

The Harris Survey

For Release: Thursday AM, February 7th, 1985

1985 #11
ISSN 0273-1037

PUBLIC REACTS TO THE GOETZ CASE

By Louis Harris

A substantial 62-32 percent majority of the American people believe that if Bernhard Goetz, who shot four young men in a New York subway, is found guilty of illegal possession of a dangerous weapon, he should be sentenced to jail just like anyone else on similar charges. Goetz has been indicted for illegal possession of a gun and could receive 7 years in prison if found guilty.

The American people hold clear-cut and what they believe are highly logical views on the Goetz case, which has attracted much national attention. According to this latest Harris Survey taken by telephone between January 24th and 27th, among a nationwide cross section of 1,254 adults:

--The public liked what the New York grand jury did. A 64-28 percent majority was opposed to indicting Goetz on four counts of attempted murder. By the same token, a 64-32 percent majority favored indicting him for possession of an illegal weapon. The grand jury let Goetz off for shooting the four young men he said accosted him, but said he has to stand trial for possession of a dangerous weapon, an offense in New York City. The grand jury obviously reflected public opinion.

--By 66-28 percent, a big majority of the public sympathizes with Goetz. A nearly unanimous 87-12 percent majority shows pent-up frustration when agreeing that "it is detestable the way criminals can molest riders on subways and other public transportation and consistently get away with it." In addition, a clear-cut 57-40 percent majority goes along with the claim that "maybe if someone like Goetz shot some muggers like he did every week, the criminals would get the idea it was not worth it any more."

It is evident from these results that most Americans are not satisfied with the way the law is enforced for street crime. There are also some overtones of popular sympathy with vigilante justice, in which citizens take law enforcement into their own hands.

--But there are other strands of public reaction to the Goetz case that point to quite different conclusions. A solid 63-31 percent agree with the view that "while it's tempting to give muggers some of their own medicine by having citizens shoot some of them, it is wrong to have people take the law in their own hands, shooting and punishing people they think are criminals." Here, of course, people are saying that citizen retribution against criminals is basically undesirable.

In addition, a 54-38 percent majority expresses doubts about Goetz's real role in the episode. A majority agreed with the claim that "when Goetz said in his confession that he used dum-dum bullets, that he was sorry he didn't gouge out the eyes of the four he shot, and that if he could have reloaded his gun fast enough, he would have taken out after them, he looks more like a 'Death Wish' gunman out stalking to kill criminals, not an innocent victim just trying to defend himself."

From these results, it is evident that most Americans know vigilante justice is basically wrong and that Goetz himself may have been something more than the average victim of street crime. Indeed, the public obviously feels that Goetz potentially broke the law and should be tried for the three illegal guns in his possess: .

Here then is the bottom line logic of public opinion on the Goetz case. Most people like the grand jury, are willing to give Goetz the benefit of the doubt on the shooting of the four young men on the subway. They clearly feel that was self-defense. At the same time, people are wary of citizens taking law enforcement into their own hands. And if Goetz illegally possessed a dangerous weapon, he should stand trial and go to jail if convicted. As important as it is to give muggers their comeuppance, most people are also saying the rule and the practice of the law must also be respected.

(over)

T A B L E S

Between January 24th and 27th, the Harris Survey asked a nationwide cross section of 1,254 adults by telephone:

"Now let me ask you about the case of Bernhard Goetz, the New York subway rider who shot four young people who had approached him in an attempt to get money from him. As you may recall, when the youths approached Goetz, he drew out a gun and shot all four, paralyzing one of them. Goetz is now being called before a grand jury and may have to stand trial. He is charged with possession of a dangerous weapon and four counts of attempted murder. Let me read you some statements about the Goetz case. For each, tell me if you agree or disagree."

STATEMENTS ON THE GOETZ CASE

	<u>Agree</u> %	<u>Disagree</u> %	<u>Not sure</u> %
<u>CRITICAL OF GOETZ</u>			
While it's tempting to give muggers some of their own medicine by having citizens shoot some of them, it is wrong to have people take the law in their own hands, shooting and punishing people they think are criminals	63	31	6
When Goetz said in his confession that he used dum-dum bullets, that he was sorry he didn't gouge out the eyes of the four he shot, and that if he could have reloaded his gun fast enough, he would have taken out after them, he looks more like a "Death Wish" gunman out stalking to kill criminals, not an innocent victim just trying to defend himself	54	38	8
<u>PRO-GOETZ</u>			
It is detestable the way criminals can molest riders on subways and other public transportation and consistently get away with it	87	12	1
Maybe if someone like Goetz shot some muggers like he did every week, the criminals would get the idea it was not worth it any more	57	40	3

"Do you feel that Goetz should be indicted for (READ EACH ITEM), or not?"

GOETZ INDICTMENTS

	<u>Feel</u> %	<u>Don't feel</u> %	<u>Not sure</u> %
Possession of a dangerous weapon, which is illegal in New York City	64	32	4
Four counts of attempted murder	28	64	8

"Do you think if Goetz is tried and found guilty of either illegal possession of a dangerous weapon or of attempted murder, he should be sentenced to jail just like anyone else on similar charges, or should he be let go?"

GOETZ SENTENCED TO JAIL IF FOUND GUILTY?

	<u>%</u>
Sentenced to jail	62
Should be let go	32
Not sure	6

(continued)

"In general, do you find yourself in sympathy with Goetz in this case, or not?"

SYMPATHY WITH GOETZ

	<u>%</u>
In sympathy with Goetz	66
Not in sympathy	28
Not sure	6

METHODOLOGY

This Harris Survey was conducted by telephone within the United States between January 24th and 27th among a cross section of 1,254 adults nationwide. Figures for age, sex, race and education were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population.

In a sample of this size, one can say with 95 percent certainty that the results are within plus or minus three percentage points of what they would be if the entire adult population had been polled.

This statement conforms to the principles of disclosure of the National Council on Public Polls.

© 1985
World Rights Reserved
Tribune Media Services, Inc.
720 No. Orange Ave., Orlando, Fla. 32801

851201
1c-f