

## RESEARCH IN BRIEF

# Perceptions of Disorder: Results from Two Las Vegas Tourist Locations

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Over the past 30 years, much has been written about the negative consequences that minor disorders and quality of life offenses can have on public places. The literature documents cases where disorder contributed to the deterioration of locations such as the New York City subways, the downtown Civic Center in San Francisco, and MacArthur Park in Los Angeles (Kelling & Coles 1996; Sousa & Kelling 2010). The literature also describes the process by which disorder leads to the decline of public places. According to the 'broken windows' hypothesis (Wilson & Kelling 1982), disorder can generate fear among citizens, causing them to avoid locations where disorder is a problem. These locations, which lack informal social control mechanisms, are potentially vulnerable to more serious forms of crime.

Although research provides evidence of a link between disorder and fear, how one perceives disorder is largely "in the eye of the beholder." The literature suggests that an observer's perceptions of disorder depend on the context in which it occurs (Kelling & Coles 1996). Factors such as the amount of disorder, the vulnerability of the observer, and the observer's prior knowledge of the disorderly person or place, for instance, play a role in whether one fears disorder or considers it to be problematic.

Given the potential for quality of life offenses to generate fear and cause other community problems, it is important to understand perceptions of disorder in public places. The purpose of this Research in Brief is to examine citizen opinions of personal safety, disorderly activity, and police presence at two locations in Clark County: The Fremont Street Experience and the Las Vegas Strip. These are two public locations that are known for tourism and are therefore important to the region's economy. This study also considers the demographic factors that may be relevant to individual perceptions of disorder,

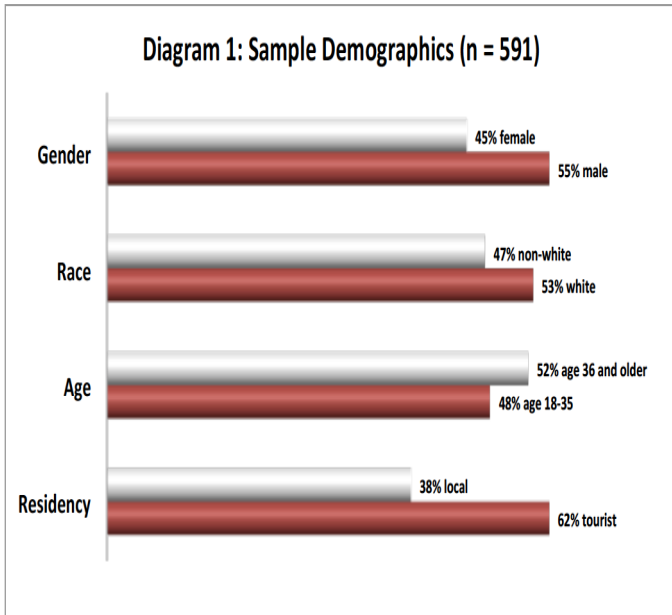
## HIGHLIGHTS

- Most survey respondents at the Fremont Street Experience and on the Las Vegas Strip reported that they generally felt safe at these locations. Over 90% believed that they were safe and over 75% reported that they would be comfortable visiting the locations at any time of the day.
- Most respondents reported favorable opinions of police at these locations: approximately two-thirds reported seeing at least some Las Vegas police officers during their visit; over three-quarters agreed that police add to a sense of safety; and only about 10% indicated that officers seem to harass citizens. Over 65%, however, agreed that more foot or bike patrols should be added to the locations.
- When asked about different types of social disorders at the locations, most respondents did not perceive them to be significant problems. Some disorders, however, were considered more problematic than others: approximately 25% rated aggressive street performers as a problem; over 33% considered aggressive street peddlers as a problem; over 40% indicated that aggressive panhandlers were a problem; and approximately 50% believed that vagrants laying in public areas were a problem.
- The survey results suggest some variability among respondents in terms of feelings of safety and perceptions of disorder. Younger respondents and male respondents were more likely to report that they would be comfortable at the locations during any time of the day or night. Tourists and younger respondents were less likely to report disorders as problematic.

such as age, gender, race, and residency status (i.e., Las Vegas Valley local vs. tourist).

**THE PLACES**

Las Vegas welcomed over 39 million visitors in 2013 and over 375,000 jobs in Southern Nevada were supported by tourism (LVCVA, 2014). Many tourists visited the Fremont Street Experience – an entertainment district located in Downtown Las Vegas. The Fremont Street Experience is home to the world’s largest video screen, which spans 90 feet in width and 1,500 feet in length. The screen is located above a pedestrian mall that includes casinos, restaurants, bars, and other attractions. The Las Vegas Strip is a roughly four-mile long section of Las Vegas Boulevard where many of the major resort-casinos in Clark County are located. Much of the gaming revenue in Clark County (over 6.5 billion in 2014 according to LVCVA) is generated on the Las Vegas Strip.



