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Trends in youth opinions about police agencies in the United States, 2017–2021

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Abstract

Introduction: As civil unrest about policing in the United States (US) continue, research on changing opinions about police agencies is needed, especially among younger populations. These opinions may be associated with distress and other health outcomes that come with public health implications.

Methods: We aggregated and used yearly 2017 to 2021 data on 12th-grade youth living in the US from the Monitoring the Future cross-sectional study (n = 7132). We categorized opinions about police agency job performance into 1) very poor/poor (hereafter: poor), 2) fair/good/very good, and 3) no opinion. To examine trends in policy agency opinions over time, we conducted logistic regression between year and opinions, adjusted for age, sex, and race and ethnicity, and included a two-way interaction between year and race and ethnicity to determine differences across racial and ethnic groups by year.

Results: From 2017 to 2020, the proportion of youth who believed police did a poor job remained constant. However, from 2020 to 2021, this proportion increased from 24.4% to 50.0%. Results from regression models showed that year 2021 (vs. 2017) was associated with nearly three times higher odds of perceiving police agencies do a poor job (OR: 2.90, 95% CI: 1.87–4.52). The interaction between year and race and ethnicity indicated that each racial and ethnic group in 2021 had higher odds of perceiving police agencies do a poor job compared to 2017, with associations

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

Delvon T. Mattingly: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Nancy L. Fleischer:** Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2024.100972>.

strongest for non-Hispanic Black (OR: 6.46, 95% CI: 3.74–11.18) and non-Hispanic multiracial (OR: 7.38, 95% CI: 2.99–18.25) youth.

Conclusions: Negative opinions about police agencies increased from 2017 to 2021, and differences were observed by race and ethnicity. Shifting youth views about police agencies in the US reflect the greater social context of the period, with potential implications for public health.

Keywords

Youth; Police; Police agency; Police violence; Race and ethnicity; Health disparity

1. Introduction

Police violence, broadly defined as intentional, unwarranted, and forceful contact by law enforcement officials, is a growing public health problem in the United States (US) (DeVylder et al., 2022; Fleming et al., 2021; Simckes et al., 2021). Recent high-profile killings by police have garnered national attention and provoked civil unrest about policing in the US, including a demand to understand the public health consequences of police violence (DeVylder et al., 2022; Fleming et al., 2021; Simckes et al., 2021). Several studies have demonstrated that policing, whether direct (e.g., forceful contact) or indirect/vicarious (e.g., witnessing police-related killings), impacts health outcomes of younger populations, such as by increasing distress, substance use, and premature mortality (Bui et al., 2018; Edwards et al., 2019; Jackson et al., 2019; Mattingly et al., 2022; Simckes et al., 2021). For example, depression and anxiety symptoms were found to be heightened after the murder of George Floyd in 2020, with larger increases in these symptoms for Black Americans relative to White Americans (Eichstaedt et al., 2021).

To date, little is understood about youth opinions of police agencies, which may be shaped by instances of police violence and directly linked to behavioral and mental health consequences (DeVylder et al., 2020). These views are salient due to law enforcement presence, especially in communities of color (Theall et al., 2022), and historical relevance in the US (Alang et al., 2017). Police agencies are entrenched in systemic racist ideals, dating back to the slavery era where police affiliates were responsible for chasing down and disciplining runaway slaves (Alang et al., 2017). Thus, it is no surprise that police exposure, violence, and related deaths differentially pattern by race and ethnicity (Crutchfield et al., 2012; Edwards et al., 2019; Jackson, 2021). Youth perceptions regarding police agencies likely differ by racial and ethnic identity as well, and such variation may represent broader inequities in police exposure and associated health outcomes. For example, one study among youth found that perceptions about police legitimacy worsened as youth aged and substantially varied by race and ethnicity, with Hispanic and Black youth having far more negative perceptions than White youth (Fine et al., 2022).

