

# The Harris Poll

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**THE HARRIS POLL #22**  
Wednesday, April 7, 1999

## **CHANGING ATTITUDES TO THE POLICE**

- **IMPROVEMENT ON PREVENTING CRIME.**
- **DECLINE ON BEING FRIENDLY AND HELPFUL.**

***While most whites give the police good marks, many African-Americans see police brutality and are afraid of the police; most blacks believe police treat them unfairly.***

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*by Humphrey Taylor*

White and African-American attitudes to the police are very different. While most white Americans give their local police good marks, many African-Americans are afraid the police will mistreat them. Most African-Americans believe that their local police treat racial minorities unfairly.

These are the results of a nationwide *Harris Poll* of 1,008 adults surveyed between March 19 and 23. It follows several high profile cases involving white police allegedly brutalizing African-Americans, most notably the killing of Amado Diallo in New York City.

The Harris survey asked several questions about the police which were last asked in 1992, and show some changes in attitudes to the police over the last seven years, a period during which crime rates have fallen very dramatically. This trend is reflected in the **biggest change since 1992, a significant, if not huge, improvement in "preventing crime."** However, the only other clear change is in the other direction. The police are seen as **somewhat less "helpful and friendly"** than they were in 1992.

Some of the main results of this *Harris Poll* are:

- Most people give their local police **positive ratings** of between 60% and 68% on being **friendly and helpful, responding quickly** to calls for help, **not using excessive force, treating people fairly, preventing crime, and solving crime.**
- Police ratings on **preventing crime** have improved since 1992 from 58% positive, 41% negative to 64% positive and 34% negative.
- On **“being helpful and friendly,”** however, ratings of 73% positive, 25% negative in 1992 **have declined** to (still high) 68% positive and 30% negative.
- While only 8% of the public believe their local police are **often** guilty of **brutality** against blacks and Hispanics, most people think this happens either often (8%) or occasionally (47%).
- Among **African-Americans** the numbers are much higher; **27% believe police brutality occurs often, and 52% believe it occurs occasionally.** Only 17% believe it never occurs.
- Black and white experiences of their local police also seem to have been very different. Among whites, 16% say they are **sometimes afraid that the police will stop and arrest them when they are completely innocent.** Among blacks fully **43% are sometimes afraid.**

These findings underline the problems many African-Americans have experienced with white police officers, and the vital importance (and the difficulties) of building much better relations between the police and black Americans.

*Humphrey Taylor is the Chairman of Louis Harris & Associates, Inc.*

**TABLE 1****LOCAL POLICE RATINGS ON SIX CRITERIA**

"How would you rate the police in your community on the following -- (READ EACH ITEM) excellent, pretty good, only fair or poor?"

	<u>Excellent</u> %	<u>Pretty Good</u> %	<u>Only Fair</u> %	<u>Poor</u> %	<u>Don't Know/Refused</u> %
Responding quickly to calls for help and assistance	27	41	16	10	5
Not using excessive force	28	40	18	9	5
Being helpful and friendly	32	36	21	9	2
Treating people fairly	25	40	20	11	3
Preventing crime	21	44	24	10	2
Solving crime	17	43	26	11	3

**TABLE 2**

**LOCAL POLICE RATINGS ON SIX CRITERIA (TREND '92 - '96)**

Base: All adults

"How would you rate the police in your community on the following -- (READ EACH ITEM) excellent, pretty good, only fair or poor?"

	NOW (MARCH '99)			1992			TREND 1992-1999 Change in "Net"
	Positive %	Negative %	"Net" %	Positive %	Negative %	"Net" %	
Being helpful and friendly	68	30	38	73	25	48	-10
Responding quickly to calls for help and assistance	68	27	41	69	29	40	+1
Not using excessive force	68	27	41	68	30	38	+3
Treating people fairly	65	32	33	63	35	28	+5
Preventing crime	64	34	30	58	41	17	+13
Solving crime	60	37	23	58	39	19	+4

**NOTES:**

Positive = excellent or pretty good.

Negative = only fair or poor.

Net = positive minus negative.

**TABLE 3****DO LOCAL POLICE TREAT ALL RACES FAIRLY**

"Do you think the police in your community treat all races fairly or do they tend to treat one or more of these groups unfairly?"

	<u>Total</u> %	<u>White</u> %	<u>Black</u> %	<u>Hispanic</u> %
Treat all races fairly	59	67	30	48
Treat one or more groups unfairly	33	25	63	52
Don't know/Refused	8	7	7	*

**TABLE 4****HOW OFTEN POLICE BRUTALITY AGAINST BLACKS AND HISPANICS HAPPEN**

"Do you think that police brutality against blacks and Hispanics in your community happens often, occasionally or never?"

	<u>Total</u> %	<u>White</u> %	<u>Black</u> %	<u>Hispanic</u> %
Happens often	8	3	27	19
Occasionally	47	46	52	44
Never	38	43	17	34
Don't know/Refused	6	7	3	4

**TABLE 5****SOMETIMES AFRAID OF POLICE WHEN COMPLETELY INNOCENT**

"Are you sometimes afraid that the police will stop and arrest you when you are completely innocent, or not?"

	<u>Total</u> %	<u>White</u> %	<u>Black</u> %	<u>Hispanic</u> %
Yes, sometimes afraid	22	16	43	28
No, not afraid	78	84	56	72
Don't know	1	1	1	-

## Methodology

This Harris Poll was conducted by telephone within the United States between March 19 to 23, among a nationwide cross section of 1,008 adults. Figures for age, sex, race, education, number of adults and number of voice/telephone lines in the household were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population.

In theory, with a sample of this size, one can say with 95 percent certainty that the results have a statistical precision of plus or minus 3 percentage points of what they would be if the entire adult population had been polled with complete accuracy. Unfortunately, there are several other possible sources of error in all polls or surveys that are probably more serious than theoretical calculations of sampling error. They include refusals to be interviewed (non-response), question wording and question order, interviewer bias, weighting by demographic control data and screening (e.g., for likely voters). It is difficult or impossible to quantify the errors that may result from these factors.

These statements conform to the principles of disclosure of the National Council on Public Polls.

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Contact Louis Harris & Associates, Inc. 111 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10003, or by fax (212) 539-9669, for complete demographic details for the question in this release.

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