**DATA AND METHODS**

The survey instrument used in this study included items related to perceptions of safety, perceptions of disorder, and perceptions of police. The research team, which included UNLV undergraduate and graduate students, administered surveys along the Fremont Street Experience and the Las Vegas Strip during the Summer and Fall of 2014.<sup>1</sup> The interviewers used availability sampling techniques at both locations to identify potential respondents. The interviewers administered 256 surveys on Fremont Street and 335 surveys on the Las Vegas Strip, for

a total sample of 591 (Diagram 1). Surveys were administered on all days of the week during daytime and nighttime hours. All respondents were 18 years of age or older.

For analysis purposes, we rely primarily on cross tabulations and chi-square tests of significance to examine respondents’ perceptions of safety, disorder, and the police.<sup>2</sup>

**RESULTS**

**Overall Perceptions of Safety**

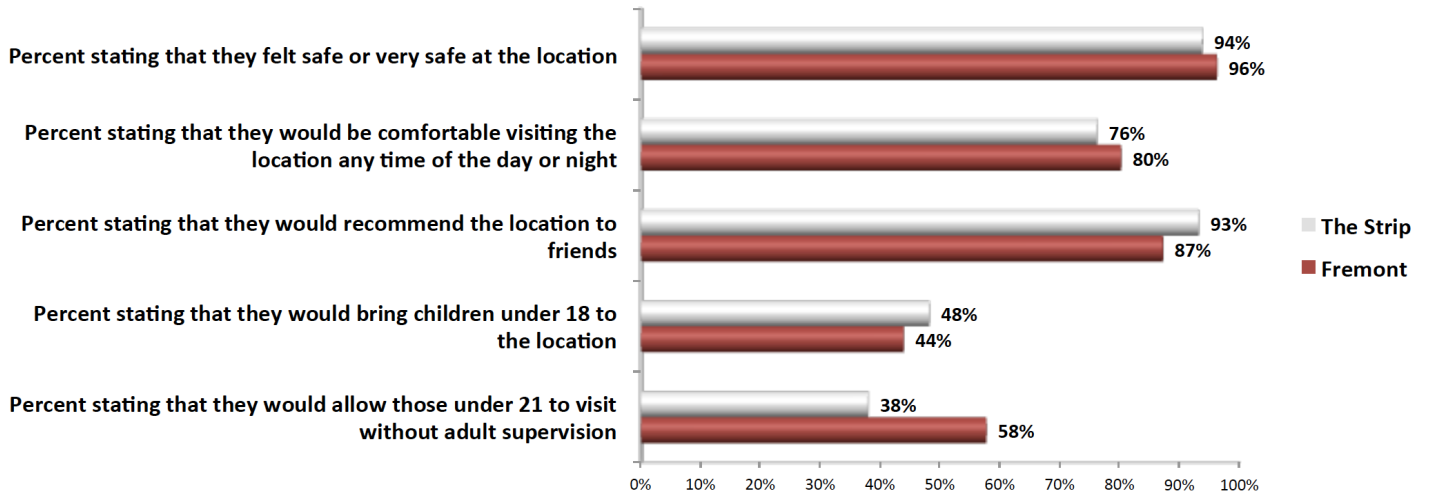
Several questions on the survey asked respondents about their overall feelings of safety and comfort levels at the time of their visit to either Fremont Street or the Strip (Diagram 2). While there were some differences among types of respondents (discussed in a later section), people mostly felt safe and were comfortable with their surroundings. At both locations, over 90% of respondents indicated that they believed they were safe or very safe and over 85% reported that they would recommend the locations to friends. Although slightly less reported that they would be comfortable visiting any time of the day or night, overall perceptions of safety were generally very high. Respondents were, however, less comfortable bringing children under 18 to Fremont Street or the Strip. Similarly, survey respondents – especially those on the Strip – were less comfortable allowing those under 21 to visit the location without adult supervision.