This study aimed to examine trends from 2017 to 2021 in youth opinions about police agencies using a nationally representative US sample. We also explored whether these opinions varied by race and ethnicity over time, as policing disproportionately affects minoritized racial and ethnic groups and, in many cases, is considered a racialized adverse experience (Bui et al., 2018; Edwards et al., 2019; Jackson, 2021). We hypothesized that

perceptions of whether police agencies are doing a good job in the US have shifted from better to worse, corresponding to recent national attention to high-profile police-related killings, the Black Lives Matters movement and multiple youth- and young adult-driven protests against racism and police violence, and a more widespread call for police agency reformation across the nation (Howard et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2023). We additionally hypothesized that we would observe variation in trends about police agency opinions by race and ethnicity, with the most pronounced shifts for Hispanic and Black youth.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Data

We used data on 12th-grade youth from five aggregated cross-sectional (2017–2021) Monitoring the Future (MTF) study surveys (Miech et al., 2018, 2019; Miech et al., 2020, 2021, 2022). MTF is a nationally representative study that includes annual administration of surveys to students enrolled in public and private schools in the US. MTF uses a multi-stage, clustered sampling design and provides weights to approximate the differential probability of selection at each stage of sampling. In 2020, MTF was truncated to about 25% of data collection due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Miech et al., 2021). Further details on the MTF methodology are available elsewhere (Johnston et al., 2022). This study was approved by the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board.

2.2. Participants

Each year, 12th-grade youth are randomly assigned to one of six survey forms in addition to a core survey (Miech et al., 2018, 2019; Miech et al., 2020, 2021, 2022). Among 12th-grade youth across the five years ($n = 54,529$), we included youth assigned to the form that contained the police agency opinions variable (2017, $n = 2,261$; 2018, $n = 2,437$; 2019, $n = 2,284$; 2020, $n = 650$; and 2021, $n = 1,477$). Among these 9,109 youth, we excluded respondents who had missing data on police agency opinions ($n = 429$) and sociodemographic characteristics ($n = 804$). In 2021, MTF introduced a new method to reduce survey fatigue by randomizing youth to certain questions on a given form. This process resulted in 744 youth who received the appropriate form but were not assigned the police agency opinions question and were thus excluded. These exclusions resulted in an analytic sample size of 7,132.

2.3. Measures

Police agency opinions.—Each year, youth were asked, “how good or bad a job is being done for the country as a whole by ... the police and other law enforcement agencies?” Response options included 1) very poor, 2) poor, 3) fair, 4) good, 5) very good, and 6) no opinion. We categorized police agency opinions into 1) very poor/poor (hereafter: poor), 2) fair/good/very good (hereafter: good), and 3) no opinion. We further collapsed good and no opinion categories for regression models.

Sociodemographic characteristics.—We included age (under 18 years, 18+ years), sex (male, female), and race and ethnicity (Hispanic, non-Hispanic White, non-Hispanic Black, non-Hispanic multiracial, another non-Hispanic race. Another non-Hispanic race

included youth who identified as either non-Hispanic Asian, American Indian/Alaskan Native, or Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander.

2.4. Statistical analysis

We estimated the prevalence of police agency opinions and socio-demographic characteristics by year and evaluated differences over time. Using logistic regression, we examined the relationship between categorical year and police agency opinions (poor vs. good/no opinion), adjusted for age, sex, and race and ethnicity. We included a two-way interaction between year and race and ethnicity and tested for statistical significance using the Wald test. In a separate model, we created a 24-category year*race and ethnicity variable to examine the joint relationship between year and race and ethnicity on police agency opinions, compared to non-Hispanic White youth in 2017. For all analyses, we used the appropriate survey weights to account for the complex survey design of MTF and the probability of non-response using the *svy* command in Stata 18.0.

3. Results

3.1. Police agency opinions

In 2017, 57.1% of youth reported that police agencies do a good job, 25.8% reported that they do a poor job, and 17.1% reported no opinion (Table 1). The proportion of youth who reported that police agencies do a good job marginally increased from 2018 (58.1%) to 2020 (66.8%), while poor opinions remained constant, and no opinions decreased (14.1%–8.7%). From 2020 to 2021, opinions that police agencies do a good job decreased from 66.8% to 41.4%, opinions that police agencies do a poor job increased from 24.4% to 50.0%, and no opinions remained relatively constant (8.7%–8.5%).

