

## FEATURES

# Can Citizen Police Academies Influence Citizens' Beliefs and Perceptions?

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Citizen police academies (CPAs) are now frequently seen in law enforcement agencies throughout America. Recent surveys report that as many as 45 percent of police departments offer some form of citizen police academy.

Why have CPAs become so popular? In theory, they provide police officers with an opportunity to involve citizens in law enforcement efforts. This opportunity, in turn, offers potential benefits.

First, it is thought that CPAs give citizens a working knowledge of a police department's mission, operation, policies, personnel, and challenges. As a result, citizens become more familiar with the day-to-day operations of their police department and the actual role of the police.

Second, these academies are thought to afford opportunities for people to interact positively with police, compared with the way many people experience police contact. Unfortunately, the only contact most people have with police officers is during a traffic stop, which usually results in a traffic citation. Thus, the only contact is negative. Citizen police academies are a form of proactive law enforcement, a situation in which citizens can interact with and learn about police officers under positive circumstances.

Third, it is believed that CPAs help to develop a relationship of trust and cooperation between the police and citizens. Other researchers and law enforcement administrators have suggested that CPAs help to dispel suspicions and misconceptions that people have about the police. They are thought to humanize citizens' impression of officers and to help the public realize how tough it really is to police a locality. In theory, participation in an academy gives participants insight into police work that the general public rarely obtains.

So, CPAs are a means by which police can improve relations and interactions with the community. Are they effective at accomplishing this goal? The answer, to date, has been "We're not sure." Despite the popularity of these academies, little research has been done to determine the extent to which they influence citizens' beliefs and perceptions of the police. Results of a 2004 survey conducted by the Center for Government at Auburn University-Montgomery, however, provide a better understanding of the effectiveness of academies.

