Duke University Center for International & Global Studies
Grant Report for 2019
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Thank you so much for your $1,000 Graduate Award for Research and Training! It went toward interviewing expenses for my qualitative study “What Actually Matters: The Whats, Whys, and Whens Behind Civilian Assessment of Police.” I spent January – July, 2019 in East London recruiting and conducting in-depth interviews of Muslim men aged 18-29 years old of Bangladeshi descent. These interviews averaged two hours each, and I conducted 30 interviews.

I asked 33 open-ended questions followed by a short survey at the end to collect some demographic data to help me answer three research questions: how do civilians living in heavily policed areas (relative to the rest of the city in which they reside) want police to keep them safe, how do these civilians judge officer performance, and what are the actions they take or do not take if and when they feel officers have not met their expectations?

I focused on Bangladeshi men because after Black Brits, Brits of Bangladeshi background (Bengalis) are the most stopped and searched, even significantly more than Brits of Pakistani and Indian backgrounds. Using government statistics on both the areas of London where police activity is most concentrated and where Bengalis live in the highest concentrations, I limited my recruitment area to two neighboring boroughs: Newham and Tower Hamlets.

I created a flyer advertising my study and offered 35 pounds for a two-hour interview, which at the time was roughly equivalent to $50. I also carried intake forms with me, which I filled out if a prospect expressed interest in participating. I then followed up by text via WhatsApp to set the appointment, choosing public locations convenient for the interviewee. I went to barber shops, mosques, recreation centers, grocery stores, and independently owned neighborhood shops and spoke with management to explain my study and get permission to post my flyer on the wall. Many owners and managers said yes, allowing me to post the advertisement and even helping spread the word to their customers about the study. I know this because one question on my intake form asks where a person learned about the study. I also spent several hours per day in high foot-traffic areas outside of places where I observed young Muslim men frequenting, and I approached men on the street. To appear more official-looking, I wore professional clothes or Duke attire with Duke lanyard with my name tag, and a large blue clipboard. I successfully recruited many men using this technique.

Additionally, through networking, I was introduced to two Bengali city councilmen who also volunteered with soccer teams. They invited me to their matches at a park, and referred team members to me so I could speak to them one-on-one to explain my study and see if they were interested. Either on my own or being introduced to other players, I also recruited young men from other teams. Finally, many participants referred their brothers, cousins, and friends to me, most of whom participated.
As part of my effort to gain context about police resource allocation and get a sense of the crime patterns, I arranged a ride-along with the Forest Gate Police Station in the Newham Borough. I saw how austerity measures resulting in cuts of 38,000 police officers throughout London, affected call prioritization and response. It was also eye-opening to see enormous differences between U.S. and U.K. policing that one would otherwise assume was similar. For example, though I knew most officers did not carry guns, I was surprised to learn that driving is not something that most officers do. Being certified to drive a police car is not something that happens as a standard part of passing the academy, like in the U.S. In London’s Metropolitan Police Department, a driving certification is something officers can “go for” after they have already graduated the academy and are working as a police officer, and are eligible. Operating the sirens requires an additional layer of training and certification beyond even being able to drive the car. This means that most officers are either dropped off to their location and on foot, or arrive there on bicycle, or horseback (in certain instances). In fact, the Forest Gate Police Station was the only police station in Newham with the ability to respond to calls by patrol car. Thus, Forest Gate serviced the entire borough of over 300,000—not just its own little area.

A few police stations I had passed earlier when riding the bus or walking, I learned from Forest Gate’s commander during my visit, were actually empty inside due to budget cuts. The borough’s officers in remaining police stations performed administrative duties or did local neighborhood partnerships that did not necessitate them responding to emergency situations. Having had the opportunity to spend a Saturday afternoon and evening shift with two partners in their car, I could see the kind of calls they responded to, how long it took to respond, the duration in resolving each call, and some of the police-community relationship dynamics. All of this was helpful context for my interviews, particularly when I would often hear complaints about there not being enough officers, them not responding to certain kinds of calls, or them taking too long to respond—and then the decisions these men were making as a result in terms of handling their own safety and subsequent crime reporting.

I still need to transcribe all of the interviews and code before determining and relaying findings. But, I learned a great deal about these young men’s experiences, opinions, and recommendations for police departments and municipal leaders that will assuredly serve not only London but all police departments looking to improve their relationships with marginalized populations. I grew tremendously as a researcher, and I was personally moved by the willingness of the men to trust me with their very personal stories. I look forward to sharing my findings once completed. In the meantime, I hope you enjoy this photo of my ride-along experience with the Metropolitan Police Department.