

Executive Summary

This report summarizes the latest survey data and relevant academic literature on public opinion towards police violence in the United States (U.S.). The following findings are part of the first phase of a national polling project commissioned by Human Rights Watch (HRW) in partnership with the University of Minnesota to better understand the American public's attitudes on key human rights issues. The material reviewed provides HRW with a baseline of public opinion on police brutality, and makes some evidence-based suggestions as to how future advocacy work can be strengthened by public opinion research.

The Main Findings from the Contemporary Polling Literature:

- Americans are generally supportive of the police; no community is strongly anti-police (Gallup, 2015).
- Among demographic variables, race has the strongest influence on public perceptions of the police and policing (Brown & Benedict, 2002; Weitzer & Tuch, 1999).¹
- General public support for the police begins to crack along party lines, however, with Republicans reported more satisfaction with policing than Democrats (Ekins, 2016).
- Crime, poverty rates, racial composition, and residential mobility all effect public perceptions of law enforcement.
- Publicizing specific instances of police abuse *does* have the power to shift public opinion towards more sympathy for victims of police violence.

¹ Ronald Weitzer and Steven Tuch, both of whom are affiliated with the Sociology department of George Washington University, publish research extensively in this area and will be cited often throughout this report.

- Americans largely support police reform, including the use of body cameras and independent investigations of police misconduct (Ekins, 2016)

Introduction:

After the killing of Trayvon Martin and acquittal of his attacker, George Zimmerman, the killing of black Americans and excessive police use of force has received national attention in the U.S. “Officer-involved” killings have sparked demonstrations across the country and have featured heavily in the American news cycle and social media.²

According to the Police Foundation, police forces in the U.S. kill approximately fifteen people per week through use of force, though it is not known how many of these are due to *excessive* force (Police Foundation, 2016).³ In many other instances, police use of force results in physical injury or psychological trauma, but not death. Many experts trace the rise of police violence to national prominence to Black Lives Matter, a network of activists organized in local chapters that focus on protesting police killings of black Americans and the lack of accountability. But how does the general public perceive the police’s use of excessive force? Which factors influence these perceptions? This report will shed light on these questions through compilation of public opinion polls and review of relevant academic literature.

The first surveys of public opinion on policing and criminal justice in the U.S. began in the late 1960s and early 70s, but it was not until the early 90s that the relevant academic literature and polling developed momentum. In those years, national confidence in the police hovered at a historic low of

² Just some examples of high-profile killings include Terence Crutcher, Philando Castile, Samuel DuBose, Sandra Bland, Freddie Gray, Walter L. Scott, Akai Gurley, Laquan McDonald, Keith Lamont Scott, Paul O’Neal, Alton B. Sterling, Christian Taylor, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner.

³ This is according to the Police Foundation, a research organization with strong ties to police departments across the country. The foundation frames the 15 deaths per week as “rare” instances of death from police use of force.

52%⁴ (Jones, 2015).⁵ Overall, the relevant polls have focused on criminal justice and the police more broadly, rather than on the specific issue of excessive force. Today, current research is beginning to fill the gaps in the literature. New areas of research include the impact of media (traditional and new), the relevance of citizen-police contacts and community contexts, and the perceptions (and perspectives) of racial groups other than the dichotomous black/white categories.

