



How Residents View Policing in Somerville

SURVEY REPORT

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Executive Summary

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

During October and November, 2020 we surveyed a random sample of more than 600 Somerville residents to understand their experiences with and views towards the Somerville police.

- About one-in-four Somerville residents report having had at least one negative experience with the Somerville police. Just under half of Somerville residents have had at least one positive experience involving the Somerville police.
- About half of Somerville residents are satisfied with the Somerville police and 79% say that the Somerville 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-fifth of Somerville residents of color are dissatisfied with the police and nearly 30% say that the Somerville police make them feel unsafe.
- Somerville residents perceive inequalities in how residents are treated based on race/ethnicity. While 80% of Somerville residents think that the Somerville police treat white residents somewhat or very fairly, less than 50% say that the Somerville police treat Black or Hispanic residents fairly.
- These perceptions can have important consequences. For example, more than one-third of Somerville residents of color did not indicate that they would feel comfortable calling the Somerville police if they needed help.
- There is overwhelming support among Somerville residents for the creation of a Civilian Review Board to oversee policing. 81% of residents want to see the creation of such a board and only 6% are opposed.
- A clear majority of Somerville 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 Somerville residents think the police should not be allowed to use a variety of tactics, including choke holds (7% support), tear gas (18%), rubber bullets (25%), impact weapons (29%), and firearms (31%).

Introduction

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

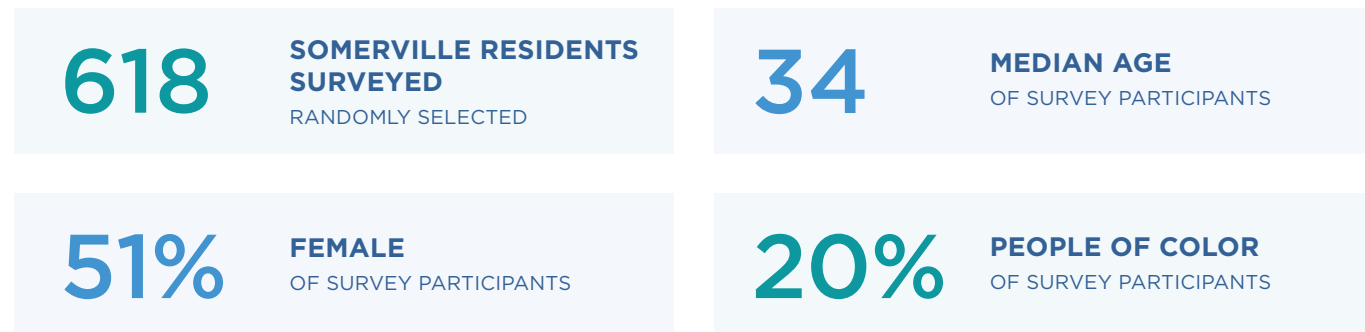
The survey was sponsored by the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life and is being provided as a community service to the City of Somerville to help inform discussions about policing in the community. Residents were asked to tell us about their own experiences with Somerville police, their perceptions of Somerville 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 618 Somerville 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, 80% of respondents identified as white, 2% were African American, 6% 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 34; 30% of respondents are between the ages of 18 and 29 while 48% are between 30 and 44 years old, 16% are 45-64 years old, and 6% are 65 or older. 51% of respondents identified as female. In terms of education, 45% reported having a bachelor's degree and an additional 46% 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 Somerville population with regard to race/ethnicity, as well as age, sex, education, party registration, and ward. All results presented below incorporate these weights.



Residents' Experiences with Somerville Police

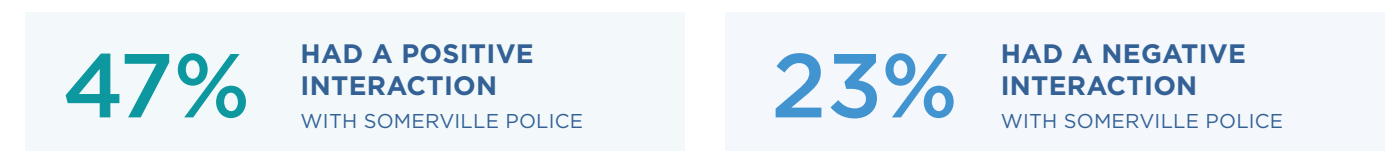
In separate questions, we asked each respondent whether they had ever had any negative interactions with the Somerville Police and whether they had ever had any positive interactions with the Somerville Police.

