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Study shows deep racial division when it comes to attitudes about cops — but it's driven by experience

By **Radley Balko** December 20, 2016

The Cato Institute recently published the results of a survey of 2,000 people about their attitudes toward policing. The results are pretty striking.

First, 68 percent of white people had a favorable view of police, against just 40 percent of blacks and 59 percent of Hispanics. Blacks (73 percent) were much more likely to say that police are too quick to use lethal force than whites (35 percent) and Hispanics (54 percent). A healthy majority of whites (64 percent) say their local police department treats people of different races equally; only a minority of blacks (31 percent) and Hispanics (42 percent) think so. Among all three groups, only a majority of white people believe that cops are usually held accountable for misconduct.

There's a common perception among some on the right that attitudes toward police are more affected by class than race. This survey suggests otherwise. While it's true that upper-income whites generally have more favorable attitudes toward law enforcement than lower-income whites, among blacks opinions generally remain the same among all income groups. Another interesting statistic: While 85 percent of Republicans believe police only use lethal force when necessary, just 36 percent of *black* Republicans do.

Those latter figures suggest that attitudes toward police aren't born of ideology so much as of actual experience. More figures from the survey back this up. The study found, for example, that blacks were twice as likely as whites to report that the police had directed profanity at them. Blacks were twice as likely to report knowing someone who was abused by cops. And upper-income black Americans reported getting stopped by police more frequently than *lower-income whites*. Overall, blacks were five times more likely than whites to report experiencing some sort of mistreatment at the hands of police. As the study's author Emily Ekins writes, "abuse at the hands of an individual police officer — whether individually or vicariously experienced — may be internalized and help explain differences in favorability toward the police."

The only real conclusion to draw: Black people are more mistrustful of police not because black people are more likely to commit crimes, or because black people are less interested in law and order, or because of some other cultural issue, but because, quite simply, black people are much more likely to have been victimized by the police — and they're much more likely to know others like them who have been victimized as well.

If basic human empathy doesn't cause you to be troubled by those numbers, consider this, from the survey:

> Groups who feel less favorable toward local law enforcement are less certain they would report a crime they witnessed. For instance, black and Hispanic Americans are more than 20 points less likely than white Americans to say they definitely would report a crime. Research finds that when the police have legitimacy, the law has legitimacy, which encourages compliance and cooperation.

The report lists a half-dozen law review articles and peer-reviewed academic studies to back up that seemingly uncontroversial contention. As I've written here before, this is the "Ferguson Effect" that law enforcement groups don't want to talk about: There are entire communities in this country in which — based on their own experiences and the experiences of people who are close to them — large majorities of residents simply don't trust the police. And when entire communities lose trust in those entrusted to enforce the law, respect for law itself begins to go down. And so crime goes up. Look at Chicago, a city frequently cited as one of the most violent in the United States and which the Brennan Center recently found has been the largest driver of the recent uptick in violent crime. Chicago also has a long and sordid history of police abuse, including (at least) a decade-long pattern of torture that the city has only recently attempted to address. But you needn't go back to the 1980s to find incidents of abuse. The city's cops are notoriously brutal. The city is perhaps even more notorious for doing little to nothing about it — and for punishing those who report it.