Survey Results and Findings from the Literature

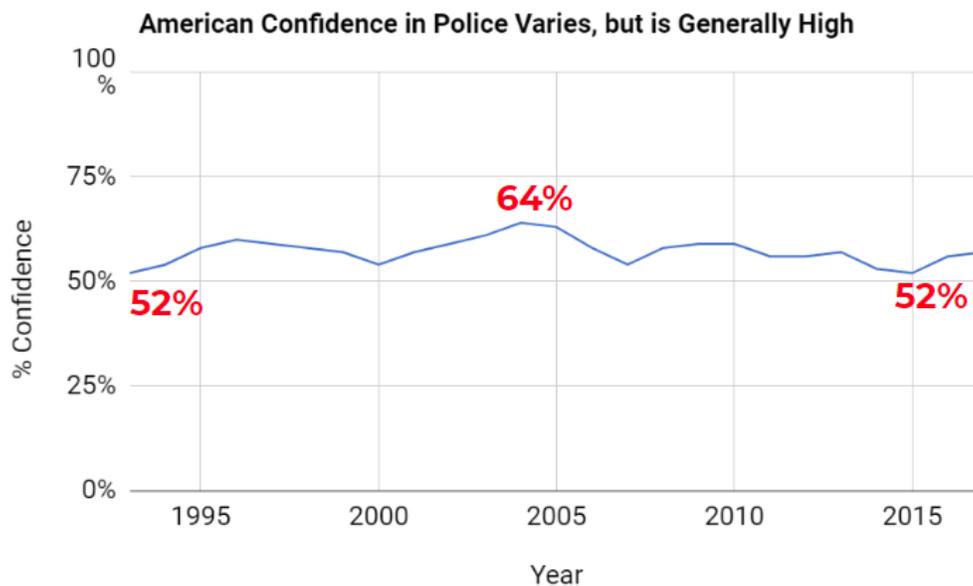
Overall Confidence in Police:

Surveys generally find that most Americans support the police, although there is some indication that this support is in (mild) decline. A 2015 Gallup survey (n=1,527; nationally representative) found that 52% of the general public has “great confidence” in the police, though they also highlighted that this number represents a tie (with the year 1993) for the lowest public support of police in their 22 years of tracking public opinion on the matter—see Figure 1 below (Jones, 2015).

Fig. 1 - Gallup data show that American confidence in police has hovered around 50-60% since 1993
(Jones, 2015)

⁴ This rate has fluctuated between 52% and 64% since 1993.

⁵ The authors contribute the growth in polling and academic interest in public opinion towards policing to the riots in Los Angeles after the release of a video of officers brutally beating Rodney King, which received national attention.



This overall positive sentiment towards police is felt across party lines. A 2016 Criminal Justice Survey commissioned by the Cato Institute and designed in collaboration with YouGov (n=2,000; nationally representative) found that no group defined by party affiliation was “anti-cop,” though some groups had higher levels of conflicted or neutral feelings than others. Similarly, 9 of 10 respondents in that survey opposed reducing the number of police officers on the ground, and majorities in each group reported sympathy for the challenges of policing (Ekins, 2016). Thus, any negative opinions related to police misconduct or excessive force come on top of a general broad base of public support.

Public opinion towards the police has real and immediate implications. Respondents with less favorable views of the police in the Cato/YouGov poll reported they were less likely to report a crime they witnessed. For example, 78% of white Americans reported they would “definitely report a crime,” compared to only 54% of black Americans or 57% of Hispanic Americans (Ekins, 2016). Other groups more likely to report crimes include older people, higher-income people, more educated people, and Republicans. These demographic differences in perspective reflect general trends in opinion towards police, as discussed below. The fact that supporters of the police are also more likely to report crimes is a reason for police departments and the general public to care about public opinion on these issues.

Political Party:

There is substantial evidence indicating that political party identification matters when measuring attitudes towards police, with Republicans being most supportive. For example, the Gallup findings cited above found that 42% of Democrat-supporting respondents expressed confidence in the police, compared to 51% of Independents and 69% of Republicans (Jones, 2015). Also reflecting this trend, the Cato/YouGov poll found that 81% of Republican respondents were favorable toward police compared to only 59% of both Democratic and Independent respondents (Ekins, 2016). These recent findings reflect well-established trends of Republicans being the political party most supportive of the police.

Perceptions of how well and safely the police do their job also vary widely based on party identification. The Cato/YouGov poll found that 80% of Republicans respondents said police use lethal force “only when necessary,” compared to just 37% of Democrats and 60% of Independents (Ekins, 2016).

