



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 28
Issue 1 *March*

Article 4

March 2001

Crime Rates and Confidence in the Police: America's Changing Attitudes toward Crime and Police, 1972-1999

Georgia Ackerman
Arizona State University

Bobbie Anderson
Arizona State University

Scott Jensen
Arizona State University

Randy Ludwig
Arizona State University

Darrel Montero
Arizona State University

See next page for additional authors

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Ackerman, Georgia; Anderson, Bobbie; Jensen, Scott; Ludwig, Randy; Montero, Darrel; Plante, Nicole; and Yanez, Vince (2001) "Crime Rates and Confidence in the Police: America's Changing Attitudes toward Crime and Police, 1972-1999," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 28 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol28/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

Crime Rates and Confidence in the Police: America's Changing Attitudes toward Crime and Police, 1972-1999

Authors

Georgia Ackerman, Bobbie Anderson, Scott Jensen, Randy Ludwig, Darrel Montero, Nicole Plante, and Vince Yanez

Crime Rates and Confidence in the Police: America's Changing Attitudes toward Crime and Police, 1972–1999

GEORGIA ACKERMAN
BOBBIE ANDERSON
SCOTT JENSEN
RANDY LUDWIG
DARREL MONTERO
NICOLE PLANTE
VINCE YANEZ

Arizona State University
School of Social Work

This paper examines American national public opinion on crime and the American police force. The data were gathered from published opinion polls of national samples of adults taken from 1972–1999. The findings reveal that Americans have contradictory perceptions regarding crime in their area, crime in our nation, confidence in the police, and the honesty of the nation's police officers. A growing number of respondents report that crime seems to be decreasing; however, a majority of Americans still report that there is more crime in their area than there was a year ago. These are only a few examples of the complexity of American public opinion. Adding to this intricate web of American opinion and attitude is the issue of ethnicity. National polls indicate that most Americans are satisfied with police honesty and ethics. However, when we control for ethnicity, minorities rate the honesty and ethical standards of police officers much lower than do White Americans. Nevertheless, despite the widespread media reports of erosion in trust in the police, a solid majority of Americans consistently express confidence in and support of the police. These findings are discussed in light of the apparent contradiction of the actual crime rates and perceived crime rates.

Regardless of the time in American history, crime and the police have been issues of considerable debate. Americans consistently express concerns about the amount of criminal activity in

their communities and what is being done to prevent it. The prevailing attitude toward crime in this country is one of frustration. The news media regularly report that Americans are "fed up with crime" and "profoundly disillusioned" with the criminal justice system (Warr, 1995, p. 296). This frustration is certainly nothing new to the American public. Since the 1970s, the violent crime rate and Americans' fear of crime have remained remarkably stable. The overall national crime rate has declined over the last 20 years, but this does not change Americans' perceptions of an increasing rate of crime (Shaw, Shapiro, Lock, & Jacobs, 1998).

Americans continue to feel the crime rate is increasing. The responsibility for the current crime rate in this country is largely assigned to the criminal justice system (Maguire & Pastore, 1999). Americans feel that the courts are not aggressive enough and far too lenient. This attitude has created an American public that has been far more punitive in recent years (Shaw et al., 1998). Proof of this cannot only be found through the passage of the "three strikes" law, but 1999 Gallup opinion polls also show that Americans overwhelmingly support capital punishment.

Despite America's criticism of the criminal justice system, the police maintain a surprising level of popular support. In fact, in 1993 and 1994 Gallup surveys, Americans likened the honesty and ethical standards of the police with those of medical doctors and college professors (Warr, 1995). This perception of police officers has undoubtedly translated into support for more law enforcement officers and increased funding for police departments across the nation (Blumstein & Rosenfeld, 1998).

It is imperative to note, however, that not all Americans hold the police in such high regard. Ethnicity has always been a very strong predictor of attitudes toward the police, with African Americans and Latinos being far more likely to express concerns about various aspects of law enforcement. Although overall confidence levels in the police have increased in the 1990s, incidents such as the 1991 beating of Rodney King, commonly referred to as the "King incident", and the 1996 beatings of two Mexican immigrants have given minorities very real reasons to remain distrustful (Tuch & Weitzer, 1997).