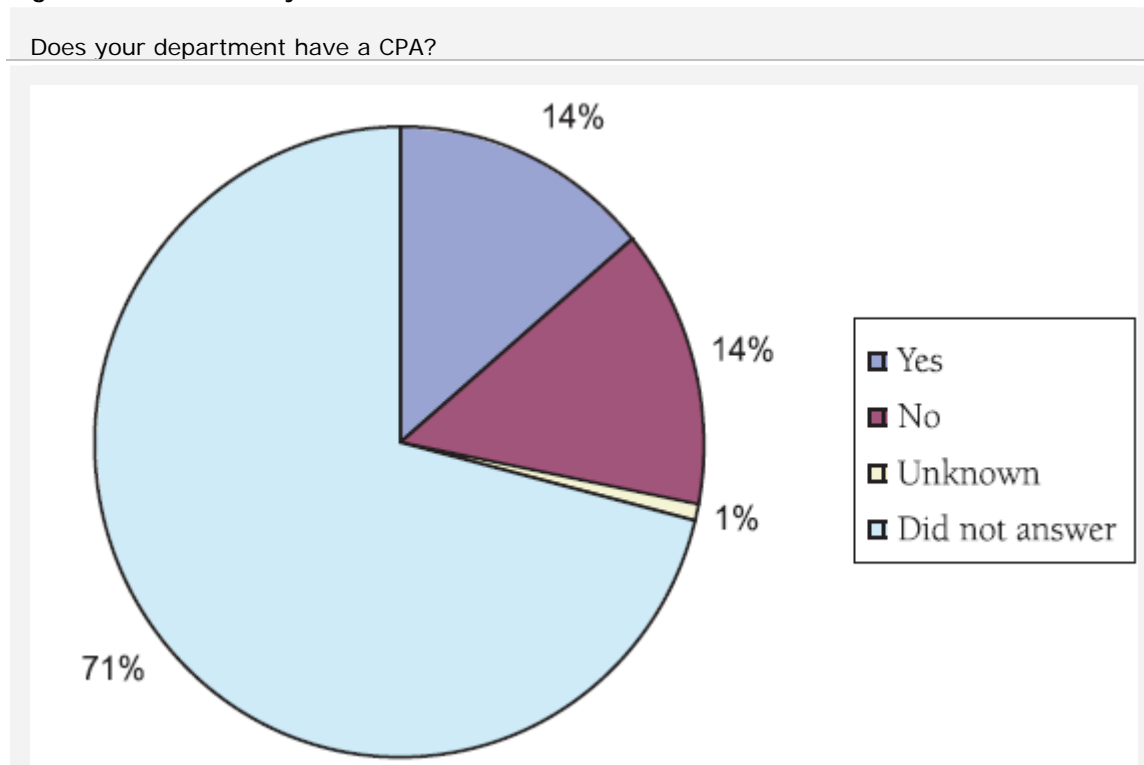
## Citizen Survey

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The Center for Government and Public Affairs recently performed a telephone survey of residents of the commonwealth of Virginia on their perceptions of police services. A total of 659 Virginia residents completed the telephone survey.

One area of investigation concerned citizen police academies. First, residents were asked if their police department included a CPA (see Figure 1). Approximately 14 percent responded yes, 14 percent no, and 71 percent that they didn't know.

**Figure 1. CPA Availability**



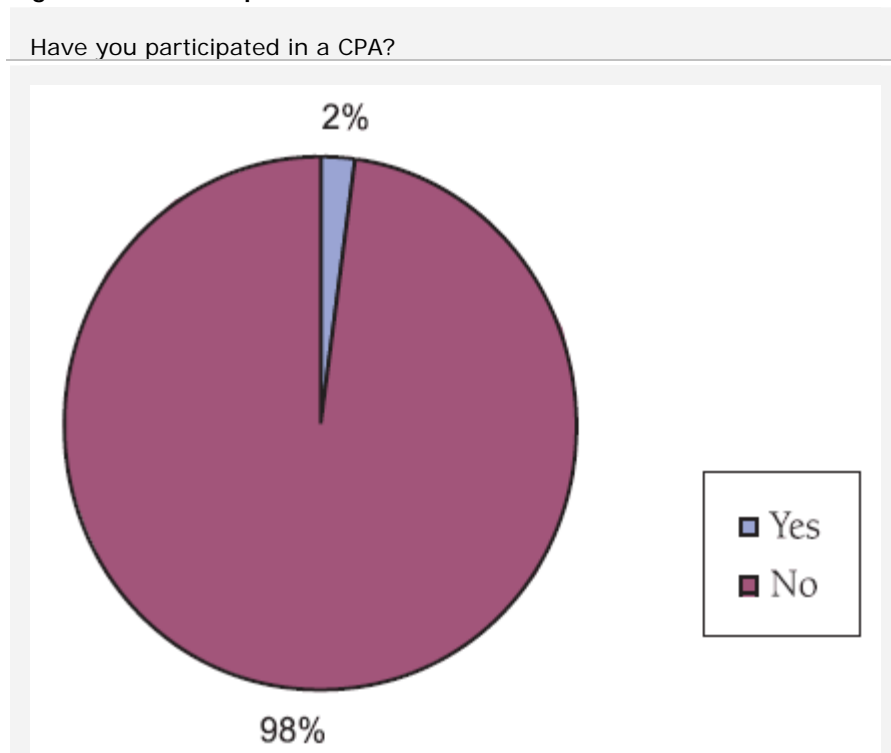
At first glance, it seems strange that only 14 percent of citizens responded affirmatively to this question, when previous surveys indicate that about 45 percent of departments provide CPAs. However, this result may indicate a disconnect between police departments and citizens, rather than conflicting data.

Citizen police academies are a form of proactive law enforcement, a situation in which citizens can interact with and learn about police officers under positive circumstances.

It is possible that more departments offer a CPA but that the citizens are uninformed about the program. This possible disconnect is a potential area to target to improve a CPA's effectiveness. Certainly, police departments would get a higher return on their investment if public awareness of the program were increased.