**Perceptions of Disorder**

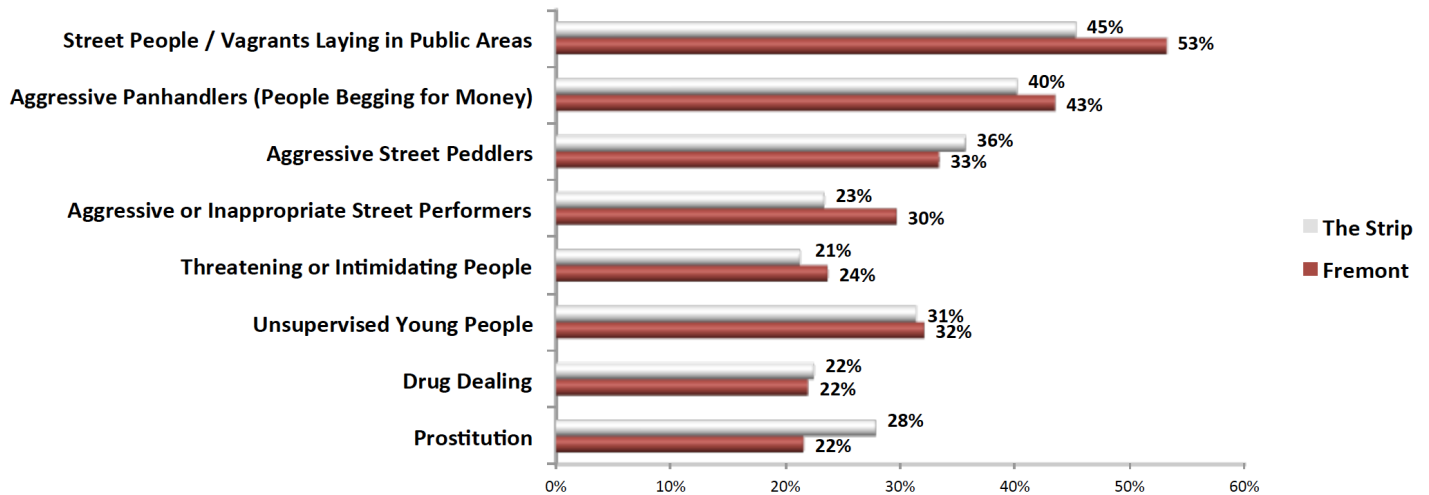
Respondents were presented with a list of social disorders. They were then asked to rate each disorder as either “no problem,” “some problem,” or “a big problem” while on their current visit to either Fremont Street or the Strip (Diagram 3).

The majority of respondents at both locations did not perceive the disorders as a problem. One-third of respondents, however, rated aggressive street peddlers as a problem and over 40% rated aggressive panhandling as a problem. At both Fremont Street and the Strip, respondents identified street people or vagrants laying in public areas as problematic (approximately 50% of respondents).<sup>3</sup> For the most part, people at both locations were consistent in their perceptions of disorder—while there were some percent differences in perceptions between Fremont and Strip respondents, these differences did not reach statistical significance.

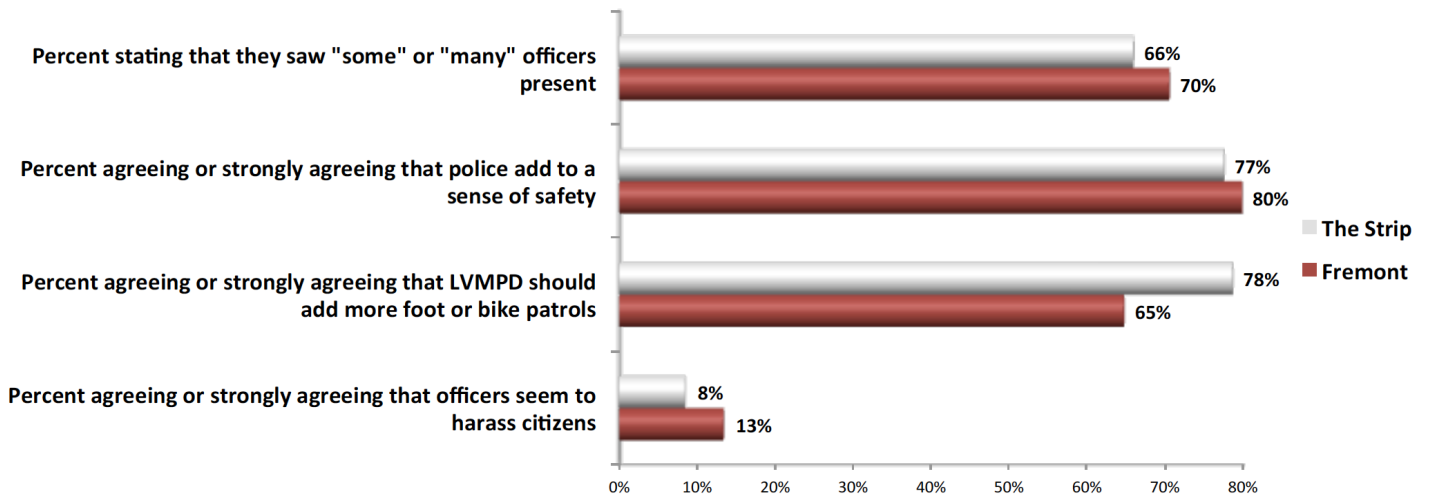
**Diagram 2: Overall Perceptions of Safety**



