

Williamstown CARES Community Safety and Wellbeing Assessment
Research Protocol

TITLE:

Williamstown CARES Community Safety and Wellbeing Assessment

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ABSTRACT:

The purpose of the Williamstown Community Safety and Wellbeing Assessment is to develop a thorough understanding of perceptions of community safety and wellbeing in the Town of Williamstown, Massachusetts, in order to provide recommendations to the Town for aligning Town policies and practices with community needs. The study is funded by the Town of Williamstown and employs a Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) framework (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). It includes four components, the first two of which involve human subjects:

1. Interviews with community members (phone, Zoom, or in-person) about perceptions of safety and wellbeing in Williamstown, experiences with the Williamstown Police Department (WPD), and thoughts about how Williamstown can best provide for safety and wellbeing in the future;
2. Interviews with members of the WPD about their jobs, their role in the community, and their thoughts about how Williamstown can best provide for safety and wellbeing in the future;
3. Assessment of current policies and practices of the WPD in order to determine their alignment with residents' community safety and wellbeing needs;
4. Review of literature on alternative models of safety and wellbeing provision.

Background, Research Questions, and Methodology

The Community Safety and Wellbeing Assessment developed in response to both national and local discussions of the scope and nature of policing. In collaboration with a group of social workers in the community, the Williamstown Town Manager began exploring alternative approaches to policing and community safety during summer 2020. Because most research on these topics has been conducted in larger cities (for examples, see Bailey et al, 2018; Davidson, 2014; Helfgott et al, 2016; Lombardo & Donner, 2018), a decision was made to conduct an in-depth safety and wellbeing assessment in Williamstown itself, with the aim of producing actionable recommendations tailored to Williamstown's particular context. In early 2021, the Town hired Jennifer James to serve as its Research Director for Community Assessment & Engagement for this and future projects.

The primary research questions for this project include:

- How do diverse community members understand and experience safety and wellbeing in Williamstown?
- How do members of the Williamstown Police Department perceive their role in providing for safety and wellbeing in the community?

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- How do current policies and practices of the Williamstown Police Department conceptualize and shape safety and wellbeing in the community, and how do these align with resident and employee perceptions?

The Community Safety and Wellbeing Assessment is guided by interpretive research methodology (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2012; Yanow, 2014). Interpretive research aims to understand how people make sense of the world around them, both individually and collectively (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012; Schaffer, 2016). While other methodologies emphasize the generalizability of knowledge, interpretive research emphasizes the context and use of knowledge (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). In other words, the researchers aim to understand how particular people in a particular place and time (context) make sense of their world and to use that knowledge to promote change in that place and time. This methodology blends well with the CBPR approach,¹ which grounds itself in the needs and interests of a particular community, inviting community members to partner with skilled researchers to analyze issues impacting the community and to identify potential solutions (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008).

Research Methods

Researchers will employ multiple methods of data collection and analysis, including:

- In-depth, one-on-one interviews with Williamstown residents and employees of the Williamstown Police Department (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995);
- Textual (and intertextual) analysis of interview transcripts (Schaffer, 2016; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012);
- Analysis of current WPD policies and practices using a “value-critical” approach (Schmidt, 2014);
- And a literature review of research on alternative models of policing, community safety and mental health.

Interviews will be conducted using Holstein and Gubrium’s (1995) active interview methods. Active interviewing begins with the assumption that interviews are acts of *knowledge construction* that take place between the interviewer and the interviewee, rather than simply *reports of facts* made by the interviewee. This assumption is in keeping with the broader aim of interpretive research, which is “to elucidate shared meanings” rather than to “faithfully represent a reality taken to be independently pre-existing” (Schaffer, 2016, 10).

In active interviews, the interviewer asks questions that encourage the interviewee to share their own experiences and knowledge in ways that reveal how they are making sense of particular concepts – in this case, concepts related to safety and wellbeing. This means that, while a consistent list of interview questions is asked of every interviewee, the interviewer allows the conversation to unfold somewhat organically, ensuring that relevant issues are addressed but also that each interviewee is able to address these in their own way, from their own perspective, and in their own voice (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995).

It is critical to note here that while active interviewing is inherently less structured than other interview methods, this does not equate with a lack of reliability or trustworthiness. In contrast, allowing research participants to respond to questions from their own, often complex and multifaceted, perspectives

¹ NOTE: CBPR is neither a research methodology nor a research method. It is an approach or an orientation that guides who is involved, what questions are asked, and how results are disseminated and used. CBPR projects can use a variety of methodologies and methods.

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provides researchers with the opportunity to examine the range of meanings that concepts like safety and wellbeing have in a particular context (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012).

Researchers will conduct analysis of interview data on an ongoing basis. As interviews are completed, they will be transcribed and uploaded to ATLAS.ti, a qualitative coding software. Any notes taken by the interviewer at the time of the interview will also be uploaded to ATLAS.ti, such that these notes can be included in the coding process and incorporated into efforts to map concepts and perspectives across texts.

