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Study shows deep racial division when it comes to attitudes about cops — but it's driven by experience

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The Cato Institute recently published the results of a survey of 2,000 people about their attitudes toward policing. The results are pretty striking.

First, 68 percent of white people had a favorable view of police, against just 40 percent of blacks and 59 percent of Hispanics. Blacks (73 percent) were much more likely to say that police are too quick to use lethal force than whites (35 percent) and Hispanics (54 percent). A healthy majority of whites (64 percent) say their local police department treats people of different races equally; only a minority of blacks (31 percent) and Hispanics (42 percent) think so. Among all three groups, only a majority of white people believe that cops are usually held accountable for misconduct.

There's a common perception among some on the right that attitudes toward police are more affected by class than race. This survey suggests otherwise. While it's true that upper-income whites generally have more favorable attitudes toward law enforcement than lower-income whites, among blacks opinions generally remain the same among all income groups. Another interesting statistic: While 85 percent of Republicans believe police only use lethal force when necessary, just 36 percent of *black* Republicans do.

Those latter figures suggest that attitudes toward police aren't born of ideology so much as of actual experience. More figures from the survey back this up. The study found, for example, that blacks were twice as likely as whites to report that the police had directed profanity at them. Blacks were twice as likely to report knowing someone who was abused by cops. And upper-income black Americans reported getting stopped by police more frequently than *lower-income whites.* Overall, blacks were five times more likely than whites to report experiencing some sort of mistreatment at the hands of police. As the study's author Emily Ekins writes, "abuse at the hands of an individual police officer — whether individually or vicariously experienced — may be internalized and help explain differences in favorability toward the police."

The only real conclusion to draw: Black people are more mistrustful of police not because black people are more likely to commit crimes, or because black people are less interested in law and order, or because of some other cultural issue, but because, quite simply, black people are much more likely to have been victimized by the police — and they're much more likely to know others like them who have been victimized as well.

If basic human empathy doesn't cause you to be troubled by those numbers, consider this, from the survey:

Groups who feel less favorable toward local law enforcement are less certain they would report a crime they witnessed. For instance, black and Hispanic Americans are more than 20 points less likely than white Americans to say they definitely would report a crime. Research finds that when the police have legitimacy, the law has legitimacy, which encourages compliance and cooperation.

The report lists a half-dozen law review articles and peer-reviewed academic studies to back up that seemingly uncontroversial contention. As I've written here before, this is the "Ferguson Effect" that law enforcement groups don't want to talk about: There are entire communities in this country in which — based on their own experiences and the experiences of people who are close to them — large majorities of residents simply don't trust the police. And when entire communities lose trust in those entrusted to enforce the law, respect for law itself begins to go down. And so crime goes up. Look at Chicago, a city frequently cited as one of the most violent in the United States and which the Brennan Center recently found has been the largest driver of the recent uptick in violent crime. Chicago also has a long and sordid history of police abuse, including (at least) a decade-long pattern of torture that the city has only recently attempted to address. But you needn't go back to the 1980s to find incidents of abuse. The city's cops are notoriously brutal. The city is perhaps even more notorious for doing little to nothing about it — and for punishing those who report it.

The good news is that healthy majorities across demographic groups do support a core set of basic reforms. Nearly 90 percent of respondents support the use of police body cameras. The use of body cameras isn't a panacea, of course, and their effectiveness is really contingent on the policies that state and local governments implement to govern their use. But it's encouraging that 90 percent of respondents favor more transparency for police. Nearly 80 percent of respondents also say police shootings and misconduct cases should be investigated by outside agencies. This, too, reflects a healthy skepticism of power and an understanding of the misaligned incentives at play when police agencies investigate their own. Nearly 70 percent think police need additional training in conflict resolution, a sign that recent reporting about the disparity between training for using force and training in deescalation is changing public opinion. More good news: Just under 85 percent of respondents oppose civil asset forfeiture — likely another area where exposure has educated and affected public opinion. Majorities of blacks, whites and Hispanics all think domestic police shouldn't be permitted to use military equipment. (Of the subgroups surveyed, Republicans were the only group who disagreed — 65 percent are okay with police using weapons and gear designed for war.) Over 6 in 10 respondents oppose racial profiling, while 65 percent believe it's commonly used. And more than 60 percent of respondents think police have too much authority to search automobiles without a warrant.

The important takeaways from this survey:

1. There are deep racial divides in attitudes toward police officers, and those divides appear to be driven not by ideology or groupthink, but by actual experiences with law enforcement. These divides transcend class, political ideology and income levels.

2. These divides drive how willing people of different races are to report crimes to police and to cooperate with police during criminal investigations, tendencies with a direct and significant impact on public safety.

3. Consequently, there's a pretty good argument to be made that if you consider yourself someone who believes in law and order, you ought to care about how black and Latino communities view the police, and about why they view the police the way they do.

4. Finally, there's broad agreement about the need for some core reform and about doing away with certain police tactics that go too far or violate our fundamental notions of fairness and individual liberty. Politicians tend to be highly risk-averse when it comes to criminal justice reform. But this survey suggests they could pursue any of these particular issues knowing that they'll have significant public support should they get pushback from police groups.