



**CORTLAND COUNTY  
SHERIFF'S OFFICE  
COMMUNITY SURVEY  
2020-2021**

**A response to  
Executive Order 203:  
NY State Police Reform and Reinvention Collaborative**

## INTRODUCTION

On June 12, 2020, New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo issued *Executive Order 203: New York State Police Reform and Reinvention Collaborative* (hereinafter EO 203), which directs local law enforcement agencies to review and revise policies, and create plans to address race-based issues, systemic inequalities, and foster trust in the community. In Cortland County, Sheriff Mark Helms has employed a number of tactics to proactively examine current policies and procedures.

In August 2020, Sheriff Helms enlisted the services of SUNY Cortland Assistant Professor of Criminology in the Sociology/ Anthropology department and Faculty Associate to Africana Studies, Dr. Mary Cannito-Coville, to formally survey County residents about their perceptions of and experiences with the Sheriff's Office and its deputies.

This report is an analysis of the data collected from the survey by Dr. Cannito-Coville.

## METHODS

A main task in this research project was to develop a comprehensive and empirically-sound survey which could be administered properly within the time constraints of EO 203, safely during a global pandemic, and with minimal internal funding.

Participants were selected using a randomized sampling method of all households in Cortland County. Prior research indicates that this method nearly eliminates sampling bias and allows researchers to capture a representation of the community which can be extrapolated to the larger population. After receiving Institutional Review Board approval from SUNY Cortland, an introductory letter was sent to 750 households with a goal of 382 responses. This number was calculated following Cochran's sample size formula and given a U.S. Census population estimate of 47,581 people in the County, with a confidence interval of 95% and a margin of error of 5%.

In total, 315 surveys were completed; 296 electronic surveys were submitted, 17 paper copy surveys were returned, and 2 surveys were recorded verbally via phone. This number of completed surveys provided a confidence level of 90% with a margin of error of 5%.

The introductory letter invited one member of selected households to complete the survey anonymously by entering a link to access an electronic version of the survey via Select Survey software. The use of an electronic survey aimed to increase participant demographic diversity in terms of race, age, and income. This method also cut costs by reducing postage for returning a paper copy of the survey. Participants preferring a paper copy of the survey were given a phone number or email address to use to contact Dr. Cannito-Coville and request a paper copy be mailed to their household. Once

returned, Dr. Cannito-Coville input data from the hard copy. The option to have a paper copy mailed to participants increased access and therefore the likelihood of participation from those with limited access to or literacy with the internet.

Initial letters inviting residents to participate were mailed on December 7, 2020. Participants were given approximately 21 days to complete the survey with a return date of December 31, 2020. The cost of printing the initial survey letter was funded by the Chair of the Sociology/ Anthropology Department, Dr. Sharon Steadman. Funding for the initial postage was provided by Sheriff Helms. After a lower than desired response rate during the initial period, a postcard was mailed on January 7, 2021 asking participants who did not participate to do so by January 22, 2021. The cost of printing the postcards was covered by Dr. Cannito-Coville. Postage for the follow-up mailer was provided by Dean of the School of Arts & Sciences at SUNY Cortland, Dr. Bruce Mattingly. Surveys continued to be received until January 29, 2021. Quantitative data was analyzed using Excel and qualitative data was coded and analyzed using NVivo software. Any potential information given by participants which could reveal their identity was de-identified in order to maintain anonymity of participants.

As with any study, there were limitations which should be acknowledged. The most challenging parts of conducting this survey were balancing time constraints and lack of external funds to conduct the survey.

Time presented a constraint for this study due to a condensed timeframe for compiling final reports for EO 203 by April 1, 2021. Furthermore, the global health pandemic due to COVID-19 provided additional challenges for survey execution. Safety concerns limited our ability to follow-up in person with participants to increase response rate. Moreover, some surveys sent to student housing and seasonal homes were returned as there were no residents at the time indicating a potentially lower than desired response for these residents.

Several participants called the number provided to inquire if the survey was a scam phishing for information. The follow-up postcard included a number for the Sheriff's office so that participants could seek additional verification. Additionally, some participants expressed frustration with accessing the survey, likely from entering the web address incorrectly.

During the research period we fielded multiple calls from residents who were not randomly selected for the survey but wanted to participate. These residents were directed to voice their concerns directly to the Sheriff's Office by phone or during a community listening session.

## RESULTS

The results indicated an overall positive relationship between the majority of Cortland County residents and the Cortland County Sheriff's Office; however, the concerns raised by the minority of the participants should be considered sincerely. Results for the quantitative portion of the survey are reflected in the charts presented at the end of this document, as well as a selection of comments reflecting the themes present in the qualitative comments.

Comparison of our data with the most recent population data reveals the demographic makeup of participants for this study mirrors actual population proportions. The United States Census reports an overall population of approximately 47,581 people, with 94.5% of the population identifying as white, 2.1% identifying as Black or African American, 1.1% as Asian, 0.4% as American Indian. Data reveal 2.8% of the population identifies as Hispanic or Latino. Furthermore, 51.1% of the population identifies as female.

As reported in the demographic section of the survey (Section IV), 84% of survey participants identified as White, 3% as Black or African American, 2% as Asian, 2% as American Indian or Alaska Native, 7% preferred not to answer, and 1% selected 'not listed'. One participant who selected the 'not listed' category identified their race in line with their 'Hispanic' ethnicity by listing 'Spanish' for their race. Approximately 4% of respondents identified as Hispanic, Latino/a or Latinx. Female participants constituted 54% of total respondents, while 41% reported as male, 1% as non-binary/third gender and 4% preferred not to answer.

