



How Residents View Policing in Medford

SURVEY REPORT

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Contents

- 3 Executive Summary
- 4 Introduction
- 5 Residents' Experiences with Medford Police
- 5 Residents' Experiences with Medford Police
- 7 Residents' Perceptions of Medford Police
- 9 What Residents Want From Policing in Medford
- 12 Civilian Review Board and Transparency
- 13 Methodology

Executive Summary

Overall, Medford residents are somewhat satisfied with policing, but they also recognize clear inequalities in how different types of residents are treated and express clear support for certain reforms, including the creation of a Civilian Review Board.

During October and November of 2020 we surveyed a random sample of about 500 Medford residents to understand their experiences with and views about the Medford police.

- About one-in-five Medford residents, and one-in-four Medford residents of color, report having had at least one negative experience with the Medford police. Over half of Medford residents have had at least one positive experience involving the Medford police.
- About half of Medford residents are satisfied with the Medford police and 83% say that the Medford police make them feel somewhat or mostly safe. This is relatively consistent with national surveys on policing.
- However, we find more dissatisfaction among residents of color. One-fourth of Medford residents of color are dissatisfied with the police and nearly 30% say that the Medford police make them feel unsafe.
- Medford residents perceive inequalities in how residents are treated based on race/ethnicity. While 78% of Medford residents think that the Medford police treat white residents fairly, just half say that the Medford police treat black residents fairly.
- These perceptions can have important consequences. For example, one-fourth of Medford residents of color say that they would feel uncomfortable calling the Medford police if they needed help.
- There is overwhelming support among Medford residents for the creation of a Civilian Review Board to oversee policing. 73% of residents want to see the creation of such a board and only 11% are opposed.
- A majority of Medford residents believe that social workers rather than police should respond to incidents involving mental health crises, homeless individuals, neighbor disputes, and intoxicated individuals.
- A majority of Medford residents think the police should not be allowed to use a variety of tactics, including choke holds (7% support), tear gas (24%), rubber bullets (26%), impact weapons (34%), and firearms (42%).

Introduction

This report presents results from a survey of a representative sample of Medford adult residents conducted in October-November 2020 by Professor Brian Schaffner and a group of students at Tufts University.

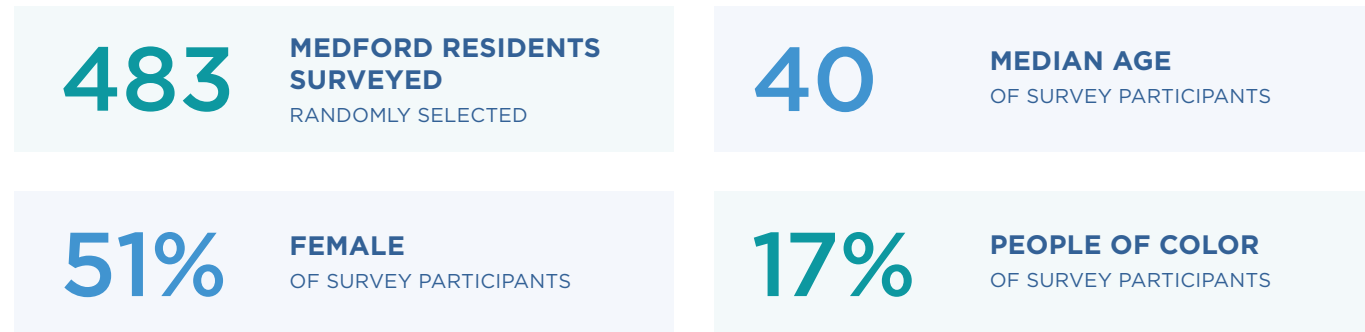
The survey was sponsored by the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life and is being provided as a community service to the City of Medford to help inform discussions about policing in the community. Residents were asked to tell us about their own experiences with Medford police, their perceptions of Medford police, and their views on a variety of questions related to how policing should be conducted in the future.