As researchers read (and re-read) transcripts and interview notes, they will allow themes or “codes” to emerge, attending to interviewees’ use of language and mapping this language use across interviews. This process is grounded in the concept of the hermeneutic circle, as the researchers move from transcripts to policies and practices and back to transcripts in order to discern similarities and differences in perceptions of safety and wellbeing (Yanow, 2014). This process continues as new interviews are conducted, transcribed, analyzed, and added to the “map” of interpretations.

Researchers will draw specifically on Schmidt’s (2014) value-critical policy analysis methods as they include current WPD practices and policies in their hermeneutic analysis. The goal here is to determine where current policies and practices align with community views and values and where they fail to address what community members see as the issues at stake. Where misalignment exists, the researchers will make recommendations for bringing policies and practices into better alignment with community views and values.

PARTICIPANTS:

Every household and business in Williamstown will receive a mailing describing the Community Safety and Wellbeing Assessment and inviting them to participate. The mailing will include a link to the study’s website where community members can register to be interviewed. Researchers will also promote the study through meetings of official town bodies, a feature on Williamstown’s Willinet TV channel, and the newsletters of relevant local organizations. Employees of the WPD will be contacted individually to schedule interviews. With the exception of WPD employees, participants must be residents of Williamstown, and all participants must be over the age of 18.

Williamstown’s interest in understanding the diversity of perspectives that exist within the community requires that researchers continue interviewing as long as community interest exists, keeping track of various demographic characteristics of participants in order to ensure the broadest possible exposure. In the words of Holstein and Gubrium (1995), “Sampling for an active interview is an ongoing process...As interviews reveal particular horizons of meaning associated, say, with different experiential, physical, or cultural locations, the researcher might want to solicit information from an expanded array of people occupying these locations of interest or interpretive significance” (74).

While all members of the community will be invited to participate in interviews, researchers will specifically seek out the participation of those who perceive *a lack of safety and wellbeing* in the community, recognizing that these residents’ are likely to have particular insight into policies and practices that have been experienced as inequitable or harmful. The community mailing highlights this focus. This practice is in keeping with active interview sampling methods and with the study’s goal of making actionable recommendations to the Town.

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CONSENT:

Comprehensive written consent will be provided by participants when they register for their interview. The online consent document informs participants of the purpose of the study and potential risks and benefits of participation. It also informs them that their participation is entirely voluntary and describes measures that will be taken to keep their participation confidential (see the section on Confidentiality below).

The consent document includes contact information for Jennifer James, Research Director for the Town, should participants have questions about the study following the interviews. Signed consent documents will be saved in password protected files separate from interview recordings and transcripts.

RISKS:

This study involves some psychological risk for participants, particularly those who may have experienced traumatic events in relation to policing. The consent document informs participants of this risk and notes that they can stop the interview at any time without penalty and may choose to skip any individual question(s). Interviewers will also provide contact information for local mental health and wellness resources.

The study also involves potential risk related to privacy and confidentiality of interview responses. To protect against such risks, interviewees will be reminded that their participation is entirely voluntary and that they can skip any questions they do not feel comfortable answering. Members of the Williamstown Police Department (WPD) will also be assured that their responses will not be shared with town officials, including WPD leadership. Once any interview is complete, the participant's contact information will be deleted, and recordings, transcripts, and interview notes will be saved and linked by identification numbers. (See the section on Confidentiality below.)

BENEFITS:

Participants in these interviews will benefit from sharing their perspectives and from contributing to actionable recommendations for the Town to enhance their own and others' safety and wellbeing.

Williamstown has expressed a desire to be a community in which all residents – especially those who have experienced marginalization and exclusion in the past - feel safe and welcome. The findings of this study will enable the researchers to provide recommendations for evidence-based, sustainable policies and practices that enhance such safety and wellbeing.

Study findings will also contribute to interdisciplinary scholarship on community safety, policing, and mental health and have the potential to serve as a model for other small communities in the U.S.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

In order to maintain confidentiality, each participant's contact information will be deleted from all records once the interview is completed. Interview recordings, transcripts, and notes will be assigned identification numbers, and all documentation related to an individual interview will be filed under that number.

Signed informed consent forms, recordings of interviews, and resulting transcripts, along with any notes taken by the researcher, will be saved as password-protected files on a secure, online system.

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Quotations and other information from interviews may be used in academic publications as well as in community reports. No information that could identify individual participants will be included.

DEBRIEFING:

At the end of each interview, participants will be asked if they have any questions or concerns regarding our conversation or the study itself.

Each participant will be provided with a copy of the Informed Consent document, which includes study details as well as contact information.

Interviewers will provide contact information for local mental health and wellness resources as desired by interviewees.

All reports and recommendations produced by the research team will be publicly accessible via the Town of Williamstown's website.

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