

Black Lives Matter & Policing: Public Attitudes

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Attitudes Toward Black Lives Matter and Policing: An Encyclopedia Entry

The relationship between the **Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement** and attitudes toward policing represents one of the most critical and polarizing areas of contemporary social and political psychology. Since its inception in 2013, BLM has fundamentally challenged prevailing narratives surrounding law enforcement, racial justice, and systemic inequality in the United States and globally. Understanding attitudes within this domain requires examining deep-seated psychological mechanisms, historical context, and the profound impact of lived experience on perceptions of fairness, trust, and legitimacy concerning state authority. These attitudes are not monolithic; they are highly stratified by race, political affiliation, geography, and personal history with law enforcement, leading to a deeply fractured public discourse regarding necessary reforms and the role of police in society.

Attitudes toward policing traditionally focus on evaluations of effectiveness, safety, and legitimacy. However, the rise of the BLM movement shifted this focus dramatically toward issues of **racial bias**, excessive force, and accountability. This shift necessitates analyzing attitudes not just toward individual officers or specific departments, but toward the entire institution of policing as a mechanism of social control. The movement's visibility, driven by highly publicized instances of police violence against Black individuals, forced a reckoning with historical injustices, compelling researchers to explore how perceived procedural justice--or the lack thereof--shapes the broader societal contract between citizens and law enforcement. Consequently, the study of these attitudes has become central to understanding contemporary political polarization and efforts toward social change.

Crucially, the attitudes surrounding BLM and policing are often intertwined with core moral and political identities. For supporters of the movement, attitudes reflect a moral imperative to address systemic racism and protect marginalized communities, often viewing policing institutions as inherently flawed and requiring radical overhaul. Conversely, opponents frequently view the police as essential protectors of order and safety, interpreting critiques of law enforcement as threats to societal stability and the rule of law. This fundamental difference in framing--justice versus order--explains much of the intense attitudinal divergence observed in public polling and political rhetoric, making consensus on reform efforts exceedingly difficult to achieve.

The Genesis and Core Tenets of the Black Lives Matter Movement

The Black Lives Matter movement emerged in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the 2013 shooting death of Trayvon Martin, articulating a profound dissatisfaction with the legal system's failure to hold individuals accountable for violence against Black youth. It quickly evolved from a hashtag into a decentralized national and international network dedicated to combating **systemic racism**, violence, and institutional disregard for Black lives. The core tenets of the

movement focus squarely on demanding accountability for police misconduct, challenging discriminatory practices such as racial profiling and stop-and-frisk, and advocating for investments in community resources rather than expanded policing budgets. These tenets directly challenge the traditional, often idealized, public image of policing as a neutral, benevolent force, generating intense defensive reactions among those whose identities or political ideologies are tied to supporting law enforcement.

A central tenet of BLM is the concept of **de-centering whiteness** and prioritizing the experiences of marginalized Black communities, particularly those who are LGBTQ+, disabled, or otherwise doubly marginalized. This intersectional approach emphasizes that attitudes toward policing are not uniform even within the Black community but are shaped by multiple axes of oppression. By focusing on the structural roots of violence rather than individual bad actors, BLM shifts the attitudinal target from specific officers to the institutional policies and cultural norms that permit excessive force and shield officers from accountability. This structural critique requires individuals to confront uncomfortable truths about historical and ongoing racial inequality, which often triggers resistance and motivated reasoning among those who benefit from the existing social hierarchy.

The movement's visibility was significantly amplified by subsequent high-profile incidents, including the deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd. These events served as critical attitude formation catalysts, moving the debate from abstract discussions of race to tangible, visceral examples of police power misuse. For many, particularly younger generations and non-White populations, these incidents solidified attitudes that policing is fundamentally biased and requires radical restructuring. For others, the subsequent protests and associated social unrest fostered counter-attitudes that characterized BLM as an extremist or anti-police organization, leading to a strong backlash characterized by increased support for law-and-order rhetoric and expanded police power.

Racial and Demographic Differences in Perceptions of Policing

Attitudes toward policing and BLM are perhaps most starkly divided along racial lines, reflecting fundamentally different lived realities regarding interactions with law enforcement. Research consistently shows that Black Americans hold significantly less favorable attitudes toward police compared to White Americans, perceiving higher levels of bias, unfairness, and brutality. For many Black individuals, interactions with the police are often characterized by suspicion, surveillance, and the threat of force, leading to attitudes rooted in self-preservation and deep distrust. Conversely, White Americans, who generally experience police as protective and helpful, often maintain highly positive attitudes toward law enforcement, viewing them as necessary agents of social control and order maintenance. These divergent experiences make cross-racial understanding of the BLM movement's core demands particularly challenging.