Demographic composition of the survey

As described in the methodology section at the end of this report, our findings are based on a survey completed by 483 Medford residents who were randomly selected and agreed to participate in the study. During the sampling process, we made efforts to attempt to ensure a sufficient sample of residents of color by over-sampling residents living in census blocks with higher percentages of residents of color based on U.S. Census data. Despite this effort, during the survey, 83% of respondents identified as white, 3% were African American, 4% were Latinx, and 4% were Asian, with the remainder split among other racial and ethnic categories.

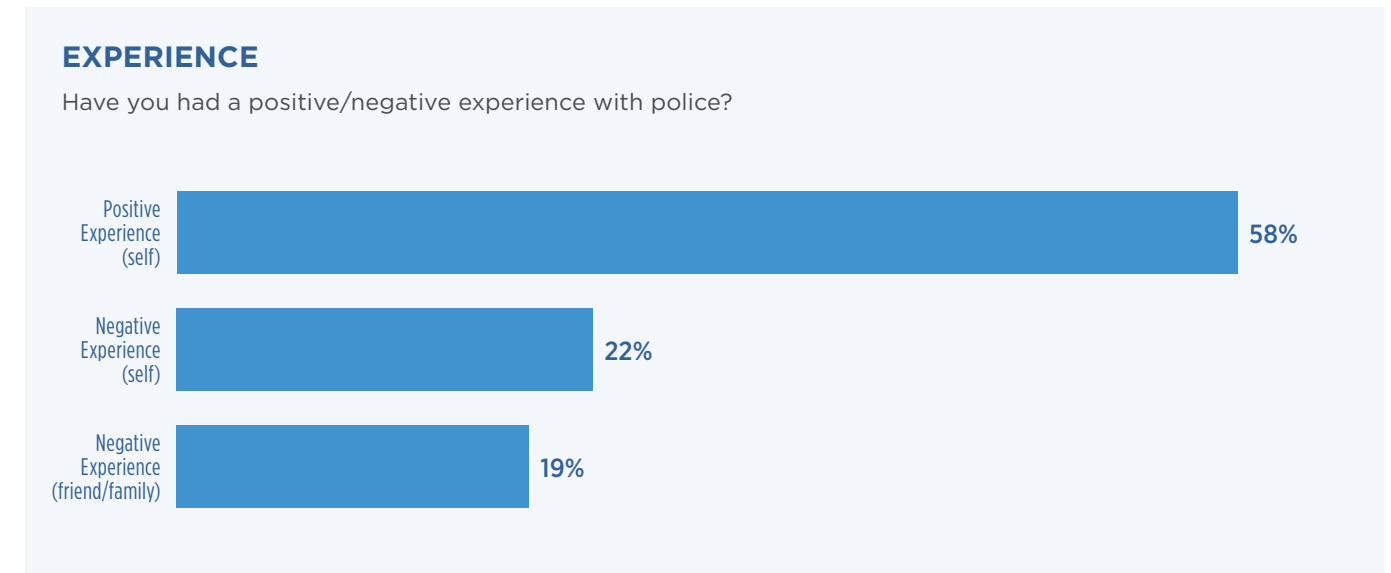
The median age of those answering the survey was 40; 20% of respondents are between the ages of 18 and 29 while 38% are between 30 and 44 years old, 30% are 45-64 years old, and 11% are 65 or older. 51% of respondents identified as female. In terms of education, 38% reported having a bachelor's degree and an additional 43% had a master's degree, doctorate, or some other professional post-graduate degree.

As described in the methodology section, we weighted the data to be reflective of the Medford population with regard to race/ethnicity, as well as age, sex, education, party registration, and ward. All results presented in the report incorporate these weights.



Residents' Experiences with Medford Police

In separate questions, we asked each respondent whether they had ever had any negative interactions with the Medford Police and whether they had ever had any positive interactions with the Medford Police.



58% of respondents indicated that they had at least one positive interaction with the Medford Police. The vast majority of these comments make note of examples of Medford officers demonstrating politeness, professionalism, helpfulness, and cooperativeness. For example, one respondent wrote, "Police officers I have encountered are consistently polite, respectful and solution-focused when I interact with them."