Race:

Many polls demonstrate that black Americans have long viewed the police less favorably than whites; indeed, race appears to have the strongest effect of all socio-demographic variables on public opinion towards the police (Brown & Benedict, 2002; Weitzer & Tuch, 1999). The 2015 Gallup survey demonstrated this gap, with only 30% of blacks expressing confidence in the police, compared to 52% across all respondents and 57% among whites (Jones, 2015). This gap appears fairly stable since 1970, when a nationally representative Harris poll (n=1,600) found that 43% of black Americans were favorable toward the police compared to 67% of whites (Harris et al., 1970, cited in Ekins, 2016). Researchers suggest that this more negative perception of the police among people of color stems from

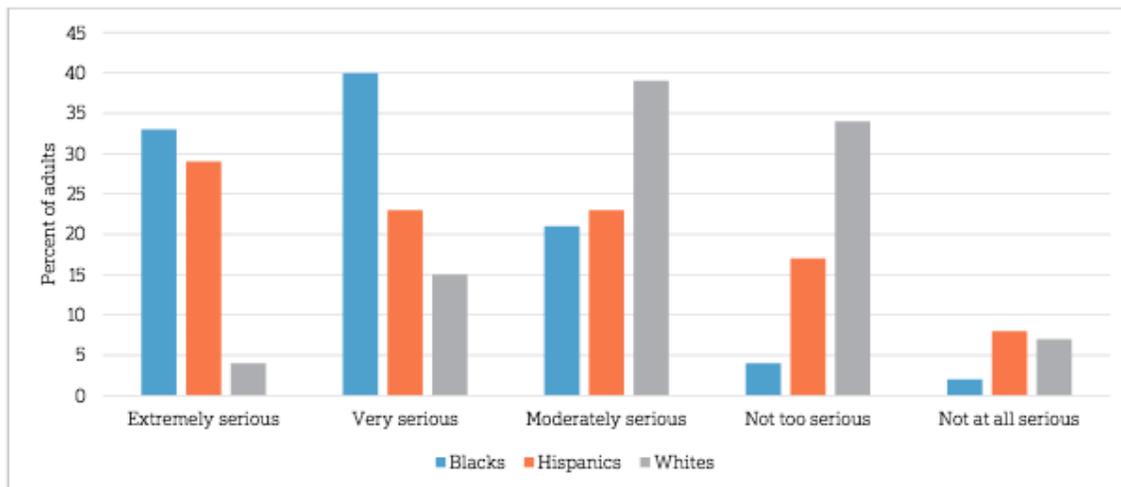
their more frequent negative interactions with officers. Whites, by contrast, have fewer negative interactions with the police and therefore tend to view the police as their protectors.

Until recently, the research literature has not focused on racial groups other than whites and blacks. In 2014, Weitzer noted that there is limited evidence to suggest that the attitudes of Hispanic Americans are more negative than whites, and likely either similar to or slightly more positive than those espoused by blacks. This hypothesized order can similarly be seen in Figure 2 below and in a set of polls with various wordings gathered by Weitzer in 2017. However, there might be more complexity to this hierarchy than appears at first glance: a decade earlier, Weitzer and Tuch (2005a) had found that controlling for other demographic factors (including education, income, gender) made Hispanic Americans not significantly different from whites in general satisfaction with the police. Thus, the difference in white-Hispanic views may be related to those demographic factors, rather than race. On the other hand, after controlling for those same variables, the confidence gap between black and white Americans endured. In sum, the limited available evidence suggests that Hispanic attitudes are somewhere between black and white Americans.

Fig. 2 - AP-NORC data shows that people of color, particularly black Americans, view police violence as more severe an issue than do white Americans, with Hispanic Americans falling in the middle

(The Associated Press and NORC, 2015)

Differences in views of severity of police violence against the public



Question: How serious a problem do you think police violence against the PUBLIC is in the United States?

Researchers have also largely ignored Asian-American attitudes towards policing. Chu and Hung (2010; n=198) found that Chinese immigrants in San Francisco generally had attitudes towards the police that were similar to those of other San Franciscans, though respondents who had been in the U.S. longer rated police more negatively. However, this is just one, small-sized study, and it is neither representative of the country as a whole, or even of San Francisco. This ongoing gap in the literature may be due to the fact that many Asian Americans are immigrants, suggesting that their views on police in the U.S. may be confounded with their views on police in their home country. The opinions of Asian-Americans about the police thus require further exploration.