Beyond race, demographic factors such as age, socioeconomic status, and geographic location also play significant roles in shaping attitudes. Younger adults, regardless of race, tend to express greater support for the BLM movement and are more critical of traditional policing models than older generations, reflecting differing values regarding social justice and political engagement. Individuals living in urban areas, particularly those with high levels of visible police presence and documented histories of police misconduct, are more likely to harbor negative attitudes toward law enforcement and support radical reform efforts. Conversely, suburban and rural populations, often removed from direct experiences of structural policing issues, tend to show higher levels of generalized police support and resistance to the systemic critiques advanced by BLM.

Political orientation acts as a powerful mediating factor, often intensifying existing racial and demographic divides. Liberals and Democrats overwhelmingly express positive attitudes toward BLM and support comprehensive police reform, viewing these issues through the lens of civil rights and equity. Conservatives and Republicans, however, tend to view policing as a matter of national security and order, expressing strong negative attitudes toward the BLM movement, which they often characterize as divisive or dangerous. This political polarization means that attitudes are frequently formed through the lens of motivated reasoning--individuals seek out and accept information that confirms their existing political ideology, thereby reinforcing their predispositions toward either supporting or opposing the principles championed by BLM.

Public Opinion and Polarization Regarding BLM

Public opinion concerning the Black Lives Matter movement exhibits significant volatility, often spiking dramatically following high-profile police violence incidents before settling back into politically polarized baseline attitudes. The surge in support observed in the summer of 2020, following the murder of George Floyd, was unprecedented, briefly achieving majority support across several demographic groups, including a moderate increase among White Americans. This temporary consensus suggested a momentary willingness to acknowledge systemic issues. However, this broad support proved fragile, quickly receding as political narratives shifted to focus on associated protests, property damage, and the controversial policy slogan of "**Defund the Police.**"

The polarization surrounding BLM is deeply entrenched, driven by fundamental differences in how Americans understand the causes of inequality and crime. Those who oppose BLM often rely on System Justification Theory, exhibiting a psychological need to believe that the existing social order, including the police, is fair, legitimate, and necessary. Critiques of police behavior are perceived not as calls for justice but as attacks on the legitimate authority structure, leading to strong counter-attitudes and increased support for punitive, order-focused policing. This defensive reaction is often amplified by media framing that disproportionately emphasizes violence and disorder associated with protests rather than the movement's core demands for institutional

change.

The specific language used to discuss reform also heavily influences public attitudes. While terms like "police accountability," "transparency," and "de-escalation training" generally garner broad, bipartisan support, terms like "defund the police" trigger severe negative reactions, particularly among White and conservative populations. This phrase, often misinterpreted as abolishing police entirely rather than reallocating resources, serves as a powerful political wedge, allowing opponents to characterize the entire BLM movement as radical and unrealistic. Consequently, the success of future reform efforts hinges significantly on the ability to frame policy proposals in language that addresses systemic issues while mitigating the fear and resistance associated with perceived threats to public safety.

Attitudes Towards Police Reform and Accountability

Attitudes toward specific police reform measures reveal a complex landscape where consensus exists on some procedural changes but evaporates quickly when structural or financial changes are proposed. There is generally high public support across most demographics for reforms aimed at increasing transparency and minimizing discretionary force. These include mandatory use of **body-worn cameras**, standardized national use-of-force policies, and enhanced de-escalation training. These measures are often viewed as common-sense improvements that enhance officer safety and citizen trust without fundamentally altering the institution.

However, attitudes diverge sharply on structural reforms designed to hold officers accountable or shift resources away from policing. Measures aimed at limiting **qualified immunity**--the legal doctrine protecting officers from civil lawsuits unless they violated a clearly established statutory or constitutional right--face intense opposition from police unions and conservative groups, who argue that removing this protection would hinder officers' ability to perform their duties effectively. Conversely, proponents view the removal of qualified immunity as essential for establishing genuine accountability and changing officer behavior, reflecting a core attitudinal difference regarding whether police should be treated differently under the law than ordinary citizens.

The most contentious area of attitudinal difference concerns the reallocation of police funding. Support for the "defund" concept--which often means shifting a portion of the police budget toward mental health services, housing support, and other community-based interventions--is strong among BLM supporters and progressives, who view this as a necessary step to address the root causes of crime and reduce unnecessary police interaction. Opposition, however, is widespread, driven by concerns that reducing police funding will inevitably lead to increased crime rates and diminished public safety. These polarized attitudes underscore a fundamental disagreement over whether social problems should primarily be addressed through punitive measures (policing) or preventative community investment.

High Support Reforms: Mandatory body camera usage, de-escalation training, and establishing national misconduct registries.

Moderate Support Reforms: Limiting no-knock warrants and increasing civilian oversight boards with disciplinary power.

