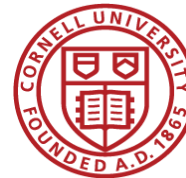# Campus Safety at Cornell University

Public Safety Advisory Committee
Qualitative Research Results

May 5, 2021

Research for:

Background

Intro to Southpaw Insights

What We Do

We help you understand what people think, feel, and do – so you can make smart decisions

How We Do It

- Drill down on attitudes
- Explore experiences
- Ideate solutions

Objectives & Methodology

Objective

Provide rich understanding of the experiences, sentiments, and opinions of a wide range of campus community members to help the PSAC evaluate and reimagine university safety and security protocols.

Total of 90 participants (out of 122 invitees)

74% participation rate

Twelve, 90-minute focus groups of 3-5 participants conducted via Zoom from April 5th-13th (n=50)

4 groups with students
5 groups with non-faculty staff
1 group with faculty
2 groups with CUPD officers

One asynchronous online discussion board conducted via Recollective from April 5th-April 9th (n=40)

25 students
13 non-faculty staff
2 faculty members

Incentive for all participants

$75 Visa e-gift card

Methodology

Using results from Cornell's PSAC quant survey, those who expressed interest in participating in discussions were invited to take a screener. In addition to scoping availability for scheduling, the screener gauged demographics, CUPD interactions, and campus security perceptions to recruit a cross-section of backgrounds, experiences, and attitudes. Separate outreach efforts were also deployed to engage with inclusion and workforce diversity groups as well as CUPD officers.

Executive Summary
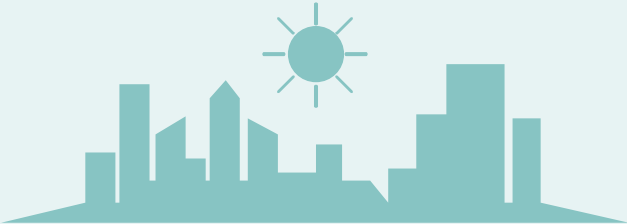
Key Takeaways

1

Overall, most of the community feels safe and is appreciative of the CUPD. The CUPD's presence and ability to quickly respond when need are highly valued.

2

However, there is deep concern about experiences where the CUPD has had biased responses. The CUPD is perceived to be a "friend of the community" for majority groups but much more aggressive toward students of color or other underrepresented minorities.

3

There are also concerns about officers being armed at all times as well as officers responding to mental health issues as part of their duties. The community would like to see concrete changes that will push Cornell forward as leading the charge toward better public safety policies.

Detailed Findings

Overall Impressions of Campus Safety

Although experiences around safety vary by group and circumstances, in general Cornell community members feel safe on central campus.

Across segments, participants mention feeling uneasy or vulnerable late at night and/or in the more remote, less populated parts of campus.

At those times/places, the presence of CUPD and their fast response times increase sense of security.

The Blue Lights enhance feelings of safety.

Some feel decreasing degrees of safety as they move away from central campus to Collegetown, Ithaca, and beyond

"I do feel safe on campus…when I do stay out past 9 pm…I would see CUPD vehicles…that certainly makes me feel safer…might be a little bit of a deterrent to people with bad intentions." – Asian male student

"There are some poorly lit areas where I'm kind of looking to make sure no one's following me at night, but other than that, I feel generally safe on campus." – Hispanic male student

"Blue lights…knowing that they're there and the CUPD is available for assistance just in case, it definitely helps." – White female student

"If you walk near Collegetown or go beyond…outside the campus, that's worrisome." – Asian female staff member

Community members reference disparate categories in which safety and security is seen as a concern.