**Diagram 3: Percent of Respondents Indicating Disorder as "Some" or "Big" Problem**



**Diagram 4: Perceptions of Police**



**Diagram 5: Demographic Differences**

		Age		Race		Gender		Residency	
		18-35	over 35	white	nonwhite	male	female	local	tourist
<b>SAFETY</b>									
Percent Stating "Yes"	Overall safety	95.0%	94.5%	95.8%	93.4%	96.3%	92.7%	92.8%	95.9%
	Visit day or night	<b>83.3%</b>	<b>73.1%</b>	79.0%	77.0%	<b>85.5%</b>	<b>69.1%</b>	76.1%	79.2%
	Recommend to friends	92.2%	89.0%	91.7%	89.4%	90.7%	90.8%	88.3%	91.8%
	Bring children under 18	48.4%	44.0%	44.9%	47.4%	<b>51.2%</b>	<b>39.7%</b>	<b>51.4%</b>	<b>42.6%</b>
	Allow under 21 unsupervised	<b>53.2%</b>	<b>40.1%</b>	47.5%	45.1%	<b>53.9%</b>	<b>37.0%</b>	<b>57.9%</b>	<b>39.6%</b>
<b>DISORDER</b>									
Percent Stating "Some" or "Big" Problem	Street people/Vagrants in public	<b>40.7%</b>	<b>56.0%</b>	49.7%	48.0%	<b>45.1%</b>	<b>53.3%</b>	52.7%	46.3%
	Aggressive panhandlers	<b>34.6%</b>	<b>47.9%</b>	44.6%	38.1%	41.8%	41.2%	<b>47.3%</b>	<b>38.1%</b>
	Aggressive street peddlers	<b>27.8%</b>	<b>40.7%</b>	36.2%	32.8%	32.7%	36.9%	39.2%	31.6%
	Inappropriate street performers	25.6%	26.1%	27.9%	23.8%	<b>22.3%</b>	<b>30.0%</b>	<b>36.0%</b>	<b>19.8%</b>
	Intimidating people	<b>18.1%</b>	<b>25.7%</b>	20.8%	23.4%	19.1%	25.4%	<b>29.4%</b>	<b>17.5%</b>
	Unsupervised young people	<b>27.4%</b>	<b>35.3%</b>	28.7%	35.0%	32.4%	30.9%	<b>40.1%</b>	<b>26.2%</b>
	Drug dealing	22.1%	22.3%	<b>18.2%</b>	<b>27.0%</b>	24.4%	19.8%	<b>32.4%</b>	<b>15.8%</b>
	Prostitution	24.2%	25.6%	24.8%	25.2%	25.6%	24.4%	<b>30.6%</b>	<b>21.3%</b>
<b>POLICE</b>									
Percent Stating "Agree"	Saw "some" or "many" officers	71.5%	64.6%	70.1%	65.2%	<b>72.4%</b>	<b>62.2%</b>	<b>78.7%</b>	<b>61.7%</b>
	Police add to a sense of safety	77.9%	78.9%	80.8%	76.3%	78.9%	77.9%	<b>83.8%</b>	<b>75.6%</b>
	Want more foot or bike patrols	73.3%	71.4%	74.8%	70.0%	<b>67.0%</b>	<b>79.3%</b>	68.3%	75.1%
	Officers seem to harass citizens	11.4%	9.8%	<b>7.3%</b>	<b>13.6%</b>	<b>13.0%</b>	<b>6.9%</b>	<b>17.6%</b>	<b>6.0%</b>

\* Percentages in **bold** represent a statistically significant difference

**Perceptions of Police**

Respondents were also asked several questions about Las Vegas police, including whether they noticed any officers during their visit, whether officers add to a sense of safety, and whether Las Vegas Police should consider adding more patrols to tourist areas. Respondents were also asked whether Las Vegas Police in tourist areas seem to harass citizens. Diagram 4 displays the results of this series of questions.

Approximately two-thirds of respondents reported seeing at least some Las Vegas police officers while on their visit to Fremont Street or the Strip. Most also agreed that police add to a sense of safety – and very few believed that officers seem to harass citizens. Interestingly, while most respondents at both locations felt that LVMPD should consider adding more foot and bike patrols, those on the Strip were significantly more likely than those on Fremont Street to agree that more patrols should be added.

