

Pennsylvania 2016 Pre-Election Poll on Policy and Governance



School of Public Affairs

Criminal Justice

November 1, 2016

More than 8 out of 10 PA residents trust their local police

Summary: Public attitude toward police reflects public attitude toward the federal and state government. While support from the general public is high, there are mitigating factors of individual attitudes.

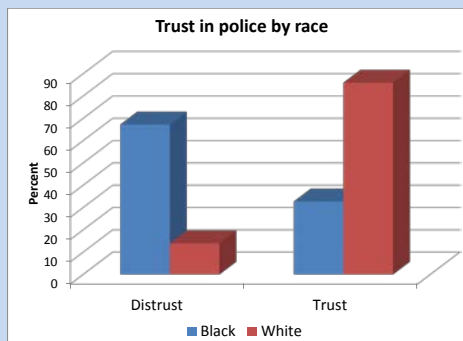
Trust in the Police

The consensus in the academic literature is that public attitude toward the police is indicative of the public support for the federal and state government. Police are the most ubiquitous representatives of government authority, given the sheer amount of their contact with the public and their impact on everyday life. Besides, public safety begins from calls for service and hinges on public cooperation. No police can expect public support without public confidence in the police. The poll included measures of public attitude toward the police for yet another reason. In the wake of unsettling conflict and escalating animosity between police and the community, we need to understand what determines a person's trust and confidence in the local police. We have identified widely acknowledged factors of individual attitudes toward the police from the literature and incorporated them in the poll.

The poll found that more than 8 out of 10 residents reported that they trust their local

police. Regional variation was observed, although not statistically significant. For example, residents in Northwestern Pennsylvania are more favorable to their police, while Southeastern residents appear slightly less favorable.

Perhaps the most significant finding was the differences among racial groups



regarding trust in the police. As shown in the figure above, 86 percent of white respondents trust their local police to make decisions that are right for the community, compared with 33 percent of black or African American respondents who felt the same way. Statistically, a white resident was 67 percent more likely to trust the local police than a non-white resident.

By contrast, differences between male and female and between education levels were negligible. Interestingly, political affiliation appears to have a significant impact on a person's trust in their police.

Significant differences were observed for other demographic attributes. The average age of those with no trust in their police was 40 years old, while that of residents with trust in their police was 50 years old. Also, a person with higher income was more likely than another person with lower income to trust the police. For instance, a person who makes more than \$60,000 a year is 18 percent more likely to trust the police than a person who makes less than that. A Republican is 19 percent more likely than a Democrat or other resident to trust the police.

Experiential factors are significantly associated with a person's trust in the police, too. Among residents who had any contact with police, a person who was satisfied

Trust in the Police (continued)

with the way police handled the situation was twice as likely to trust their local police as a person who was not satisfied. Also, a person who often hears about police misconduct in the media is likely to distrust the local police. Having been a victim of crime appears to lower trust, but the difference was not statistically significant. Finally, when a person knows a police officer by name and feels comfortable talking with him or her, the person is three times as likely to trust the police as a person who also knows an officer by name but feels uncomfortable engaging in conversation with the officer. This finding lends support for police initiatives to build a healthy relationship with the public through community-oriented policing.

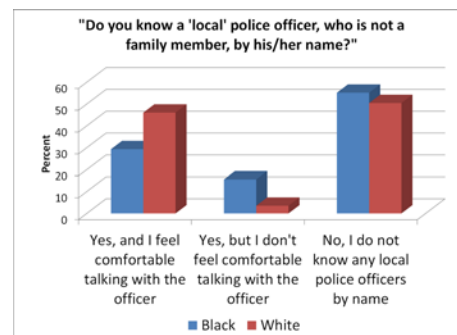
Improving Perceptions

Recent research suggests that closing the gap in social distance – the perception of closeness one feels toward the police – is an important step to improving public trust in police. One indicator of social distance is whether a citizen knows a police officer by name.

Acquaintance with a police officer varied across the Commonwealth. More Pennsylvanians living in the Northwestern part of the Commonwealth know a local police officer by name and are comfortable talking with him/her (62.0 percent), while 37.5 percent of residents in the Southeastern region feel the same.

Almost half (49.3 percent) of the Pennsylvanians surveyed know a local police officer (who is not a family member) by name, although 4.6 percent would not feel comfortable talking with the officer.

Knowing a police officer differs by group. Significantly more men (49.8 percent) than women (39.7 percent) know a police officer by name and feel comfortable talking to that officer. As depicted in the graph below, while about half of both white (49.0 percent) and black or African American (48.0 percent) respondents know a police officer, significantly more whites (46.0 percent) feel comfortable talking to that officer than black or African American (30.0 percent) respondents.



Conclusion

Trust in the police varies among social group, but the most significant finding among Pennsylvanians is the divide among racial groups, with whites having more trust in the police than others. These differences in attitudes may be due to differential connections with the local police. The data presented here suggest that police may be able to close the social distance gap and, in the process, improve public attitudes toward police through connecting more with the community. However, how the police engage with the community is important, too. The challenge is for the police and the public to interact in such a way that all parties feel comfortable communicating with one another about criminal justice issues. When this is accomplished, the police and the federal and state government may find more support among the public they serve.

Methodology

Data consist of responses from 660 randomly selected adult Pennsylvania residents, who participated in the School of Public Affairs' Pennsylvania Pre-election Poll on Policy and Governance. This was an omnibus survey administered by telephone through the Center for Survey Research at Penn State Harrisburg between August 18 and October 15, 2016. The Center employed a dual-frame design consisting of both landline and cell phone samples, with 60.8% of respondents interviewed via cell phone and 39.2% interviewed via landline. The survey cooperation rates for the landline portion and cell portion of the sample were 73.4% and 60.1%, respectively. Responses were weighted by demographic criteria to enhance representativeness. Margin of error is +/- 4.0 percentage points with 95% degree of confidence.

Contact:

Jonathan Lee, Ph.D.
Jennifer Gibbs, Ph.D.
Phone: 717-948-4319
Email: JLee@psu.edu
jengibbs@psu.edu

Sponsor:

School of Public Affairs in partnership with Penn State Justice and Safety Institute
harrisburg.psu.edu/public-affairs



PennState
Harrisburg

777 West Harrisburg Pike
Middletown, PA 17057
harrisburg.psu.edu

Penn State is an equal opportunity, affirmative action employer, and is committed to providing employment opportunities to all qualified applicants without regard to race, color, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, disability or protected veteran status. U.Ed. HBO 17-70