47% of respondents indicated that they had at least one positive interaction with the Somerville Police. The vast majority of these comments make note of examples of Somerville officers demonstrating politeness, professionalism, helpfulness, and cooperativeness. For example, one respondent wrote, "any time I have been in situations where they have been called, or were simply working security, they have always been pleasant and professional."

While fewer residents could cite a negative experience with the Somerville Police, it is still the case that 23% of Somerville residents has had at least one negative interaction with the Somerville Police. This includes about one-in-four white Somerville residents and about one-in-five Somerville residents of color. Negative experiences with Somerville police tended to revolve around a few different themes. For example, roughly one-third of negative interactions involved instances where the individual found an officer to be involved in intimidating behavior or taking unwarranted actions. About 30% of those who had a negative interaction gave examples of officers acting in unprofessional and dismissive ways. For example, many respondents noted incidents when officers "berated" or "cursed" at them during a misunderstanding about instructions. Two other common themes were that Somerville officers showed a lack of respect for the community as well as some examples where people felt that there was police misconduct and a lack of accountability.

On a general level, many of these negative experiences that Somerville residents reported were reflected by one respondent's summary: "most of my dealings are of this nature: a feeling of us against them." Several respondents expressed feeling intimidated by the Somerville police officers and fearful of retaliation.

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



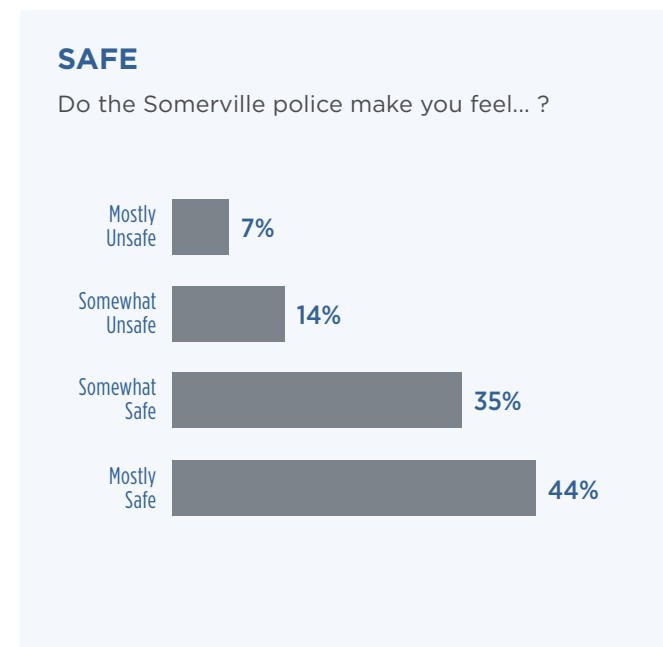
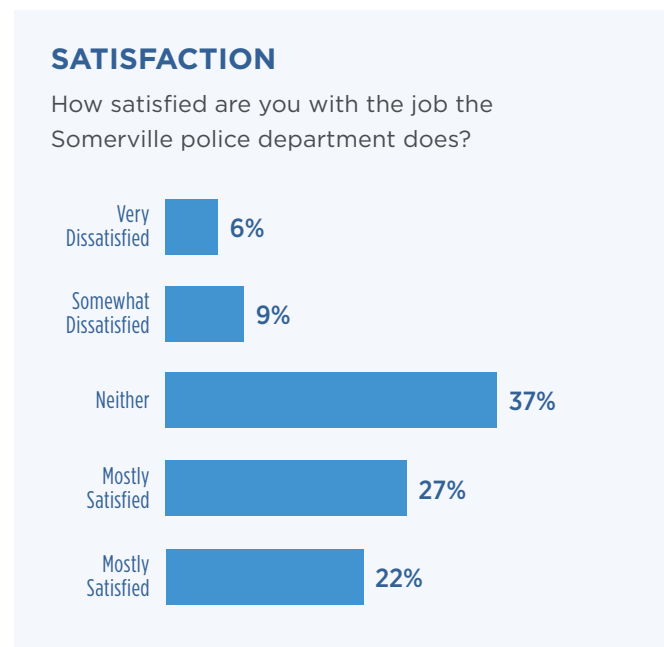
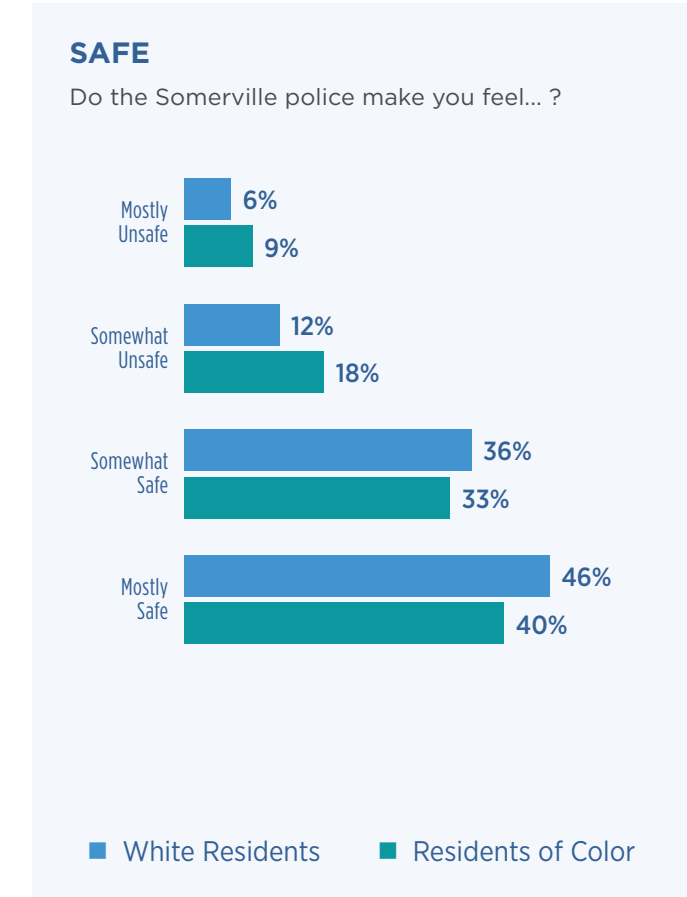
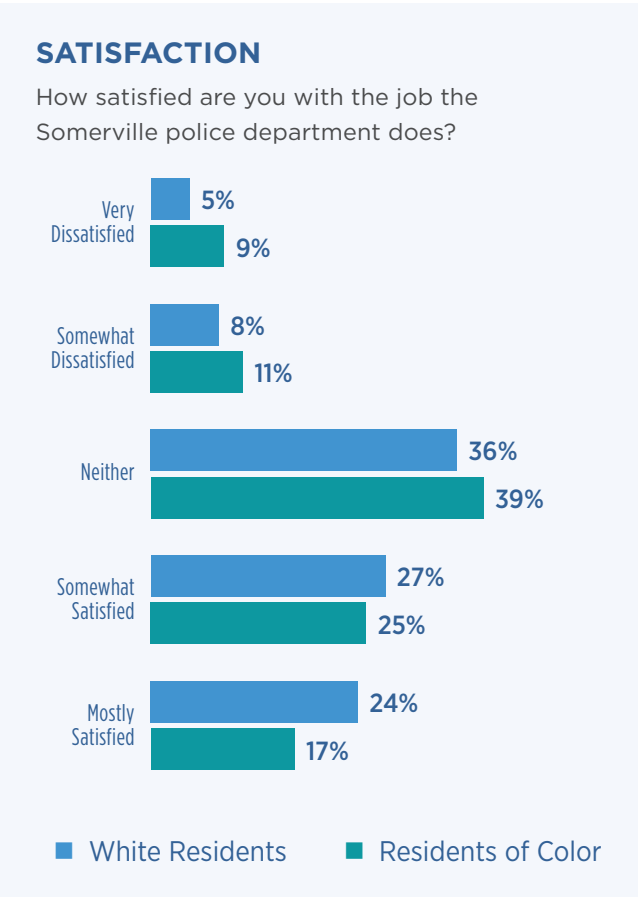
Residents' Perceptions of Somerville Police

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

About half of Somerville residents (49%) report that they are either somewhat or very satisfied with the job the Somerville police department does and 79% of Somerville residents say that the Somerville police make them feel either somewhat or mostly safe. 15% of Somerville residents report that they are dissatisfied with the Somerville police and 21% said that the Somerville police make them feel mostly or somewhat unsafe.