Primary Safety Concerns

- **Mental and physical health emergencies**

  "We've had some employee issues that have happened in the building…one staff member who was dealing with a very significant mental health issue." – White female staff member

- **Rare but possible violent acts**

  "There's been multiple muggings…campus reports it really quickly…reasonable to be afraid of that. – Hispanic female student

  "Do [we] feel safe anywhere, especially in the skin that we're in?" - Black male staff member

- **Racialized intimidation or violence**

- **Sexual harassment and sexual assault**

  "I'm a white man, faculty member, I look at [campus] as an extension of my home, which is just off the campus…On the other hand, I really worry about my daughter. The chances of getting sexually assaulted on the campus are extremely high." – White male faculty member

- **Traffic safety**

  "The pedestrian-car-bike interactions on campus, the distracted driving, the distracted walking…I don't feel safe from accidentally hitting someone." – White female staff member
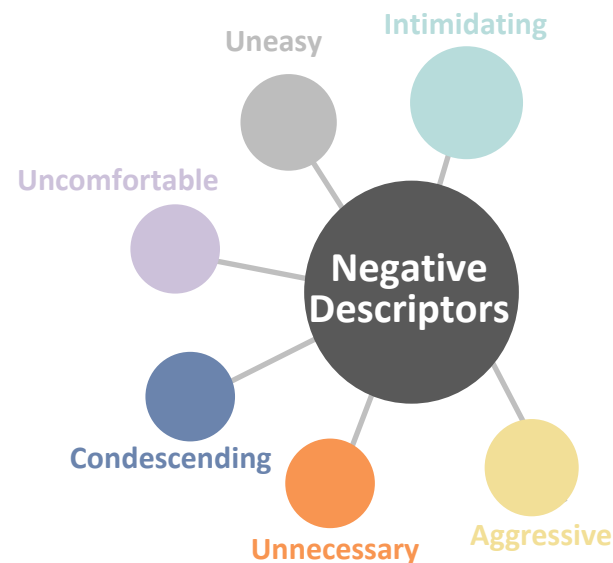
CUPD Perceptions

For the most part, the CUPD is perceived as being pleasant and moderate in behavior/demeanor. However, some view the officers negatively.

Positive Descriptors: Responsive, Courteous, Professional, Helpful, Caring, Kind, Friendly

"I feel comforted by their presence because it helps me know that if anything were to happen, I would have a very quick place to seek safety." – Black female student

"They come immediately…they're right there with me helping me walk through that situation…they have been extremely responsive." – White female staff member

Negative Descriptors: Uneasy, Intimidating, Uncomfortable, Condescending, Unnecessary, Aggressive

"CUPD seemed very scary and intimidating. Like I was the one being interviewed, even though I was just reporting someone blacking out." – Hispanic male student

"The way the CUPD shut down that party was so different than the way they shut down frat parties…they were way more aggressive. They had their hands on their guns…it was very clear that the police were responding differently to the party at the co-op…There are a lot of students of color who live in my co-op." – White female student

The CUPD is seen as a gentler force in relation to other law enforcement agencies, including Ithaca Police and Tompkins County Sheriff departments.

The community prefers to interact with CUPD versus other law enforcement

> *"It's way worse to be caught doing something by Ithaca police department than by CUPD…harsher, more likely call you on committing a crime." – White female student*

IPD and Sheriff are perceived as less welcoming

> *"We had a student a while ago who was found dead and that investigation sounded completely botched. They never quite figured out what happened…[CUPD] seemed out of their league to a detective investigation." – Asian female staff member*

Certain incidents are considered out of CUPD's league

> *[CUPD] does a lot of things better…I know they take a lot of crap from their partners in law enforcement…telling them they're not real cops. – Black male staff member*

Some see CUPD as being an "easy" or "cushy" policing job

Despite overall positive perceptions of the CUPD as a campus safety presence, some do not feel comfortable reaching out to them when trouble arises.