While fewer residents could cite a negative experience with the Medford Police, it is still the case that more than one-in-five Medford residents has had at least one negative interaction with the Medford Police. This includes about one-in-four white Medford residents and about one-in-five Medford residents of color. Negative experiences with Medford police tended to revolve around a few different themes. Roughly one-third of those who had a negative interaction gave examples of officers acting in condescending and dismissive ways. For example, one respondent described a situation where they reported a robbery and the officer who responded was dismissive. The respondent wrote, "I never felt unsafe, but I did feel dismissed and annoyed. [...] It certainly did not inspire confidence in the police department." Three other common themes included instances where people felt that Medford officers showed a lack of respect for the community, situations where the police response was described as ineffective, and instances of negligence or a failure of Medford Police to respond to calls for help.

Residents' Perceptions of Medford Police

Aside from direct experiences, we also asked residents about their own perceptions of the Medford Police. For example, respondents were asked how satisfied they were with the job the Medford police department does and whether the Medford police department makes them feel safe or unsafe.

About half of Medford residents (48%) report that they are either somewhat or very satisfied with the job the Medford police department does and 83% of Medford residents say that the Medford police make them feel either somewhat or very safe. 16% of Medford residents report that they are dissatisfied with the Medford police and 18% said that the Medford police make them feel mostly or somewhat unsafe.

To provide some context, we can compare the question about how safe the Medford police make residents feel to a question asked on a national survey conducted during the same time period. This item comes for the Cooperative Election Study, which is a large-scale nationally representative academic survey funded by the National Science Foundation. Nationally, 78% of Americans said that the police make them feel mostly or somewhat safe while 23% say somewhat or mostly unsafe. Thus, a slightly higher percentage of Medford residents (83%) report that the Medford police make them feel safe compared to the national benchmark.

However, on these questions, we do see some notable differences between white residents and residents of color. For example, one-fourth of Medford residents of color indicate that they are dissatisfied with the Medford police while 36% say that they are satisfied. By comparison, 53% of white residents are satisfied with the job the Medford police department does while just 14% are dissatisfied. Likewise, Medford residents of color are more likely to report that the Medford police make them feel unsafe—29% of residents of color report feeling unsafe compared to just 13% of white residents. However, 72% of Medford residents of color still report that the Medford police make them feel somewhat or mostly safe.

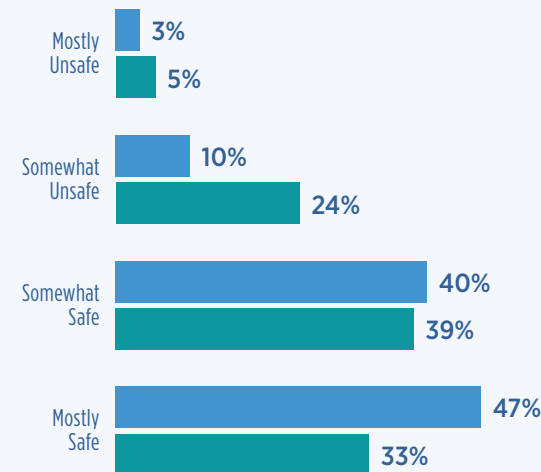
We also asked Medford residents about their perceptions of how the Medford police treat residents from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. 78% say that the Medford police treat white residents either somewhat or very fairly, with nearly two-thirds saying the same about Asian residents. The assessment is much more mixed for Black and Hispanic residents. Only about half of Medford residents think that the Medford police treat these groups somewhat or very fairly. This is similar to results from a national survey conducted in 2016, when 50% of Americans said that racial minorities were treated fairly by their local police.¹

These perceptions can have significant consequences. This is evident from responses to a question asking respondents, "If you needed help, how comfortable would you feel calling the police?" 77% of white residents

¹ Gallup Organization (2016). Gallup Organization Poll: June 2016, Question 1 [USGALLUP071316.R01]. Gallup Organization. Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.