To provide some context, we can compare the question about how safe the Somerville 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, the findings from Somerville are in line with this national benchmark.

However, on these questions, we do see some notable differences between white residents and residents of color. For example, 20% of Somerville residents of color indicate that they are dissatisfied with the Somerville



police while 42% say that they are satisfied. By comparison, 51% of white residents are satisfied with the job the Somerville police department does while just 13% are dissatisfied. Likewise, Somerville residents of color are more likely to report that the Somerville police make them feel unsafe—27% of residents of color report feeling unsafe compared to just 18% of white residents. However, 73% of Somerville residents of color still report that the Somerville police make them feel somewhat or mostly safe.

We also asked Somerville residents about their perceptions of how the Somerville police treat residents from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. 80% say that the Somerville 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. Less than half of Somerville residents think that the Somerville police treat these groups somewhat or very fairly. This is somewhat lower than results from a national survey conducted in 2016, when 50% of Americans said that racial minorities were treated fairly by their local police.¹ Notably, in response to a separate question, one-in-five residents of color noted that they have at some point felt discriminated against by Somerville police because of their race or ethnicity.

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?" 72% 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.

What Residents Want From Policing in Somerville

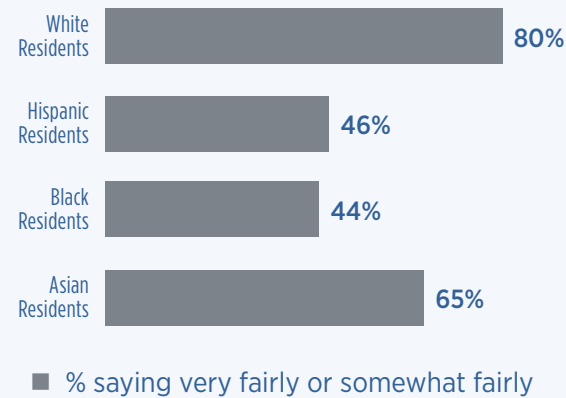
Residents were asked “Which of the following police tactics and weaponry do you believe Somerville police should be allowed to use to ensure public safety?” They were provided a list of potential tactics and weaponry and allowed to select as many from this list as they wanted.

There is a clear hierarchy of tactics when it comes to public support among Somerville 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 tasers and pepper spray, residents are much more divided, with just under half supporting each of these tactics.

For several additional tactics, there is a distinct lack of widespread support. Only about 30% of Somerville residents think that the Somerville police should be allowed to use firearms or impact weapons (such as batons). Only about one-fourth of Somerville residents support the use of K9 dog bite-and-hold or rubber bullets to ensure public safety and 18% support the use of tear gas. Choke-holds were overwhelmingly unpopular—just 7% of Somerville residents indicated that the Somerville police should be allowed to use choke holds.