It is extremely difficult to characterize public opinion on crime in any simple way. There are numerous contradictions within the

opinions of many Americans. What Americans tend to believe about crime in the nation does not necessarily correspond to their perception of crime in their own neighborhoods. Moreover, their apparent contempt for one element of the justice system, the courts, is countered by their respect for another, the police (Warr, 1995).

Method

The findings of this paper are based upon published public opinion polls from the Gallup Organization—Gallup Poll, Gallup Poll Monthly, National Opinion Research Center/General Social Surveys, and the *Public Opinion Quarterly*. These organizations use similar sampling techniques. For example, the standard Gallup sample consists of 1000 face-to-face and telephone interviews. The sample design for face-to-face surveys is a replicated area-probability sample that selects subjects based on demographics from the block level in urban areas and segments of townships in rural areas. After stratifying the nation geographically and by size of the community, according to information derived from the most recent census, more than 350 different sampling locations are selected on a mathematically random basis from within cities, towns, and counties that have, in turn, been selected on a mathematically random basis. A more detailed discussion of this sampling procedure is found in Gallup Poll Monthly (1996).

Results and Discussion

Crime as the Most Important Problem Facing the Country. From 1985 to 1999, a cross-section of the American public was asked the following question (Table 1): "What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?" The top five responses included crime, economy/employment, health care, the deficit, and drugs. More specifically, from 1994 to 1997 between two in 10 and five in 10 Americans believe that crime ranks as the most important problem facing the country today.

Interestingly, despite the media's reporting of widespread discontent, with the criminal justice system and crime in general, Americans did not view crime as the highest ranking social

Table 1

Percentage of Respondents Who Think Crime is the Most Important Problem Facing the Country, 1985–1999^a

<i>Year</i>	<i>Crime</i>	<i>Economy/ Employment</i>	<i>Health Care</i>	<i>Deficit</i>	<i>Drugs</i>
1985	3	28	—	16	3
1987	3	26	1	11	11
1989	3	6	—	5	63
1991	4	24	3	6	13
1992	8	50	7	5	10
1993	9	57	18	13	6
1993	16	46	28	15	6
1994	52	23	29	3	9
1995	27	25	12	14	6
1995	25	21	7	11	10
1996	25	20	8	12	8
1997	23	21	7	8	17
1997	16	16	7	5	12
1998	10	4	6	2	9
1999	13	6	7	2	6

^a Question: "What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?"

NOTE: Data reported twice in one year indicate the question was asked twice in that year.

NOTE: Figures may not total 100% due to multiple responses.

SOURCE: Gallup Organization (1999).

problem until 1994, when it peaked at 52%. This sharp increase from 16% in 1993 to 52% in 1994 suggests some significant outside influencing event or chain of events. That same year, the U.S. Congress passed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, the most comprehensive crime-control bill in history (Walker, 1997). The highly publicized bombings of the World Trade Center and Oklahoma City Federal Building may have some effect on these findings. Correspondingly, high-profile crimes during the 1990s included the murders of Nicole Brown Simpson, Polly Klaas, the Menendez parents, and other similar crimes, that could be factors in the increase (Alderman, 1994).

Attitudes toward Crime in Own Area. As a social issue, crime is capable of generating both intense public debate and ever-changing public policy. A key component in any shift in public policy toward crime is how Americans perceive crime in their own area. From 1972 through 1998, a cross-section of the American public was asked the following question (Table 2): "Is there more crime in your area than there was a year ago, or less?"

From 1972 to 1998, the number of Americans who believe that there is "less crime" in their area than a year ago has increased, ranging from a low of less than one in 10 respondents to a high of nearly five in 10. Interestingly, these findings of perceived "less crime" in one's own area dovetail nicely with a recent report of the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics indicating an overall 20% decrease in crime from 1981 to 1992 (Radelet & Carter, 1994; U.S. Department of Justice, 1994).

Table 2

Attitudes toward Crime in Own Area, 1972–1998^a (Numbers are in percentages)

Year	More Crime	Less Crime	Same	No Opinion
1972	51	10	27	12
1975	50	12	29	9
1977	43	17	32	8
1981	54	8	29	9
1983	37	17	36	10
1989	47	21	27	5
1989	53	18	22	7
1990	51	18	24	8
1992	54	19	23	4
1996	46	24	25	5
1997	46	32	20	2
1998	31	48	16	5

^a Question: "Is there more crime in your area than there was a year ago, or less?"

