

Evaluation of Police and Youth Programs

Description of the Police and Youth Programs

The *Police and Youth Programs* (PYP) is a project funded by the State of Connecticut Office of Policy and Management (OPM) in coordination with the State of Connecticut's Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee (JJAC). The project provides opportunities for youth and police to work together to benefit their community with the goals of (1) promoting positive youth development and (2) increasing the number of police officers who are experienced with and comfortable interacting with youth in non-enforcement activities. The State of Connecticut Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee funded PYP's in twenty-two communities for three 12-month funding cycles during the period of July 1, 2011 through June 30, 2014. This funding opportunity was available to the entire state of Connecticut, and the applicant agencies were local government agencies, such as police departments or youth service bureaus.

Funded programs were expected to target youth between 12 and 18 years of age. All of the programs included activities designed to appeal to youth along with a "community service project." The typical program included an early team-building component for the officers and youth, a series of activities/events that were enjoyable for both groups and provided opportunities for police and youth to interact, a joint community service project that benefited the community or individuals in the community other than youth aged 12 to 18, and a concluding recognition event.

Overview of the PYP Evaluation

An evaluation of the PYP was conducted by the Center for Applied Research in Human Development (CARHD) at the University of Connecticut. The CARHD provides assistance to state and community-based agencies in the development, delivery, and evaluation of human service programs. The PYP was evaluated by a study that employed a quasi-experimental, pre/post survey, research design. The evaluation focused on whether and to what degree participation in the program had an impact on the opinions and attitudes that police and youth had towards one another. Lastly, the evaluation surveyed both youths' and police officers' levels of satisfaction with the program.

Sample

The sample for the program evaluation consisted of 357 youth and 110 police officers.

Youth Participants. The average age of youth participants was 14.8 years (Range: 11 to 19 years). There were more boys in the program (55%) than girls (45%). Slightly over 66% of the youth participants were Caucasian with the remainder of the sample being comprised of Black youth (14%), Latino/Hispanic youth (7%), Multiracial youth (7%), and Asian youth (2%). A small percentage of youth (less than 3%) described themselves as falling into an "other" category. Just over 35% of the youth qualified for "free or reduced meals" at their schools. This serves as a crude indicator of the socio-economic standing of the families of the youth involved in the program.

Police Participants. The police officers participating in the program were predominantly male (81%) and Caucasian (86%). The remaining percentages of police officers participating in the program were Latino/Hispanic (7%) and African American (5%). On average, police officers had been in their role for just over 10 years with a range of 2 to 26 years.

Measures

Youth attitudes towards police. Youth attitudes towards police were measured with a scale that was modified from scales used by Fine et al. (2003) and Webb and Marshall (1995). The scale consisted of 14 items that asked youth to evaluate each statement about police from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Sample items include: “Police officers help keep my neighborhood safe,” “Police officers play an important role in stopping crime,” and “I generally have positive interactions with police officers.” The internal reliability coefficient (alpha) was .88 in the pre-test and .88 in the post-test.

Youth prior experiences with police officers. Youth were asked about whether or not they had prior experiences with police officers prior to participating in the program. Only 30% of the sample indicated that they had “No” prior experiences or interactions with police officers prior to participation in the program. Of those who had prior experiences or interactions with police officers, the overwhelming majority of these youth indicated that these experiences were “positive” in nature (81%). The remaining 19% of the youth reported prior negative experiences with the police.

Police attitudes towards youth. Police attitudes toward young people and, in particular, their expectations of youths’ behaviors and intentions, were measured using a 10-item scale previously developed by the CARHD (Center for Applied Research in Human Development, 2008). Similar to the youth participants, police officers were asked to evaluate the degree to which they agreed with the 10 statements about youth on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Sample items include: “Young people are positive assets to my community,” “Young people are hardworking,” and “Teenagers who make mistakes deserve a second chance.” An overall score was calculated for each participant by averaging across the 10 items. Higher score suggested more positive attitudes toward youth. The internal reliability coefficient (alpha) for this scale was .82 in the pre-test and .89 in the post-test.