SAFE

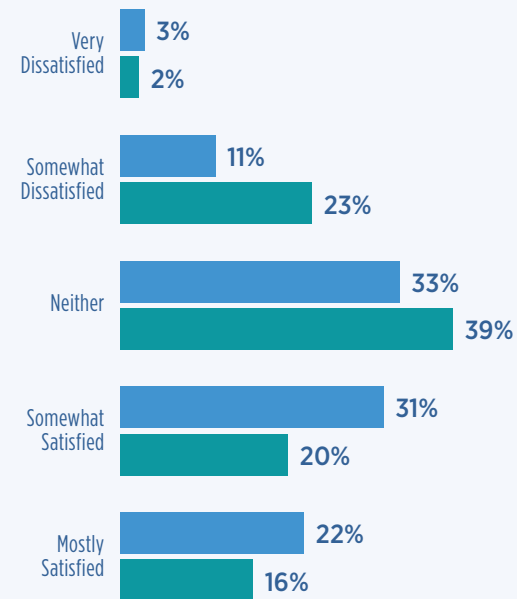
Do the Medford police make you feel... ?



■ White Residents ■ Residents of Color

SATISFACTION

How satisfied are you with the job the Medford police department does?



■ White Residents ■ Residents of Color

On a general level, many of these negative experiences that Medford residents reported were reflected in a common feeling expressed by several respondents who wrote that they felt like a burden on the Medford Police Department and regretted calling them because of the ways that officers dismissed and often refused to act on their concerns.

We also asked Medford residents whether a family member or friend had ever had a negative experience with the Medford Police. 19% of Medford residents answered yes to this question, half answered no, and the remaining 31% said that they were unsure.

What Residents Want From Policing in Medford

Residents were asked “Which of the following police tactics and weaponry do you believe Somerville police should be allowed to use to ensure public safety?” They were provided a list of potential tactics and weaponry and allowed to select as many from this list as they wanted.

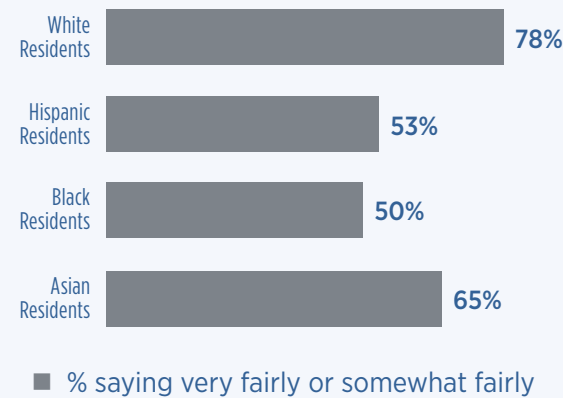
There is a clear hierarchy of tactics when it comes to public support among Medford residents. A large majority of residents think that the police should be able to use restraint devices (e.g. handcuffs) or physical strength. When it comes to tasers, pepper spray, and firearms, residents are much more divided, with only about half supporting these tactics.

For several additional tactics, there is a lack of widespread support. 35% of Medford residents think that the Medford police should use K9 dog bite-and-hold or impact weapons. And one-in-four registered support for the use of rubber bullets or tear gas. Choke-holds were overwhelmingly unpopular—just 7% of Medford residents indicated that the Medford police should be allowed to use choke holds.

For many situations, it may be possible to have either social service workers or the police respond. We gave Medford residents a series of hypothetical situations and asked whether they thought it would be better for

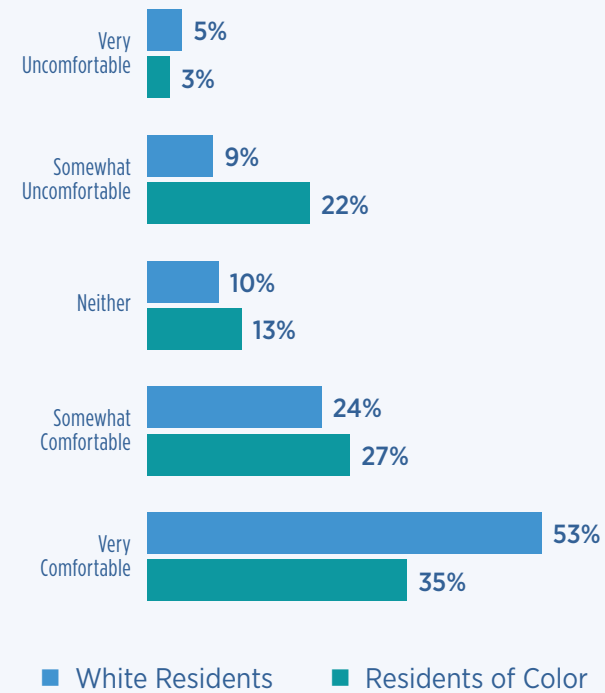
TREATMENT

How do you think the Medford Police treat the following groups?