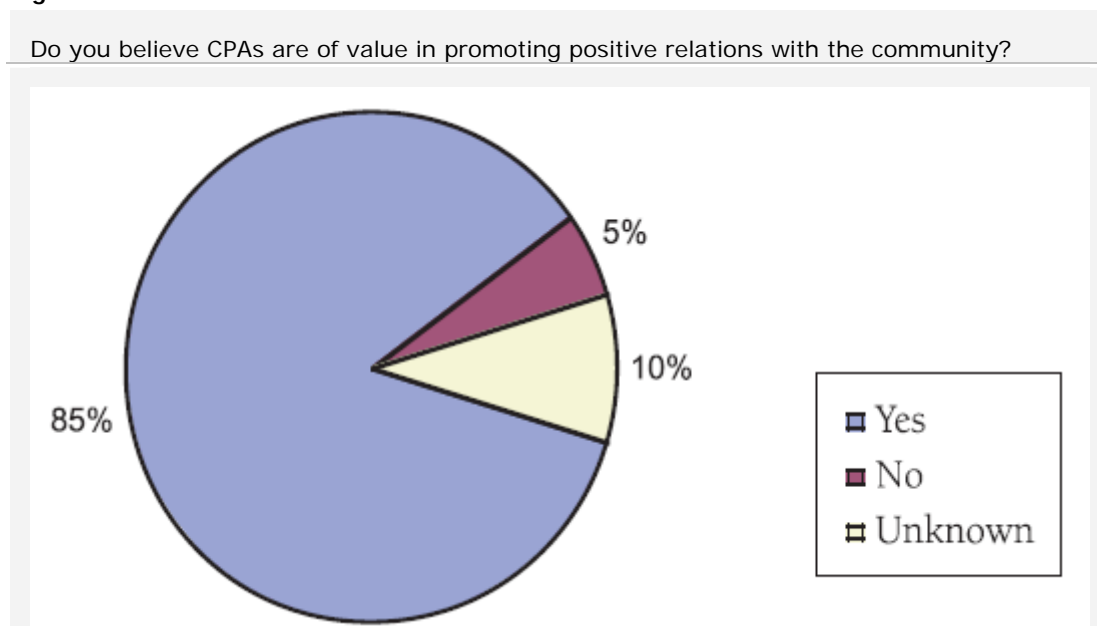
Next, citizens were asked if they had participated in a CPA (see Figure 2). Approximately 2 percent indicated that they had, while 98 percent said that they had not. Thus, only a small percentage of the sample had actually participated.

**Figure 2. CPA Participation**



Citizens were asked if they believed CPAs are valuable in promoting positive relations with the community. In response to this question, some 85 percent said that these academies are valuable in promoting positive community relations. Only about 5 percent answered this question negatively, and about 10 percent were unsure (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Public Relations Value**