Police and youth satisfaction questions. Police and youth participants were asked to complete eight open-ended and Likert-scale questions on the post-test surveys regarding their satisfaction with the program. Participants were asked to report how often they attended the program and how they would rate the program overall. In addition, they were asked what their favorite part of the program was and what could be done to improve the program. Finally, they were asked whether the community service project was a good way for the police and youth to interact, their favorite and least favorite part of the community service project.

Results of the Evaluation

Police Attitudes toward Youth

The question of whether or not involvement with the program had an impact on police participants’ attitudes towards youth was explored via a repeated-measures ANOVA. This analysis supports the conclusion that police attitudes towards youth statistically significantly increased as a result of their participation in the program [$F(1, 106) = 26.77, p < .001$].

Additional repeated-measures analyses using demographic variables as between-subjects factors were conducted to examine whether various subgroups of police were more or less likely to report greater levels of change following program completion. The demographic

variables included gender, ethnicity, and number of years as a police officer. No significant interaction effects were found on any of these variables.

Conclusion: Police officers' attitudes towards youth increased as a result of their involvement with the program AND none of these changes were impacted by the gender, race/ethnicity, or number of years of service of the police officers.

Youth Attitudes toward Police

The question of whether or not involvement with the program had an impact on youth participants' attitudes towards police was explored via a repeated-measures ANOVA. This analysis supports the conclusion that youth attitudes towards police statistically significantly increased over time [$F(1, 353) = 31.44, p < .001$]. In other words, youth who completed the program reported an increase in positive attitudes toward police.

Additional repeated-measures analyses using various youth variables as between-subjects factors were conducted to examine whether various subgroups of youth were more or less likely to report greater levels of change following program completion. The variables explored in these analyses included gender, age, free or reduced lunch status, ethnicity and prior positive or negative experiences with police.

No significant interaction effects were found for gender, age, and free or reduced lunch status. This means that youth attitudes towards the police increased in similarly positive ways for males and females, for younger and older youth, and for youth irrespective of their family's socio-economic standing.

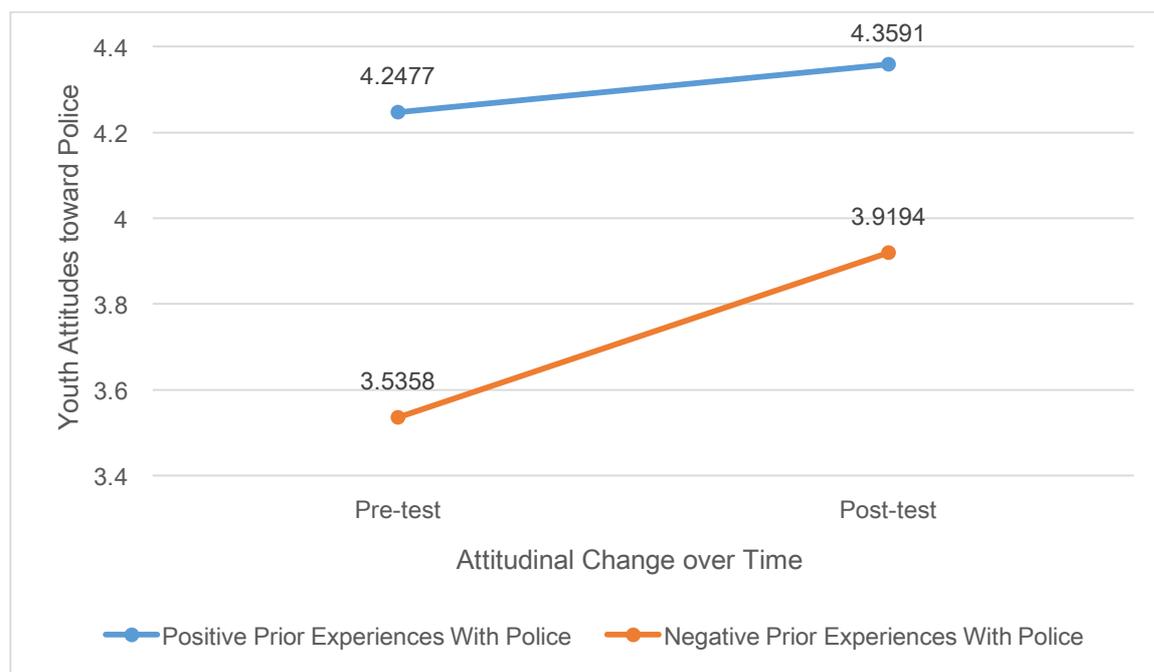
Significant interactions effects were found for prior experiences with police and ethnicity. These additional analyses are summarized as follows:

Youth Prior Positive or Negative Experiences With Police. The goal for this analysis was to explore whether participation in the program had a differential impact on youths' attitudes towards police for those youth who had prior positive or negative experiences with the police. For these analyses whether or not youth had past positive or negative experiences with police was the between-subjects factor and change from pre-test to post-test (over time) was the within-subjects factor. Results indicated a statistically significant main effect for prior experiences on youth attitudes toward police, [$F(1, 351) = 36.31, p < .001$]. An analysis of the mean attitude scores for youth in both "prior experience groups" suggests that youth with prior negative experiences with the police began the program and ended the program with less favorable attitudes towards the police when compared to youth who had prior positive experiences with the police.

However, this main effect was qualified by a significant interaction between past experiences with police and time in the program [$F(2, 351) = 3.80, p < .05$]. An analysis of the breakdown of the attitude scores for youth in each of these subgroups suggests that both the positive and negative groups show increases over time in their attitude scores. The fact that the interaction term is statistically significant means, at the same time, that the rate of changes in these scores differs for the youth in each of these groups. Specifically, the rate of change over time in youth attitudes towards the police is greater for the youth who had prior negative experiences with the police. In other words, youth participants who had previous positive

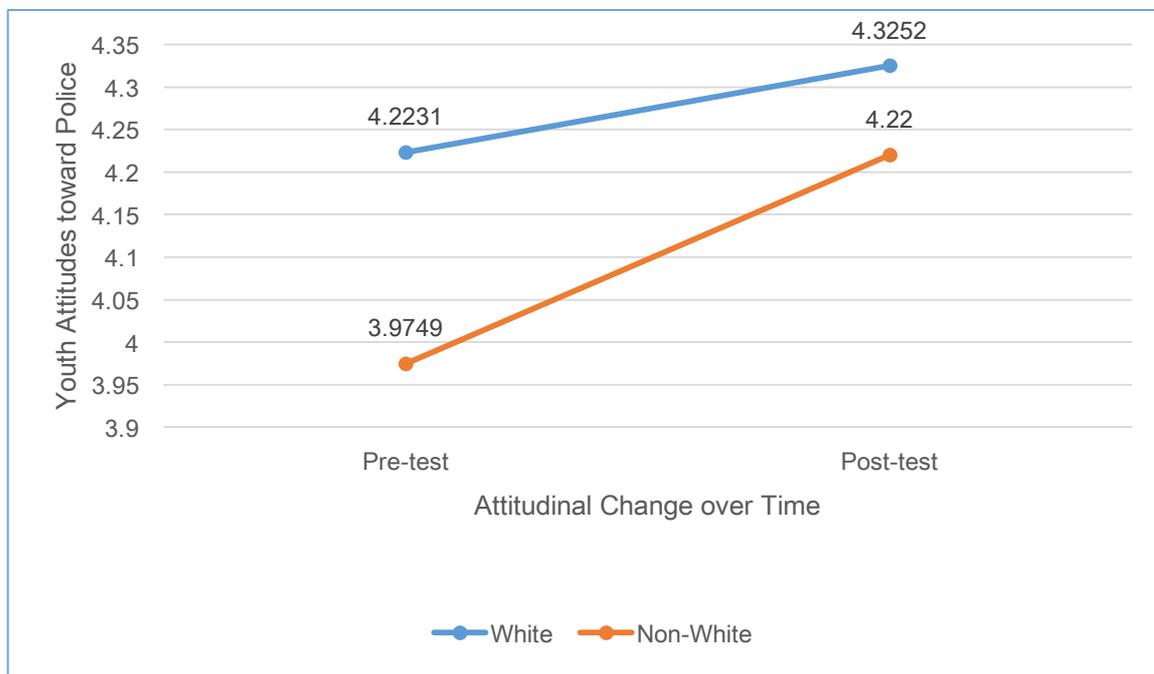
experiences with police were more likely to begin the program with positive attitudes toward police than those who had negative experiences with police. Improvements in youth attitudes for both positive and negative groups were significant. However, the attitudinal changes of youth participants who had past negative experiences with police were significantly greater than those who had positive experiences.

