

February
2026



Survey of North Carolina Police Culture

An Aggregate Report Based on
Responses From All Participating
Officers in North Carolina

Jesse Lopez, PhD



Table of Contents

Background	3
Community Relations	3
Guardian Mindset	3
Views on Community Relations.	4
Changes to Agency's Community Engagement	4
Incidents of Appreciation/Aggression	5
Law Enforcement Roles and Responsibilities	5
Law Enforcement Orientation	5
Importance of a Law Enforcement Response to Various Offenses	5
Openness To Non-Law Enforcement Response	6
Enhanced Law Enforcement Approaches Support	7
Officer Wellbeing and Support	7
Burnout - Exhaustion	7
Burnout - Efficacy	8
Burnout - Cynicism	8
Well-Being Norms	8
Agency Effectiveness Related To Officer Supports	9
Misconduct Policy	9
Clarity of Misconduct Policies	9
Influence of Personal Relations on Misconduct Consequences	10
Unspoken Rules/Expectations	10
Accountability Policies and Norms	11
Accountability Policy Support	11
Accountability Norms and Practices	11



Background

This report outlines the findings from a survey conducted by the Wilson Center for Science and Justice at Duke Law School in collaboration with the Task Force for Racial Equity in Criminal Justice, the North Carolina Department of Public Safety, and the North Carolina Department of Justice. The survey, which included responses from officers within your agency, asked about officers' views on their roles, relationships with the community, and the challenges they face.

Data collection took place between April 16th, 2024 and July 31st 2024. This involved emailing the Chiefs of 333 law enforcement agencies in North Carolina a survey link requesting that they distribute the survey to their officers. Of these, 190 agencies distributed the survey, resulting in an agency level participation rate of 57%. This report presents an aggregate analysis of 1,608 responses collected from participating officers throughout North Carolina.

We thank each agency for its participation and the continued dedication to improving law enforcement practices across North Carolina.

Community Relations

This section focused on the various aspects of community relations including officers' attitudes about their role and relationship with the community, desired level of community engagement, and incidents of appreciation and aggression from community members. These questions aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of how officers perceive and interact with the community.

Guardian Mindset

Why We Asked

The “Guardian mindset” is an approach, where officers embrace non-enforcement interactions and building community trust as key responsibilities.

Research suggests that this approach leads to improved officer-community relationships. Officers who adopt this mindset tend to be less likely to engage in inappropriate uses of force and more likely to engage in rapport-building and procedural fairness.

What We Asked

What Was Found

How much they agree or disagree that

It is important that I have non-enforcement contacts with the public

91%

A primary responsibility of an officer is to build trust between the department & community

88%

Views on Community Relations

Why We Asked

How officers view their current community relations can shape their behaviors toward the community. Understanding whether officers feel trusted, respected, misunderstood, or distrustful of the community can help identify aspects of police-community relations that may need to be improved.

Trust and Respect Questions

Prior research has asked officers whether they feel trusted and respected to assess feelings of external legitimacy and perceived treatment by the community.

Distrust and Understanding Questions

In addition, questions asking officers about their distrust of community members and whether they feel understood help capture a sense of cynicism and disconnect with the community

What We Asked

What Was Found

How much they agree or disagree that

Community members treat officers with respect	81%
Community members trust officers act in the best interests of the community	83%
Officers have reason to be distrustful of most citizens	31%
The community understands what it means to be an officer	88%

Changes to Agency's Community Engagement

Why We Asked

Engagement between law enforcement and the community can help build trust and improve relationships. We wanted to understand officers' perspectives on whether their agency's current level of engagement is sufficient or if they desire more involvement with the community.

What We Asked

What Was Found

Most Common Response

Should your agency's level of community engagement increase, decrease, or stay the same?	56% said stay the same 30% said somewhat increase
--	--

Incidents of Appreciation/Aggression

Why We Asked

Understanding the frequency with which officers are shown appreciation or face aggression from the community can serve as another metric of police-community relations from the officer's perspective.

What We Asked

How frequently do community members

What Was Found

Most Common Response

Express their appreciation for your service

33% said 3-5 times/month

Act verbally violent or aggressive towards you

43% said 1-2 times/month

Law Enforcement Roles and Responsibilities

This section focused on understanding the extent to which officers adhere to a traditional law enforcement view of their role. Specifically, it explores attitudes towards "traditional" law enforcement, the importance of police responding to various offenses, and the involvement of non-law enforcement entities, as well as their support for alternative practices.

Law Enforcement Orientation

Why We Asked

Prior researchers have used the following two questions measure the extent to which officers take a traditional enforcement-centric approach to policing as well as endorse a "warrior" mindset that emphasizes "crime fighting".

