

Featured Speakers

[Wesley Lowery](#) – Correspondent, CBS News

[Steve Crabtree](#) – Senior Editor, Gallup

[John Gramlich](#) – Senior Editor, Pew Research Center

[Abby Walsh](#) – Vice President, Strategy and Operations, Council on Criminal Justice (moderator)

Summary

A striking partisan divide characterizes public perceptions of police in the United States, with Republicans expressing far greater confidence in law enforcement than Democrats. Nearly [nine out of ten Democrats](#) support major changes in policing, while only 14% of Republicans do. And nearly eight of ten Democrats – versus just 5% of Republicans – favor reducing police department budgets and shifting the money to social programs.

When asked about racism in policing, around [two-thirds of Americans](#) say they believe police treat black people less fairly than white people, a view held by 91% of black adults. Still, in communities characterized by poverty and a lack of opportunity, surveys show that black residents are somewhat more likely than whites to express support for more police presence in their neighborhood, rather than less.

These and other findings were discussed on October 7 at a Council on Criminal Justice web event featuring two public opinion experts, John Gramlich of the [Pew Research Center](#) and [Gallup](#)'s Steve Crabtree, and Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Wesley Lowery, author of a book about police violence and racial justice.

The event shed light on issues that have gained renewed prominence in the nation's conscience and political campaigns since the May police killing of George Floyd and the social

unrest that followed.

During the hourlong discussion, the panelists explored findings of multiple opinion surveys tracking how Americans view police, policing, and proposed police reforms – as well as how differences in those views break down by age, race, and political affiliation.

Lowery said sorting through the public's perceptions and preferences is critical as elected officials across the nation strive to craft policies to improve policing and ease tensions between officers and the communities they are sworn to protect.

Obviously, this is an extremely important moment, and we're seeing departments across the country debate how we might bring policing in line with the public's expectation of it. But in order to do that, we need to understand what the public's expectation of policing is.

Wesley Lowery, Moderator


Gramlich and Crabtree said that despite the striking partisan differences, a majority of Americans from both political parties support some reform, including policies to hold police accountable for their actions, creation of a federal database to track those accused of misconduct, and rules requiring officers to live in the communities they police. But Crabtree said a sharp difference in underlying values – with Republicans emphasizing law and order and Democrats expressing more concern about social justice – influences how far people are willing to go with such changes, and also shapes individuals' general assessment of police.

“Republicans are more likely to approve of the police because they're there to enforce law and order, while Democrats are more likely to disapprove when they hear about police misconduct because it violates their strong sense of social justice,” Crabtree said. Gramlich said another factor shaping perspectives is messaging from political leaders: “You can never underestimate the role of elected officials in moving public opinion with the signals they are sending to their constituents,” he said.

Key Takeaways

What are Americans' overall opinions of the police, and how do they break down in terms of different demographic and political groups?

CRABTREE “One of the notable findings this year is that for the first time, the percentage of Americans who say they have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the police has dipped below 50%. It’s now at 48%, and over the 20 years we’ve been tracking this, it’s never been below 50%. In 2017 it was up to 57%, so there’s been some decline since then.

“But just as important is that since 2014, perceptions of the confidence in the police has diverged politically to a massive extent. In 2013, just prior to the events in Ferguson and New York, where unarmed black men were killed, there was 9-point partisan difference between Republicans and Democrats in confidence in the police. Now ... there’s a 54% difference, so it’s a massive shift.” 

GRAMLICH “If you ask people overall what they think of the police and how police compare with some other groups in society, the police do pretty well. In April, just before the killing of George Floyd, we asked Americans what they thought of police and 78% said they had a great deal or a fair amount of confidence in them. That wasn’t quite as high as the military or scientists, which are groups that typically do pretty well in these questions, but still pretty good.

“But when you ask about police in a more specific way, it’s a much more mixed story. In June, right after the killing of George Floyd, we asked how the police are doing on four particular questions: protecting people from crime, using the right amount of force in each situation, treating racial and ethnic groups equally, and holding officers accountable for misconduct.

“Out of those four things, the only one on which the American public said police are doing a good job on balance was number one. On the other three, about two-thirds of the public said the police are doing only a fair or a poor job.”

How does public trust of police vary among ethnic and racial groups?

CRABTREE “One thing we wanted to gauge [after George Floyd’s killing] was people’s

everyday interactions with police and whether those were positive or negative. So we asked, 'If you had an interaction with police in your area, how confident are you that they would treat you with courtesy and respect?'

"Among all Americans, just 15% said they were not too confident or not at all confident. But among black Americans, that goes up to 39% ... Among white Americans it's one in ten, about 90%. So there's a big racial gap there.