SEEK HELP

If you needed help, how comfortable would you feel calling the police?



87% WHITES FEEL SAFE
HOW THE MEDFORD POLICE MAKE THEM FEEL

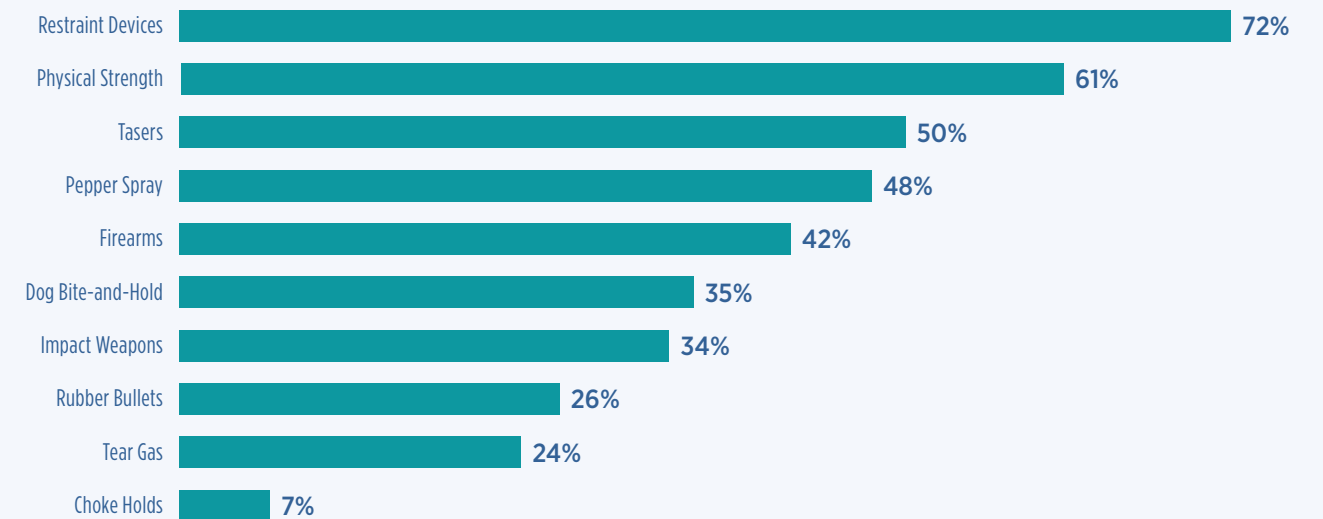
72% PEOPLE OF COLOR FEEL SAFE
HOW THE MEDFORD POLICE MAKE THEM FEEL

said that they would feel somewhat or very comfortable calling the police if they needed help, but just 62% of residents of color felt the same way. One-fourth of Medford residents of color report that they would feel uncomfortable calling the police if they needed help.

We also asked residents whether they would know how to file a complaint if they had a negative experience with a Medford police officer and also whether they would feel comfortable filing such a complaint. Just 37% reported that they would know how to do this. Even if the process for filing a complaint was clear, many Medford residents would not feel comfortable doing so. About half of Medford residents reported that they would feel very or somewhat comfortable filing a complaint against an officer if they had a negative experience. Residents of color were especially unlikely to feel comfortable filing a complaint—39% said that they would feel comfortable doing so while 42% said that they would be uncomfortable.