**Demographic Differences**

Finally, we analyzed differences in respondents' age (18- 35; over 35), race (white; non-white), gender (male; female), and residency (local; tourist) on the three main survey categories of overall perceptions

of safety, perceptions of disorder, and perceptions of police (Diagram 5).

In terms of age, there were few statistically significant differences between younger and older respondents on perceptions of safety and perceptions of the police. Notably however, younger respondents were more likely to report that they feel comfortable visiting the locations any time day or night – and perhaps predictably, younger respondents were also more likely to indicate that those under 21 should be allowed at the locations unsupervised. There were several age differences, however, on perceptions of disorder. For five of the eight disorders listed on the survey, older respondents were statistically more likely to report that the disorder was a problem at their location.

The survey results suggest very few statistical differences between whites and non-whites. Non whites were more likely to report that drug dealing was a problem and were more likely to believe that officers seem to harass citizens. Overall, however, whites and non-whites were generally consistent and positive on their views toward safety, disorder, and the police.

There were several differences between male and female respondents. Women were less likely than

men to indicate that they would be comfortable visiting the location any time day or night. They were also less likely than men to be comfortable bringing children to the location or allowing those under 21 to visit the location unsupervised. Women differed from men on nearly all questions related to perceptions of police, and were more likely than men to perceive several of the disorders as a greater problem.

The greatest differences on the survey were between those respondents who identified themselves as “locals” and those who identified themselves as “tourists.” Although there were only a few differences in overall feelings of safety, locals perceived nearly all of the disorders to be a greater problem than tourists. In terms of perceptions of police, locals reported seeing more officers and were more likely to report that police add to a sense of safety. Locals were also more likely to believe that officers seem to harass citizens.

#### **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY**

Most visitors to the Fremont Street Experience and the Las Vegas Strip feel generally safe at these locations and report favorable opinions of the Las Vegas police. This study does not test causal relationships between variables. However, respondents’ feelings of safety and favorable opinions of police may be related to the finding that most minor offenses are not considered to be major issues at these locations. For most of the disorders listed on the survey, less than one-third of respondents indicated that they were a problem. These results are consistent with past research that suggests a connection between perceived disorder and fear.

Although the general result was that minor offenses were not a major problem, there was some variability reported by respondents. Aggressive street peddlers and panhandlers, for example, were considered more problematic than other types of disorder. The results also suggest variability among respondents in terms of feelings of safety and perceptions of disorder. Younger respondents and male respondents were more likely to indicate that they would be comfortable visiting the locations any time of the day or night. Older respondents and locals were more likely to report disorders as problematic. These results are also consistent with academic literature suggesting that perceptions of minor offenses depend on individual characteristics and the context in which the disorders occur.

The data from the surveys have implications for policy. If it is indeed the case that disorder – and perceptions of disorder – are related to citizen feelings of safety and opinions of police, then it is essential to manage disorder in such a way that individuals do not perceive it as a significant problem. It is therefore important to monitor the level of perceived disorder in public places. In addition, since feelings of safety, perceptions of disorder, and attitudes toward police depend on individual characteristics to some degree, it is also important to consider the variety of people who visit or frequent public places.

#### **LIMITATIONS**

The main limitation of this research relates to the sampling design. Researchers used a convenience sample at both the Fremont Street location and the Las Vegas Strip location. Because respondents were selected based on their availability and willingness to take the survey, the sample may not be representative of all individuals who visit or frequent the survey locations. As a result of this limitation, we advise some caution when interpreting the survey results. Nevertheless, the results reported here are generally consistent with theoretical developments and past research on disorder and fear of crime.

## **END NOTES**

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- i. The Fremont Street Experience location included the Fremont Street Experience itself and the area just east along Fremont Street to 9th Street (i.e., Downtown Container Park). The Las Vegas Strip location included the area of Las Vegas Boulevard between Tropicana Avenue and Spring Mountain Road.
- ii. Unless otherwise noted, test statistics use the conventional  $p < .05$  level.
- iii. An additional disorder question that asked respondents to consider “people aggressively handing out advertising materials” was asked at the Las Vegas Strip location but not originally asked at the Fremont Street location. This was by far the largest perceived problem on the Strip – 66% of respondents rated this disorder as a problem. By comparison, the next highest perceived problem on the Strip was “vagrants laying in public areas” – 45% of Strip respondents rated this as a problem.

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**CONTACT INFORMATION**

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