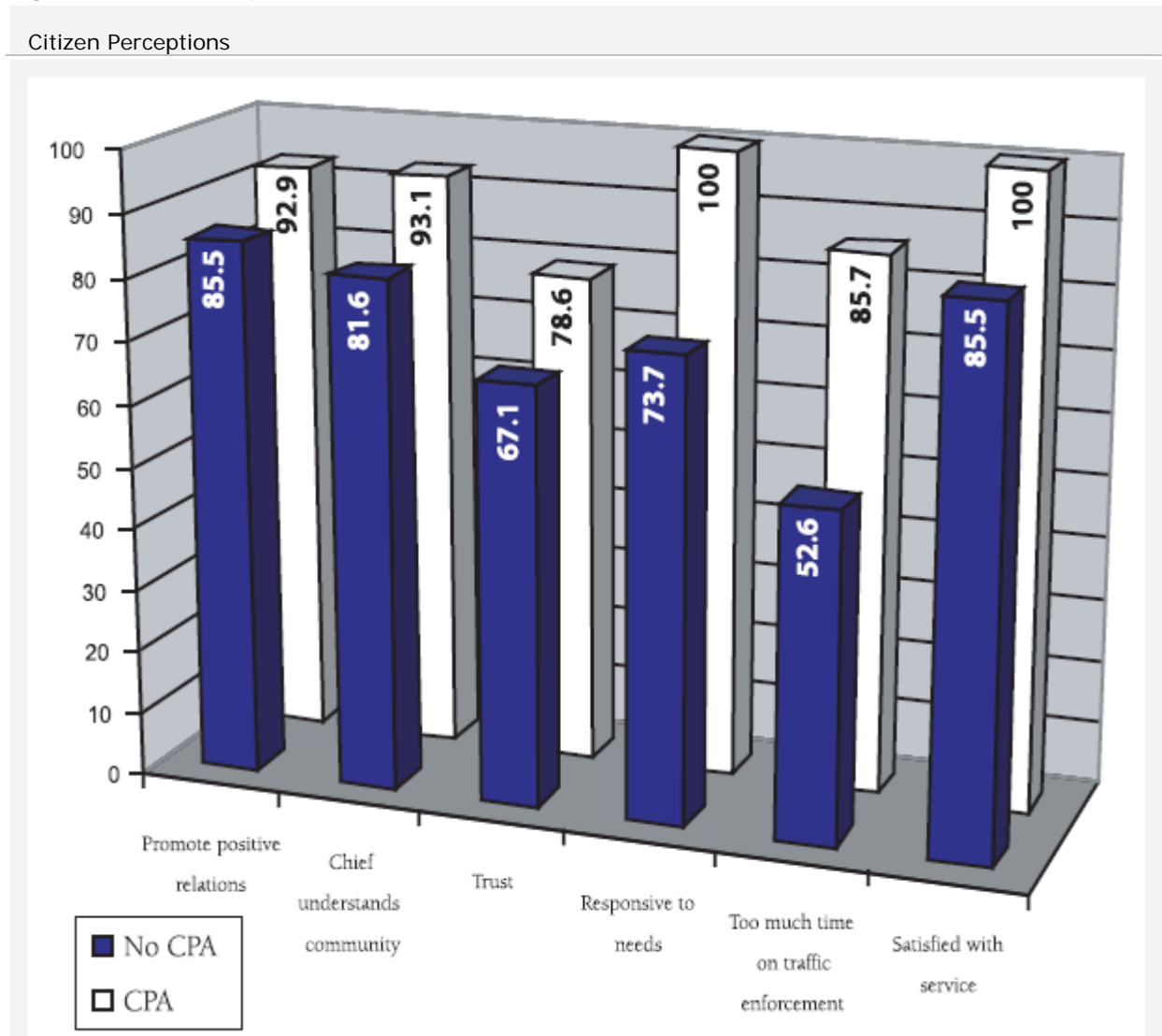
Therefore, it seems that citizens feel that CPAs are of value, regardless of whether or not they have participated in one or know if their police departments offer one.

## CPA Effectiveness

According to the philosophy behind CPAs, participation in an academy should be associated with more positive beliefs, feelings, and perceptions of the police. Several questions on the survey concerned citizen perceptions of police programs, practices, and operations.

If these academies are effective, one would expect to see a difference between the perceptions of those who have participated in one and those who have not. In response to a number of questions, the results seem to support this expectation (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Citizen Perceptions of Police**



## Public Relations Value

One of the most frequently cited goals of citizen police academies involves public relations. Most CPAs strive to educate the community, emphasizing the positive aspects of police departments and attempting to positively influence community relations. To date, though, no empirical data have shown that they are successful in accomplishing this goal.

Survey results are encouraging, as approximately 93 percent of citizens who had completed a CPA felt that it was of value in promoting positive relations with the community, compared with 85.5 percent of those who had not. It seems that citizen police academies are perceived as a valuable means of promoting positive community relations both by those who have participated in one and by those who have not. And the results indicate that participation in a CPA is associated with an even more likely perception of this program's public relations value.