Section I of the survey focused on quality-of-life issues. The majority of residents reported feeling safe or very safe in their neighborhood. The most prominent issues reported were speeding, drug dealing/drug use, and noise. Most participants did not indicate that they perceived crime had changed significantly in the last 12 months or that crime levels made them consider moving.

Section II asked for feedback on participant perceptions of law enforcement. Understanding community perception is important to address concerns before they surface and to limit potentially negative interactions in the future. In this section, most participants described deputies in a positive manner and perceived them as being fair and not using racially-biased language, for example. Participants responded more neutrally when asked to assess if the Office works cooperatively with community members. County residents living in the City of Cortland were surveyed about their perceptions of body cameras. An overwhelming majority of participants (94%) supported the use of body cameras and most (86%) believe they will improve police-community relations. Of the participants in the entire County, 25% reported having any type of contact with the Sheriff's Office in the last 12 months. From this pool of participants, 97% reported being treated professionally, and with dignity and respect.

Section III of the survey prompted respondents to record any additional feedback as a qualitative comment. This section yielded 93 responses. The qualitative data was coded to find emergent themes, which included topics such as praise for deputy actions, concerns for deputy actions, quality-of-life issues, and feedback on survey questions. The results from that analysis are discussed in more detail below.

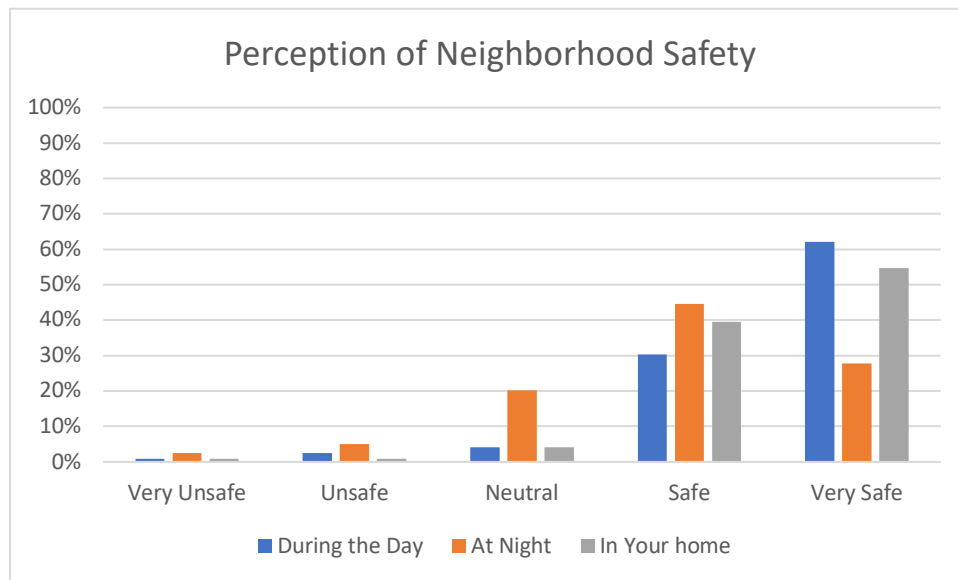
Section IV recorded demographic data including participant number of years in the community, race, Hispanic, Latino/a, or Latinx heritage, gender, age, education level, and income.

# **DATA ANALYSIS**

**SECTION I-SAFETY**

**How safe do you consider yourself:**

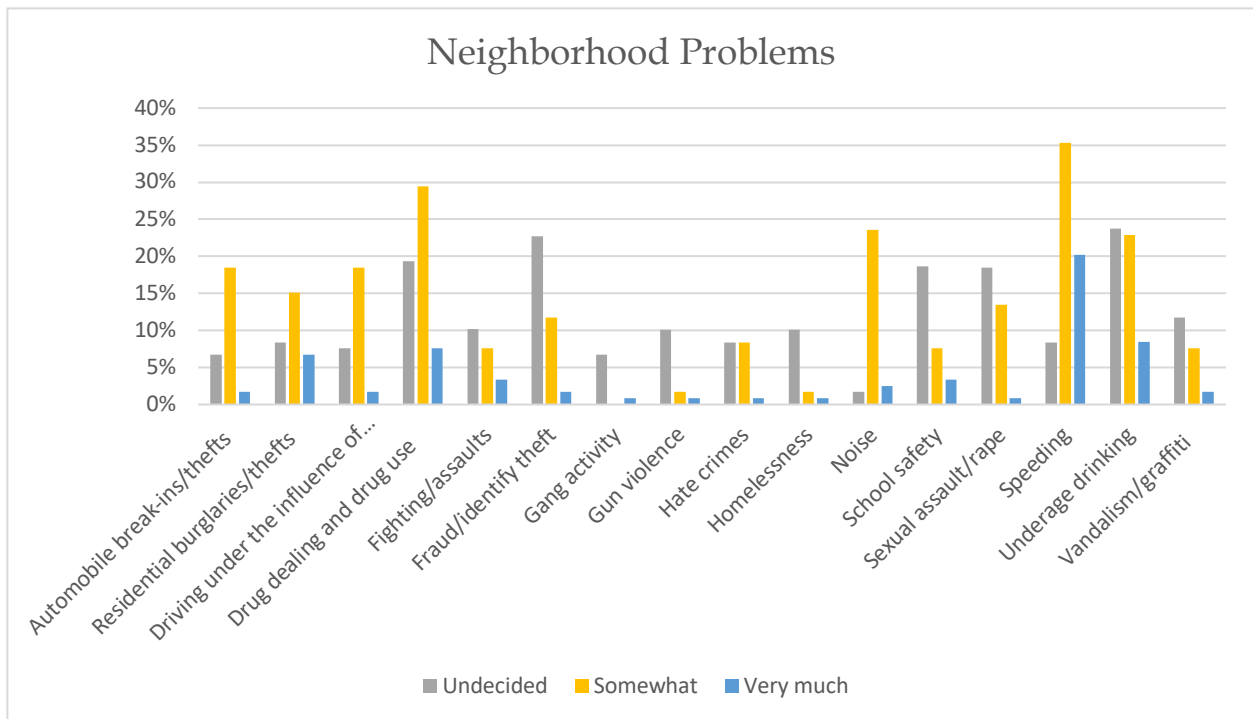
	<b>Very Unsafe</b>	<b>Unsafe</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Safe</b>	<b>Very Safe</b>
Walking alone during the day in your neighborhood?	0.84%	2.52%	4.20%	30.25%	62.18%
Walking alone at night in your neighborhood?	2.52%	5.04%	20.17%	44.54%	27.73%
Overall, in your own home?	0.84%	0.84%	4.20%	39.50%	55%