3.2. Associations between survey year and police agency opinions

In adjusted models, year 2021 (vs. 2017) was associated with higher odds (OR: 2.90, 95% CI: 1.87–4.52) of perceiving police agencies do a poor job (Table 2). Male (vs. female) youth had lower odds (OR: 0.84, 95% CI: 0.73–0.97) of perceiving police agencies do a poor job, and non-Hispanic Black (OR: 1.42, 95% CI: 1.11–1.83) and non-Hispanic multiracial (OR: 1.65, 95% CI: 1.25–2.18) youth had higher odds, relative to non-Hispanic White youth, of perceiving police agencies do a poor job.

The two-way interaction between year and race and ethnicity was statistically significant ($p = 0.002$). In the model with the 24-category year*race and ethnicity variable, compared to non-Hispanic White youth in 2017, Hispanic (OR: 1.76, 95% CI: 1.31–2.36) and multiracial (OR: 1.86, 95% CI: 1.06–3.24) youth in 2018, multiracial (OR: 2.27, 95% CI: 1.35–3.81) youth in 2019, and non-Hispanic Black (OR: 4.72, 1.88–11.87) youth in 2020 had higher odds of perceiving police agencies do a poor job (Fig. 1, Supplementary Table 1). In 2021, all racial and ethnic groups had higher odds of perceiving police agencies do a poor job relative to non-Hispanic White youth in 2017, with associations strongest for non-Hispanic Black (OR: 6.46, 95% CI: 3.74–11.18) and non-Hispanic multiracial (OR: 7.38, 95% CI: 2.99–18.25) youth, followed by youth who identified as another non-Hispanic

race (OR: 5.73, 95% CI: 2.00–16.38), Hispanic youth (OR: 3.10, 95% CI: 1.99–4.84), and non-Hispanic White youth (OR: 2.64, 95% CI: 1.21–5.81).

4. Discussion

This study examined trends in police agency opinions among a nationally representative sample of 12th-grade youth in the US. We found that the proportion of youth who perceived that police agencies do a poor job increased over the study period, and sex and race and ethnicity were associated with perceiving that police agencies do a poor job. We also observed differences in opinions by race and ethnicity over time. Each racial and ethnic group (i.e., Hispanic, non-Hispanic White, non-Hispanic Black, non-Hispanic multiracial, another non-Hispanic race) had higher negative perceptions about police agencies in 2021 relative to opinions held by non-Hispanic White youth in 2017. We observed that these associations were most profound for non-Hispanic Black and non-Hispanic multiracial youth.

Among the overall population, an increase in the proportion of youth perceiving that police agencies do a poor job was consistent with our hypothesis and may relate to the evolving social and political policing landscape in the US. From a public health perspective, it is important to consider whether these changing views about police, from positive to negative, trace back to police exposure or interactions. In addition, negative opinions about police agencies in the US may shift parallel to national responses and associated civil unrest to police-related killings. The idea is that vicarious exposure to police violence is associated with increases in psychological stress (Howard et al., 2023) and poorer mental health (Webb et al., 2022) and may directly correspond to negative perceptions about law enforcement in general. Furthermore, the proportion of youth who had no opinion on police agencies in 2017 (17.1%) dramatically decreased in 2021 (8.5%), representing more confident viewpoints about the ways in which police operate in the US. Recent national events involving police have acted as a catalyst in cementing police-related perceptions among youth. For example, since 2020, more youth and young adults are advocating for racial health equity and police reformation, ideas that were not as vocalized at a wide scale among younger populations in years prior (Howard et al., 2023).

The statistical interaction between year and race and ethnicity revealed differences over time in police agency opinions. A salient finding is that non-Hispanic Black youth in 2020 had higher odds of perceiving that police agencies do a poor job compared to non-Hispanic White youth in 2017, which represented substantial changing opinions a year sooner than every other racial and ethnic groups. This result could be in part linked to exposure to policing being racialized and the acts of police violence in early 2020 that incited national uproar and discourse about policing in the US (Jackson, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2021). While all racial and ethnic groups showed an increase in perceiving that police agencies do a poor job in 2021, associations were strongest for non-Hispanic Black and non-Hispanic multiracial youth. A previous study had found that distress about police brutality has increased among US young people since the beginning of 2020 (Howard et al., 2023), and our study complements these findings by showing that police agency opinions shift

over time, possibly corresponding to personal, vicarious, and publicized acts of malfeasant policing.