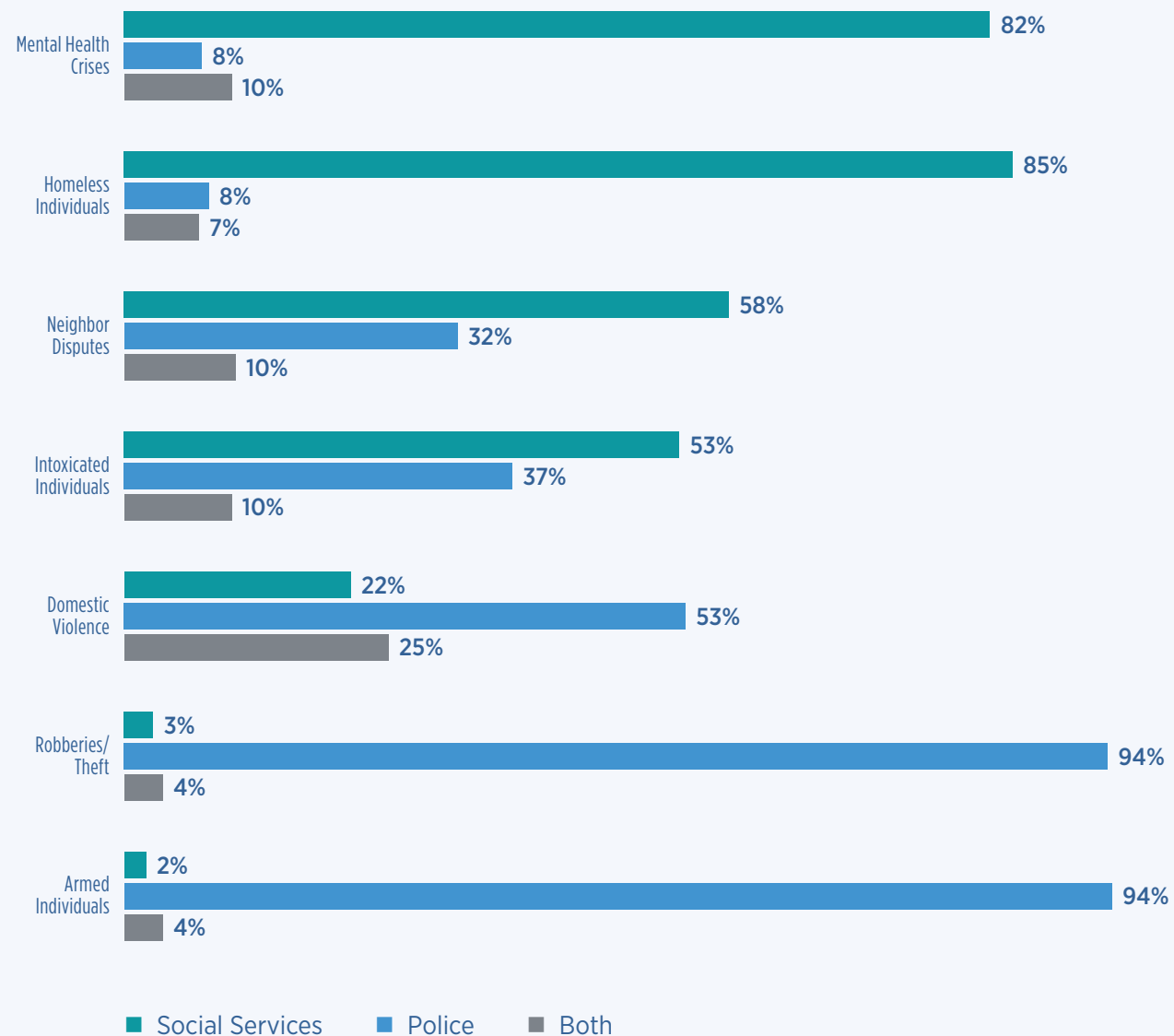
TACTICS

Which tactics/weaponry should Medford police be allowed to use?



RESPONDERS

Who should respond to the situation?



the police or social service workers to respond. Respondents could also indicate that they thought both the police and social service workers should respond or that they were not sure. There are some situations that Medford residents overwhelmingly agree should be the purview of police. In particular, instances involving armed individuals or a robbery or theft were situations where the vast majority thought that only police should respond.