## SECTION I-SAFETY

Thinking about your neighborhood, how much of a problem is/are:

	Not at all	Not really	Undecided	Somewhat	Very much
Automobile break-ins/thefts	20.17%	52.94%	6.72%	18.49%	1.68%
Residential burglaries/thefts	22.69%	47.06%	8.40%	15.13%	6.72%
Driving under the influence of alcohol/drugs	19.33%	52.94%	7.56%	18.49%	1.68%
Drug dealing and drug use	16.81%	26.89%	19.33%	29.41%	7.56%
Fighting/assaults	31.36%	47.46%	10.17%	7.63%	3.39%
Fraud/identify theft	23.53%	40.34%	22.69%	11.76%	1.68%
Gang activity	60.50%	31.93%	6.72%	0.00%	0.84%
Gun violence	51.26%	36.13%	10.08%	1.68%	0.84%
Hate crimes	51.26%	31.09%	8.40%	8.40%	0.84%
Homelessness	45.38%	36.13%	10.08%	1.68%	0.84%
Noise	33.61%	38.66%	1.68%	23.53%	2.52%
School safety	35.59%	34.75%	18.64%	7.63%	3.39%
Sexual assault/rape	35.29%	31.93%	18.49%	13.45%	0.84%
Speeding	11.76%	24.37%	8.40%	35.29%	20.17%
Underage drinking	1.68%	27.12%	23.73%	22.88%	8.47%
Vandalism/graffiti	39.50%	39.50%	11.76%	7.56%	1.68%

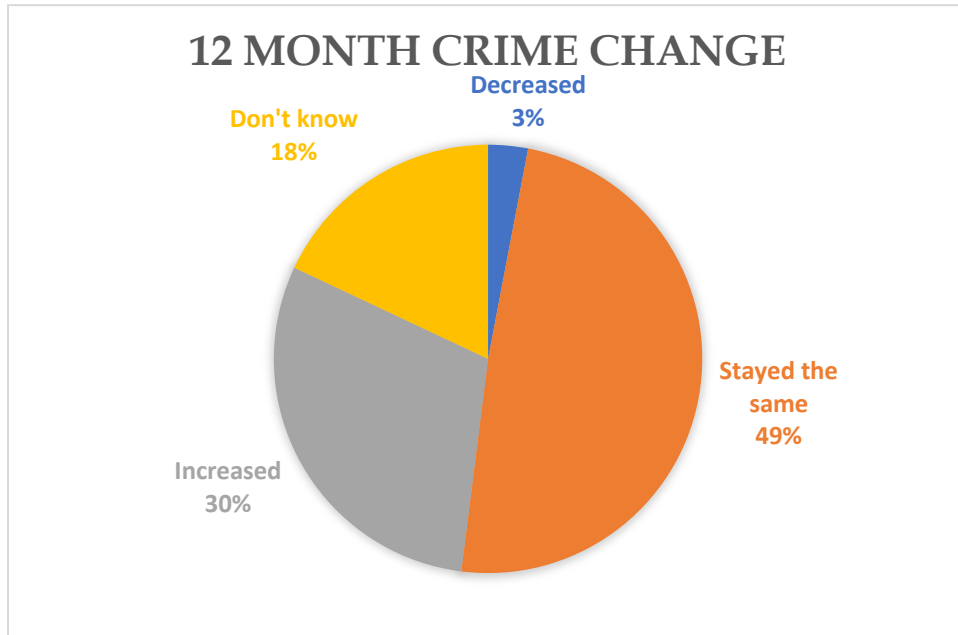




**SECTION I-SAFETY**

**Over the last 12 months, how do you think crime has changed?**

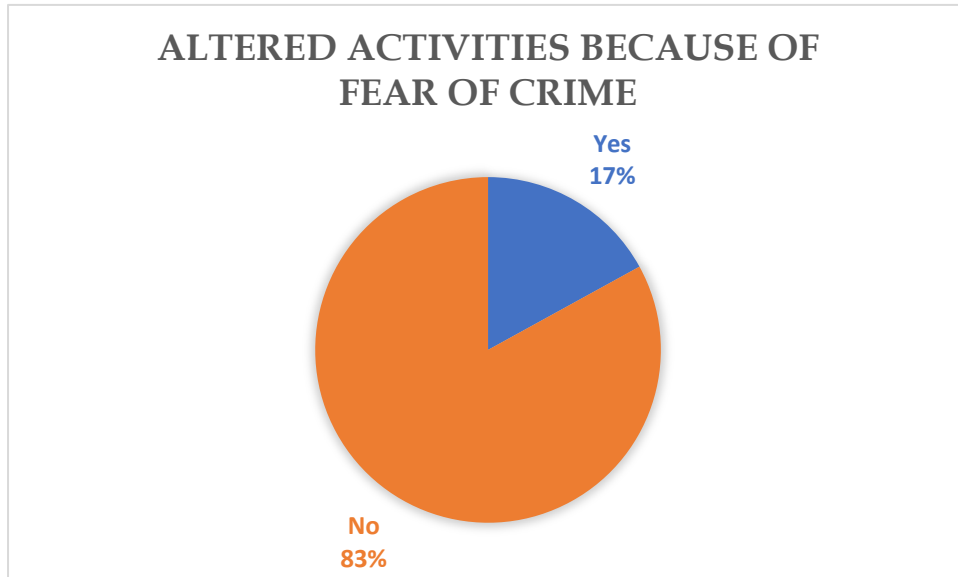
<b>Decreased</b>	<b>Stayed the Same</b>	<b>Increased</b>	<b>Don't Know</b>
3%	49%	30%	18%



