

Thorough their eyes: A study of police perspectives of reform and Texas Senate Bill 4

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ABSTRACT

Following a period of political upheaval in 2020, which resulted in remarkable change in public perceptions of police officers, the discussion of police reform has greatly increased. To build positive relations between police officers and the communities they serve, transparency between all parties is crucial. To do so, this study will collect police officers' perceptions of past and present reforms, with a focus on Texas Senate Bill 4 (TXSB4); this bill would empower local and state law enforcement to enforce immigration law. Through collection and analysis of qualitative data, via interviews, focus groups, and a related survey of local police officers, the researchers aim to create a better understanding of police perceptions of policing reforms. A sample of eight police officers from local South Texas precincts are the subject pool for this pilot study. It is the researchers' hope that a better understanding of any bias held by police officers, and how it might influence their acceptance or rejection of certain issues and reforms, will shed light on how best to approach the public aspect of policing in the future.

INTRODUCTION

Though institutionalized policing, and subsequent reform, are not new practices, more recent political and social change has negatively influenced support for police officers and police reforms (Hanink & Dunbar, 2024). The literature regarding changes to the nature of policing focus on the sociocultural and sociopolitical impact on civilian life but does little to highlight the internal impact on law enforcement agents.

- Considering more recent sociopolitical change, institutionalized policing practices have faced public scrutiny, resulting in low support for active police officers (Hanink & Dunbar, 2024).
- Sociopolitical movements like the Black Lives Matter movement highlight possible motivation for negative public perception of policing practices (Hanink & Dunbar, 2024; Davis 2000; Chan, 2007).
- Police culture and policing environments are shaped by social, cultural, and political ideologies which include intrapersonal and interpersonal interactions and bias (Hetey et al., 2024).
- Texas Senate Bill 4 would empower local and state law enforcement agents to enforce immigration law (Perry, 2023; Sullivan, 2024).

PURPOSE

Identify perspectives of law enforcement officers as it pertains to police reform, specifically, Texas Senate Bill 4, and community-oriented relationships.

METHODS

This pilot study follows a qualitative approach wherein participant interviews and focus group session were conducted to gain a greater understanding of officer perspectives on policing reforms, topics of concern regarding policing, and immigration reform Texas Senate Bill 4. South Texas (STx) law enforcement officers (current or retired) were able to provide the most relevant perspective of issues facing their respective jurisdictions, and of TXSB4 as its impact would be most prominent in the borderland regions of South Texas. All participants were older than eighteen years old and were serving as law enforcement officers at the time of recruitment.

Interviews and Focus Groups

- One focus group consisting of four police officers (n=4) and two individual interviews (n=2) were conducted by researchers to determine officer perceptions of community relationships, general departmental issues, and proposed reforms for policing tactics.
- Each session began with all participants completing the prepared survey digitally. Preliminary versions of the digital survey were printed and given to both interview participants to complete prior to the commencement of the interview.

Officer Surveys

- A digital survey was created using SurveyMonkey to collect additional demographic data and measure perception of certain issues and policing reforms using several 5-point matrix scale questions.
- The survey is comprised of twenty-two multiple choice, matrix, and short answer questions that work in tandem with a set of eleven predetermined questions to gather the richest possible data set from the interview and focus group sessions.

Data Coding

- All transcripts, surveys, and notes recorded by the researchers was analyzed using Tesch's Eight Steps to reveal a set of prominent topics or major themes among the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).
- The descriptive results of the five-point matrix scale questions were considered when developing the final coding of major themes and topics but is not represented quantitatively.

RESULTS

Researchers found an overwhelming network of officer perceived deficiencies within their departments and other such trends relating to institutionalized policing in the general South Texas area.

Resources	Officer Morale	Public Misperception	Senate Bill 4	Community Relations	The Role of an Officer
Lack of officers	Misuse of personnel	Media representation	Redirection of resources	Community oriented	Protect & Serve
Misuse of dept. Resources	Political tape	Body/dash cameras	Public perception	Intentional positive experiences	Guardian & Warrior
Lack of mental health resources	Civilian opinion	Incident De-escalation	Racial Profiling	Transparency & Accountability	Law & order

Figure 1. The figure above shows the coding of prominent topics and major themes across all interviews, focus group, and survey data.

- We found that all major themes and prominent topics recorded during the interview and focus group processes are corroborated and enriched by the matrix scale results and short answer questions included in the online survey.
- Researchers found that the topics of resource misuse, officer morale, and public perception are all intrinsically linked to one another. The topics all relate to hypothetical negative and positive impacts of Senate Bill 4, with officers referencing the issue of resources i.e. a growing lack of officers and a subsequent misuse of the already scarce resource.

DISCUSSION

- Policing environments develop in response to internal and external factors, often influenced by self-reflection (Hanink & Dunbar, 2024; Chan, 2007).
- Civilian perceptions of law enforcement officers is rooted in prior, negative or positive, experiences that often occur at a young age or throughout their life (Carr et al., 2007; Lee et al., 2022).
- The role of an officer morphs time as it responds, much like the concept of policing environments, to sociopolitical, cultural, and personal influences (Caveney, 2019; Reiner, 2010).
- STx police officers hypothesize that the possible ramifications of Texas Senate Bill 4, should it be put into practice, would exacerbate the already prevalent issues of resource misuse and public misperceptions of officers.

FUTURE STUDY

- Researchers will continue to develop this study using the insight gained through the preliminary phases of this pilot study.
- To expand this study, researchers may utilize different methods to recruit participants for focus groups and survey distribution.
- Further research will explore a larger and more diverse sample of participants across the greater South Texas area including Mexico-Texas border regions.

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REFERENCES

