1	10.9	10.6	9.9	8.9	56.1*
Vandalism	10.2	10.4	10.4	10.2	10.0	9.2	13.9*
Violent crimes	9.5	8.1	9.4	9.9	10.7	11.7	98.7*
Traffic offenses	8.3	9.3	8.2	7.9	7.7	6.7	56.1*
Disorderly conduct	7.9	8.4	8.0	7.9	7.5	7.0	18.5*
Weapons	6.6	5.8	6.6	6.7	7.1	7.9	41.7*
Motor vehicle theft	6.4	6.2	6.3	6.4	6.6	6.7	3.7*
Gangs	5.2	4.2	5.0	5.5	6.1	6.8	55.9*
Hate crimes	2.2	1.9	2.1	2.2	2.3	2.9	19.1*
Prostitution	1.8	1.7	1.8	1.7	1.9	1.8	1.7
Wildlife crimes	1.7	2.0	1.9	1.6	1.3	1.0	37.7*
Agricultural crimes	1.6	1.9	1.7	1.5	1.2	0.9	30.5*

*$p < .01$

drugs and other crimes that coincide with population growth. Table 3 presents the 15 mean public-safety concerns across department size categories. Differences in public-safety concerns for various sizes of smaller police agencies were assessed by recoding the number of sworn police officers into five categories: *5 or fewer sworn officers*, *6 to 10 officers*, *11 to 20 officers*, *21 to 40 officers*, and *more than 40 officers*.[12]

Three discernable patterns were evident. First, more serious crime issues become more of a concern as department size increases (drug offenses, violent crimes, weapons offenses, motor vehicle thefts, gangs, and hate crimes). Second, some less serious issues become less of a concern as department size increases (alcohol-related offenses, vandalism, traffic offenses, disorderly conduct, wildlife crimes, and agricultural crimes). Third, linear patterns were less apparent for some public-safety concerns (property crimes, domestic violence, and prostitution).

Among the top four offenses—property, domestic violence, drugs, and violent crimes against persons—domestic violence was a major concern for a large proportion of agencies regardless of size. However, departments with more than 40 officers ranked domestic violence as a lower priority than violent crimes, drug offenses, and property crimes, whereas for all of the smaller agency categories, domestic violence was the second highest ranking priority.

Drug offenses were also a major concern for most departments but an even greater concern for larger departments. Concern for violence suggested a similar but

Table 4
Mean Public-Safety Concern Ranks by Region
of the United States (ANOVA)

Public-Safety Concern	Overall Mean	Northeast ($n = 1,072$)	South ($n = 2,085$)	Midwest ($n = 1,900$)	West ($n = 734$)	F Value
Property crimes	12.6	12.9	12.4	12.8	12.3	12.8*
Domestic violence	11.6	11.9	11.4	11.8	11.5	10.3*
Drug offenses	10.9	9.9	11.9	10.2	10.8	102.1*
Alcohol offenses	10.6	10.4	10.3	10.9	10.6	11.8*
Vandalism	10.2	10.7	9.4	10.8	10.0	68.2*
Violent crimes	9.5	9.1	9.6	9.2	10.5	15.6*
Traffic offenses	8.3	8.8	7.7	8.0	7.2	35.1*
Disorderly conduct	7.9	8.8	7.7	8.0	7.2	33.2*
Weapons	6.6	5.6	7.2	6.3	6.8	40.3*
Motor vehicle theft	6.4	6.9	6.4	6.0	6.6	13.0*
Gangs	5.2	3.4	4.8	5.6	7.8	164.5*
Hate crimes	2.2	2.4	2.1	2.0	2.4	9.4*
Prostitution	1.8	1.8	1.9	1.5	1.8	9.8*
Wildlife crimes	1.7	1.6	1.7	1.7	1.8	1.3
Agricultural crimes	1.6	1.2	1.7	1.7	1.7	14.3*

*$p < .01$

more dramatic pattern. Specifically, violent crimes were generally not a primary concern for the smallest departments (less than 5 sworn officers), however, concern for violent crimes increased greatly as department size increased. For the largest departments in the sample (more than 40 sworn officers), violent crimes were the second highest public-safety concern behind only property crimes.