Whether changing opinions are associated with poorer health outcomes is not well known, but scholars have demonstrated that exposure to policing among younger populations is harmful (Alang et al., 2017; DeVlyder et al., 2020, 2022; Eichstaedt et al., 2021). Perceiving that police agencies do a poor job might stem from previous negative interactions or increased awareness about police malfeasance and violence at a community or national level, and these lived experiences differ depending on several factors such as place and race and ethnicity (Jackson, 2021). The increase in negative opinions about police agencies highlight a broader problem, calling for reform in how police agencies operate and impose harm, to promote public health and health equity. As we continue to explore the extent to which exposure to policing, including police violence, affects health, it is necessary for health professionals to consider the causes and detriments of shifting perceptions about police agencies among youth. These opinions might be shifting in conjunction with nationwide increases in police violence and can be studied to understand proximal changes in well-being among various youth populations. In addition, further research examining the causes and consequences of shifting perceptions about police agencies will be suited to inform the broader public health impact of policing in the US.

4.1. Limitations

Our study was limited by self-reported data that is subject to reporting biases and limited statistical power due to smaller sample sizes of youth who were asked the police agency opinions question on the specific MTF survey forms. In addition, sample size limitations precluded the examination of more granular racial and ethnic categories, resulting in the use of a heterogeneous “another non-Hispanic race” group. Lastly, youth perceptions are shaped by numerous factors, and we make assumptions that shifting opinions about police agencies are primarily due to personal police agency knowledge, exposures, and interactions. However, for a proportion of youth, these opinions may also be shaped by biases such as social desirability or parental/peer influences including political affiliations or general opinions.

5. Conclusions

This study examined trends in youth opinions about policing in the US from 2017 to 2021 and whether these trends differed by race and ethnicity. The proportion of youth who perceived police agencies do a poor job increased over the study period, with the largest increase occurring from 2020 (24.4%) to 2021 (50.0%). Associations between increasing year and perceiving police agencies do a poor job were strongest for non-Hispanic Black and non-Hispanic multiracial youth, though increases were observed across all racial and ethnic groups from 2017 to 2021, including among non-Hispanic White youth. Our study demonstrates that youth opinions about police agencies are shifting and likely correspond to direct and vicarious exposure to police violence. As these opinions might also affect mental health and substance use outcomes, it is important to further monitor how youth perceive law enforcement and the harms police agencies inflict on younger populations. In

addition, particular attention must be given to racial and ethnic minoritized youth who are more susceptible to heightened police exposure.

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

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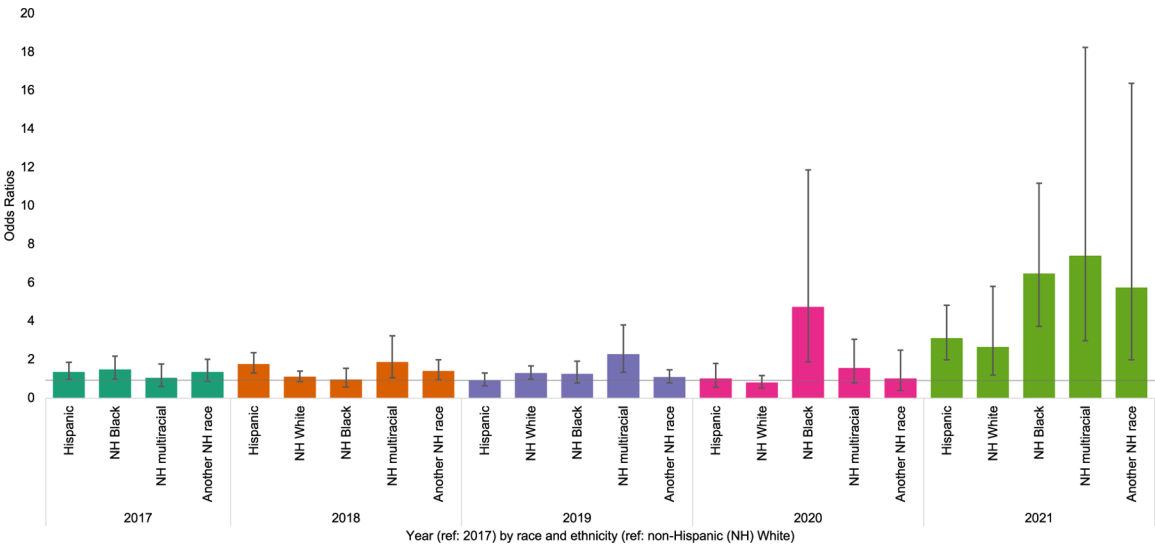