Students of color feel apprehensive or fearful

White students see the CUPD as a last resort

Staff members – particularly those who work with students – first explore what else they can do besides calling CUPD

Fear of escalation, especially for racialized populations

Prospect of time-consuming/frustrating red tape and paperwork

"There are cases where we feel like the police shouldn't have to be involved or they're not particularly the best at handling these [mental health] situations, but…we are expected to call them and having that expectation on me makes me feel dreadful." – Asian male student

"I tried calling my RA at first and my RA suggested that I call the police and I was feeling a bit uncomfortable doing that…I've also had a bad experience with the police before coming to Cornell. I was kind of reminded of that incident and I was a bit scared." – Hispanic male student

"I don't call CUPD as a first response because I know they have a gun and I work with mostly black and brown students…I think that would escalate any conflict, just by their presence." – Asian female staff member

"The school has a vested interest in its reputation…doesn't really deal with stuff in the right way…most of the time nothing happens. I know people who've dealt with sexual assault, who have decided not to report for that reason." – White female student

CUPD is seen as trying to be both "a friend of the community" and an armed, sworn police force – with mixed success.

Build strategic partnerships

"It's kind of nice having a dedicated police force for Cornell...it allows them to really specialize on a college campus versus having the Ithaca police that mainly deals with the city and surrounding area." – White male student

"Their approach tends to be a bit more gentle compared to some of the other agencies I've had experience working with." - Asian female staff member

"With CUPD, there's the understanding that they're dealing with students on a college campus...they might be a little bit more understanding for minor offenses." – White female student

"The police aren't friends...especially among the African-American community, CUPD isn't a friend or someone you want to encounter daily." – Black male student

"Are they trying to be like a regular police department with guns and intensity, or are they trying to be like a friend of the community? It seems like they're trying to walk the line...for some students it works, but for others, I know it doesn't." – White female student

"Switching between their role as...friendly guy who can help...Then sworn officers of the court with guns and can make you go to jail...the switching between those two things is really complicated...can feel deceived...betrayed. – White male faculty member

Note: Photos shown were uploaded by discussion board participants when asked to post a meme that captures their impression of CUPD

Across segments of the Cornell community, members agree that there is a tense relationship between CUPD and minority students, fostered by experiences on and off campus.

"[In] Ujamaa…they don't feel comfortable calling the CUPD to diffuse a situation because they don't trust them…instead of the police following the drunk people who happened to be Caucasian, they pursued my friends who were sober…they had just finished prelims." - Black female student

"Just their presence on campus makes a lot of students feel uneasy and uncomfortable, especially students of color…can feel very, very uncomfortable around CUPD." – White female student

"If we're having alumni events where trustees are in town, police are there, but they're in suits…we've tried for student events asking them to be in more plain clothes…the answer is usually a no…so it's interesting because I know that's happening for certain communities of people where we're not having this intimidating police presence, but for others that's not happening…if you're paying for a service to protect a community at an event, it needs to be culturally competent…the attendees of that event feel like they're safe and that [CUPD] isn't another threat to them." – White male staff member

"Black or African- American students get really, really uncomfortable…a good amount of my peers have stated that they avoiding areas that see a large amount of police because it makes them uncomfortable. – Hispanic female student

"I have a lot of friends who aren't from America and none of them would ever talk to CUPD…if English, isn't your first language…not only are you a person of color, but you're also not American, the whole idea of CUPD…doesn't feel like they're there to serve you." – White female student

"There were tensions between an undocumented student and a white American student, and the police did not handle that very well." – Asian male student

Although CUPD officers also recognize the strained relationship between the department and Black students, some express that "it's a two-way street".

"I would really love to get out and engage more with the community...African- American students do not want us in their dorms. They've made it very clear and that's really tough to build a relationship with somebody who doesn't want to build a relationship. So it is a two-way street." – CUPD Officer

"Leadership from within their dormitory who may have the same viewpoints, but are open-minded to say, 'Let's stop this. It isn't fixing anything. Let's try to have a conversation.'" – CUPD Officer