In other situations there was a clear and overwhelming preference to only have social service workers respond. This was especially true for instances with “individuals experiencing mental health crises or who are suicidal” and for situations involving homeless individuals. Very few respondents thought that only the police should respond to these situations. A majority also thought that only social service workers should respond to situations with “individuals who are intoxicated or have overdosed” or situations including “Neighbor disputes and disorderly kids or truants.” However, between 30% and 40% of Medford residents thought that the police should respond in these situations.

When asked about a situation involving “domestic violence and abuse,” about half of Medford residents said that only the police should respond, but the other half said that social service workers should also be included in the response.

Respondents were also asked about funding for the Medford Police Department. After being told how much of the Medford city budget is spent on policing, residents were asked whether they thought funding for the police department should be increased, decreased, or kept at about the same level. 17% of Medford residents want to see police funding increased. A plurality of residents—44%—think funding should be kept at about the same level, while 39% want to see it decreased.

A majority of Medford residents think only social service workers should respond to situations involving mental health crises, homeless individuals, neighbor disputes, and intoxicated individuals.

Civilian Review Board and Transparency

Medford residents were also asked about their support for a Civilian Review Board—a body of residents who would oversee the police department. For example, Cambridge has used such a board since 1984.

Medford residents are overwhelmingly in favor of establishing a Civilian Review Board to oversee the Medford Police Department. 73% of Medford residents support establishing such a board and just 11% oppose it; 17% were not sure. The substantial support for a civilian review board is consistent with national polling, which shows that about 75% of Americans support this type of oversight.²

We also asked Medford residents what powers a Civilian Review Board should have if it were to be established. Respondents were provided with a list of different possibilities and could select as many responsibilities as they wanted. At least two-thirds of Medford residents indicated that the Civilian Review Board should have the power to investigate any police shootings as well as any “allegations of excessive force and abuse.” A majority also indicated that they supported having the Civilian Review Board be granted the power to “set priorities for policing” and “to pass judgement on the disciplinary process against officers in violation of policies or law.” And 43% of Medford residents said that the board should have the power to “set policies for policing.”

Many Medford residents did not think the Civilian Review Board should have power when it comes to personnel actions. Specifically, 31% thought that the board should have the power to fire officers, 22% thought the board should have the power to negotiate contracts, and only 17% said that the board should be given the authority to hire police officers.

Residents were also asked about four different proposals for increasing transparency into policing. There was overwhelming support for three of these proposals. 71% support making public the details of the department’s internal process in addressing violations of conduct and crimes committed by officers, 66% support including community members in the investigation process of police misconduct, and 65% support making public a list of all complaints against Medford police officers and any disciplinary actions taken in response to those complaints. Only 40% of Medford residents supported making public a list of all weapons carried by each police patrol unit.

73%

SUPPORT ESTABLISHING A CIVILIAN REVIEW BOARD
OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

² Pew Research Center for the People & the Press (2020). Pew Research Center’s American Trends Panel Poll, Question 8 [31117509.00029]. Ipsos. Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.

Methodology

We sampled 12,500 residents from Medford and mailed letters to those individuals to invite them to take a survey online. The sample is weighted to ensure that it is representative of the population of Medford adult residents.

Each sampled individual was provided with a unique code that they could use to access the survey.³ Our sample was stratified by the racial/ethnic composition of census blocks to try to ensure a sufficient sample of residents of color. We determined that only 10,179 of these residents were eligible for the survey. Ultimately, we received valid responses from 483 Medford residents, for a response rate of 4.7%.

The weighting process proceeded in two stages. First, we calculated propensity score weights to ensure that the pool of respondents matched the profile of Medford adult residents (from the town’s resident file) according to age, party registration, and geography (which Ward they live in). A second stage of weighting used calibration raking to ensure that the sample was representative of Medford residents on gender, race/ethnicity, and education.



³ Due to an error with our mailing list, some invitations were sent to Medford residents who were under the age of 18. These individuals were removed from the sample after this error was identified.

About Tisch College

The only university-wide college of its kind, the **Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life** offers transformational student learning and service opportunities, conducts groundbreaking research on young people's civic and political participation, and forges innovative community partnerships. Its work is guided by two core beliefs: that communities, nations and the world are stronger, more prosperous, and more just when citizens actively participate in civic and democratic life; and that higher education has a responsibility to develop the next generation of active citizens.