TREATMENT

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

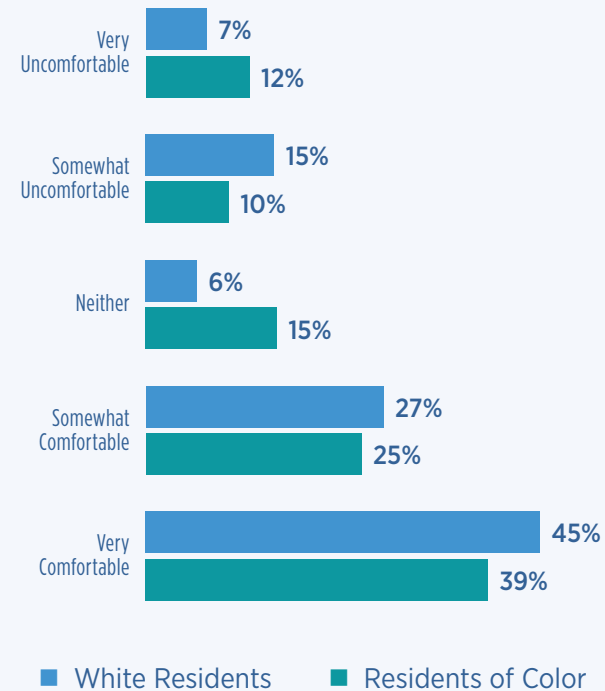


82% WHITES FEEL SAFE
HOW THE SOMERVILLE POLICE MAKE THEM FEEL

73% PEOPLE OF COLOR FEEL SAFE
HOW THE SOMERVILLE POLICE MAKE THEM FEEL

SEEK HELP

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

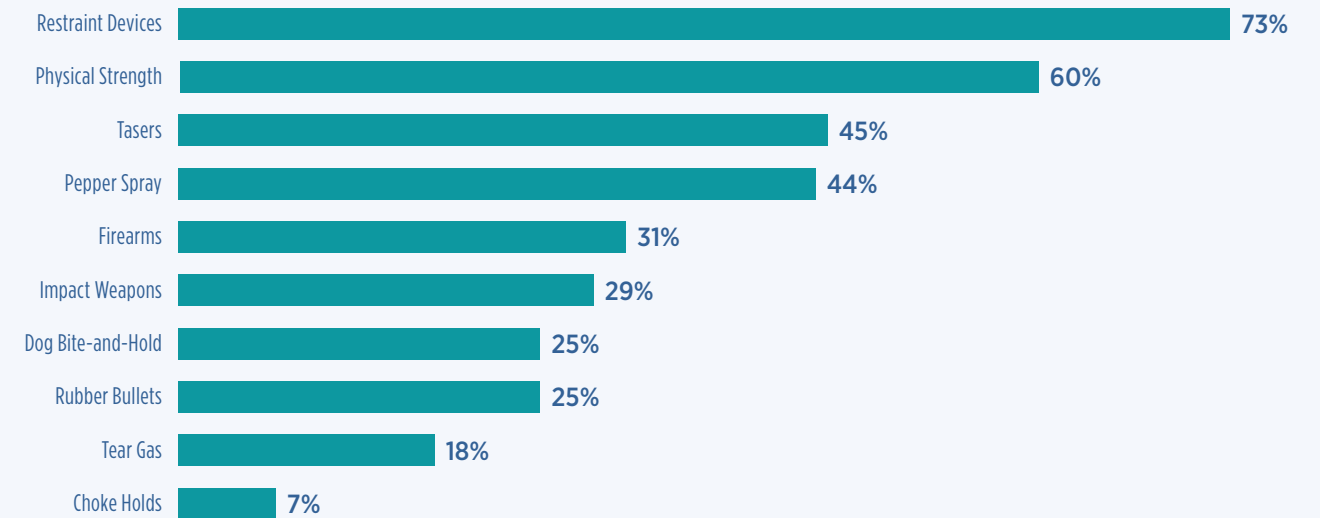


said that they would feel somewhat or very comfortable calling the police if they needed help, but just 64% of residents of color felt the same way. 22% of Somerville residents report that they would feel uncomfortable calling the police if they needed help.

We also asked residents whether they would know how to file a complaint if they had a negative experience with a Somerville police officer and also whether they would feel comfortable filing such a complaint. Just 30% reported that they would know how to do this. Even if the process for filing a complaint was clear, many Somerville residents would not feel comfortable doing so. 57% of Somerville 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 likely to feel very uncomfortable filing a complaint—16% said that they would feel very uncomfortable doing so, compared to 8% of white residents who said the same. This discomfort was driven mostly by Black and Latinx residents—about one-in-five from these groups reported that they would feel very uncomfortable filing a complaint.

