



December 2020

RESEARCH BRIEF

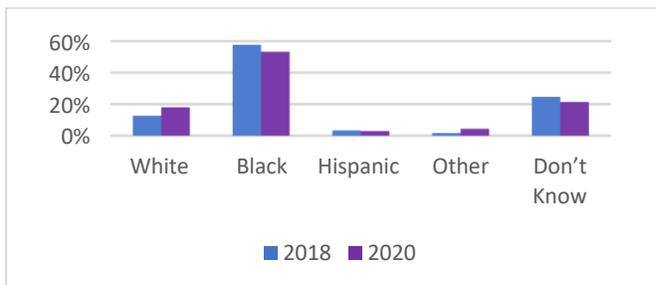
Pennsylvanians' Racial and Ethnic Expectations of Arrestees and Neighborhood Safety

PENN STATE HARRISBURG - The United States was founded and formed on racial divides. These divides have historically contributed to perceptions that racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to commit crimes that come to the attention of police and result in arrest. Racial tensions have been high across the United States in the past decade, and Gallup polls¹ show a reduction in positive white-Black relations in recent years. Much of this tension is attributable to police killings of persons of color. We sought to understand whether Pennsylvanians' perceptions of criminality and violence shifted in response to increased media attention of police-citizen interactions considering the *Black Lives Matter* movement and Summer of 2020 protests surrounding police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other persons of color.

Lion Poll Omnibus Survey

We collected data to assess citizen perceptions on perceived criminality and violence proneness at two time points, Fall 2018 and Fall 2020. A representative sample of Pennsylvanians was interviewed through the Lion Poll, an omnibus web-based survey conducted by the Center for Survey Research (CSR) at Penn State Harrisburg. The two samples consisted of 1,048 (Fall 2018) and 1,001 (Fall 2020) completed surveys. All respondents were asked "Which racial/ethnic group do you believe is arrested for the largest proportion of serious crime in the United States?". In both years, respondents predominantly said that Blacks are arrested for the largest portion of serious crime (Figure 1). This result is in stark contrast to official data on arrests for serious crime (i.e., homicide, robbery, rape, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson). Police records show that Blacks are arrested for a smaller proportion of serious crime than whites, while Pennsylvanians believed Blacks are more likely than whites to be arrested for serious crime. According to 2018 Uniform Crime Report data,² Blacks comprised 28.1% of all serious crime arrestees in the US, while 68.3% were white. In Pennsylvania, Blacks comprised 36.9% of all serious crime arrests in 2018, and 62.4% were white.³

Figure 1. Percent of Pennsylvanians who believe certain racial/ethnic groups are arrested for the largest portion of serious crime in the United States, 2018 and 2020



In the 2020 survey, 51.3% of whites, 78.3% of Blacks, and 61.0% of Hispanics believe Blacks are arrested for the largest portion of serious crime in the US. There were no differences by gender.

¹ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1667/race-relations.aspx>

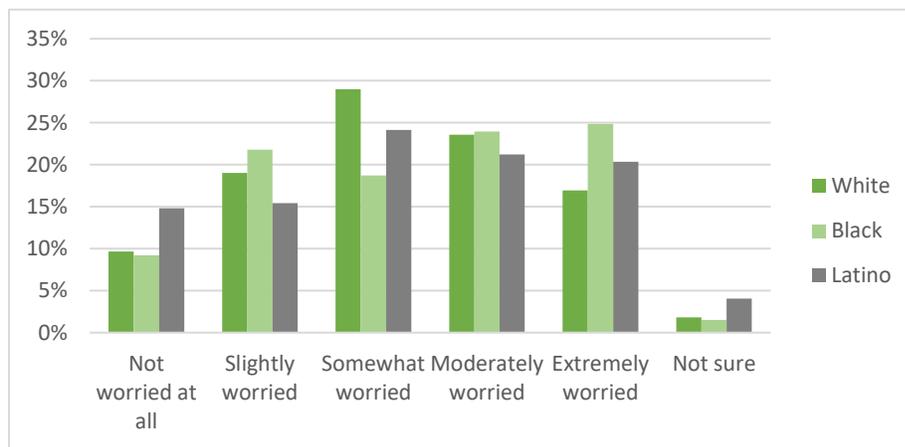
² <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s./2018/crime-in-the-u.s.-2018/topic-pages/tables/table-43>

³ <https://www.ucr.pa.gov/PAUCRSPUBLIC/Publication/Active/2018%20Annual%20Uniform%20Crime.pdf>

We sought to understand if there were political divides in the perception of serious crime arrests by race and ethnicity. Perceptions of discrimination are important because research shows that police are more likely to stop, investigate, and arrest Blacks than whites.^{4,5} A May 2020 survey conducted by Democracy Fund + UCLA Nationscape showed that 77.5% of Democrats and 45.4% of Republications believe Blacks experience discrimination.⁶ In the 2020 Lion Poll, 50.7% of Republicans believe Blacks are the largest racial/ethnic group arrested for serious crimes compared to 56.2% of Democrats. About equal proportions believed whites (20.4% Republican; 18.1% Democrat) were arrested for the largest portion of serious crime in the US.

Using a vignette study design, respondents were also asked how worried they would be if they were walking through a low-income, predominantly [white/Black/Latino] neighborhood in an unfamiliar area after dark. Each respondent was randomly presented one of the three vignettes, with one-third of the sample receiving the question about white neighborhoods, one-third the question about Black neighborhoods, and one-third the question about Latino neighborhoods. There were no substantive differences in perceptions between 2018 and 2020. In the 2020 poll, 16.9% of respondents said they would be “Extremely worried” walking through a mostly white neighborhood, 24.8% would be “Extremely worried” walking through a mostly Black neighborhood, and 20.3% would be “Extremely worried” walking through a mostly Latino neighborhood, suggesting that Pennsylvanians worry more in non-white neighborhoods.

Figure 2. How concerned would you be walking through a low-income area of a predominantly white, Black, or Latino neighborhood in an unfamiliar area after dark? 2020



Study Information

For additional information, contact Shaun L. Gabbidon, Ph.D., Distinguished Professor of Criminal Justice (slg13@psu.edu), or Eileen M. Ahlin, Ph.D., Associate Professor Criminal Justice (ema105@psu.edu), School of Public Affairs, Penn State Harrisburg.

Lion Poll Methodology

The Fall 2018 Lion Poll is an omnibus survey conducted by the Center for Survey Research (CSR) at Penn State Harrisburg. A total of 1,048 self-administered web surveys were completed by adult Pennsylvanians between September 21 and October 25, 2018. The Fall 2020 Lion Poll uses the same methodology; a total of 1,001 self-administered web surveys were completed by adult Pennsylvanians between September 3 and October 23, 2020, resulting in a margin of sampling error of +/- 3.0% at the traditional 95% confidence level. Both Lion Polls used a quota-based invitation system to produce a final dataset that is representative of Pennsylvania’s population by region and, separately, by age/sex combined categories. To learn about the Lion Poll: <https://csr.hbg.psu.edu/Lion-Poll>. For additional information, contact Stephanie L. Wehnau, M.S., Research Project Manager, Center for Survey Research, at 717-948-6429 or csr@psu.edu.

⁴ Alexander, M. (2010). *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. The New Press.

⁵ Brunson, R.K. (2007). ‘Police Don’t Like Black People’: African American Young Men’s Accumulated Police Experiences. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 6, 71–102.

⁶ <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/theres-still-a-huge-partisan-gap-in-how-americans-see-discrimination/>