Youth Changes In Attitudes Broken Down by Prior Experiences With Police



Ethnicity. The goal for these analyses was to explore whether the program was experienced differently for youth of different races and ethnicities. Specifically, for these analyses, Ethnicity (White or non-White) was the between-subjects factor and change from pre-test to post-test (over time) on youth attitudes towards police was the within-subjects factor. Results indicated a significant main effect on changes in youth attitudes toward police for ethnicity, [$F(1, 348) = 36.88, p < .001$]. Also, the main effect was qualified by a significant interaction between ethnicity and time on attitudinal changes, [$F(1, 348) = 6.25, p < .05$]. An analysis of the breakdown of the attitude scores for youth in each of the ethnic subgroups suggests that non-White youth participants were more likely to begin and end the program with less positive attitudes toward police than White youth participants. The fact that the interaction term was statistically significant means, however, that the rate of change in attitudes towards the police was greater for the non-White youth participants.

Youth Changes In Attitudes Broken Down by Race/Ethnicity



Conclusions from the Program Evaluation

Both the police officers and youth involved in the program experienced positive changes in their attitudes towards one another after their participation in the program. Because non-White youth and youth with prior negative experiences with the police began the program with less favorable attitudes towards the police than White youth and those who had more positive previous experiences with the police, we did explore whether it was the case that non-White youth were more likely to have prior negative experiences and more likely to experience the greatest shifts in attitudes towards police as a result of participation in the program. None of these interaction terms were statistically significant. This leads us to conclude that (1) youth with prior negative experiences with the police and non-White youth begin and end the program with somewhat less favorable attitudes towards the police than their counterparts; (2) all youth, including youth with prior negative experiences with the police and non-White youth, held more favorable attitudes towards the police as a result of their participation in the program; AND (3) the attitudes held by youth towards the police changed at a greater rate as a result of their participation in the program for both non-White youth and those who had prior negative experiences with the police.

Participants Satisfaction with the Program

Among all the youth who answered the questions about their program experience, 96% indicated that the program was excellent or good. Among police participants who answered this question, 96% indicated the program was excellent or good.

Overall participants reported very high satisfaction with the program. The majority of the open-ended responses demonstrated that the youth greatly enjoyed seeing the police officers out of uniform and getting to know them on a friendly, informal basis. The officers also reported that they enjoyed interacting with the kids and seeing them be enthusiastic about the activities and relationship-building. Many police officers communicated that one of the highlights of the program was seeing how excited the youth were to spend time with them, which in turn made it fun for the officers to be with the youth.

Additionally, participants provided feedback about how the program might improve in the future. The most frequent suggestion was to provide even more opportunities for police and youth to interact.