What We Asked

How much they agree or disagree that

What Was Found

Enforcing the law is by far a police officer's most important responsibility

88% agree

My primary responsibility as a police officer is to fight crime

90% agree

Importance of a Law Enforcement Response to Various Offenses

Why We Asked

Understanding which offenses officers view as critical for law enforcement to address provides insight into whether their responses align with both agency priorities & community needs..

<i>What We Asked</i>	<i>What Was Found</i>
How important it is for officers to address the following:	
Public nuisances	26% said very or extremely
General disorder	54% said very or extremely
Non-violent interpersonal disputes	39% said very or extremely
Non-violent incidents involving the homeless	31% said very or extremely
Minor traffic infractions	38% said very or extremely
Possession of drugs in small quantities	60% said very or extremely
Sale of drugs in small quantities	78% said very or extremely
Violent crime	100% said very or extremely

Openness To Non-Law Enforcement Response

Why We Asked

Understanding how open officers are to having non-law enforcement entities handle or support responses to certain issues can provide insight into which alternative interventions or alternative response programs may be viable in a department.

<i>What We Asked</i>	<i>What Was Found</i>
Which issues should non-law enforcement lead or support:	
Public nuisances	44% marked this
General disorder	24% marked this
Non-violent interpersonal disputes	38% marked this
Non-violent incidents involving the homeless	46% marked this
Minor traffic infractions	11% marked this
Possession of drugs in small quantities	6% marked this
Sale of drugs in small quantities	4% marked this
Violent crime	5% marked this
None (all issues should be exclusively handled by law enforcement)	31% marked this

Enhanced Law Enforcement Approaches Support

Why We Asked

Exploring officers' support for policies that go beyond strict enforcement, such as recognizing opioid overdoses or issuing citations for minor offenses, provides valuable insight into how receptive officers are to adopting such practices. Officer support is crucial for successful implementation of such policies.

What We Asked

How much officers support the following policies:

What Was Found

Training officers to recognize & reverse active opioid overdoses	83% support
Extending the practice of issuing citations instead of arrests for minor offenses	85% support

Officer Well-Being and Support

This section explores officer well-being by assessing burnout using items from the Maslach Burnout Inventory, specifically measuring emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and professional efficacy. In addition to burnout, it also examines the practices and norms within agencies related well-being, as well as the effectiveness of the agencies at addressing work related issues.

Burnout: Exhaustion

Why We Asked

The survey asked two questions from the Emotional Exhaustion subscale of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) designed to assess how drained and overextended individuals feel from work. Emotional exhaustion, is a central element of burnout, which can lead to diminished motivation, job performance, and well-being.

What We Asked

How often officers feel the following:

What Was Found

I feel emotionally drained from my work	46% said at least once a week
I feel used up at the end of the day at work	49% said at least once a week
	38% said that they feel both at least once a week

Burnout: Efficacy

Why We Asked

The survey included two questions from the professional efficacy subscale of the MBI which measures an individual's sense of competence and accomplishment in their work. Low professional efficacy can lead to reduced motivation, engagement, and overall job satisfaction, while high efficacy can mitigate other aspects of burnout.

What We Asked

How often officers feel the following:

What Was Found

I feel accomplished at my job

64% said at least once a week

I feel I'm positively influencing people's lives through my work

57% said at least once a week

48% said that they feel both at least once a week

Burnout: Cynicism

Why We Asked

The survey included two questions from the cynicism subscale of the MBI which measures feelings of detachment or distrust towards one's work and the people it serves. High cynicism reflects emotional withdrawal, which can erode and undermine relationships within the workplace and the people one serves.

What We Asked

How often officers feel the following:

What Was Found

I worry that my job is hardening me emotionally

41% said at least once a week

I feel more insensitive toward people since I took this job

41% said at least once a week

30% said that they feel both at least once a week

Well-Being Norms

Why We Asked

The norms and practices surrounding officer well-being are critical in fostering a healthy, supportive work environment. By examining how likely officers believe their peers are to seek mental health support, request resources to manage workload, and have open conversations with supervisors, we aim to understand how embedded well-being practices are in the culture of a department.

<i>What We Asked</i>	<i>What Was Found</i>
How likely most officers are to:	
Seek mental health support after a distressing event	42% said likely
Request support/resources to manage workload effectively	42% said likely
Have open/honest conversations with direct supervisor	64% said likely

Agency Effectiveness Related to Officer Supports

Why We Asked

The effectiveness of leadership in resolving internal conflicts, addressing feedback, and communicating expectations is crucial for maintaining a positive work environment. Understanding officer perceptions of their agency’s effectiveness can provide insight into areas where improvement may be needed.

<i>What We Asked</i>	<i>What Was Found</i>
How effective or ineffective the agency is at:	
Resolving conflicts among members of your department	62% said effective
Addressing concerns and feedback from officers	57% said effective
Clearly communicating responsibilities and expectations	69% said effective

Misconduct Policy

This section focuses on various aspects of misconduct policies within law enforcement agencies, examining officers’ perceptions of policy clarity, the influence of personal relationships on consequences, and the presence of unspoken rules. This provides insights into how well-defined and impartial the disciplinary processes are, as well as the extent to which unwritten expectations may impact actions.

Clarity of Misconduct Policies

Why We Asked

Clear guidelines on when and how to engage in stops and use of force are essential for ensuring officers’ actions align with department policies and the law. By assessing the clarity of these policies, we aim to identify any gaps in understanding that may impact an officer’s decision-making and community interactions.

<i>What We Asked</i>	<i>What Was Found</i>
How clear are policies related to:	
When/how to engage in vehicle stops	85% said very or extremely clear
When/how to engage in pedestrian stops	78% said very or extremely clear
When/how to engage in use of force beyond handcuffing	87% said very or extremely clear

Influence of Personal Relations on Misconduct Consequences

Why We Asked

We aimed to understand whether personal relationships within the department could influence how policy violations are handled. Clear and fair consequences are critical for maintaining trust, and examining this can help identify any perceptions of inconsistency or bias in applying disciplinary measures.

<i>What We Asked</i>	<i>What Was Found</i>
How often relationships influence consequences for:	
Not following policy around vehicle stops	57% said never or rarely
Not following policy around pedestrian stops	60% said never or rarely
Not following policy around use of force beyond handcuffing	63% said never or rarely

Unspoken Rules/Expectations

Why We Asked

In addition to written policies, unspoken rules or expectations can significantly shape behavior. By identifying whether officers believe these informal influences exist, we can better understand any gaps between official policy and actual practice.

<i>What We Asked</i>	<i>What Was Found</i>
Whether officers agree there are unspoken rules or expectations about:	
Vehicle stops	29% agree
Pedestrian stops	25% agree
Use of force beyond handcuffing	23% agree

Accountability Policy and Norms

This section aimed to measure support for various accountability policies and assess perceptions of related norms that contribute to a culture of accountability. This section provides a comprehensive view of both stated support for such policies and the perceived norms within the agency regarding practices that enhance accountability.

Accountability Policy Support

Why We Asked

Accountability measures such as body cameras, intervention in excessive force, and detailed reporting help promote transparency and responsibility in law enforcement. These policies are designed to enhance officer accountability and protect both the community and the officers themselves. Officer support for these measures is critical, as it can directly impact their effectiveness.

What We Asked

What Was Found

How much officers support the following policies:

Requiring officers performing patrol functions to use body cameras	95% support
Mandating officers intervene in excessive use of force by colleagues	98% support
Writing detailed reports for every use of force incident beyond handcuffing	92% support

Accountability Norms and Practices

Why We Asked

The norms and practices that officers believe exist in their day-to-day work play a critical role in promoting accountability. By examining how likely officers believe their colleagues are to report misconduct, intervene in cases of excessive force, and consistently use body cameras, we can better understand the extent to which accountability is embedded in the culture of an agency.

What We Asked

What Was Found

How likely most officers are to:

Report officer misconduct to a superior	58% said likely
Intervene when witnessing excessive use of force	72% said likely
Consistently use a body camera when performing patrol functions	79% said likely

Acknowledgements

The Wilson Center for Science and Justice brings together faculty and students at Duke University in law, medicine, behavioral health, public policy, and arts and sciences to conduct research, develop policy recommendations, and educate the next generation of criminal justice professionals to improve criminal justice outcomes.

We are deeply grateful for our partnership with the Task Force for Racial Equity in Criminal Justice, the Department of Public Safety (DPS), and the Department of Justice (DOJ). We extend special thanks to Secretary Eddie M. Buffaloe, Jr., for his leadership and support. We also wish to thank the agencies and officers throughout North Carolina for their participation.

About the Wilson Center

The Wilson Center for Science and Justice brings together faculty and students at Duke University in law, medicine, behavioral health, public policy, and arts and sciences to conduct research, develop policy recommendations, and educate the next generation of criminal justice professionals to improve criminal justice outcomes.

Our work is non-partisan and evidence-informed. We engage with community organizations, practitioners, and policymakers to inform our research and develop solutions. Learn more about the Center at wscj.law.duke.edu.