

“21st Century Policing: A Public Opinion Report”

by Karlyn Bowman (Feb 2, 2015-www.Forbes.com)

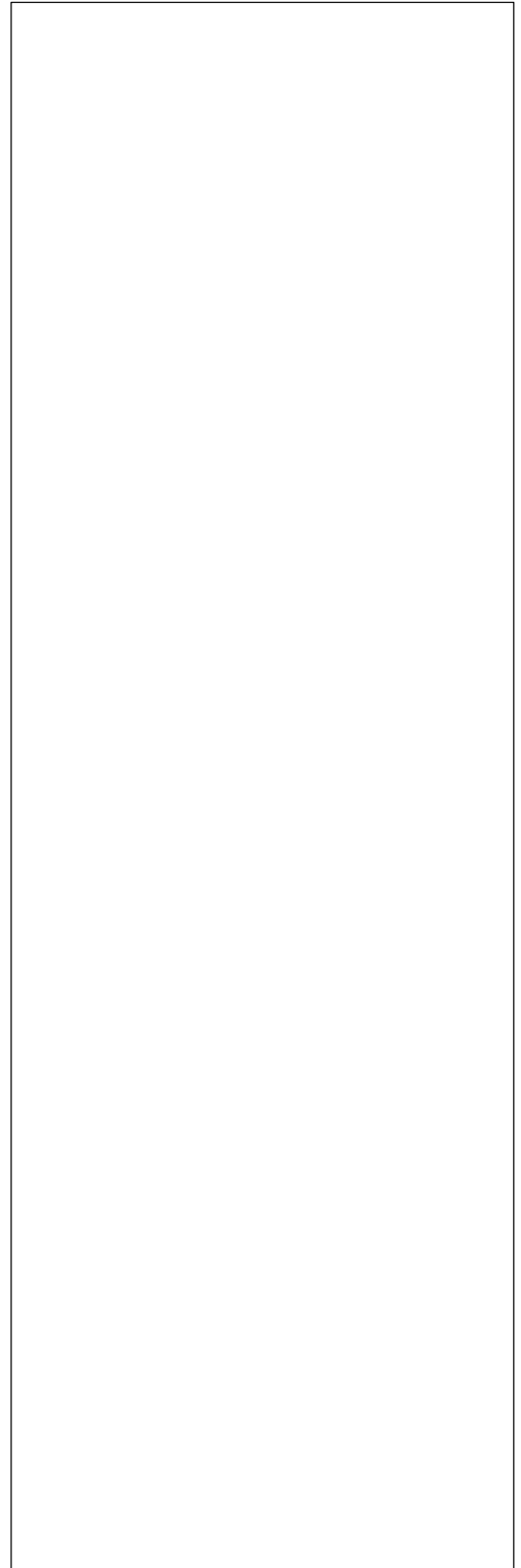
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In early March, the White House Task Force on 21st Century Policing will deliver its report to President Obama. When the President announced the task force’s creation in December 2014, its stated purpose was to “strengthen community policing and strengthen trust among law enforcement officers and the communities they serve.” The latest issue of AEI’s Political Report looks at how Americans view the police today and how those views have changed over time. As one might expect, there are sharp differences between blacks and whites on most questions about the police. But the polls also point to areas of agreement.

Since the early 1990s, the Gallup Organization has been asking people about their confidence in the police and other institutions. Americans express a relatively high level of confidence in the police, and, perhaps surprisingly, the responses have changed little over the past twenty years. In June 2014, only the military and small business ranked higher in terms of a great deal or quite a lot of public confidence. But blacks and whites see the world differently on this measure. Thirty-four percent of blacks compared to 61 percent of whites had high confidence in Gallup’s data aggregated for 2006-2014. In the latest poll, far more people had high confidence in the police (53 percent) than in the criminal justice system (23 percent).

Whites and blacks also differ about police treatment of blacks, but here the views of whites have moved closer to the views of blacks over time. When Harris first asked whether blacks were discriminated against in the way they were treated by the police in 1969, 19 percent of whites and 76 percent of blacks agreed for a gap of 57 points. Although there is still a big gap in Harris’s December 2014 online survey, 48 percent of whites and 86 percent of blacks agreed (a 38-point gap).

Americans make distinctions between the police in general and the police in their communities, though deep racial gaps remain. In an NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll from September, majorities of white (80 percent) and black (58 percent) registered voters said they had a great deal or fair amount of confidence that police officers in their community were doing a good job enforcing the law. In a Harris online poll from December, 88 percent of whites and 72 percent of blacks agreed that most police officers have a positive impact on the communities where they work. Whites (81 percent) and blacks (61 percent) were confident that the police in



their community to protect them from violent crime in a recent McClatchy-Marist poll.

There's also general agreement about some police reforms. Large majorities of whites (61 percent) and blacks (83 percent) told CBS News pollsters in December that military weapons should be reserved only for the military and National Guard. Large majorities of both groups favored patrol officers wearing video cameras in a December ABC News/Washington Post poll. As for police responses to crime, 59 percent of whites and 85 percent of blacks say most officers need better training in the CBS News poll.

Looking specifically at attitudes in Los Angeles and in New York City, two cities that have experienced a number of high-profile incidents involving questionable police behavior, provides interesting context for the public opinion picture. In both cities after these kinds of incidents, views about the police have returned over time roughly to their pre-incident levels. That said, this encouraging news is limited by the continued gap between blacks' and whites' approval of each city's police departments—a gap of at least 20 points in both cities over an almost 20-year span.

As the polls show, the racial gap on the police is long-standing and deep-seated. The administration's commitment to strengthening trust among law enforcement and the communities they serve is an admirable one, and the polls indicate there are many areas where progress can be made. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen if the recent events in Ferguson, Missouri and New York City will serve as building blocks or stumbling blocks to improvement.