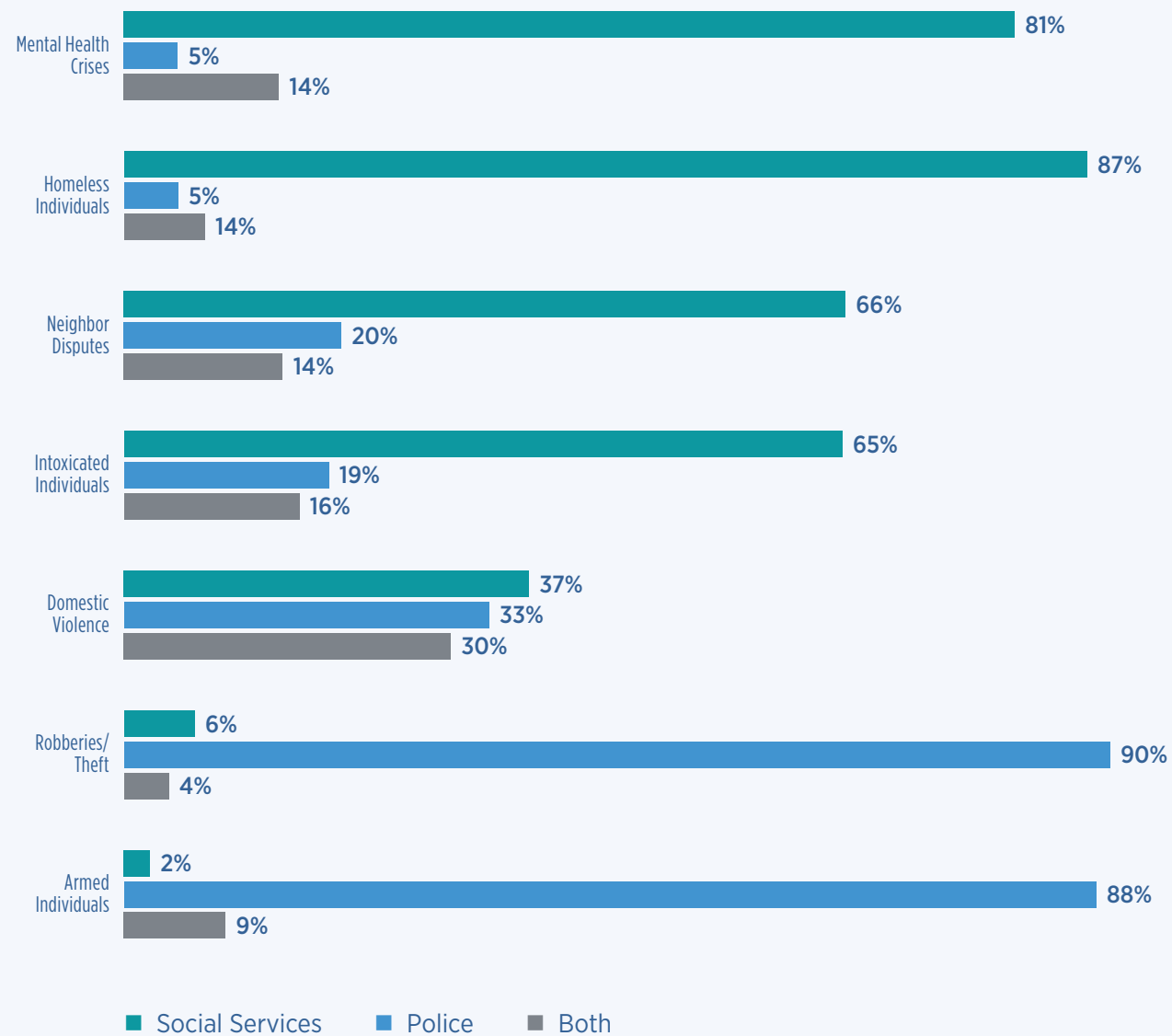
TACTICS

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



RESPONDERS

Who should respond to the situation?



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

When asked about a situation involving “domestic violence and abuse,” about one-third of Somerville residents said that only the police should respond, about the same percentage said that only social service workers should respond, and roughly the same share said that both police and social services should respond.

Respondents were also asked about funding for the Somerville Police Department. After being told how much of the Somerville 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. Just 15% of Somerville residents want to see police funding increased. A majority—55%—expressed a preference for funding to the police to be somewhat or greatly decreased. One-third thought that funding should be kept at its current level.

A majority of Somerville 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

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

Somerville residents are overwhelmingly in favor of establishing a Civilian Review Board to oversee the Somerville Police Department. 81% of Somerville residents support establishing such a board and just 6% oppose it; 13% were not sure. The substantial support for a civilian review board is consistent with, though slightly higher than, national polling, which shows that about 75% of Americans support this type of oversight.

We also asked Somerville 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. More than two-thirds of Somerville residents indicated that the Civilian Review Board should have the power to investigate “allegations of excessive force and abuse” as well as any police shootings. A large 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 53% of Somerville residents said that the board should have the power to “set policies for policing” while 46% thought the board should have the power to fire police officers.

