

Majority satisfied with police

But police commission does not fare as well, poll finds

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The majority of respondents rate policing in the city as average to very good, but see the police commission in a less favourable light, according to a StarPhoenix and Global Television survey.

The explanation may be that recent, negative publicity, such as the harassment investigation of Chief Russell Sabo, is viewed as a police commission or a management problem -- as opposed to an on-the-street policing issue, said John MacIntosh, a senior associate with H. J. Linnen Associates.

The firm includes marketing research organization Sigma Analytics, which conducted the poll.

"When you ask the public to rate things, you would hope that there was a positive view on something like policing," said MacIntosh.

The poll's intent is to assess the public's attitude toward municipal issues -- the police, mayoralty candidates, the casino, mosquito spraying and the south downtown. The results are considered accurate within plus or minus 4.0 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

This report is based on 602 interviews conducted by telephone.

The poll found that city residents seem neutral to moderately positive on policing in Saskatoon, with the largest single group of respondents -- 36.5 per cent -- providing a rating of "average."

Nearly another one-third, or 31.7 per cent, rated the effectiveness of policing as "good," while just over nine per cent said it was "very good."

Only 15.6 per cent of respondents described the effectiveness of policing as "poor," while another seven per cent said it was "very poor."

"It's just one of those anomalies, perhaps, that the public doesn't view it quite as badly as perhaps maybe the press might," said MacIntosh.

However, the police commission didn't fare as well, with most respondents describing the job it has been doing in the "middling to poor" range. While just over 35 per cent were neutral on the subject, more than 40 per cent indicated the commission has not been doing a good job.

In addition, the number who strongly disagree the commission's performance is good outweighs the number who strongly agree by almost three to one.

"It's almost the converse to the effectiveness of policing," noted MacIntosh.

Still, there's no doubt the Saskatoon Police Service has been plagued with controversy in recent years. The service made headlines when a Native man, Darrell Night, complained he was ejected from a police cruiser on the outskirts of the city on Jan. 28, 2000, when the temperature had dipped to a frigid -22 C.

Soon after, the bodies of two other aboriginal men who had frozen to death were discovered in the same area.

Night's complaint sparked the creation of an RCMP task force and led to unlawful confinement convictions against constables Dan Hatchen and Ken Munson, who later lost their jobs. They began serving eight-month jail sentences earlier this year.

In February, the province also announced a public inquiry into the freezing death of 17-year-old Neil Stonechild, whose body was found in 1990 on the edge of Saskatoon. That inquiry will be held this fall.

And, earlier this month, the treatment of aboriginal people by Saskatoon police came under scrutiny once again, when Sabo confirmed that police abandoned an aboriginal woman outside city limits in 1976. Justice Minister Eric Cline has asked the RCMP to investigate Sabo's revelation.

Stan Goertzen, president of the Saskatoon City Police Association (SCPA), said he was surprised to hear the survey results were so positive regarding the effectiveness of policing.

"I guess I've just been at the centre of this for too long," he said.

The SCPA has gone on record saying morale at the service is low. A police union vote recently indicated 90 per cent of its officers have no confidence in Sabo, while 95 per cent have no confidence in the board of police commissioners.

"I do know that all the police officers in Saskatoon are going out and they are working their hardest. I'm just amazed every day that everyone still goes out and they work hard," Goertzen said. "And I think that speaks volumes."

In an interview, Sabo said that while the police have made some "historical mistakes," the service is dedicated to working with the community and healing old wounds. He said a "customer satisfaction survey" conducted by the service late last year showed "a very good response from people.

"I think they're similar results to what you had. I think maybe ours might have been a little bit higher, but of course things fluctuate on any kind of census," Sabo said.

"I think what that is saying to me is, generally speaking, the people in this city recognize that our members are out there and they're providing a good service to the people. And they are maintaining a professional approach, and doing the right things to make this a better community, where we can all live in safety.

"So I'm quite sure that a year from now, (if) you do that survey again, you'll find it will be even better. Because we're trying to move forward and recognize where we've made our mistakes, and find ways that we can build on our successes and eliminate those weaknesses that we have," he said.

In terms of the police commission, Sabo said it has done "a fairly remarkable job of being supportive, as has council, in getting us resourcing in the last 18 months for sure.

"They're the ones that have said, 'we listen to the people.' The people told us we wanted change, and they're the ones that have been the impetus behind that," he said.

The police commission has been criticized for its handling of a harassment investigation of Sabo. He was reinstated last month following a leave of absence, after his secretary filed 42 complaints against him. Five were deemed to have merit by an independent investigator.

The drawn-out process regarding Sabo's harassment investigation and reinstatement was handled poorly, Coun. Don Atchison recently said. The commission should have been more forthcoming and made a quicker decision to limit the damage to the force's morale, he said.

"I had thought the board of police commissioners was actually doing good work," said Mayor Jim Maddin, a member of the police commission.

"The recent thing with the chief and all of that, I'm sure, hasn't sat well with some people. There has been a lot of complaining and a lot of comments with respect to the length of time that that investigation took.

"But really, in terms of doing diligence and seeing the due process was delivered, it just took that long. Plain and simple. And the police commission was no party to over-extending that process. Believe me, we wanted it done ASAP and as quick as possible, but that's how long it took," Maddin said.

Those paying property taxes were more likely, by nearly three to one, to "strongly disagree" (20.9 per cent) the commission has been doing a good job than those who don't pay taxes (7.3 per cent).

"It's the taxpayers who are footing the bill. As homeowners or business owners in the city, people just tend to pay closer attention to what goes on in civic affairs, historically, than non-homeowners," MacIntosh said.

Leanne Bellegarde Daniels, chair of the board of police commissioners, said over the last couple of years, the commission has become more familiar to citizens than ever before.

She said if people are feeling confident in the effectiveness of policing in the city, "I think the commission is heartened by that.

"Because, after all, the commission is responsible for the strategic direction and the policy for the police service," said Bellegarde Daniels.

"So it's hard to sort of be grossly concerned by the findings. But certainly as a police commission, we are striving -- and are still somewhat in our infancy as a board in the last couple of years with all the changes -- to be known to and be responsive to the community about the things that they would like to see happen for the police service."

(Sigma Analytics is a Saskatchewan marketing research organization, a division of the consulting firm H. J. Linnen Associates, with offices at 1103 CN Tower, Saskatoon, 931-6145.)

STARPHOENIX-GLOBAL TELEVISION POLL

CITY POLICE

1. Do you agree or disagree that the Saskatoon Police Commission has been doing a good job?

17.1 per cent -- strongly disagree

24.1 per cent -- disagree

35.2 per cent -- neutral

17.0 per cent -- agree

6.5 per cent -- strongly agree

2. How would you rate the effectiveness of policing in Saskatoon?

7.0 per cent -- very poor

15.6 per cent -- poor

36.5 per cent -- average

31.7 per cent -- good

9.3 per cent -- very good

Ran with fact box "StarPhoenix-Global Television Poll" which has been appended to the story.

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