Recently, pollsters and academics have been working to fill these gaps by including respondents of races other than black and white. A nationally representative Harris poll conducted in 2016 (n=2,236), for example, attempted to do this by oversampling Hispanic and Asian Americans. Their findings indicate that while 49% of respondents overall believed the police treat different races fairly, white respondents

were the only racial group in which the majority believed this to be true. Among blacks, 49% believed police are biased towards blacks, while 45% of Hispanic Americans, 39% of those of Middle Eastern descent, and 29% of Asian Americans also thought their racial group was treated differently by the police (Pollack, 2016). Overall, the opinion gap between white and black Americans on police is well-documented; more research is needed on the attitudes of other races, however.

These race-based opinion differences hold for specific policing issues, with whites continually having the least critical views. On use of excessive force specifically, several studies demonstrate that blacks are more likely than whites to identify it as an issue requiring reform, even while controlling for other demographic factors (Carter, Corra, & Jenks, 2016; Johnson and Kuhns, 2009; Tuch & Weitzer, 1997; Weitzer & Tuch, 1999). This is similarly true of racial profiling; although Americans across the board disapprove of the practice, blacks are more likely than whites to report that profiling is widespread and/or that they have personally experienced it (Ekins, 2016; Weitzer & Tuch, 2002). Even when specific issues haven't been covered in polls, it is reasonable to hypothesize that white Americans will often take the most positive stance towards the police.

Other Demographic Factors:

In general, findings of the effects of other demographic variables (besides political party and race) on public satisfaction with police have been limited and largely mixed. Weitzer and Tuch (2005b) found income, education, gender, and region to generally have no consistent effects on the public's opinion of police misconduct, while younger people did retain more negative attitudes. (For further support on the negative views of young Americans towards the police, see Brown & Benedict, 2002, and Jefferis, Kaminski, Holmes, & Hanley, 1997).

Psychological factors are also relevant: Carter, Corra, and Jenks (2016; n=8,327), for example, used data from the nationally representative General Social Survey (GSS) to determine that high levels

of racial resentment among white Americans significantly predicted support for use of police force.⁶ Overall, however, more research on the psychological drivers of public opinion towards the police is warranted.

Neighborhood Context & Situational Factors:

In 2004, researchers Howell, Perry, and Vile, noted that almost all research to date on public opinion towards the police had been done in white-majority areas. How might opinion differ in a majority-black-American neighborhood, or a more mixed area? The racial composition of a given area may contribute to the experiences its residents have, regardless of a specific respondent's own race. Community context, in other words, may influence opinion towards the police over and above individual socio-demographic and psychological factors (Sampson and Jeglum Bartusch, 1998). These researchers found support for their hypothesis in a representative poll of 8,782 residents living in 343 Chicago neighborhoods, which indicated that respondents living in areas of "concentrated disadvantage," measured in crime rates, income levels and demographic makeup (high crime and racial diversity, low income), were more cynical about the law and dissatisfied with the police, even after controlling for other confounding factors. A recent study by Yuning Wu, Ivan Y. Sun, and Ruth A. Triplett (2009), similarly, showed that among 66 urban Kentucky neighborhoods (n=1,963), four neighborhood-level characteristics—crime rates, concentrated disadvantage, racial composition, and residential mobility—were better predictors of respondent satisfaction with police than individual-level factors such as income, race, and education.