"We've got to have some honest conversations and...everybody's got to come to the table, wanting to listen and wanting to make changes." – CUPD Officer
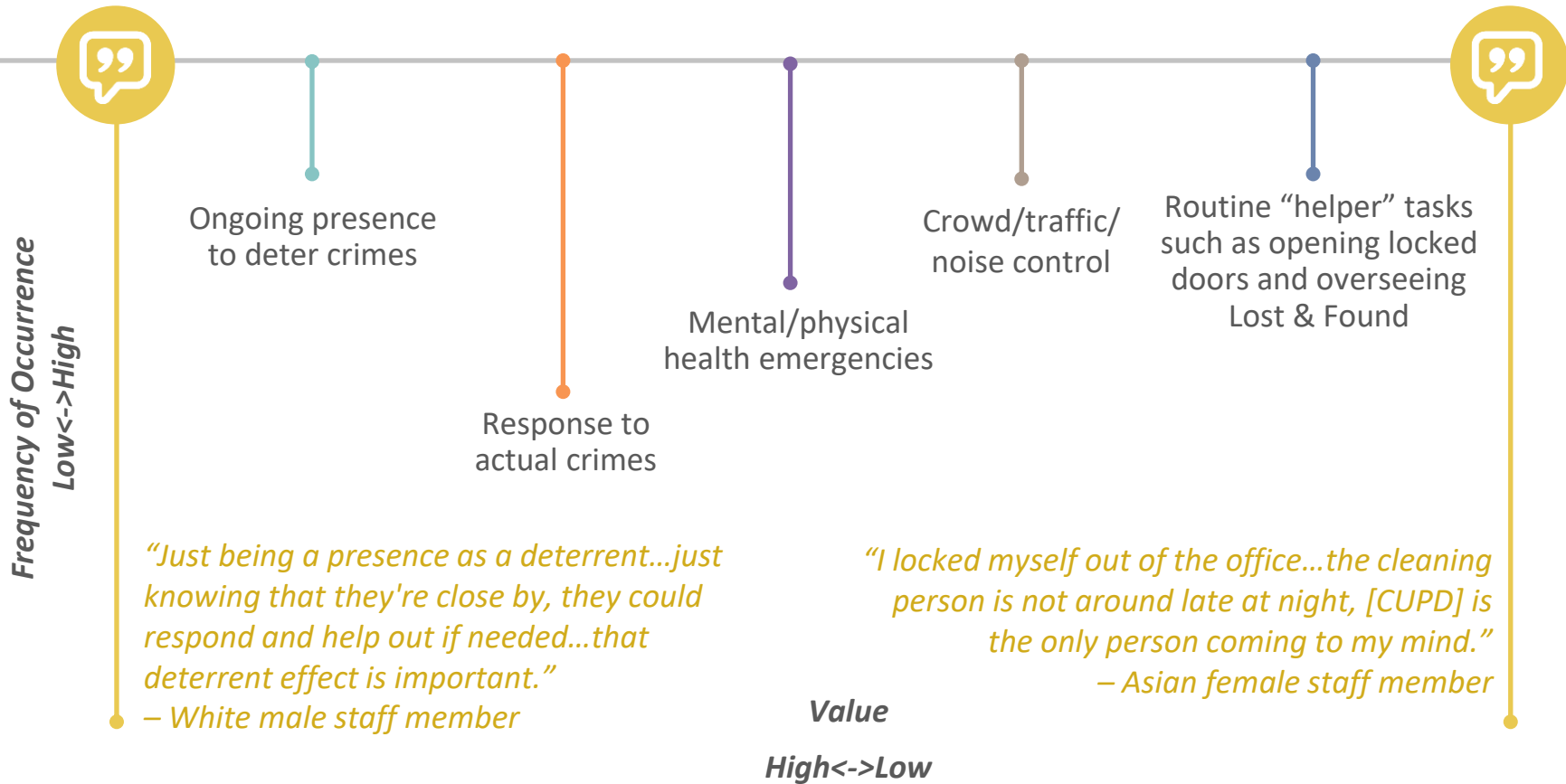
"These students are being shaped...there are faculty and staff that have a lot of influence with certain student organizations...what I'm not seeing is an adult in the room trying to explain how we operate." – CUPD Officer

"Just give us the chance to prove or disprove on our own actions. Give us the respect that we're giving you. And don't judge us based on your past. I know you can't take that away, but we have the opportunity to make those connections and possibly steer you a different way and see us in a different light." – CUPD Officer

"Launching of the survey and these forums...the messaging is, 'I am confident that the Cornell police are anti- racist, but...' And all you get is this big giant, 'but', and so it doesn't exude confidence that we are actually operating on the up and up...there are aspects of this administration that really does question how we're operating." – CUPD Officer

CUPD Duties & Responsibilities

The Cornell community depends on CUPD for a wide range of duties, some of which are only designated to the department due to 24/7 availability.

