Community Perspectives on Policing

A summary of a study conducted by East Hawai'i Cultural Center and University of Hawai'i at Hilo

Context
In the mid-1900s, the building that East Hawai'i Cultural Center (EHCC) currently inhabits housed the Hawai'i Police Department (HPD). With this rich history, EHCC was interested in understanding the impacts of policing in East Hawai'i, as well as how the local community feels towards law enforcement. So, EHCC contacted University of Hawai'i at Hilo (UH Hilo) faculty to initiate a study on this topic.

Why Does This Matter?
Rooted in EHCC’s belief in acknowledging difficult untold stories from the past, this project recognizes and shares diverse experiences to foster understanding and a sense of justice. By utilizing EHCC’s rich history, it seeks to explore community–police relations and guide future directions for the East Hawai'i community.

Study Methods
UH Hilo criminology students created and carried out interview-surveys with 250 residents in East Hawai'i. These community members were diverse: they ranged from 18–95 years old, and were of varying economic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. To ensure well-rounded data, law enforcement personnel were also included.

Key Findings
- Over two-thirds of respondents (69%) reported feeling safe or very safe while out in the East Hawai'i community alone during the day. This sense of safety dropped to roughly one-third (36%) while out alone at night.
  - Women generally felt less safe than men while alone at all times of day.
- Roughly half of surveyed individuals (49%) do not believe that the Hawai'i Police Department treats all people fairly.
  - Women (55%) are more likely than men (43%) to believe that HPD treats people unfairly.
- Fewer than one in three people (28%) believe that the Hawai'i Police Department makes efforts to develop relationships with the community. Thus, a common recommendation for HPD was to do more community engagement and develop connections.
- Roughly half of respondents (48%) report being satisfied or very satisfied with police services in East Hawai'i.
- Despite feelings of unfairness or lack of connection, most (78.5%) who interacted with the police in the past five years found their interaction to be fair and equitable, and their personal stories of police were generally positive. This hints at the possible impacts of negative national media attention and local anecdotes on people’s perceptions.

Demographics of Survey Respondents

Race
(Respondents selected all that applied)

Age

Greatest Safety Issues According to East Hawai'i Community Members

- Property Crime, Theft, Robbery: 17.0%
- Drugs: 35%
- Abductions, Kidnapping: 2%
- Sex Trafficking: 3.3%
- Police Issues: 11.25%
- Violence: 4.3%
- Mental Illness: 5%
- Homelessness: 9.5%

For more information, scan here or visit:
easthawaiipolicingstudy.com
**Community Desired Improvements**

- **HPD needs** better training, learn to be more approachable, more friendly, less bias... and empathetic.
- If they had more resources to deal with people struggling with mental health or drug addiction, that would be great.
- **We often hear about crimes in Hilo, but don’t hear about how the police handled it.**
- They need more education on broken, dysfunctional families, so that they can deal more with [their] heart [on] how to handle [situations] with [the] understanding that not everyone is a criminal, some people are just broken or traumatized.
- The police department could improve by hiring and training problem solvers to be on call with a responding officer to deescalate non-violent situations.

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