That a community's racial makeup impacts its residents' views of police is by now well-supported by the evidence. Howell et al. (2004) conducted a representative survey in four American

⁶ Racial resentment was measured by a scale of three items about why black Americans have lower income (and other social goods) in the US than white Americans: respondents were asked whether this was due mainly to discrimination, because of a lack of educational opportunity for black Americans, or because of a lack of motivation on the part of black Americans. The responses that are more negative towards blacks indicate "racial resentment."

cities: two majority-black and two minority-black (total n=2,078), finding that the views towards police of black residents stayed relatively constant, while white residents in majority-black cities saw the police more negatively than their counterparts in minority-black cities. This could be driven by white residents of majority-black cities being exposed to and being informed of more police discrimination towards their black neighbors than whites in minority-black cities. Similarly, a nationally representative 2015 poll by the Associated Press in collaboration with NORC at the University of Chicago (n=1,223) found that whites living in more racially diverse neighborhoods held more negative views of the police than those in majority-white neighborhoods; for example, 58% of the former said police in their neighborhoods “sometimes” treat members of minority groups more roughly than non-minorities, compared to just 42% of the latter group. In this poll, unlike in the findings of Howell et al. (2004), blacks living in more heavily black neighborhoods *also* had more negative views than blacks living in heavily white neighborhoods. This difference in findings may be due to larger changes in the U.S. over time, as incidents of police violence against blacks have become more highly publicized. Overall, these studies show that it is not only the individual respondent’s race that shapes her opinion of police; the racial composition of the residential community also matters.

Other relevant contextual factors include perceptions of safety and crime, as well as personal experience with police. Weitzer and Tuch (2005a) used a nationally representative survey of households with telephones in urban and suburban areas to examine models for public satisfaction with police (n=1,792). They found that when an individual feels safe in their community or that police are effective in fighting crime there, they are more likely to express satisfaction in the police. Personal or vicarious experience with police led to more mixed results, but represent an interesting area for further research; for example, Weitzer and Tuch (2002; n=2,006 from a nationally representative Gallup poll) found that people who reported personally experiencing racial profiling were more likely to say the practice was widespread and to disapprove of the police in general.

Overall, neighborhood-level predictors of public opinion towards the police show great promise as an important area for further research.

Media Effects:

Research suggests that publicization of specific events of police use of excessive force can affect public opinion, supporting the importance of HRW's work. As far back as 1997, scholars identified the impact of the media upon the public's perceptions of police and the use of excessive force as a gap in the literature (Jefferis et al., 1997). Early work on this theme conducted by Jefferis et al. uses data from the Greater Cincinnati Survey (GCS, locally representative, n=500)⁷ to examine the impact of broadcast news coverage of a controversial violent arrest aired on local television. Statistical results suggested that viewing the arrest footage had a negative impact on perceptions of police use of force, and that, this effect was larger for people of color than for white respondents, and tended to last longer for the former group. More recent work on media effects suggests that the type of media examined and the context in which it is consumed may also produce different outcomes, suggesting a need for more specialized research.

There is a good amount of research supporting the notion that media coverage of excessive force affects public opinion. In a 2005 analysis, Weitzer and Tuch found that frequent exposure to media coverage of police misconduct significantly decreased satisfaction with police among black respondents (2005a; n=1,792).⁸ This finding echoed that of Sigelman, Welch, Bledsoe and Combs (1997), who examined specific instances of police use of force heavily featured in the media, specifically the beating

⁷ The GCS was administered by the Institute for Policy Research at the University of Cincinnati in 1995.

⁸ The data is representative of adults in urban or suburban households with telephones.

of Rodney King in Los Angeles and the killing of Malice Green in Detroit.⁹ Using data representative of the nation (GSS data) as a whole and data representative of Detroit in particular—gathered from surveys administered partly before and partly after these highly publicized incidents—led researchers to find that after these events, public support for the use of harsh police physical force declined significantly among both black *and* white Americans (though the opinion gap between the two groups remained).¹⁰ Similarly, the Green incident in Detroit raised the perceived likelihood among whites of such an event occurring in their own community. Thus, publicizing the police’s use of excessive force through traditional media seems to have a tangible effect on public opinion.