NOTE: Data reported twice in one year indicate the question was asked twice in that year.

NOTE: Figures may not total 100% due to rounding.

SOURCE: Gallup Organization (1999); Warr (1995); Newport (1997).

Despite the general decline in the national crime rates, a near plurality of Americans still believes that crime is worse in their area than a year ago. One possible explanation for this inconsistency between public opinion and the actual crime rate is that the preponderance of police and crime television programs is simply creating what Felson (1994) calls the "dramatic fallacy." Dramatic fallacy refers to the perceptions of crime being much greater than the actual rate of crime. Furthermore, the public also believes that violent crimes predominate when in actuality crimes such as burglary, robbery, and drug-related crimes are far more common.

Attitudes toward Government Spending on Law Enforcement. Between 1984 and 1996, a cross-section of the American public was asked the following question (Table 3): "We are faced with many

Table 3

Attitudes toward Government Spending on Law Enforcement, 1984–1996^a (Numbers are in percentages)

Year	<i>Too Little</i>	<i>About Right</i>	<i>Too Much</i>	<i>Don't Know</i>	<i>No Answer</i>
1984	54	35	7	3	2
1985	56	34	6	4	1
1986	50	38	7	4	1
1987	52	37	7	4	1
1988	54	36	6	4	1
1989	60	29	6	4	1
1990	54	34	6	3	2
1991	53	36	6	3	2
1993	58	31	6	4	1
1994	61	27	7	2	3
1996	55	30	8	3	4

^a Question: "We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. I'm going to name some of these problems, and for each one I'd like you to tell me whether you think we're spending too much money on it, too little money, or about the right amount . . . Law enforcement."

NOTE: Figures may not total 100% due to rounding.

SOURCE: Shaw, Shapiro, Lock, & Jacobs (1998) based on data from National Opinion Research Center/General Social Survey.

problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. I am going to name some of these problems, and for each one I'd like you to tell me whether you think we are spending too much money on it, too little, or about the right amount . . . Law enforcement." When this general question is examined, we find that a majority of Americans feel that we are currently spending "too little" on law enforcement. Without exception, a majority of the respondents report that spending is not meeting their expectations. Correspondingly, fewer than one in 10 Americans think the government is spending "too much" on law enforcement. The findings have been extremely stable over this two-decade period.

Although the beleaguered American taxpayer is often reluctant to spend additional tax money, here is an area where a substantial majority is willing to allocate tax dollars to fight crime. This is a distinct instance where public opinion polling results can directly affect the formulation of public policy.

Confidence in the American Police Force. From 1993 to 1997, a cross-section of the American public was asked the following question (see Table 4): "I am going to read you a list of institutions in American society. Please tell me how much confidence you, yourself, have in each one . . . Police." Respondents were asked to reply with "a great deal," "quite a lot," "some," "very little," "none at all," or "no opinion." From 1993 to 1997, a very consistent finding of between one-quarter and one-third of Americans report a "great deal," "quite a lot," or "some" confidence in the police. Conversely, at the other end of the continuum, only 10% of Americans report "very little" confidence in the police. Encouragingly, only one in 100 Americans reports no confidence in the police. This is particularly impressive given that this sample is representative across ethnic groups.

When we combine the top two response choices of "a great deal" and "quite a lot", we find a consistent majority of Americans indicate confidence in the police throughout the five years of polling. In fact, a notably high nine in 10 Americans have some level of confidence in the police. However, we cannot ignore the fact that one in 10 Americans has very little confidence whatsoever in the police. Although 10% is a small figure, it is a significant minority that should not be ignored.

Table 4

Confidence in the American Police Force, 1993–1997^a (Numbers are in percentages)

Year	<i>A Great Deal</i>	<i>Quite a Lot</i>	<i>Some</i>	<i>Very Little</i>	<i>None at All</i>	<i>No Opinion</i>
1993	22	30	35	11	1	—
1994	22	32	33	11	1	1
1995	26	32	30	10	1	1
1996	22	38	29	11	1	—
1997	27	32	31	10	1	—

^a Question: "I am going to read you a list of institutions in American society. Please tell me how much confidence you, yourself, have in each one—a great deal, quite a lot, some, or very little? . . . Police."