Many Somerville residents did not think the Civilian Review Board should have power when it comes to other 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 23% 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. 75% support making public the details of the department’s internal process in addressing violations of conduct and crimes committed by officers, 67% support including community members in the investigation process of police misconduct, and 70% support making public a list of all complaints against Somerville police officers and any disciplinary actions taken in response to those complaints. 47% of Somerville residents supported making public a list of all weapons carried by each police patrol unit.

81%

SUPPORT ESTABLISHING A CIVILIAN REVIEW BOARD
OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

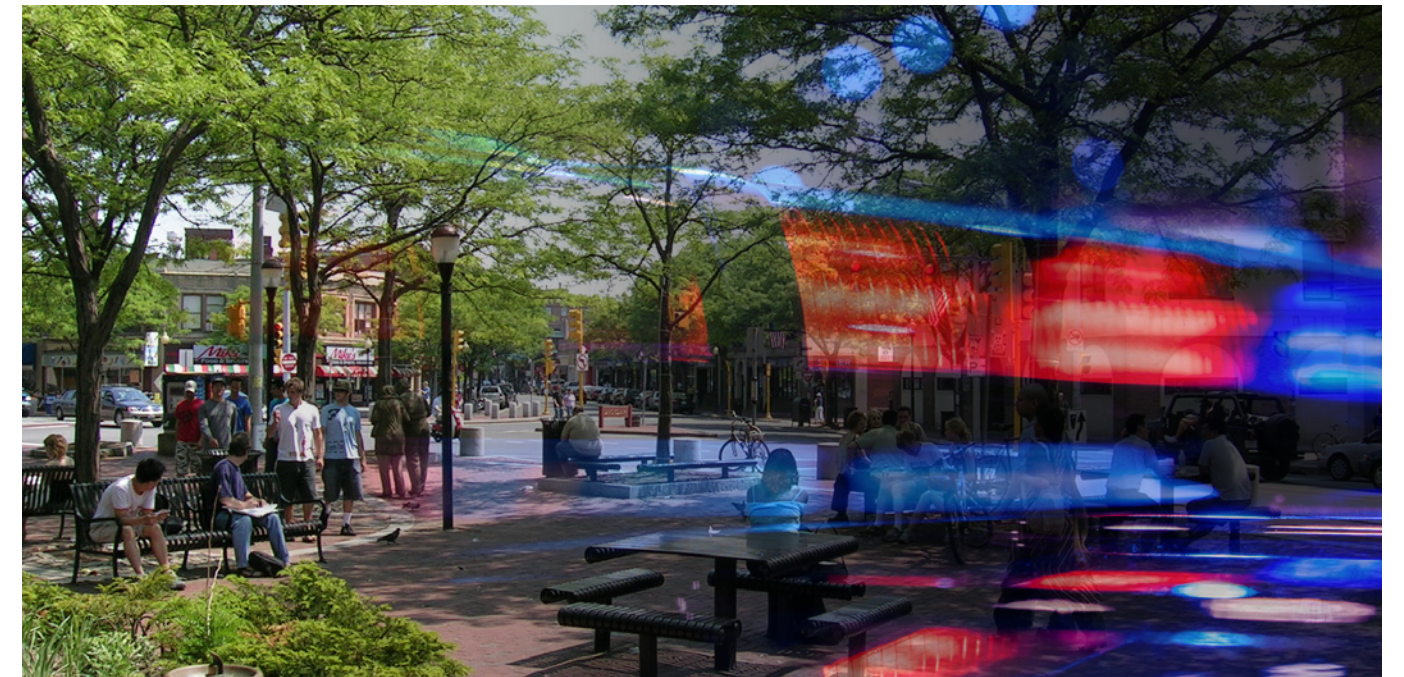
2. Pew Research Center for the People & the Press (2020). Pew Research Center’s American Trends Panel Poll, Question 8 [31117509.00029]. Ipsos. Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.

Methodology

We sampled 12,500 residents from Somerville 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 Somerville adult residents.

Each sampled individual was provided with a unique code that they could use to access the survey. Our sample was stratified by the racial/ethnic composition of census blocks to try to ensure a sufficient sample of residents of color. It was ultimately determined that only 11,153 of these residents were eligible for the survey. Ultimately, we received valid responses from 618 Somerville adult residents, for a response rate of 5.5%.

The weighting process proceeded in two stages. First, we calculated propensity score weights to ensure that the pool of respondents matched the profile of Somerville 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 Somerville residents on gender, race/ethnicity, and education.



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.