**SECTION I-SAFETY**

**Over the last 12 months, have you limited or changed your activities because you were worried about crime?**

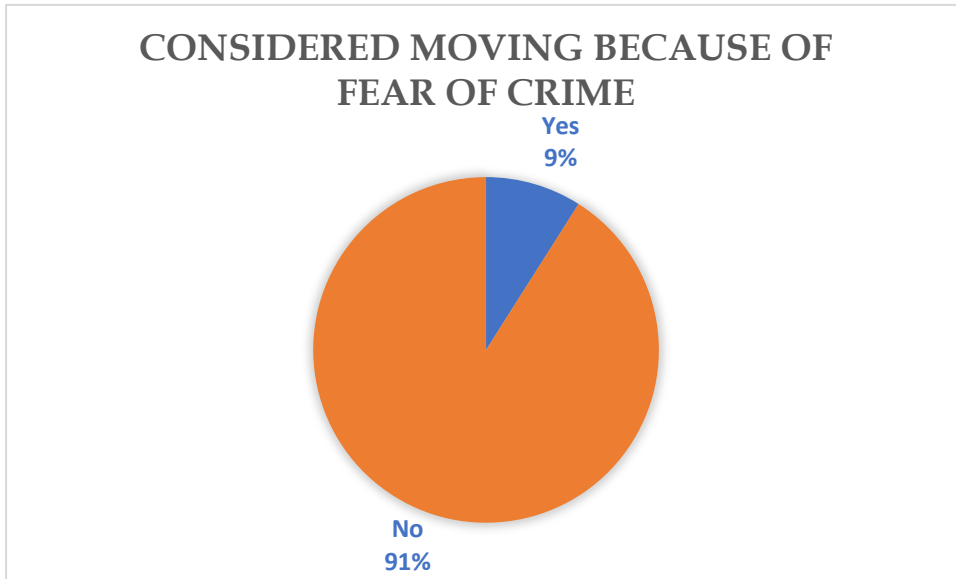
<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
17%	83%



**SECTION I-SAFETY**

**Do you feel that crime is such a problem in Cortland County that you have considered moving?**

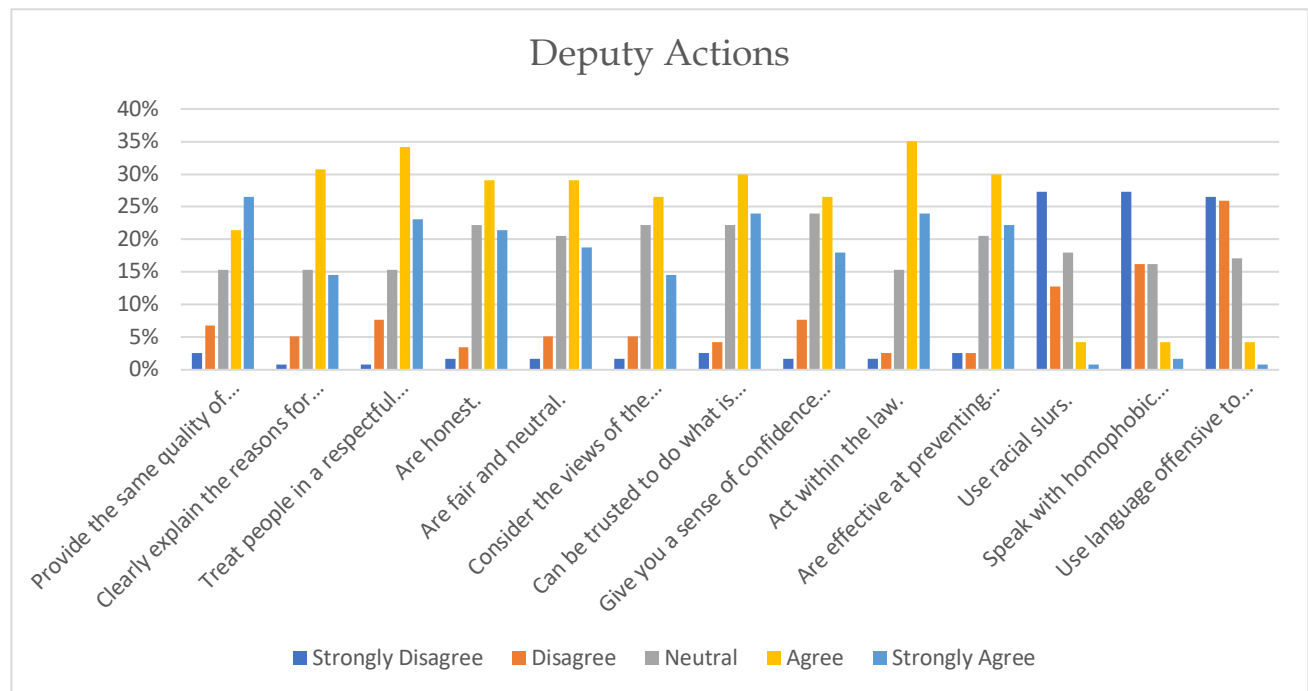
<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
9%	91%