Frequency of Occurrence
Low<->High

Ongoing presence to deter crimes

Response to actual crimes

Mental/physical health emergencies

Crowd/traffic/ noise control

Routine "helper" tasks such as opening locked doors and overseeing Lost & Found

"Just being a presence as a deterrent…just knowing that they're close by, they could respond and help out if needed…that deterrent effect is important."
– White male staff member

"I locked myself out of the office…the cleaning person is not around late at night, [CUPD] is the only person coming to my mind."
– Asian female staff member

Value

High<->Low

Mundane responsibilities, coupled with restraints on certain duties such as issuing search warrants, further mixed feelings of whether CUPD should be a security unit versus a sworn police force.

Many agree that some responsibilities could be better handled by other professionals, particularly when it comes to mental health crises.

Wellness checks/mental health emergencies

- Should handled by trained mental health professionals, but they are not on call 24/7
- CUPD officers point to extensive training and possibilities of escalation as reasons to respond

Physical health emergencies

- Should be handled by medics/EMTs

Cornell rules enforcement

- Should be handled by staff/administration

General help

- Should be handled by unarmed security/custodial staff

> *"Police officers are trained in responding to mental health [but] they can't be a cop and be a nurse all at the same time…it may be too much to ask of someone."* – Hispanic female staff member

> *"I had a student mental health crisis occur in my building and it was the same day that we had some vandalism occur…it was hard for the officer to switch mindsets…their tone was a lot more confrontational than the student in mental distress could handle."* – Black female staff member

> *"We attend a lot of mental health training…it's no secret mental health is a huge issue at Cornell. Maybe if the faculty and the students were aware of how much time and effort we actually put into that topic, it might make them more understanding of why we are responding to these calls and making decisions that we do."* – CUPD Officer

There are mixed opinions on the armament of CUPD, but most converge that not all officers need to be armed at all times.

Most participants feel that to function in many of the roles given, the CUPD need not be armed…

"Having an officer with a gun and ready to use it for a nonviolent situation causes discomfort…fragmenting and lessening the responsibility of each specific department [so that] Cornell students would not be having interactions with the ones who are prepared for the most violent crimes." – White male student

…backing up arguments to re-assign some of those duties to other CU staff groups

"If there's an active shooter, I would want people on campus that have guns to be able to respond to that." – White male staff member

Most community members want some (though fewer) CUPD officers to be armed in case of an emergency

"A police officer was in an SA meeting when they were trying to discuss disarmament of the CUPD on campus… [CUPD] thought it'd be a good idea for them to go into their space and explain why they should have guns…that was very tasteless."- Black female student

Clashes over the topic have further strained the relationship between CUPD and students

"The narrative is being pushed by adolescents who don't have quite the life experience yet to see why we have to carry guns…if somebody were to come on campus to cause harm…we have to be able to protect the community." – CUPD Officer

Future Campus Safety Policies

Community members see many possible changes that could be made to improve safety policies.

Primary Initiatives

- Add resources for other departments while continuing to fund the CUPD

- Reallocate resources to move duties from CUPD to other unarmed CU staff

- Hire mental health specialists available 24/7

- Funding to recruit and retain a diversified CUPD with more female, BIPOC and LGBTQ officers

- Create more opportunities for CUPD to engage as equal members of the community

Implementation Considerations

- Choose to make CU a leader in this space — make positive, real changes — not superficial gestures

- Keep conversations going, act with authenticity and be transparent

- Connect and involve entire community in decision-making

- Provide data to help guide decisions based on empirical evidence

- Keep the community's needs first and top of mind

Thank You