Fig. 1.
Associations between joint year and race and ethnicity on police agency opinions
Footnotes: Another NH race included respondents who identified as Non-Hispanic Asian, American Indian/Alaska Native, or Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander; opinions about police agencies referent group: good, no opinion.

Table 1

Unweighted counts and weighted percentages of each participant characteristic by survey year among 12th graders, the Monitoring the Future study (2017–2021) (n = 7132).

Participant characteristics, n (%)	Survey Year				P-value ^d
	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Age					0.67
Under 18 years	807 (41.7)	845 (43.2)	892 (43.5)	301 (46.5)	310 (46.1)
18 years or older	1095 (58.3)	1056 (56.8)	1179 (56.5)	311 (53.5)	336 (53.9)
Sex					< 0.001
Female	971 (51.2)	1059 (55.6)	615 (29.9)	332 (52.0)	335 (55.4)
Male	931 (48.8)	842 (44.4)	1456 (70.1)	280 (48.0)	311 (44.6)
Race and ethnicity					0.06
Hispanic	433 (24.4)	482 (26.7)	471 (24.1)	178 (29.0)	155 (20.3)
Non-Hispanic White	985 (49.4)	1011 (52.0)	1001 (46.3)	322 (53.7)	338 (56.4)
Non-Hispanic Black	250 (13.6)	168 (9.3)	204 (10.8)	54 (9.4)	102 (15.3)
Non-Hispanic multiracial	77 (4.0)	77 (3.4)	78 (4.4)	<i>b</i>	<i>b</i>
Another non-Hispanic race	157 (8.4)	163 (8.5)	317 (14.4)	<i>b</i>	<i>b</i>
Opinions about police agencies					< 0.001
Good	1098 (57.1)	1087 (58.1)	1252 (60.8)	398 (66.8)	295 (41.4)
No opinion	319 (17.1)	271 (14.1)	280 (13.9)	67 (8.7)	49 (8.5)
Poor	485 (25.8)	543 (27.9)	539 (25.4)	147 (24.4)	302 (50.0)

^a Chi-square test of independence p-value examining differences in distributions of each descriptive characteristic by survey year.

^b Cells were suppressed due to low sample sizes.

Table 2

Associations between participant characteristics and opinions about police agencies among 12th graders, the Monitoring the Future study (2017–2021).

Participant Characteristics	Poor opinions about police agencies		
	OR	95% CI	p-value
Survey Year (ref: 2017)			
2018	1.12	0.94, 1.33	0.21
2019	1.01	0.85, 1.21	0.90
2020	0.94	0.68, 1.30	0.71
2021	2.90	1.87, 4.52	< 0.01
Age (ref: under 18 years)			
18 years or older	1.02	0.89, 1.16	0.82
Sex (ref: female)			
Male	0.84	0.73, 0.97	0.02
Race and ethnicity (ref: non-Hispanic White)			
Hispanic	1.19	0.99, 1.43	0.07
Non-Hispanic Black	1.42	1.11, 1.83	< 0.01
Non-Hispanic multiracial	1.65	1.25, 2.18	< 0.01
Another non-Hispanic race	1.17	0.96, 1.42	0.12

Opinions about police agencies referent group: good, no opinion.

Another non-Hispanic race included respondents who identified as Non-Hispanic Asian, American Indian/Alaska Native, or Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander.