



Statewide Policing Poll: Executive Summary

June 9, 2016

Executive Summary

This memo is designed to accompany the larger report and offers an interpretation and analysis of the findings from the poll conducted for the Florida League of Cities/Florida Urban Partnership in February 2016.

Near and Far

When analyzing the findings from this poll, one of the first things that jumps OFF THE PAGE is the stark differences in public opinion between what voters (in this case) believe about what is happening in America versus what is happening in their own communities. In short, they are relatively content with what is happening in their own communities but are concerned — to different degrees based on racial differences and media exposure — about the state of things in our nation.

These are a few of the more notable differences:

General feelings about “crime and safety”:

- ▶ Only 20% feel things in “our nation” are headed in the right direction when it comes to the issue of “crime and safety.”
- ▶ Yet, 63% feel things are headed in the right direction when it comes to “crime and safety” in their “local community.”
- ▶ And finally, an astonishing 91% feel safe in their “own neighborhood!”

Opinion of police misconduct:

- ▶ 60% agreed that “police misconduct is a problem in “our country.”
- ▶ Yet, only 20% felt it was a problem, “in my community.”

Opinion of police:

- ▶ A very high number (86%) had a favorable view of “police officers who work in my community”.
- ▶ A similarly high (but lower) number (76%) felt the same about “police officers throughout our country.”

- ▶ While the 10-point differential noted in the prior two bullets doesn't appear, at first glance, to be that large of a gap, when we add in the corresponding rise in negative opinions (from 9% to 19%) the net differential is a reasonably strong 20 points.

Editor's Note: *In light of the fact that most people see crime and personal safety issues as not directly affecting them personally — and we did not test this on this poll, but we have on others — there is likely going to be higher than expected resistance to increasing taxes to address local crime-related matters.*

Black and White

Perhaps not surprisingly, there is a very large cultural and perception gap between black and white respondents. But what IS surprising is the ubiquity and strength of this gap across a wide variety of variables.

In general terms, white voters feel safer, trust police more and believe most problems related to crime and safety are to some degree a more distant problem. This doesn't mean they aren't concerned, it means that black respondents were far more concerned and had, at times, starkly different views in most key areas. The persistence of these difference — and they appeared in virtually every question — is both enlightening and troubling as it clearly demonstrates the large cultural perception (and reality) gap that exists in our state. The issues — and there are many — where black and white respondents differ are as follows:

Opinion of police and police-related issues:

- ▶ When asked about “police officers throughout the country” there was a large gap in net favorable ratings of 30 points (white respondents had an 83% favorable rating while black respondents only had a 53% favorable rating) but when comparing net favorabilities (positive minus negative) we find an astonishing 58-point differential as 40% of black respondents had a negative rating.
- ▶ However — and this may be one of the most important “however” in this analysis — when it comes to “police officers who work in your community” there is **no (statistical) difference** between black and white respondents. It is worth noting that black respondents gave local police officers a very strong 81% to 11% favorability rating.
- ▶ However, and this inconsistency is somewhat surprising, black respondents were nearly twice as likely (33% to 17%) as white respondents to feel that police misconduct is a “problem in

my community.” However, it is worth noting that nearly six in ten (59%) black respondents say it is not a problem.

- ▶ On the other hand, an astonishing 86% feel it is a problem in “our country” compared to only 52% of white respondents who felt it was a problem.
- ▶ Black respondents were far more likely than white respondents to feel that police officers are not as well trained as in years past (47% to 19%.)
- ▶ One of the largest racial gaps is in the perception of the cause of the recent rise in “stories about police misconduct.” Black respondents agreed by a very high 78%-17% ratio that the cause was “too many police officers thinking they can get away with things” while white respondents were nearly 2:1 opposed to that notion (35% to 63%).
- ▶ While there was a gap in perception over the role of “race and the color of someone’s skin” impacting how the police treat that person (88% of black respondents agreed while 63% of white respondents did) the gap was not as large as we might have expected given other findings in this poll.
- ▶ Half of black respondents felt that “most people who were shot by police officers were engaged in bad behavior and share some of the blame” while 78% of white voters felt that way.
- ▶ A recent study published by the *Washington Post* found that 90% of those shot by police were armed. When we asked the question “in most police shootings, the person who was shot is usually not armed” both black and white respondents were off the mark as 19% of white respondents agreed while an astonishing 57% of black voters agreed. The difference in perception of course is of interest here in that nearly six in ten black respondents felt that “in most cases” the person who was shot was not armed. This is clearly a massive gap between perception and at least one independent study of the reality.

Black Lives Matter:

- ▶ Not surprising, black respondents felt generally favorable (73% to 12%) towards BLM and while there was a large gap between black and white respondents (35% to 42% for white respondents) it wasn’t as large as we had feared. Further, black respondents were more likely to trust BLM — but not overwhelmingly so.
- ▶ Black respondents were more than twice as likely (58% to 26%) as white respondents to feel that “public demonstrations and protests” are a good thing as they call attention to these issues.

Crime and safety in “your local community” and the role of local leaders:

- ▶ While black respondents were 10 points less optimistic than white respondents (62% versus 52% “right track” ratings) they were still relatively optimistic (52% to 42%).
- ▶ Interestingly, Hispanic respondents were outliers and were the most optimistic with a very high 73% rating.
- ▶ Black respondents are far more likely to believe that “local elected officials are, often, too eager to protect police” than white respondents (78% to 47%) and are less likely (47% for black respondents compared to 65% for white respondents) to “trust local elected leaders to be honest with me” on “allegations of police misconduct.”

Media:

- ▶ Black respondents are less likely to believe that the media “too often sensationalizes issue of police misconduct” by a differential of 64% to 83% and by a similar margin (76% to 24%) are more likely to say that the recent news stories are “the result of too many officers thinking they can get away with things.”
- ▶ Black respondents are three times more likely (67% to 22%) than white respondents to say they are “more afraid of being stopped by the police” as a result of “recent news related to police shootings.”
- ▶ White respondents overwhelmingly (77%) felt the “media spends too much time attacking police officers who do a very tough and dangerous job” while only 39% of black respondents felt that way.
- ▶ Conversely, black respondents are less likely to agree (47% to 62%) that “recent increase in stories about police misconduct is mostly the result of too much political correctness.” (This is likely also a spurious relationship to party registration for the obvious reasons.)
- ▶ White respondents were much more likely to feel that “the media has overblown many of the recent stories about police shooting innocent people” by a margin of 67% to 29% (agree to disagree) versus 41% to 56% for black respondents. But it should be noted, we were surprised that more black respondents did not disagree with this statement given other findings in this poll.
- ▶ Black respondents were twice as likely to believe what they see in a video (dashcam or other on-the-scene video) than white respondents (40% to 19%).

Surprising “no differences”

The following are listed primarily because we expected to find a statistically significant difference between black and white respondents, but we found none and we felt these “non-differences” were worth noting:

- ▶ The direction of crime and safety in “our nation”: both groups felt strongly that it was headed in the wrong direction.
- ▶ There was a slight difference in “safe in your own neighborhood” but it is worth noting that 84% of black respondents (compared to 92% white and 94% hispanic) felt safe in their own neighborhoods.
- ▶ Both groups worry equally (around 63%) that “recent allegations against the police may cause a breakdown in law and order.”
- ▶ Both groups tend to favor an “independent citizens” group “investigating allegations of police misconduct” by a similar 57% and 54% margin.
- ▶ Both agree to the same extent that the recent scrutiny “makes us safer.”
- ▶ It is important to note that for most of the above, Hispanic respondents usually fell directly in between black and white respondents.

The role of media and media exposure

As noted above, there is a very large gap in several key media-related issues between black and white respondents. Interestingly there is a persistent trend — and this should not be a surprise — that those respondents who viewed more media (watched more television for example) were somewhat more likely to believe the problems in our nation are worse than those who view less television. They are also somewhat more likely to be skeptical of and less trusting of police, more likely to be concerned about these issues and more likely to generally be pessimistic about crime and safety. It appears that more media exposure is highly correlated to higher saliency and a bit more concern over these issues. (It should be noted that it is not even close to the gulf between black and white respondents.)

But it is unclear — and this is important — in this instance if correlation equates with causation.

Stepping outside of this poll for a moment, we need to reference the most recent Nielsen “Total Audience Report.” This report, issued annually, provides one of the most comprehensive analyses of viewership/listenership across multiple media platforms and for various audiences in the United States. That report notes that, “black audiences watch more TV than any other group.” While the report does not compare black audiences to

white audiences directly, it appears that black viewership (and general exposure to national media) is at least 50% greater than for white audiences.

Those who watched more TV (The “point” difference noted below are estimations as we used an amalgamated scale.):

- ▶ Viewed “police officers throughout the country” 13 points less favorable than their less-viewing counterparts — yet there was no significant difference in their opinions of local police.
- ▶ Were 12 points more pessimistic about the direction of crime and safety in the nation — and again, there was no difference in opinion on local matters of crime and safety.
- ▶ Are somewhat more likely to believe the “recent increase in stories...is mostly the result of too much political correctness.”
- ▶ Are more likely to believe that the shooting victims share some of the blame (by a 15 point margin.)

Interestingly, there is no difference between those who watch a lot of TV and those who do not believe that the “media often sensationalizes” these issues or, surprisingly, that “police misconduct is a problem in our country.”

What kinds of policies do they support?

Irrespective of how they feel in general terms and the fact that most people inherently believe local police officers are doing a good job, they do recognize and respect the fact that there are times when a police officer will do wrong. To that extent it is clear that they universally support the following policies:

- ▶ **Body and dashboard cameras.** There is universal agreement that these devices are a good thing with an eye-popping 96% agree that these devices are a good thing. Further, more than three in four (76%) believe they increase awareness and are “good for everyone” while only 4% feel they are “very misleading.” While only 22% say they are “very reliable” and 72% say they only “show part of the story” there is no doubt they believe they are valuable tools.
- ▶ **Immediate action following a shooting.** As with cameras, there is strong and near-universal support for a policy that ensures a police officer is immediately taken off the streets after a shooting as 85% support this (with 65% strongly supporting it.)
- ▶ **Communication.** We tested a variety of policy positions about communicating with the public after a shooting and this poll offers no clear direction. First, there is a relatively high degree of trust of “local elected” leaders (more on that later) at 63% overall yet the public is clearly split on when and how often

the public should be informed. About half (53%) want frequent communications (“quickly and often”) even if the facts are still unclear while 43% only want to be informed only when there is “new information.” They are likewise split on who should be investigating such allegations with a slight majority (53%) saying an “independent citizens group” should do so, while just under 40% say “our elected officials” should. To make matters more convoluted, more than six in ten said it is okay to “hold back information from the public” to let the legal process work itself out while only 35% say the “public needs to know all of the information.” (Black respondents were twice as likely as white respondents to want information quickly.)

Who do they trust?

Somewhat surprising, the “local police chief” is the most trusted person “when it comes to accurately conveying information about or investigating allegations of police misconduct” as 74% scored either “definitely” or “probably” trust. Second was “your local mayor” and third was the “state attorney.” All three are trusted to some degree.

Local news media and the local newspaper, while trusted had a relatively large (32% and 27% respectively) number of those saying they do not trust either and the least trusted groups were the “police union” and “Black Lives Matter” (which, as noted earlier, broke along racial lines.)

Differences by population density

In recognition that this survey was commissioned in part by the Florida Urban Partnership, we broke out respondents by population density and categorized them as either “urban”, “mid-sized” or “rural.” In short, (and we were generally surprised by this) there were almost no significant differences on these issues by this population density variable. The minor exceptions are:

- ▶ **Favorability/trust in the local mayor.** Urban respondents had a slightly higher favorability of their local mayor (9 points higher than either rural or mid-sized) but there was no difference on who they trust to communicate on these matters.
- ▶ **Black Lives Matter.** There was a slightly higher rating for BLM in urban areas, but that is likely due to the fact that urban areas have a larger black population than non-urban areas.
- ▶ **The NRA.** Urbanites have a significantly lower opinion of the NRA than the others. (Surprisingly the NRA only scored a 55% positive to 38% negative rating among those who live in rural communities.)

Recommendations

In offering counsel based on these findings, it is vital to note that each community is different and each incident is likewise different as well. However, in the event of a shooting involving a police officer and a citizen, there are several steps we would recommend:

- ▶ **Immediately suspend the police officer.** We are not recommending suspension as a punishment, but as a precautionary first step as a way to demonstrate that the local government is taking this matter seriously, is taking affirmative action to protect the public and is taking immediate steps to maintain public confidence.
- ▶ **Address the matter immediately.** Either the police chief or the mayor (or both) should immediately address the public; but make sure first there is something tangible to address. This address could be as simple as:
 - ▶ We are aware of the situation and are taking immediate steps to examine exactly what happened.
 - ▶ The officer involved in the shooting has been placed on immediate administrative leave and will not be reinstated unless and until a full investigation is conducted.
 - ▶ We are reaching out to community leaders and local citizens to learn more.
 - ▶ We will keep the public informed as we learn more. (Perhaps even set up an information hotline.)
- ▶ **Form a citizens advisory committee.** This recommendation of course will depend on a wide variety of factors, but there appears to be public support for involving the public. Based on the racial disparity that permeates these issues, we strongly recommend that the committee is at least as ethnically diverse as the community you serve.
- ▶ **Develop a community/public outreach plan.** Whether it is on a planned calendar or “as things develop” there should be a clear — and clearly communicated — public outreach plan to let citizens know you care about and are taking immediate and ongoing steps to address the issues surrounding this shooting. This should also include an internal calendar and list of calls to make to community leaders to both keep them in the loop and to learn about local feedback.
- ▶ **In the event there is video of the incident.** Do not discount the video footage. Take it seriously and as appropriate evidence to be used in gathering all of the facts surrounding the event. (If there is no footage, we suggest using that as a platform to support greater use of body and dashboard cameras and to also request the public to come forward with any such video to help the city better understand what happened.)



- ▶ **Recognize the strong racial gap in public perception.** While there is likely nothing one can do in this regard, it is vital to understand the strong and ubiquitous racial divide on these issues. Perhaps by recognizing them, it can help you do a better job of understanding the needs of the entire community you serve.
- ▶ **Localize the issue.** It is also vital to recognize that there is a large perception gap between how things are going in your local community and the rest of the country. Do what you can to put that clear separation into focus as it will likely calm fears and engender a stronger sense of trust in your actions.

Thank you.