NOTE: Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

SOURCE: Shaw, Shapiro, Lock, & Jacobs (1998) based on Gallup.

Attitudes toward Police Honesty and Ethics. Researchers measuring public opinion of American police honesty and ethics must consider the dynamics of ethnicity. Police brutality and corruption are subjects eagerly reported on by the media. Sensationalized cases such as the "King incident" and the O. J. Simpson trial have brought issues of police integrity to the forefront. Moreover, the popularization of media shows such as "Hard Copy" and "Inside Edition," dubbed "info-tainment" by criminologists, has given Americans greater awareness of police actions across the nation (Radelet & Carter, 1994, p. 476). Additionally, demographic reports on the make-up of the U.S. police force show that four of five police officers are of European-American heritage (white), whereas the persons at highest risk for crime are of African American (black) heritage (Loury, 1996). All of these factors interact to complicate public opinion toward the police.

When overall satisfaction of the police is examined by ethnicity, the contrast is substantial. From 1977 to 1995, a cross-section of white and minority Americans was asked the following question (Table 5): "How would you rate the honesty and ethical standards of people in these different fields (policemen)?" Respondents were asked to reply with "very high", "high", "average", "low", or "very low".

Table 5

Attitudes toward Police Honesty and Ethics, 1977–1995^a (Numbers are in percentages)

<i>Year</i>		<i>Very High or High</i>	<i>Average</i>	<i>Low or Very Low</i>	<i>No Opinion</i>
1977	Whites	38	50	11	1
	Minorities	34	44	21	1
1981	Whites	46	42	10	2
	Minorities	32	38	26	4
1983	Whites	44	44	9	3
	Minorities	28	48	22	2
1985	Whites	48	41	9	2
	Minorities	35	42	22	1
1988	Whites	49	39	10	2
	Minorities	33	47	13	7
1990	Whites	51	40	8	1
	Minorities	41	38	21	—
1991	Whites	45	43	11	1
	Minorities	30	36	30	4
1992	Whites	61	28	11	—
	Minorities	43	38	19	—
1993	Whites	53	38	8	1
	Minorities	28	45	26	1
1994	Whites	49	41	9	1
	Minorities	21	43	36	—
1995	Whites	44	44	11	1
	Minorities	25	41	32	2

^a Question: "How would you rate the honesty and ethical standards of people in these different fields (policemen)—very high, high, average, low, very low?"
NOTE: Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

SOURCE: Tuch & Weitzer (1997) based on Gallup.

The results of this survey clearly show that whites, without exception, have rated police higher in the areas of honesty and ethics than have minorities. Although there is a clear difference

in the percentage of white and minority respondents that rated police honesty and ethics as "very high or high," the disparity becomes even more apparent when comparing the data on respondents answering "very low or low."

In 1977, only one in 10 whites rated police as having "very low or low" ethical standards, compared with two in 10 minorities giving that same response. This difference held relatively constant until 1991, the year of the "King incident." In that year, whites' opinions of police remained unchanged, whereas for minority respondents, a dramatic increase occurred, with three in 10 rating the police as having "very low or low" ethical standards.

In summary, when we examine national poll data on the American public's attitudes toward crime rates and confidence in the police, some striking trends emerge. Table 1 indicates that, for the most part, from 1994 to 1997, over one in four Americans believe crime ranks as the most important problem facing the country today, outstripping the economy/employment, health care, the deficit, and drugs.

In the 1990s, concern for the amount of crime nationwide has been heightened by a series of tragic events. The bombings of the World Trade Center and the federal building in Oklahoma City, combined with a string of high-profile murder trials (O. J. Simpson and the Menendez brothers) have brought crime to the forefront of American consciousness. These events and their subsequent media coverage have resulted in many Americans perceiving that crime in their country is on the rise, regardless of the fact that the crime rate has actually been declining for the past 20 years (U.S. Department of Justice, 1994). Also interestingly as reported in Table 2, from 1990 to 1998, without exception, Americans agree that there is less crime in their area compared to the prior reporting period.