## Perceptions of the Police

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As stated earlier, CPAs are believed to promote a better understanding of the police perspective, to generate greater public support, and to develop a sense of mutual trust between police and citizens. Several questions on the survey addressed issues related to these goals (again, see Figure 4).

One question concerned citizen perceptions of their police chiefs. In response to this question, 93.1 percent of citizens completing a citizen police academy felt that their police chiefs were at least somewhat understanding of their communities, their issues, and needs. On the other hand, only 81.6 percent of those who had not completed an academy responded in this manner.

Therefore, it appears that participation in a CPA is associated with more positive perceptions of the police chief, although, in general, the vast majority of respondents who had not completed a police academy felt that their police chiefs were in touch with their communities. These results are encouraging and seem to show that CPAs give value in terms of public perceptions, not only of police officers but also of police leadership.

Improving citizen trust in the police is clearly important and of great interest to police departments everywhere. Of the citizens who had completed an academy, 78.6 percent felt that they could trust their police departments to do the right thing, compared with 67.1 percent of those who had not completed one. From these results, it appears that higher levels of trust are associated with participation in CPAs.

The largest differences in perceptions, when comparing responses of those citizens who had completed a CPA with those who had not, appeared on three important questions. First, 100 percent of people participating in an academy reported that the police were responsive to the issues and needs of their communities, compared with only 73.7 percent of those who had not completed one.

Second, when asked if they felt police spent too much time on traffic enforcement and other noncriminal activities, 85.7 percent of those who had completed a CPA answered no, versus only 52.6 percent of those who had not completed one.

Finally, when asked if they were satisfied with the services their police department provides, 100 percent of those completing one of these academies answered affirmatively. In contrast, only 85.5 percent of those who had not completed one answered yes. Clearly, responsiveness and satisfaction with police services are issues with which police departments struggle, and these results seem to suggest that CPAs are an effective way to positively affect citizen perceptions of these aspects of policing.

## Recommendations

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Even though CPAs have been around for nearly 20 years and have steadily gained in popularity, little research has been conducted to determine their effectiveness. The results of this study are encouraging and instructive. In summary:

- Data indicate that citizen police academies are associated with more positive perceptions of the police.

- Participation in this kind of program is also associated with higher levels of trust and satisfaction and with greater feelings of understanding and responsiveness. Certainly, these are perceptions that all police departments would like to develop and maintain, so they would be justified in continuing to invest funds and resources in providing CPAs.

The study also highlighted potential areas for improvement. First, it is important to note that, even though citizen police academies appear to be effective, relatively few citizens know if their police departments offer such a program, and even fewer have actually participated in one. Because of low levels of CPA awareness and participation, the benefits appear so far to be limited to a relatively low percentage of the population. Increasing awareness of and participation in these programs would seem to be a logical response.

In fact, because there was not a great difference in the perceptions of value between those who have participated in CPAs and those who have not, police departments may reap benefits simply by raising awareness of the existence of their academies, regardless of the levels of participation. At any rate, it appears that police departments would be well served to devote more effort to marketing these academies and advertising them, in order to exert a greater effect on the beliefs and perceptions of the public.

It should be noted that this study is not without its limitations. The data are cross-sectional and not longitudinal, so cause-effect conclusions cannot be drawn. A study in which the perceptions of participants are assessed before beginning CPAs and after completion would be needed to establish causation. In other words, one cannot conclude from this study that participation in a citizen police academy causes more positive citizen perceptions of police but only that such participation is associated with more positive perceptions.

This study also did not address the recruitment and selection of participants, and often people are selected based on their standing in the community and their political or social influence. Some departments might reject applicants who are seen as critics of the police because they are viewed as disruptive or distracting.

Therefore, the perceptions of those who participate in CPAs may already be somewhat positive, by design, which would skew the data in a positive direction. However, citizen police academies might be even more valuable if departments targeted such critics more often.

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