In today’s changing media landscape, what is the most effective way to publicize incidents of use of excessive force? Multiple research studies suggest it is by sharing video footage of the incident; conveniently for activists, because of the advent and spread of smartphone technology and the rise of required body cameras among police, these videos are also easier to come by in the past.¹¹ In 2017, Snyder et al. conducted a small, representative household survey of voters (n=119) in the state of New York to examine public opinion on whether police implicated in the 2014 killing of Eric Garner should be indicted, and to test the impact of viewing footage of the incident. They found that, prior to viewing the footage, 57% of their sample already believed the officers involved should be indicted, but that percentage increased by 14% when respondents viewed the footage. This suggests that video footage of

⁹ Rodney King was an unarmed black man who was beaten by several Los Angeles police officers in March 1991; this incident was filmed and shown on the local news, which led to large riots after the police officers were acquitted. Malice Green was a 35-year-old, unarmed black man who was killed by blunt force trauma perpetrated by a white police officer in Detroit, Michigan in November 1992 after allegedly disobeying police orders to drop a held object.

¹⁰ Before the Rodney King beating, 77% of white Americans (n=472) and 48% of black Americans (n=84) approved of the police striking an adult; after the beating, these proportions decreased to 67% (n=313) and 36% (n=50), respectively.

¹¹ Although research on the topic of citizen surveillance of the police has not to our knowledge been addressed in the literature specific to a U.S. context, a 2016 study of 231 policing officials conducted by Gregory R. Brown in the Canadian provinces of Ottawa and Toronto found that video-recording capabilities (and social media and online sharing capacities) on the part of the citizenry have been deeply integrated into the consciousness of police departments, resulting in modifications of police actions, up to and including demonstrable moderation of the use of force. More research is necessary to determine whether similar effects may be observed among police forces in the United States.

excessive force incidents (particularly the most egregious cases, such as those resulting in death), are an effective means of shifting public opinion on policing, violence and accountability and reform.¹²

Similarly, in a larger study, Culhane, Boman, and Schweitzer (2016) conducted a two-wave study (n=444 and n=432, respectively) after the 2014 police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. In data collected both before and after national publicity, watching visual footage of the incident led to a greater increase in negative perceptions of the police's behavior than hearing or reading a transcript of the event. These studies suggest that video footage of events of use of excessive force may be more effective than other media formats in swaying public opinion.

Criminal Justice and Policing Reform:

Although Americans are divided across racial lines over perceptions of how the police do their jobs, there is broad consensus on the need for reform. In 1995, a poll by the Washington Post found that that 77% of respondents believed police forces *should operate in a non-discriminatory manner* (cited in Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). The authors found that people of color more supportive than whites of such reforms. Echoing the above-cited studies on contextual factors, Weitzer and Tuch also found respondents were more likely to support reform when they thought police misconduct in their own community was widespread. They found the same effect for frequent exposure to media reports of police abuse.

Americans' appetite for police reform is also evidenced in more recent polling, such as the Cato/YouGov survey of 2016. Fully 89% of Americans support police body cameras, 79% support independent investigations of police misconduct, 77% support prohibiting the use of abusive language,

¹² It is important to note that one limitation of this study is the possibility of previous exposure to video footage of the incident, given the high-profile nature of the case and the public availability of the footage. If the effects described in the study's findings hold true, this could have skewed the percentage of those in favor of indictment, accountability, and reform measures *prior* to viewing the footage in the context of the research, although it would not likely have affected the observed increase for those who shifted their opinion in response to viewing the footage during the research process.

73% support police notifying individuals they have the right to refuse to stop and search, 68% support additional training for police to manage conflict confrontations, and 63% oppose the use of minor traffic violations to search cars for drugs (Ekins, 2016). Additionally, 66% of *police officers* themselves support the use of body cameras (Morin, 2017). The American public, on average, tends to support and sympathize with the police, but is also able to identify problems requiring reform.

Peer Organizations & Public Opinion on Police Brutality:

Organizations working alongside HRW on this issue highlight use of excessive force by police to different degrees, using different language and framing the issue in different ways. Few, however, do so using the lens of public opinion. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), NAACP, Black Lives Matter, Amnesty International, Southern Poverty Law Center, International Justice Resource Center, the People's Law Center, Campaign Zero and Freedom House do not use national polling data in their advocacy, with two exceptions, discussed below, of the NAACP referencing a poll and the ACLU commissioning one.