## SECTION II- EXPERIENCES WITH LAW ENFORCEMENT

In general, indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree that the Cortland County Sheriff's deputies:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't Know
Provide the same quality of service to all people.	2.56%	6.84%	15.38%	21.37%	26.50%	27.45%
Clearly explain the reasons for their actions.	0.85%	5.13%	15.38%	30.77%	14.53%	33.33%
Treat people in a respectful manner.	0.85%	7.69%	15.38%	34.19%	23.08%	18.80%
Are honest.	1.71%	3.42%	22.22%	29.06%	21.37%	22.22%
Are fair and neutral.	1.71%	5.13%	20.51%	29.06%	18.80%	24.79%
Consider the views of the people involved before making their decisions.	1.71%	5.13%	22.22%	26.50%	14.53%	29.91%
Can be trusted to do what is right.	2.56%	4.27%	22.22%	29.91%	23.93%	17.09%
Give you a sense of confidence in Cortland County Sheriff deputies.	1.71%	7.69%	23.93%	26.50%	17.95%	22.22%
Act within the law.	1.71%	2.56%	15.38%	35.04%	23.93%	21.37%
Are effective at preventing violent crime in your community.	2.56%	2.56%	20.51%	29.91%	22.22%	20.51%
Use racial slurs.	27.35%	12.82%	17.95%	4.27%	0.85%	36.75%
Speak with homophobic language.	27.35%	16.24%	16.24%	4.27%	1.71%	36.75%
Use language offensive to women.	26.50%	25.98%	17.09%	4.27%	0.85%	35.04%



## SECTION II- EXPERIENCES WITH LAW ENFORCEMENT

Indicate to what extend you believe that the Cortland County Sheriff's Office does the following:

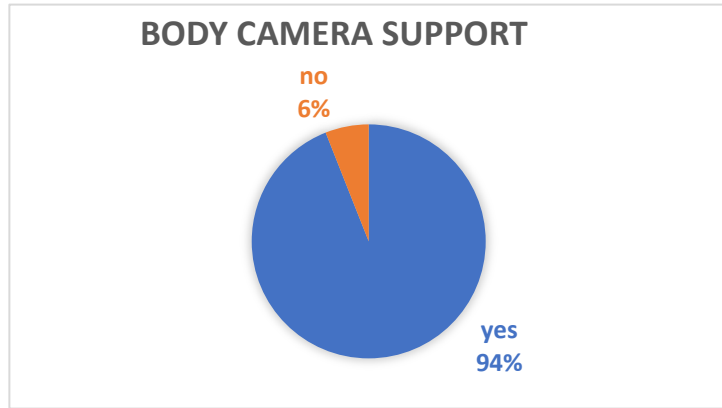
	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always	Don't Know
Develops relationships with community members (e.g., residents, organizations, and groups).	1.71%	9.40%	23.93%	23.08%	8.55%	33.33%
Regularly communicate with community members (e.g. websites, newsletters, public meetings, public interactions.	3.42%	11.11%	20.51%	25.64%	5.13%	34.19%
Works together with community members to solve local problems.	3.42%	9.40%	16.24%	22.22%	11.97%	35.75%
Practices community policing?	3.42%	9.40%	17.95%	27.35%	11.11%	30.77%



**SECTION II- EXPERIENCES WITH LAW ENFORCEMENT-  
CITY OF CORTLAND RESIDENTS**

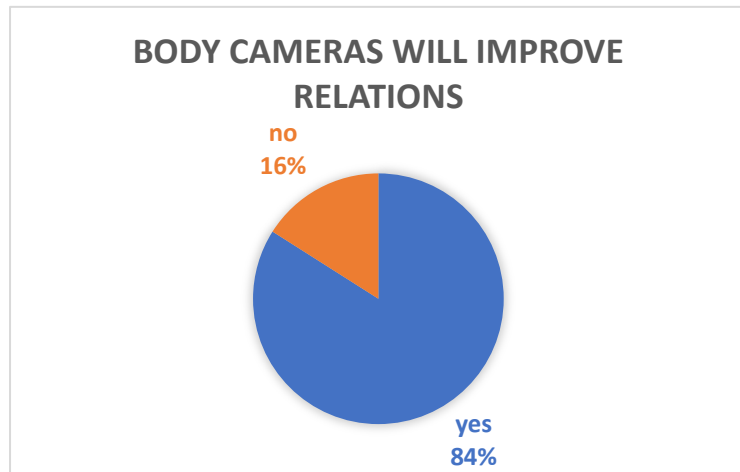
**Do you generally support the use of police body cameras?**

Yes	No
94%	6%



**Do you believe using police body cameras will generally improve community-police relations?**

Yes	No
86%	14%



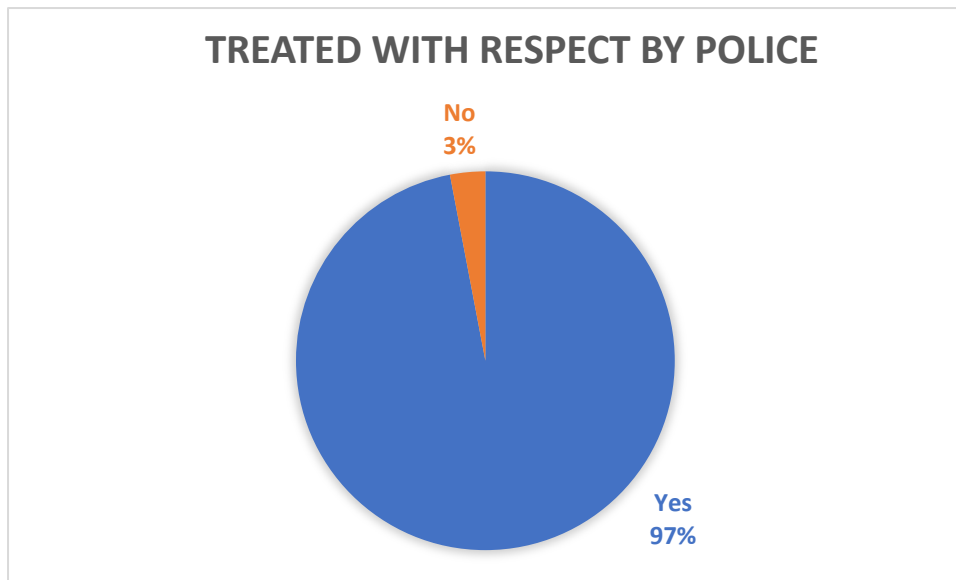
**SECTION II- EXPERIENCES WITH LAW ENFORCEMENT**

**Have you had any type of contact with or called the Cortland County Sheriff's Office in the past 12 months?**

<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
25%	75%

**If you answered yes, and had contact with the Cortland County Sheriff's deputies, were you treated professionally, with dignity and respect?**

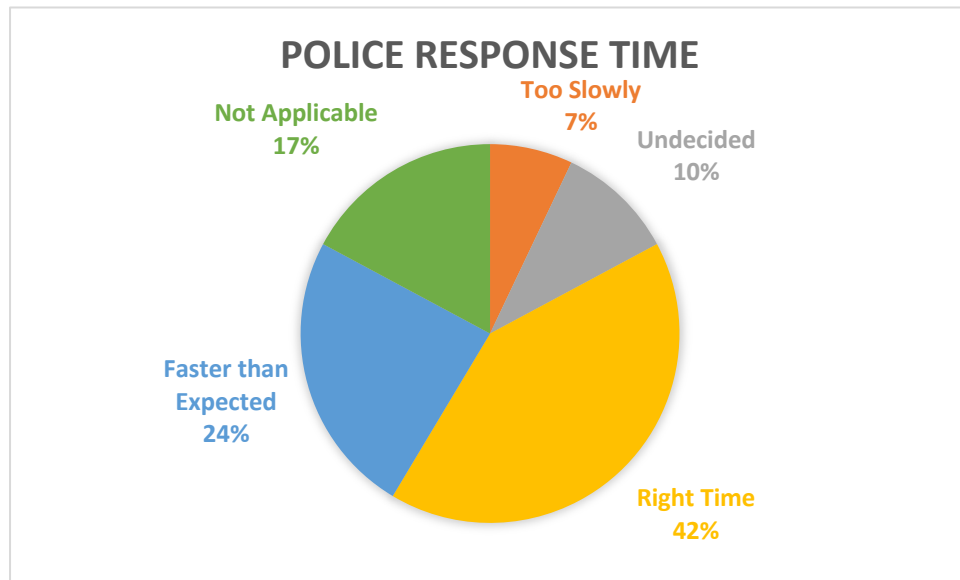
<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
97%	3%



**SECTION II- EXPERIENCES WITH LAW ENFORCEMENT**

**If you called the Cortland County Sheriff's Office for any reason in the past 12 months, how quickly did they respond?**

<b>Never Came</b>	<b>Too Slowly</b>	<b>Undecided</b>	<b>Right Time</b>	<b>Faster than Expected</b>	<b>Not Applicable</b>
0%	7%	10%	41%	24%	17%

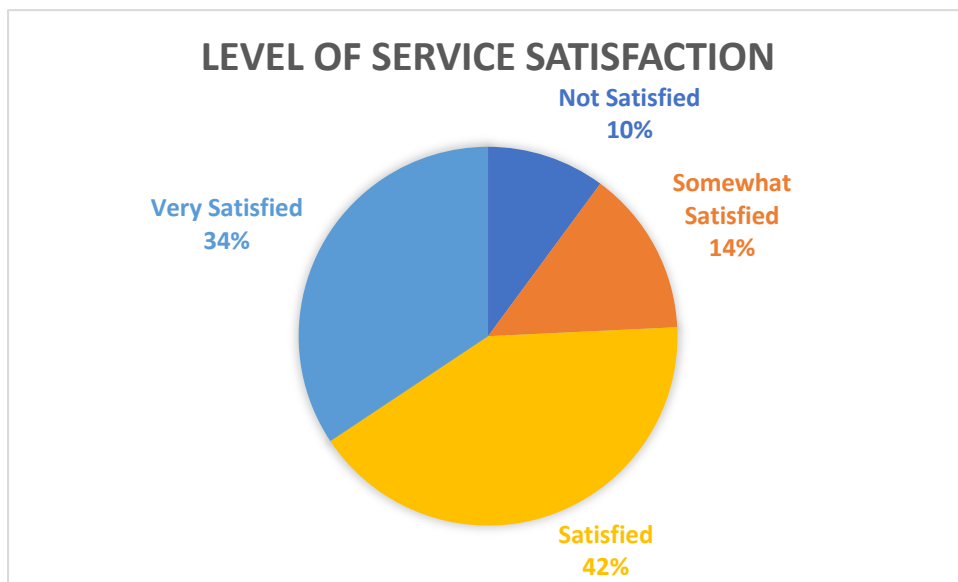




**SECTION II- EXPERIENCES WITH LAW ENFORCEMENT**

Overall, how satisfied were you with the level of service provided by the Cortland County Sheriff's Office?

<b>Not Satisfied</b>	<b>Somewhat Satisfied</b>	<b>Undecided</b>	<b>Satisfied</b>	<b>Very Satisfied</b>
10%	14%	0%	41%	34%



### SECTION III – ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

The following themes emerged after a methodological analysis of the qualitative comments provided by participants.

#### *Positive Deputy Actions*

Of the additional comments provided, 32% directly applauded the Sheriff's Office and its deputies for their efforts.

Several of these comments discussed a high quality of service from deputies: "I've had several encounters as a community member and business owner, and in all cases, found local law enforcement to be professional, helpful, understanding, and knowledgeable. I have not seen, or heard of any instances where they have been acting otherwise. I continue to value the service the local authorities provide."

Simply stated, other participants offered praise: "They were professional, but friendly, honest, and treated us with dignity and respect. [They] let us know if we just needed someone to talk to for some reassurance we could call anytime and talk with them."

Another commentor indicated a positive perception of the Office and an understanding that response times are proportional to location in the County: "I think they do a wonderful job, however if you live in the country, their time to respond to a call may take them some time to get out to where they need to be, and that also depends on road condition and other issue that they may have going on, but they always respond with in reason/time. They do a wonderful job in my books. Be safe CCS."

More residents said that they were happy with the service provided by the Office and expressed content that deputies were present but not overbearing: "We live far enough away from the city of Cortland that our interactions with the Police are, thankfully, minimal. It is good to know that they are there but we are largely unaware of much of what they do." Along this line, another resident said, "Living in the country we have few issues here, both of us have spent time working in the city & feel most social problems (crime) occurs in the city it self (sic.). Dependence on the Sheriff's for the regulation of criminal activity's (sic.) here are more limited to highway patrol, assisting motorist with winter weather incidents or deer/car accidents."

While offering praise for law enforcement, several comments believed New York State Bail reform laws contributed to difficulties for deputies: "I do believe police in general want to do the right thing and that they take risks to protect the general public. I think they are getting a bad reputation in the media because of a select few. I believe that in general they deserve respect and appreciation. I also personally am NOT a fan of the new bail reform and can only imagine how frustrating that must be to our police force."

Other comments offered signs of support: “Would you stand by an Officer if he or she was in trouble. My reply to this would be absolutely”. Additionally, a resident said, “We are very happy with our new home and community. The only complaint we have is the speeding on [our street]. Thank you for all you do to keep Cortland County safe!”

### *Community Policing*

The quantitative data indicates most participants believe the Sheriff’s Office practices community policing, however, several participants called for additional use of these methods. In calling for an expansion of community policing methods, some residents described a negative perception of individual deputies and a desire to correct that through collective community policing.

One resident stated, “I have lived in the Cortland area for 6+ years and have yet to have an authentic, community-policing-based interaction with an officer (my undergrad degree was in criminal justice, so I have a pretty solid understanding of the core tenets of community policing). I feel very distanced from the local police, as they seem to just drive around with stoic faces through the town. I’ve never seen them walking around town, engaging with community members, taking part in community events, etc. The lack of engagement with the community often reads as superiority.”

Another comment said, “I strongly believe that any Police Department should be pro active in Policing, we must have the confidence of the people so they give information regarding their community. Once we at get the information sometime (sic.) must be done with it. We have to do sometime (sic.) for the people behind closed doors that are afraid to sit on their porch. Police work is NOT sitting at the end of a speed zone. Police work is driving through communities and talking to residents.”

Some residents called for a heightened visible presence of deputies, “I do not think I have ever seen a deputy patrolling my neighborhood, and I have lived here for eight years.” Another said, “They spend way too much time in the Town of Cortlandville and should be patrolling other towns in remote areas more often. They drive way too fast when responding to emergencies and need to slow down.”

### *Perceptions of Deputies*

While the majority of survey participants discussed positive interactions with deputies, several comments described a concern for individual deputy behavior. This perception of individual deputies could negatively affect the efforts of the Office to build positive rapport with residents. Therefore, confronting these perceptions openly could work to increase trust and addressing systemic issues.

A couple residents indicated a concern for deputy behavior, particularly while off-duty. One said, "A county officer who lives in our neighborhood hosted an extremely noisy summer party that lasted until well after midnight. In doing so, he showed no regard for his neighbors and flaunted the noise ordinance. As one of his neighbors commented the next day, she hadn't dared to call the local police to complain because she knew what happens, subsequently, to citizens who do. No one listening disagreed with her."

A few resident conflated Cortland County Sheriff's Office with other agencies in the county. This is a difficult issue for the Sheriff's Office to fix, but these comments offer insight into resident perceptions in areas currently patrolled by Sheriff deputies, which may be useful to the Office in addressing resident concerns. Several comments called for deputies to perform multiple roles. While some comments had an angry tone that deputies were not performing as they hoped, others offered praise for their ability to work with the resources and trained they have available. This comment highlights these themes: "I am not sure I am the best participant in this survey. I am a retiree who lives in Preble, where we don't have a big police presence. I didn't have a positive opinion of the Cortland City when I worked as a case manager for ARC. Quite a few people on my caseload would be arrested for behaviors that didn't fit the norm, but were not illegal. The judge would always dismiss the charges. I was pleased to the willingness of the police to interact with people witnessing in favor of black lives. I think that police are part of our community. I don't believe we should defund police, but I think officers are asked to handle situations that they are unprepared for."

On the other hand, another resident said, "They are arrogantly uphanded. Most of them have not even been to a police academy and only need to be voted in. First and foremost, they should have to take education classes on medical conditions as well as medication purposes. They are not certified to be upholding the law."

### *Political Affiliations*

Multiple commentor related their perceptions of safety to political affiliations. These issues could arise as active situations in the future to which deputies would have to respond.

One commentor used the space to offer a political opinion unrelated to their perceptions of or experience with deputies by saying, "The 2020 election was rigged, and traitors need to meet justice."

However, other residents indicated that their political orientation left them feeling unsafe and unprotected by law enforcement. Given the order of EO 203 to address instances of bias, it is important to explicitly acknowledge these comments. One said, "we live in a very dangerous society and in general, the police including the Sheriff's

office are sided with the people who are most dangerous. as a democratic, I absolutely do not feel safe or protected. when the Claudia Tenney rally went through Cortland this summer the group went out of their way to harass the Black Lives Matter organizer. the police's response was not to investigate. how can I feel safe when supporting the people who are trying to destroy our way of life.”

Another resident stated that “It is clear there is right wing violent elements boiling just below the surface in Eastern Cortland County (e.g. property destroyed, or death threats in their mailboxes of neighbors who express liberal views or run for office as democrats...and these things are not reported as there is a perception that would trigger more harm than good). There is no evidence that there is any effort on any level of government to engage with or curb these elements. Trivial violations (shooting pistols regularly within 50 feet of a public road, not enforcing mask mandates...) not being addressed creates the impression (perhaps unfairly) that the police tolerate this right leaning element that I mentioned above.”

### *Survey Feedback*

Several participants left comments to indicate their pleasure or dissatisfaction with the survey. A few comments expressed gratitude for the opportunity, while another pointed out a typographical error. Still others wanted the survey to ask for perceptions about not only law enforcement, but laws too. This was particularly true for NYS bail reform laws.

Additionally, one commentor highlighted the fact that this survey took place during unusual social circumstances and prompted efforts to continue collaborating with community members, “This has not been a typical 12 month period. Normally I would have contact with the sheriff department at events such as the county fair or parades or the fireworks, ect. But we did not have any of that. Also, due to isolating for many months although I am aware of drugs and other problems they have not effected (sic.) me because I am not out and about. If I were to answer this survey a year from now some of my answer would probably change.”

**SECTION IV-DEMOGRAPHICS**

**How many years have you lived in your community?**

0-10 Years	11-20 Years	21-30 Years	31-40 Years	41-50 Years	50+ Years
20%	17%	22%	18%	14%	9%

**What is your gender?**

Male	Female	Non-binary/ third gender	Prefer not to answer
41%	54%	1%	4%

**Are you Hispanic, Latino/a, or Latinx?**

Yes	No	Prefer Not to Answer
4%	90%	6%

**What race do you most closely identify with?**

American Indian or Alaska Native	Asian	Black or African American	Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	White	Prefer not to Answer	Not listed
2%	2%	3%	1%	84%	7%	1%

**What is your age?**

18- 24 years	25-34 years	35-44 years	45-54 years	55-64 years	65-74 years	75-84 years	85+ years
2%	10%	17%	17%	23%	26%	3%	2%

**What is your highest level of education?**

High School Diploma	GED	Vocational Certificate	Associate's Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Master's Degree	Professional Degree	Doctorate Degree	Prefer Not to Answer
21%	2%	3%	17%	26%	20%	5%	5%	1%

**What is your annual income?**

Under \$20K	\$20,001- \$40K	\$40,001- \$60K	\$60,001- \$80K	\$80,001- \$100K	\$100,001- \$200K	Prefer Not to Answer
4%	15%	22%	16%	17%	22%	4%

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based upon the feedback provided by residents, there are several recommendations that can be implemented immediately at a lower cost to the County and the Sheriff's Office. Furthermore, the Office could undertake more initiatives with additional resources.

Many of the issues raised could be addressed through increased communication with residents. The Sheriff's Office already regularly communicates with the public and could build upon existing frameworks. This communication could occur via public statements and social media communication, as well as increased contact with the public by deputies. To this end, increased transparency and explanation regarding policies, procedures, available resources, current trainings, deputy accountability, and budget allocations would also be beneficial. This would clarify misconceptions, increase trust and build positive relations. In order to address resident concerns about individual deputies, the Office could publicly discuss the process for residents to offer compliments and complaints and the process by which they are addressed.

The Sheriff's Office could work to build additional trust with residents and address safety concerns through an official statement denouncing systemic racism. This is in line with the high standard of the professionalism the Sheriff currently strives to achieve and would serve a model to deputies. These measures would put the Office at the forefront of this work nationally.

Resident concerns indicate a need to continue commitments to trainings in areas such as mental health, de-escalation, bias, domestic violence, and allyship. Furthermore, while many residents called for an increase in community policing, that may be difficult to do without additional resources. Therefore, a shift of some proactive policing tactics to community policing methods would facilitate a more collective front to community policing. Finally, the Office could utilize existing program structures in the County to facilitate multidisciplinary teams to appropriately deliver services outside the scope of law enforcement.

The use of body cameras was overwhelmingly supported. The major concern for accomplishing this is funding for the purchase and long-term maintenance of the cameras. This could potentially be addressed through reallocation of budget items and grant funding, when it becomes available.

Sheriff Helms proactively sought to complete this survey in order to root out resident concerns so that they could be addressed properly. In the future, a larger census-based survey could be conducted with additional time and external funding. The County and the Sheriff's Office should also continue the work they are doing through on-going trainings, informational public forums with listening sessions, and taking seriously the work of addressing systemic issues.