Despite America's frustration with our high crime rate, our findings reveal that most Americans have a high level of confidence in the police (Table 4). Consequently, it is not surprising to find a consistent majority of Americans support increased funding for law enforcement agencies across the nation (Table 3). As indicated in Table 3, Americans' feelings have been extremely stable throughout the 1980s and 1990s regarding their belief that government is spending "too little" on law enforcement. These

findings dovetail neatly with our findings in Table 4. That is, when we combine the first two columns of Americans expressing confidence in the police force, we find that, from 1993 to 1997, a majority of Americans, without exception, have “quite a lot or a great deal” of confidence in the police.

An interesting finding emerges in Table 5. When we examine Americans’ attitudes toward police honesty and ethics, controlling for ethnicity, we find markedly different levels of support between whites and minorities. When we examine the “very high or high” response category in Table 5, remarkably consistent findings emerge. That is, for the three-decade period reported, without exception, whites rate the honesty and ethical standards of the police higher than do minorities.

Public opinion on each issue discussed in this study has remained relatively stable. There have been fluctuations in Americans’ attitudes perhaps resulting from numerous high-profile events, which may be related to Felson’s “dramatic fallacy” (Felson, 1994), but these shifts are usually small and short-lived. This consistent pattern indicates that it is likely that public opinion on crime and the police will remain stable in the years to come.

Finally, as noted throughout this paper, in a very logical fashion, Americans have expressed that crime has remained a major problem facing our country, that they have confidence in their police force, and that they, in turn, are willing to spend more tax dollars on fighting crime. Interestingly, despite the widespread media reports of erosion in trust in the police, a solid majority of Americans consistently express confidence in and support of the police.

References

- Alderman, J. D. (1994). Leading the public: The media’s focus on crime shaped sentiment. *Public Perspective*, 5, 26–27.
- Blumstein, A., & Rosenfeld, R. (1998). Explaining recent trends in the U.S. homicide rate. *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 88(4), 1175–1216
- Felson, M. (1994). *Crime and everyday life: Insights and implications for society*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- Gallup Organization (1999). “Gallup social and economic indicators—Most important problem.” [Http://www.gallup.com/poll/indicators/indmip.asp](http://www.gallup.com/poll/indicators/indmip.asp)
- Gallup Organization (1999). “Gallup social and economic indicators—Crime issues.” [Http://www.gallup.com/poll/indicators/indcrime.asp](http://www.gallup.com/poll/indicators/indcrime.asp)

- Gallup Poll (1996, January). Design of the sample. *The Gallup Poll Monthly*, p. 56–57.
- Loury, G. (1996, January 1). The impossible dilemma: Between black crime and judicial racism. *New Republic*, 21–25.
- Maguire, K., & Pastore, A. (Eds.). (1999). *Sourcebook of criminal justice statistics*. [Http://www.albany.edu/sourcebook](http://www.albany.edu/sourcebook).
- Newport, F. (1997, November). American perceptions of economic conditions and crime reach new highs in optimism. *The Gallup Poll Monthly*, 8–9.
- Radelet, L., & Carter, D. (1994). *The police and the community*. New York: Macmillan Press.
- Shaw, G. M., Shapiro, R. Y., Lock, S., & Jacobs, L. R. (1998). The polls—Trends: Crime, the police, and civil liberties. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 62, 405–426.
- Tuch, S. A., & Weitzer, R. (1997). The polls—Trends: Racial differences in attitudes toward the police. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 61, 642–663.
- Walker, J. (1997) *Crime*. In J. K. Roth (Ed.). *Encyclopedia of social issues*. (Vol. 2 “Chronic Fatigue Syndrome”). New York: Marshall Cavendish.
- Warr, M. (1995). The polls—Poll trends: Public opinion on crime and punishment. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 59, 296–310.
- United States Department of Justice. (1994). *Sourcebook of criminal justice statistics*. Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Author Notes

We wish to gratefully acknowledge the valuable comments provided by Robert Rhodes, Jean Bann, Mirjam Bakuelue, and the editor of this journal. Special thanks goes to Terry DiFalco for his significant contributions to this article. We also acknowledge the following organizations for their generosity in sharing their data with us: Gallup Poll, Gallup Poll Monthly, the National Opinion Research Center/General Social Surveys, and the *Public Opinion Quarterly*.

Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Darrel Montero, School of Social Work, Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona 85287.