In a 2016 publication, the NAACP did *mention* one public opinion survey conducted in Akron and Cincinnati, Ohio, called “Stress on the Streets (SOS): Race, Policing, Health, and Increasing Trust not Trauma.”¹³ The NAACP highlighted results showing higher levels of trust and lower levels of fear of police among white Americans, as well as higher levels of personal experience with the police by black Americans (for example, one out of seven black respondents reported being stopped by police one or two times *a day*). These findings were only highlighted in a few bullet points, and were not deeply integrated into the report or into the organization’s advocacy. The ACLU, in contrast, does frequently use public opinion when discussing criminal justice. In 2017, moreover, the group commissioned and published a nationally representative survey (n=1,003) that found that 91% of respondents, across

¹³ Note this non-representative survey was completed by Human Impact Partners in collaboration with the Ohio Justice & Policy Center and the Ohio Organizing Collective.

demographic and political divides, believed that the U.S. criminal justice system has problems and should be reformed (Franklin, 2017). Overall, however, HRW's peers, like HRW itself, are not frequent users of polling data on this issue.

Conclusion, Relevance for HRW:

This report provides insight into the factors driving public opinion towards the police, with special but not exclusive emphasis on the use of excessive force. Salient points include: that the American public overall is supportive of police; that whites are overall less critical of police than people of color, particularly blacks; that Democrats have more negative attitudes than Republicans; that neighborhood context and past experiences with police shape opinions; and that Americans want the police to be non-discriminatory, and support reforms in this vein. There are multiple areas in which further research is needed, however, including the impact of psychological traits and personality types.

Perhaps most relevant for HRW, the research suggests that publicizing police use of excessive force, particularly through video footage, can shift public opinion. Additionally, public opinion about police shapes their willingness to report a crime, presenting a useful entry point and justification for engaging on the issue with the public, legislators, opinion leaders, police departments, and the government.

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Methodology

- **Keywords Used in Search:** “public opinion” “police brutality” “use of force” “use of excessive force” “attitudes” “perception”
- **Databases Searched:** Google Scholar, JSTOR, University of Minnesota libraries and interlibrary loan services, Mendeley

Notes on our Working Library of Relevant Literature

Over the course of our literature search, we reviewed over 82 sources, the most relevant of which are included in this report. Our working library of literature includes 78 academic sources, 4 reports drawn from gray literature, and other sources (raw data/data sheets), at least 18 of which use nationally representative survey data/samples, at least 6 of which use locally representative samples (by state/county/city), at least 6 of which use non-representative samples, and 5 which use representative samples from the UK, Australia, or Canada.

Academic literature for this literature review is drawn from 38 journals (and one book chapter), of which 15 (39%) are ranked in the top quartile of the category Criminology and Penology or related categories, such as Sociology, Law, and Political Science. Another 15 journals rank in the second quartile, for a total of 30/38 (79%) journals in the top half of their category. Three of the 38 journals rank in the third quartile and two in the bottom. For 3/38 journals, we were not able to locate complete ranking data. Of the 77 articles published in academic journals, 37/77 (48%) of sources are in the top quartile of publications by this same ranking, 24/77 (31%) of sources are in the second quartile, 4/77 (5%) in the

third, and 6/77 (8% of) sources are in the bottom quartile. Studies for which we were able to access the original data sets directly include all 6 studies that examine General Social Survey data (collected by NORC), a study published in the British Journal of Criminology that utilizes data from the British Crime Survey, one USA Today study based on data pulled from a 2014 Pew poll and data from a 2016 Pew poll and report (“Behind the Badge”) published in 2017. Data from a 2014 poll on race and policing conducted by Gallup is available as well, but only via subscription to the proprietary database. The documents cited in this report are among the most relevant, best-supported, and most interesting of this larger library.