Region

Table 4 examines the 15 mean public-safety concern rankings across the four regions of the United States (Northeast, South, Midwest, and West) as defined by the Uniform Crime Reports (FBI, 1995, 1996b, 1999). Significant differences were evident within all categories with the exception of wildlife crimes.[13] Property crimes, domestic violence, traffic offenses, hate crimes, and disorderly conduct were ranked as higher concerns in the Northeast relative to other regions of the United States. Drug offenses, prostitution, and weapons were more of a concern in the South than in the Northeast, the Midwest, and the West. Alcohol offenses plagued Midwestern towns and counties more than other towns and counties across the country. Finally, violent crimes, gangs, hate crimes (which were comparable to the Northeast), and agricultural crimes were more pressing concerns in the West relative to other regions across the country.

Reported Crime Rates

Public-safety concerns are likely to be influenced by many factors, but the most salient should be recent crime within the jurisdiction. To assess the consistency between public-safety concerns and actual reported crime, we merged data from the Uniform Crime Reports (FBI, 1995, 1996b, 1999) with the COPS data. Reported regional crime trends are also examined more closely and compared with the overall regional perceptions of public-safety concerns.

The COPS public-safety data were collected in late 1994 and early 1995. We chose to examine the effects of property and violent crime rates (number of crimes per 1,000 citizens) from 1993 and 1994. This 2-year time frame is the most likely to have influenced late 1994 and early 1995 perceptions of public safety. To account for year-to-year crime reporting variations, we calculated the average crime rate across these 2 years. Many small law enforcement agencies do not routinely report crime to the FBI, so this subset of analyses was based on smaller, yet still relatively large, samples of agencies. Property crime rates were available for 3,478 of the 5,791 agencies (60%) and violent crime rates were available for 3,365 of the agencies (58%).

Common sense suggests that agencies that rank property crimes as a higher priority would also have higher property crime rates. Similarly, agencies reporting violent crime as a high-priority, public-safety concern should have higher violent crime rates. Kendall's tau-b correlations between average 1993 to 1994 property and violent crime rates and the public-safety concern rankings from 1994 to 1995 are summarized in Table 5.

Some of the findings from this analysis were relatively consistent with expectations, whereas others were rather surprising. First, most of the correlations were statistically significant but very modest in strength, possibly suggesting some inconsistency between public-safety perceptions and actual reported crime. Second, one of the few relationships that was not statistically significant was between the ranking for property crime and reported property crime rates. We view this as an important finding, and we will discuss it in more detail later. In contrast, some agencies that reported violent crimes as a higher priority did have higher violent crime rates. Third, drug offenses, weapons, and gang concerns were all positively correlated with both reported property and violent crime rates. Domestic violence, alcohol offenses, and vandalism were all inversely correlated with both property and violent crime rates. In other words, the agencies that prioritized these types of concerns were not the ones with the highest violent and property crime rates. Finally, as might be expected, the public-safety concerns that were selected the least—including hate crimes, wildlife crimes, and agricultural crimes—were inversely related to property and violent crime rates. In summary, agencies that reported higher property and violent crime rates were also concerned with drug offenses, weapons, and gangs. Agencies that did not report higher violent and property crime rates were mostly concerned with domestic violence, alcohol offenses, and vandalism.

Table 5
Kendall's Tau Correlations—Public-Safety Concerns and
Mean 1993 to 1994 Uniform Crime Reports Crime Rates

Public-Safety Concern	Mean 1994 to 1995 Rankings	Mean Property Crime Rate 1993 to 1994 ($n = 3,478$)	Mean Violent Crime Rate 1993 to 1994 ($n = 3,365$)
Property crimes	12.6	.002	−.099*
Domestic violence	11.6	−.120*	−.080*
Drug offenses	10.9	.049*	.147*
Alcohol offenses	10.6	−.153*	−.170*
Vandalism	10.2	−.097*	−.159*
Violent crimes	9.5	.158*	.175*
Traffic offenses	8.3	−.120*	−.162*
Disorderly conduct	7.9	−.051*	−.060*
Weapons	6.6	.114*	.163*
Motor vehicle theft	6.4	.021	.036*
Gangs	5.2	.178*	.141*
Hate crimes	2.2	.034*	.005
Prostitution	1.8	.014	.036*
Wildlife crimes	1.7	−.141*	−.112*
Agricultural crimes	1.6	−.126*	−.072*

*$p < .01$.

Multivariate Relationships

In the next stage of analyses, we tested the stability of the bivariate relationships in a series of multivariate models. Because the dependent variables were ordinal, we used polytomous logit universal modeling (PLUM or, essentially, ordinal regression) to analyze the impact of the contextual variables on the public-safety concern rankings. We initially reasoned that relying on a 15-level ranked dependent variable may not provide sufficient comparative information because the difference between a rank of 15 and a rank of 14 might be subjective, time sensitive (i.e., a recent violent offense may influence current perceptions), or politically influenced (if local constituents were pressuring the departments to focus resources on specific crimes). In contrast, ranking public-safety concerns as top-tier priorities versus second- or third-tier priorities might prove more useful and the results considerably more robust. As such, we first recoded each department's public-safety concern rankings into just three categories: *top-tier priorities* for those concerns that were ranked within the agency's top five public-safety priorities, *second-tier priorities* for those ranked 6th through 10th; and *third-tier priorities* for those ranked 11th through 15th (or not ranked at all). To further examine the stability of the results using a tiered recoding structure, we also recoded each department's public-safety concern rankings into five categories; *top tier priorities* for those concerns that were ranked within the

agency's top three public-safety priorities, *second tier priorities* for those ranked 4th through 6th, and so on. To ensure that our findings were not an artifact of the coding structure, we estimated three separate models for every dependent variable: one with the original 15 categories, one with 3 categories, and one with 5 categories.

For purposes of consistency, the same independent variables were used in each set of analyses. Specifically, we examined the impact of two factors—type of department (local police, coded as 1; versus sheriff and tribal, coded as 0) and region of the United States (Northeast, 1; South, 2; Midwest, 3; and West, 4). We also examined the effects of the following covariates: (a) population density, based on the size of the population divided by the square miles of jurisdiction reportedly served by the department; (b) average 1993 to 1994 violent crime rates; (c) average 1993 to 1994 property crime rates; (d) absolute agency size (sworn force); and (e) and an inverse measure of relative agency size (the ratio of population to sworn force).[14] The results of the 45 separate ordinal regression analyses (15 dependent variables $\times$ 3 different ranking structures) are summarized in Table 6. Because of space limitations, specific coefficients are not presented but are available on request.

Essentially, all of the PLUM analyses resulted in models that significantly improved on the baseline models judging from the chi-square results (all of the chi-square values are not reported, but the values ranged from 0 to 8,969.5). This finding is not particularly surprising because chi-square statistics are influenced by sample size. Given the number of covariates used and the corresponding high number of zero frequency cells, we view the use of goodness-of-fit statistics as unreliable, and therefore, we do not report that information here. Nevertheless, most of the independent variables had significant but modest influences on public-safety ratings in small towns, cities, and counties. In general, the results were fairly consistent whether we analyzed the original 15-level ranking structure, the 3-tiered ranking structure, or the 5-tiered ranking structure.

Population density was only consistently positively related to gang and motor vehicle theft rankings, was inversely related to vandalism, domestic violence, alcohol crime, traffic offenses, agricultural crime, and wildlife crime rankings but was not significantly related to violent crime, weapons, drug offense, disorderly conduct, prostitution, hate crime, or property crime rankings.

Recall from the bivariate findings of perceptions of local crime concerns were not always highly correlated with actual crime. The PLUM analyses revealed that average violent crime rates were positively related to violent crime, gang, weapons, drug offense, and motor vehicle theft rankings; negatively related to vandalism, alcohol crime, traffic offense, and property crime rankings; and not significantly related to domestic violence, disorderly conduct, agricultural crime, prostitution, wildlife crime, or hate crime rankings. On the other hand, average property crime rates were only positively related to violent crime and property crime rankings, only inversely related to domestic violence and agricultural crime rankings, and were not consistently significantly related to all other public-safety concern rankings.

Table 6
Plum Results Using 3-Level, 5-Level, and 15-Level Ranked Dependent Variables

Dependent Variables	Sworn Officers			Population Density			1993 to 1994 Mean Violent Crime Rate			1993 to 1994 Mean Property Crime Rate			Population per officers			Region of the United States			Local Police vs. Sheriff or Tribal		
	3	5	15	3	5	15	3	5	15	3	5	15	3	5	15	3	5	15	3	5	15
Violence	+	+	+	0	+	0	+	+	+	0	+	+	+	+	+	0	0	−	+	+	+
Vandalism	−	−	−	−	−	−	−	−	−	0	0	0	0	0	0	ss	ss	ss	−	−	−
Gangs	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	0	0	+	0	0	0	−	−	−	−	−	−
Weapons	+	+	+	0	+	0	+	+	+	0	0	0	0	0	0	ss	ss	ss	0	0	0
Drugs	+	+	0	0	0	0	+	+	+	0	−	−	0	0	−	ss	ss	ss	+	+	+
Domestic violence	0	−	−	−	−	−	0	0	0	−	−	−	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Alcohol	−	−	−	0	0	0	−	−	−	0	0	0	0	−	−	0	0	0	0	0	0
Disorderly conduct	−	−	−	0	0	0	0	−	−	0	0	0	0	0	+	+	+	+	−	−	−
Traffic	−	−	−	−	−	−	−	−	−	0	0	0	0	0	0	+	+	+	−	−	−
Agricultural crimes	−	0	0	−	−	−	0	0	0	−	−	0	0	0	+	−	−	−	+	+	+
Prostitution	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	+	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	+
Wildlife crimes	−	−	0	−	−	−	0	−	0	0	0	0	0	0	+	ss	ss	0	+	+	+
Hate crimes	+	+	+	0	0	0	0	−	0	0	0	0	0	0	+	0	−	−	0	−	0
Property crimes	0	0	0	0	0	0	−	−	−	+	+	+	0	0	0	+	+	+	+	+	0
Motor vehicle theft	0	0	+	+	+	+	0	+	+	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

NOTE: + = positive effect; − = negative effect; factor coding structure: region 1 = northeast, 2 = south, 3 = midwest, 4 = west; 0 = insignificant effect; ss = statistically significant, directions vary; department type, 1 = local police, 0 = sheriff or tribal.

Type of agency also had some impact on most of the rankings with weapons, domestic violence, alcohol crimes, prostitution, hate crimes, and motor vehicle thefts as consistent exceptions. Local police department status was positively associated with violent crime, drugs, agricultural crime, wildlife crime, and property crime rankings, whereas vandalism, gang, disorderly conduct, and traffic rankings were inversely related to local police status.

The number of full-time sworn officers was positively related to violent crime, gang, weapons, drug offense, and hate crime rankings and negatively related to vandalism, domestic violence, alcohol crime, disorderly conduct, traffic offense, agricultural crime, and wildlife crime rankings. Size of the department did not appear to influence prostitution, property crime, or motor vehicle theft rankings. Department size tends to increase with population size, and the number of sworn officers was highly correlated with population in this sample, a finding that is consistent with previous research. It appears that as cities or counties increase in size, concerns with violent crimes, gang activity, weapons, drug offenses, and hate crime also tend to increase.

There were some consistent differences across regions for most of the public-safety concern rankings, with the exceptions of domestic violence, alcohol crimes, prostitution, and motor vehicle thefts. Meanwhile, with the sole exceptions of violent and alcohol crimes, relative agency size was not a consistent predictor of any of the public-safety rankings. Our inverse measure of relative agency size (the ratio of population to officers) was positively related to violent crime rankings regardless of the structure of the dependent variable, and inversely related to alcohol crime rankings in two of the three analyses. Considered within the context of the sworn force results, it also appears that perceptions of concerns with violent crime increase as the rate of citizens-to-officers increases.

In summary, population density, the absolute size of the law enforcement agency, violent-crime rates, property crime rates, type of agency, and region of the United States all had some influence in shaping the perceptions of public-safety rankings within this sample of nearly 6,000 small-town and county law enforcement agencies. Relative agency size (measured here inversely as the ratio of citizens-to-officers) did not appear to influence perceptions consistently, with the sole exception of violent crime concerns.

Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine public-safety concerns among law enforcement agencies serving populations less than 50,000. Almost a third of the departments viewed property offenses as their most important challenge. Other major concerns included domestic violence, drug and alcohol offenses, and vandalism. Two problems that are often discussed in the media, violent crimes and gangs, were actually ranked 6th and 11th respectively. However, the vast majority of these smaller

departments do not appear to be concerned primarily with violence and gangs. Although these issues may be important to some of the larger departments in our sample, other issues generated far more attention among small towns and counties.

This study is one of the first to examine variations in public-safety concerns across local police departments, sheriffs, and Native American tribal agencies. The findings suggest that the context in which the agency is located plays an important, although complex, role in shaping public-safety concerns. To the extent that public-safety concerns shape the priorities, the goals, and the character of policing within these agencies, understanding the factors that influence public-safety concerns is an important step in understanding police organizations and how they operate. For instance, previous research has demonstrated that police organizations sometimes implement gang reduction strategies based on false perceptions about the size of the gang problem within the community (Katz, 2001). Other research has demonstrated that the most important factor in explaining why some cities adopt gang units is not always gang violence, rather it is the size of the Hispanic population (Katz, Maguire, & Roncek, 2002). These and other research findings emphasize the importance of unlocking the complex relationships between police organizations and the contexts in which they are embedded. It is within these contexts that police leaders develop public-safety concerns, set departmental priorities, and translate those perceptions and priorities into concrete organizational behaviors and activities.

This article represents an ambitious, but very much preliminary, effort to understand how the contexts in which police organizations are immersed shape their public-safety concerns. Overall, the contextual features we examined played an important role in shaping public-safety priorities. The study was based on one of the largest samples of American police organizations ever amassed in empirical research on police. Therefore the results, even if only partially representative beyond the sample, do apply to a wide swath of American police agencies. Unfortunately, what we gain in breadth, we may lose in depth. Some of the independent variables available to us in the secondary data set were crude proxies for a variety of more specific causal mechanisms. For instance, the regional effects we detected might be attributed to a number of more specific regional differences, such as differences in culture, local government practices, politics, or crime trends. Now that we have identified a robust set of contextual effects, the challenge for researchers is to begin unpacking these effects and parsing them into more specific and conceptually meaningful causal explanations.

One of the most important factors influencing public-safety concerns was absolute agency size (and, therefore, population size), even among the smallest departments. As a town or county grows (and the law enforcement agency grows with it), observers might expect a logical shift in both actual crime and in perceptions of crime. In this study, clear, positive, linear relationships were apparent for property crimes, drug offenses, violent crimes, weapons, motor vehicle thefts, gangs, and even hate crimes. In other words, as agency size increased, there was a perception among law enforcement administrators that these types of crimes were increasingly

problematic. Some of these concerns (gangs and motor vehicle thefts) were also consistently related to population density. On the other hand, clear inverse linear relationships were apparent for alcohol offenses, vandalism, traffic offenses, disorderly conduct, wildlife and agricultural crime, and, to a lesser extent, domestic violence. Stated differently, these challenges remain the primary concerns of the smallest law enforcement agencies, towns, and counties. Again, most of these issues were more pressing in areas of the country that have lower degrees of population density.

Although this study was unable to assess explicit differences between urban, suburban, and rural agencies, it is quite likely that such differences exist. The sample used here included primarily suburban and rural agencies. The FBI historically defined *suburban* areas as those jurisdictions within metropolitan statistical areas with populations less than 50,000, and *nonsuburban* areas (or *rural* areas) as jurisdictions located outside of an metropolitan statistical area (FBI, 1999).[15] Public officials have often issued statements regarding the displacement of urban crime into suburban and rural areas. Although there are case studies and bits of anecdotal evidence to suggest this may be occurring, the true extent of crime displacement to rural areas is unknown. Future research on small-town and county crime should examine urban-to-rural displacement. Proximity to an urban area is also a key contextual variable that we were unable to explore here.

Does Actual Crime Shape Public-Safety Concerns Among Law Enforcement Leaders?

Extensive research in criminology has explored the validity of individual self-reports about crime and arrests. In this article, we relied on representatives from police agencies to provide a different kind of self-report. Here, the individual police leader was attempting to characterize the public-safety problems of the jurisdiction. Yet, a similar validity question arises—to what extent does the individual's self-report represent the reality of actual crime within the jurisdiction? No research, to our knowledge, has explored these kinds of macrolevel self-report questions. Unfortunately, based on the evidence available to us, we can only speculate about these issues at this point.

Our analyses showed that public-safety concerns varied consistently across regions of the country. These variations present an opportunity, albeit imprecise, to explore the consistency between actual crime and self-reported public-safety concerns. In this study, law enforcement departments in the northeast reported generally higher concerns with property crimes, domestic violence, traffic offenses, disorderly conduct, hate crimes (comparable to the West), and motor vehicle thefts. Southern departments reported more concerns with weapons and drugs. Midwest departments ranked alcohol offenses as their highest priority and were also mostly concerned with vandalism. Finally, Western agencies ranked violent crime, gangs, and hate crimes (comparable to the Northeast) higher than the other regions.

Some of these regional perceptions happen to be very consistent with theoretical expectations and actual regional crime variations and some appear to be inconsistent with regional crime patterns. For example, the Northeast is heavily populated, so traffic is an obvious challenge and 1994 arrest rates for disorderly conduct were indeed highest in the Northeast. However, 1994 motor vehicle theft rates were actually lowest in the Northeast. The South has historically relaxed gun control laws. Yet firearms were actually used slightly more often in 1994 murders in the West, although followed closely by the South (FBI, 1995). Arrests for weapons violations were also highest in the West, again followed by the South (FBI, 1995). Furthermore, the West had the highest arrest rates for drug abuse violations that year, followed by the Northeast (FBI, 1995), so the Southern law enforcement perceptions of drug problems may merit closer examination in the future.

The Midwest actually ranked second in alcohol offense arrest rates (following the West), ranked first in liquor law violation arrest rates, but trailed the South and the West in drunkenness arrest rates (FBI, 1995). Western states have historically battled gangs and violence, and 1994 violence arrest rates were higher in the West than the other regions of the country (FBI, 1995). Finally, a quick tabulation of the FBI hate crime statistics for 1995 (1994 data were not available and some states did not report) indicated that the number of reported hate crimes was indeed highest in the West followed by the Northeast. However, relying on these numbers or calculating rates based on such infrequent phenomena is hardly conclusive (FBI, 1996a).

Our multivariate analyses suggested that in areas where violent crime was perceived to be a local concern, violent crime rates were indeed rather high. On the other hand, agencies that ranked property crime as a higher priority did not always report the highest property crime rates. Agencies that ranked drug offenses, weapons, and gangs as higher priorities were often serving jurisdictions with both higher violent and property crime rates. Considered collectively, the various forms of evidence we explored here suggest only a modest relationship between actual reported crime and self-reported public-safety concerns. We view this relationship as a vital area for continuing research. Effective public policy requires that local government leaders have a thorough and accurate understanding of their workload and their crime environment. To the extent that there is some loose-coupling between actual crime and perceptions of crime among local police leaders, police operations may be less efficient and less effective, and communities may suffer needlessly. Contingency theory will offer an incomplete explanation of public-safety priorities if this loose coupling is occurring. Other theories, such institutional theory, may be necessary to achieve a more complete explanation (Mastrofski & Ritti, 2000).

The findings of this study also have implications for federal investment in local policing. The 1994 Crime Act made an enormous amount of federal grant money available for small law enforcement agencies in the United States, perhaps without fully assessing the actual needs of those agencies or the jurisdictions they serve. Should federal crime reduction initiatives allocate so much law enforcement funding

for small agencies when self-reported public-safety concerns, and reported violent and property crime rates both suggest that the problems in large cities still outweigh those in small areas? Perhaps a more detailed study ought to examine suburban and rural public-safety needs prior to, or alongside, the allocation of billions of federal dollars.

Although the data available in this study could be accurately characterized as having greater breadth than depth, the study contributes to the body of knowledge in criminology and criminal justice in at least four specific ways. First, it provides a descriptive snapshot of public-safety concerns in nearly 6,000 American police agencies. This is one of the largest samples of police organizations ever examined. Second, the findings underscore the importance of context in shaping police organizations. Third, the findings provide a clear roadmap for researchers seeking to understand how public-safety concerns and police priorities develop as well as how they shape actual police practices and organizational behaviors. Finally, the descriptive findings contribute to an ongoing debate about how the federal government ought to invest scarce crime reduction resources to local jurisdictions. The data used in this study, although limited in some respects, provide a number of useful insights for theory, research, and public policy.

Notes

1. This provision was the culmination of a political compromise in which elected officials from states with numerous small communities promised support for the bill if their states would receive an equal share of the funding (Gest, 2001). Evaluation research later concluded that most of these federal initiatives failed to concentrate crime-prevention funding in places with the most crime (Sherman, 1997).

2. Although the Crime Act used a population threshold of 150,000 for dividing up federal funding, the data used in this study come from the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services's Funding Accelerated for Smaller Towns (FAST) program, an initial grant program for departments serving populations less than 50,000.

3. Studies of small police agencies use different terminology to describe the departments and the populations they serve. Rural agencies, small agencies, departments serving small populations, and nonurban agencies are often different from one another (Weisheit, Wells & Falcone, 1995). We are sensitive to the fact that our sample is comprised of agencies with marked variation in operations, approaches, clientele, and workload. However, taken together, these agencies are also distinctively different from the large, urban, metropolitan police agencies that are frequently the focus of police research (Reiss, 1992).

4. For a critique of this study as well as a reply by the authors, see Ekstrom (2003). In addition, Muhlhausen (2004) found different results with some of the same data.

5. There were other types of agencies that completed the FAST survey (county police = 5, constables = 3, and marshals = 15). However, these agencies were omitted from the study because of the small number of respondents.

6. Exploratory analyses suggested that the one agency with 409 officers was a potential outlier. However, there were other agencies that had only one part-time officer or deputy. All of these agencies were included in the analyses.

7. Agencies were required to provide a 25% local match and had to promise to retain their police officers.

8. This data collection occurred well before September 11, 2001. Therefore, the impact of 9/11 for small-town public-safety perceptions is not discussed here.

9. Although the percentage of agencies leaving violent crime and disorderly conduct unranked were close, fewer departments left disorderly conduct unranked.

10. For some of our bivariate comparisons, the public-safety concern rankings were treated as underlying interval-level variables. However, we also tested the stability of those relationships using nonparametric tests. Later, we use ordinal regression techniques to assess the multivariate relationships.

11. Kruskal-Wallis one-way ANOVA tests were statistically significant for all of the public-safety rankings except weapons, hate crimes, motor vehicle thefts, and prostitution.

12. Nonparametric correlations (Kendall's tau-b) were also examined between the number of full-time officers and the public-safety concerns rankings. With the exception of prostitution, size of the department was statistically significantly related to all of the public-safety concern rankings at the .001 level. Department size was positively related to violent crime, gang, weapon, hate crime, property crime, and motor-vehicle theft rankings and inversely related to the other public-safety concern rankings.

13. Kruskal-Wallis tests were also statistically significant for all comparisons except wildlife crimes.

14. Using both population and sworn force created collinearity concerns. Because we had two indirect measures of population (density and population-per-officers), we dropped the population variable and used sworn force. Furthermore, some dependent variable rankings were evenly distributed (gangs, weapons, disorderly conduct, traffic, motor vehicle theft), some had more responses in higher categories (*violence*, *vandalism*, *drugs*, *domestic violence*, *alcohol*, *property crimes*), and some had more responses in lower categories (*agricultural crimes*, *wildlife crimes*, *hate crimes*). Therefore, we used logit, complementary log-log, and negative log-log link functions respectively. For more information on using these separate link functions for data that are distributed differently, see Norušis (2006).

15. The FBI recently changed some of these designations based on updated census analyses (FBI, 2003).

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