High Opposition Reforms: Eliminating qualified immunity and substantial reallocation of police budget (Defund the Police).

The Role of Media and Political Discourse in Shaping Attitudes

Media consumption plays a decisive role in shaping attitudes toward both the BLM movement and policing, often serving to reinforce pre-existing political biases. News framing significantly influences how individuals perceive the legitimacy of police actions and the motivations of protestors. Media outlets catering to conservative audiences often prioritize narratives emphasizing crime, disorder, and the danger faced by officers, thereby fostering negative attitudes toward BLM and reinforcing support for punitive policing. Conversely, outlets serving liberal audiences tend to focus on narratives of racial injustice, systemic bias, and victim testimony, cultivating support for the movement and demands for radical reform. This selective exposure contributes significantly to attitudinal polarization, making it difficult for individuals across the political spectrum to engage with a shared set of facts.

Political discourse further solidifies these media-driven attitudes. Political leaders often utilize highly charged rhetoric to mobilize their bases, frequently employing fear-based messaging regarding crime rates or societal collapse to discourage support for BLM initiatives. For example, politicians who align with the "law and order" perspective often conflate protest activity with criminal behavior, successfully shifting public attention away from the underlying issues of police brutality. This strategy leverages psychological heuristics, causing individuals to associate BLM with chaos rather than justice, thereby solidifying attitudes of opposition and increasing support for aggressive police tactics.

Furthermore, the rise of social media has created echo chambers where attitudes are continuously validated and intensified. Users are exposed primarily to content that aligns with their existing views, whether they are supportive of police actions or critical of systemic racism. This environment limits exposure to counter-attitudinal information, making individuals less receptive to complex nuance and more likely to hold extreme, unwavering positions. The virality of specific videos--whether showing police misconduct or violence against officers--serves as powerful, emotionally resonant stimuli that bypass rational deliberation, cementing immediate, strong attitudes based on identity and affiliation rather than comprehensive policy analysis.

Psychological Mechanisms Underlying Attitudinal Formation

Several psychological mechanisms explain the formation and rigidity of attitudes toward BLM and policing. **Social Identity Theory** is particularly relevant, positing that individuals derive self-esteem from their group memberships. For those who identify strongly with law enforcement or conservative political groups (the in-group), critiques of police are perceived as direct threats to their identity, leading to defensive attitudes and rejection of the BLM out-group. Conversely, strong identification with marginalized communities fosters attitudes of solidarity, empathy, and a strong desire for systemic change.

System Justification Theory (SJT) helps explain the strong resistance to BLM's message among those who benefit from the status quo. SJT suggests that people are motivated, often unconsciously, to believe that the existing social, economic, and political systems are fair and legitimate, even if they disadvantage certain groups. Challenging the police--a core institution of the status quo--creates cognitive dissonance, which is often resolved by rejecting the messenger (BLM) and rationalizing existing disparities, thereby maintaining positive attitudes toward the police and the overall system.

Finally, **Motivated Reasoning** plays a central role. When faced with ambiguous or conflicting information regarding police misconduct or protest activity, individuals process the information in a manner that aligns with their desired conclusion. A person predisposed to support the police will interpret video evidence in a light favorable to the officer, emphasizing compliance failures or perceived threats. A person predisposed to support BLM will interpret the same evidence as clear proof of excessive force and systemic bias. This mechanism ensures that attitudes, once formed, are highly resistant to change, even in the face of compelling evidence.

Policy Implications and Future Directions

The profound attitudinal divergence concerning BLM and policing presents significant challenges for policymakers attempting to enact meaningful reform. The polarization ensures that any proposed change is immediately filtered through partisan and racial lenses, making legislative compromise difficult. Effective policy implementation requires navigating these attitudinal barriers, focusing efforts on measures that possess the highest potential for cross-cutting support, such as investments in officer training, data transparency, and improved community relations strategies that emphasize dialogue and mutual respect.

Future research must continue to explore the nuances of attitudinal change, particularly how brief moments of consensus (like the period following the George Floyd murder) can be sustained and translated into durable policy support. This involves developing communication strategies that frame police reform not as an attack on law enforcement but as a necessary step toward enhancing public safety and legitimacy for all communities. Furthermore, researchers must analyze the long-term psychological impact of sustained activism and counter-activism on political efficacy

and trust in democratic institutions.

Ultimately, achieving lasting change requires addressing the underlying attitudinal roots of conflict--the fundamental disagreement over the fairness of the social system. While procedural changes in policing are necessary, true progress depends on bridging the vast experiential gap between demographic groups regarding law enforcement contact. Until a critical mass of the population shares the perception that policing is applied equitably and justly, attitudes toward the Black Lives Matter movement and the police institution will remain deeply polarized, hindering the path toward genuine racial and social justice.

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