"We also asked Americans to think about interactions they may have had with police over the last 12 months - were they positive overall? Negative? Seventy-five percent of Americans say positive overall. That number drops to 59% among black Americans and rises to 79% for white Americans. So again you have 4 in 10 black Americans with negative perceptions of police based on their encounters."

GRAMLICH "In a survey released yesterday [October 6] we looked at how people see police treating racial and ethnic minority groups, and ... found that two-thirds of Americans feel black people are treated less fairly than white people. That's the same as it was in June, right after George Floyd's killing, and there are huge racial and ethnic differences.

"One thing that's notable is that this is a majority view across all racial and ethnic groups. So you have 91% of black Americans, 71% of Hispanic Americans, 71% of Asian Americans, and 58% of white Americans who believe black people are treated less fairly by police."

Is there polling information that tells us where the public is now on reform proposals related to policing?

GRAMLICH "In June we asked about policy proposals like requiring police officers to be trained in nonviolent alternatives, creating a federal database to track officers who are accused of misconduct, giving civilian oversight boards the power to investigate and discipline officers, requiring officers to live where they do their policing, making it a crime for police officers to use chokeholds, and qualified immunity. In most cases a majority of Americans support each proposal.

"The whole idea of defunding police is a little challenging to get at in a survey because of these different ideas of what de-fund actually means ... In our June [survey](#) we gave people five options: would you prefer for police funding in your area to be decreased a little, be decreased a lot, stay about the same, be increased a little, or be increased a lot. The largest

share of Americans (42%) said they wanted police funding in their area to stay the same. Only one in ten said they'd prefer that policing funding be decreased a lot."✖

CRABTREE "We asked a question gauging public support for several proposed policing reforms in the wake of the George Floyd incident. They divide into three sets. One set is pretty much uncontroversial among all groups, and those are things that include changing management practices to hold police more accountable for their actions, and requiring officers to have good relations with the community. And over 95% of Americans across partisan lines agree those things should happen.

"Then there's one that doesn't get much support among any group and that's abolishing police departments altogether - 15% of Americans say they strongly or somewhat support this, including 27% of Democrats and 1% of Republicans ... And the proposal that most closely corresponds with defunding the police is reducing budgets of police departments and shifting the money to social programs. This is where we see the biggest partisan divide of all. Just 5% of Republicans say they support this idea, versus 78% of Democrats, which is a massive gulf."

How do these questions correlate with our electoral politics? How might these opinions factor into the presidential race or other elections?

GRAMLICH "What we know from our polling is that the public is very clearly engaged with these issues. In polling we released yesterday, 78% of Americans said they've been paying attention to issues of racial equality. Back in September we asked people about a variety of big news stories and the one that came out on top, with 84% of Americans saying they were paying attention to it, was about clashes between law enforcement and protesters in some cities around the country.

"But I'd caveat everything I've said by taking a step back to look at the big picture, and the issues voters say are important to them when they think about voting. We haven't asked about policing exactly but we have asked about violent crime and issues of racial and ethnic inequality. These issues are in the middle of the pack - not as important as the economy or healthcare, but more important than climate change or abortion."✖

CRABTREE "The fundamental insight is that politics have become so much more polarized in the last ten years and certain issues have driven that polarization - and issues of law and

order and social justice are key among those ... COVID is the overarching issue for the election. But this criminal justice reform issue is one of the key differentiators for the parties, so it will have an effect.”

What else jumps out from the data? What else should people take away from these numbers in terms of how they think about these questions?

CRABTREE “Gallup does a separate study of Americans living in fragile communities, which are areas with high poverty rates, low rates of postsecondary education, and a lack of access to opportunity. One of the questions we ask – and law enforcement professionals are often surprised by the answer – is would you rather that police spend more time, the same amount of time, or less time than they currently spend in your area. Among all residents of these fragile communities, 51% say more time and 6% say less time. What’s really interesting is that among black residents, 52% say they would like police to spend more time in their area, versus 46% for white residents.

“I think there’s a real craving for positive relations with police in these communities. The sense of security that people get when they see law enforcement officers around occasionally, when they feel free to interact with them in a positive manner, and have that sense that things are under control in their neighborhood, that’s really the only way you can get to the place of building a better life for yourself, is having that sense of security.”

GRAMLICH “A lot of times in this discussion about policing, the attitudes of police are overlooked. Pew did a survey of relatively large police departments in 2016. One finding that stands out to me, and that I feel is always worth remembering, is that the views of police are not a monolith. We know that the views of black police officers and white police officers differ widely, in some cases even more than the general public’s views do. Our survey asked whether these confrontations between police and black people in society were signs of a larger problem or a one-off incident, and black police officers were far more likely to say they were signs of a larger problem. Black officers also view racial progress in the United States far less positively than white police officers.”

Additional Resources

Pew Research Center Survey - [July 2020](#)

Gallup Survey - [August 2020](#)