



Crime And Law Enforcement In America: Racial And Ethnic Differences In Attitudes Toward The Criminal Justice System

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An analysis of the 2014 General Social Survey (GSS) reveals a complex relationship between the American public and the criminal justice system. Over the past 20 years, there has been a gradual decline in the percentage of Americans who believe there are instances in which police use of force against citizens is justified. However, when asked about specific law and order scenarios, the trend is less clear, with acceptance for the use of force increasing in some cases and decreasing in others. Other attitudes, such as support for capital punishment, have remained relatively stable in recent years.

Even controlling for other demographic, socioeconomic, and political factors—like age, gender, income, education, and political party—the data show vast differences between the attitudes of whites and blacks when it comes to how the police and the courts should interact with citizens, as well as spending on law enforcement.

MOST AMERICANS SAY COURTS ARE TOO LENIENT, AND 6 IN 10 SUPPORT THE DEATH PENALTY FOR THOSE CONVICTED OF MURDER.

The percentage of Americans who believe their local courts are too lenient in dealing with criminals has been on the decline since 1994, when 85 percent of Americans said their local courts were not harsh enough in dealing with criminals. In 2014, 58 percent of Americans say the courts in their area are not harsh

Four Things You Should Know

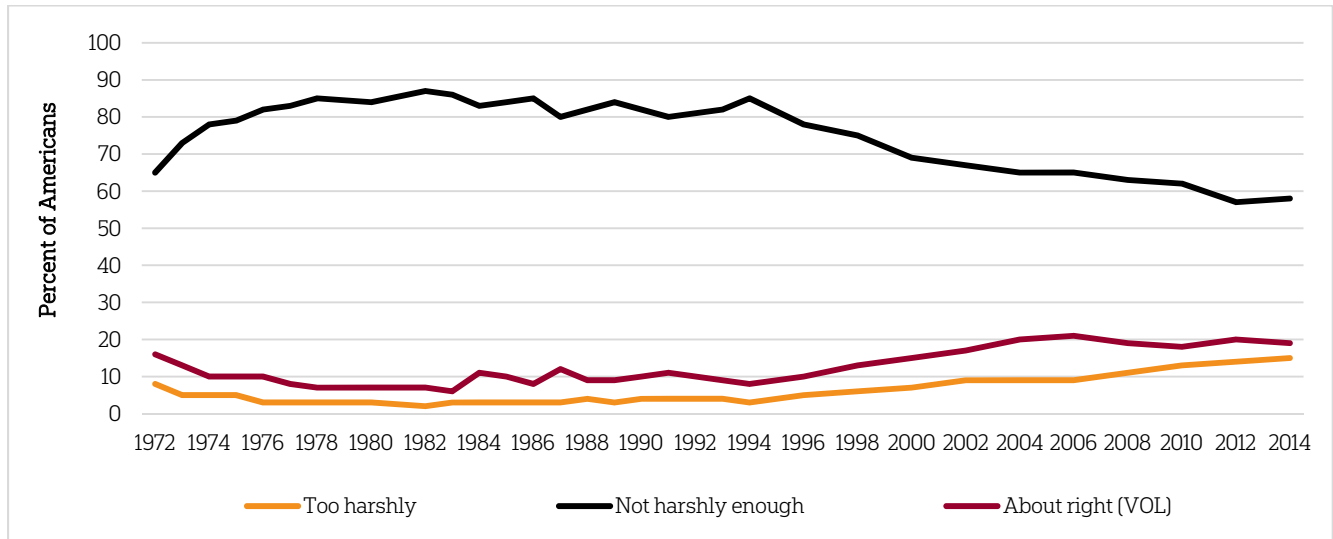
From the 2014 GSS Questions on Crime and Law Enforcement in America

Among American Adults:

- 1) There are large racial and ethnic differences on many crime and law enforcement attitudes.
- 2) Fewer than half of blacks (44 percent) and Hispanics (48 percent) say they favor the death penalty for persons convicted of murder, while two-thirds of whites say they favor the death penalty.
- 3) A majority of whites (70 percent) say there are situations in which they would approve of a police officer striking a citizen, while fewer than half of blacks (42 percent) and Hispanics (38 percent) say the same.
- 4) Forty-six percent of Americans say the country spends too little on law enforcement, which is an all-time low.

enough in dealing with criminals, 15 percent say the courts are too harsh, and 19 percent say their treatment of criminals is about right.

The percentage of Americans who believe local courts are too lenient with criminals has declined in recent years

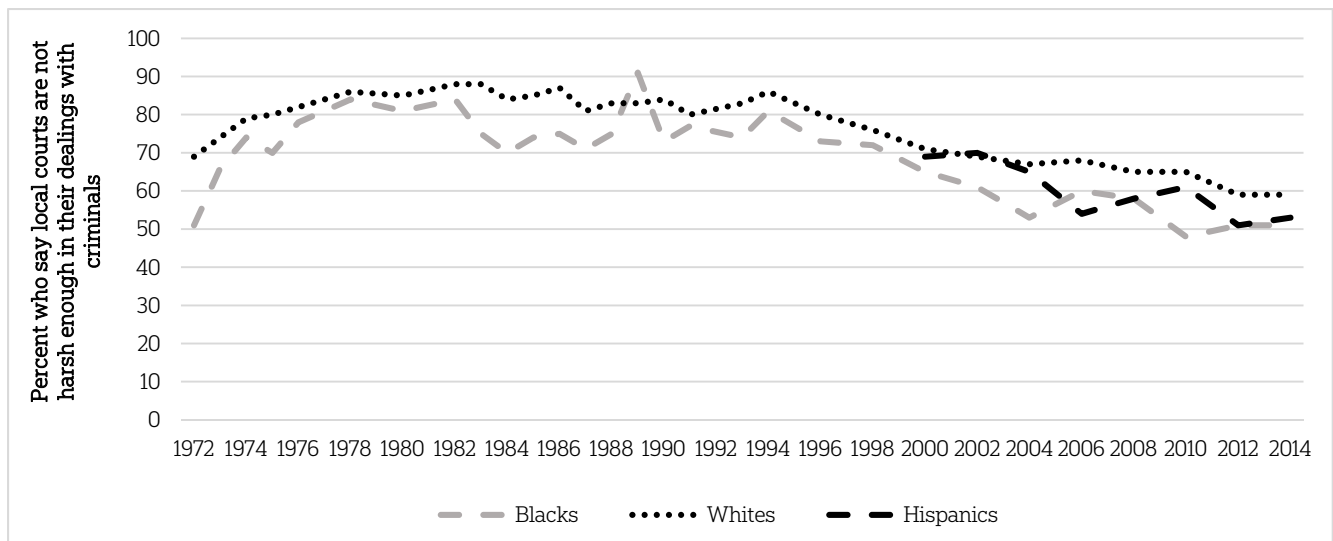


Question: In general, do you think the courts in this area deal too harshly or not harshly enough with criminals?

The steady decline in those who say their local courts are not harsh enough in their treatment of criminals can also be seen across racial and ethnic groups, though significantly fewer blacks (51 percent) currently say so than whites (59 percent). Hispanics follow a similar pattern, falling from 69 percent in 2000 to 53 percent in 2014.

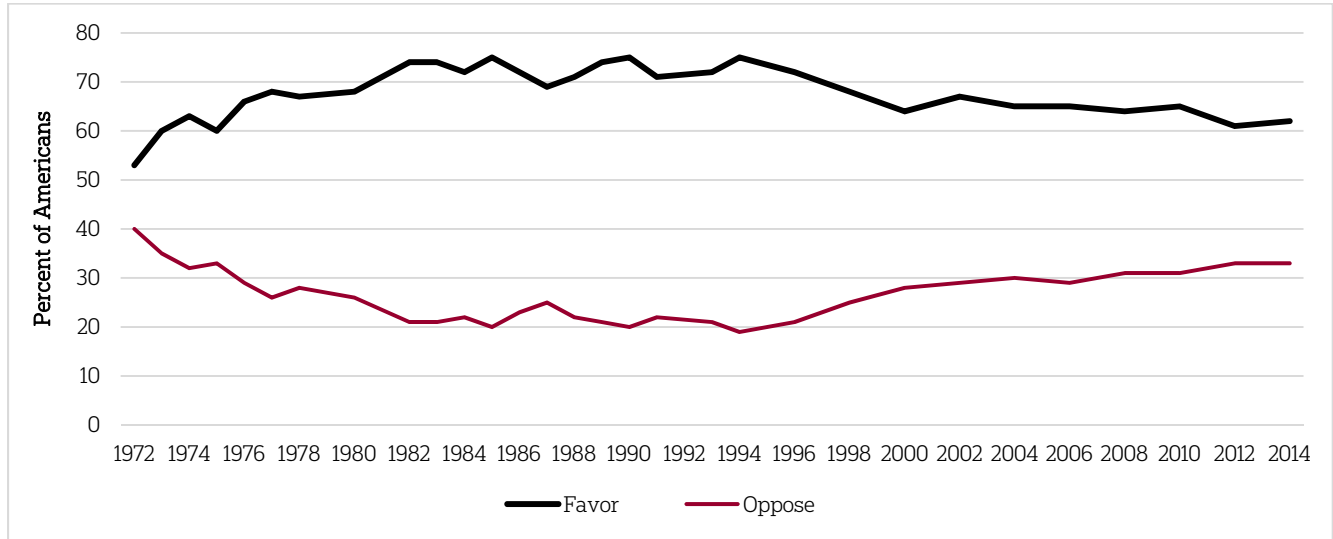
Those with a college education are less likely than those with less education to say their local courts are too lenient on criminals.

Whites are more likely than blacks to say their local courts are not harsh enough when dealing with criminals



While a majority of Americans continue to support the death penalty for convicted murderers, support has steadily declined over the past 20 years and has leveled out in recent years. In 2014, 62 percent of Americans say they favor the death penalty for those convicted of murder, a decline of 13 percentage points over the past 20 years.

A majority of Americans favor capital punishment for those convicted of murder

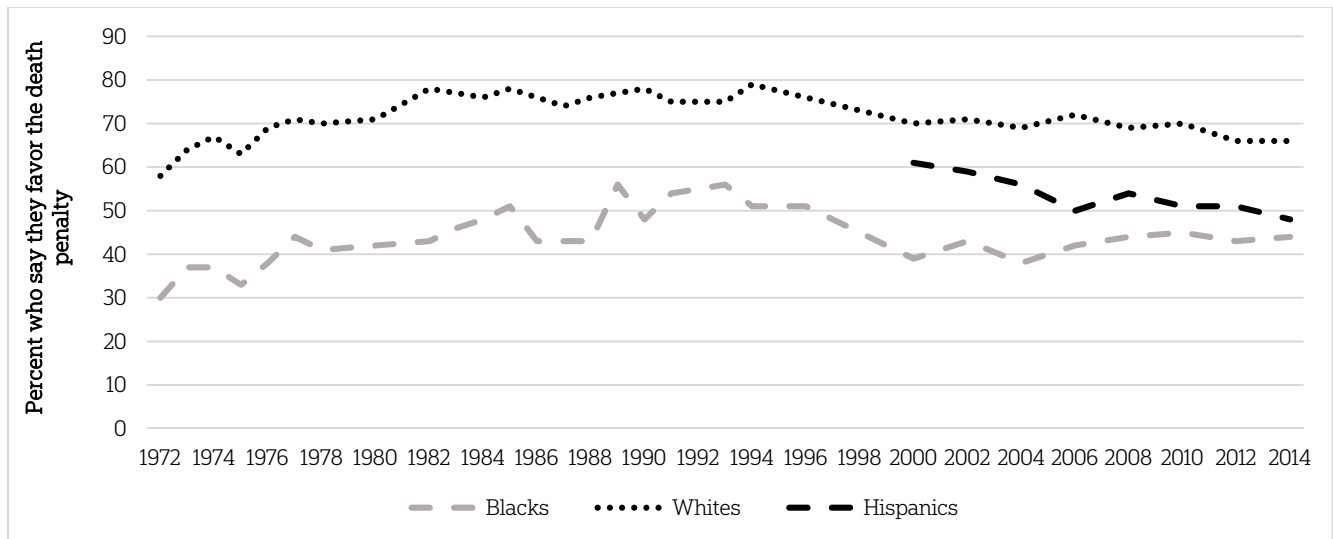


Question: Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder? Note in 1972 and 1973, a different version of the question was asked: Are you in favor of the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?

In the same time period, white and black Americans have diverged significantly in their views toward capital punishment. Today, fewer than half of blacks (44 percent) and Hispanics (48 percent) say they favor the death penalty for persons convicted of murder, while two-thirds of whites say they favor the death penalty.

Support for the death penalty also varies significantly by party identification, level of education, gender, and income.

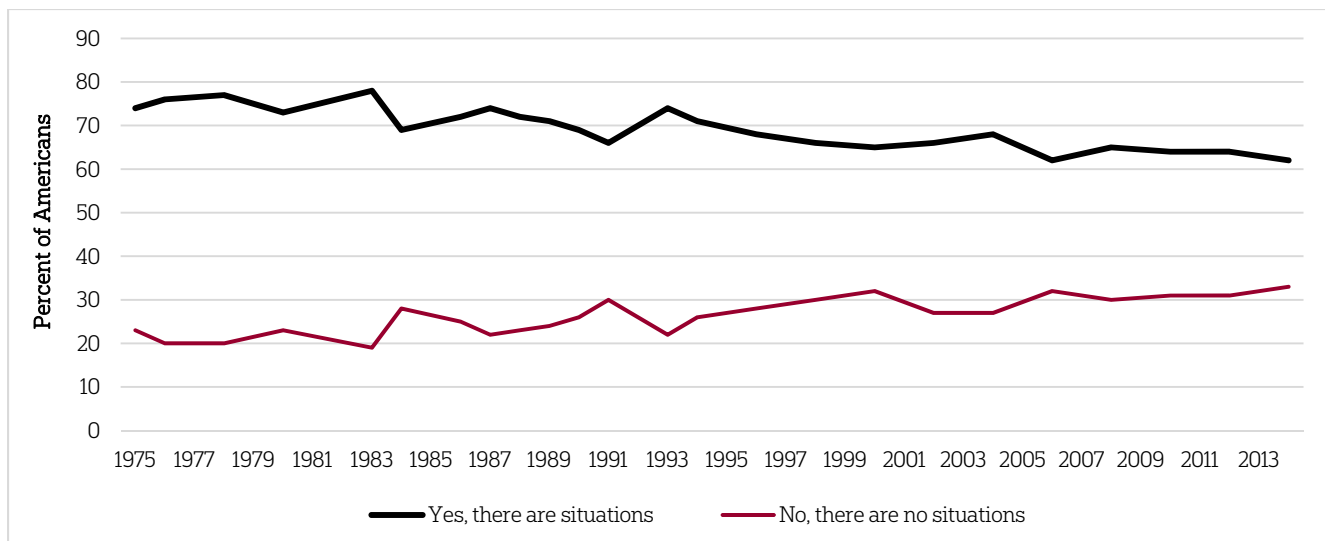
Blacks and Hispanics are less likely than whites to support the death penalty



A MAJORITY OF AMERICANS APPROVE OF A POLICE OFFICER STRIKING A CITIZEN, BUT SUPPORT FOR SUCH ACTION DEPENDS ON THE SITUATION.

A majority of Americans say there are situations in which they would approve of a police officer striking an adult male citizen, but this percentage has slowly declined over the past 20 years. Currently, 62 percent of Americans say there are situations in which they would approve of a police officer striking a male citizen, and 33 percent say there are not instances in which they would approve of a police officer striking a male citizen.

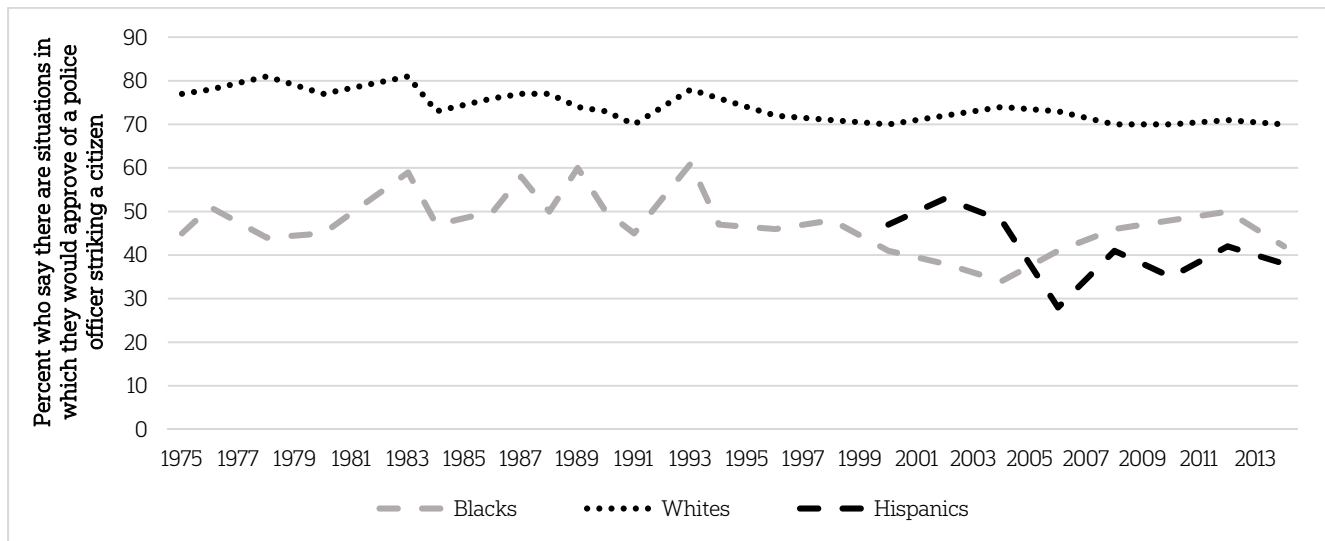
A majority of Americans say there are instances in which they would approve of a police officer striking a citizen



Question: Are there any situations you can imagine in which you would approve of a policeman striking an adult male citizen?

In 2014, whites (70 percent) are significantly more likely than blacks (42 percent) or Hispanics (38 percent) to say they can imagine a situation in which they would approve of a police officer striking an adult male citizen. Approval of police use of force against a citizen also varies by party identification, educational attainment, gender, and income.

A majority of whites say there are situations in which they would approve of a police officer striking a citizen, while fewer than half of blacks and Hispanics say the same



When pressed about specific instances, approval of the use of police force varies depending on the severity of the situation. Americans are more likely to approve of police force when a citizen is attacking the officer or trying to escape than when a citizen says something vulgar or when a citizen is being questioned as a suspect in a murder case.

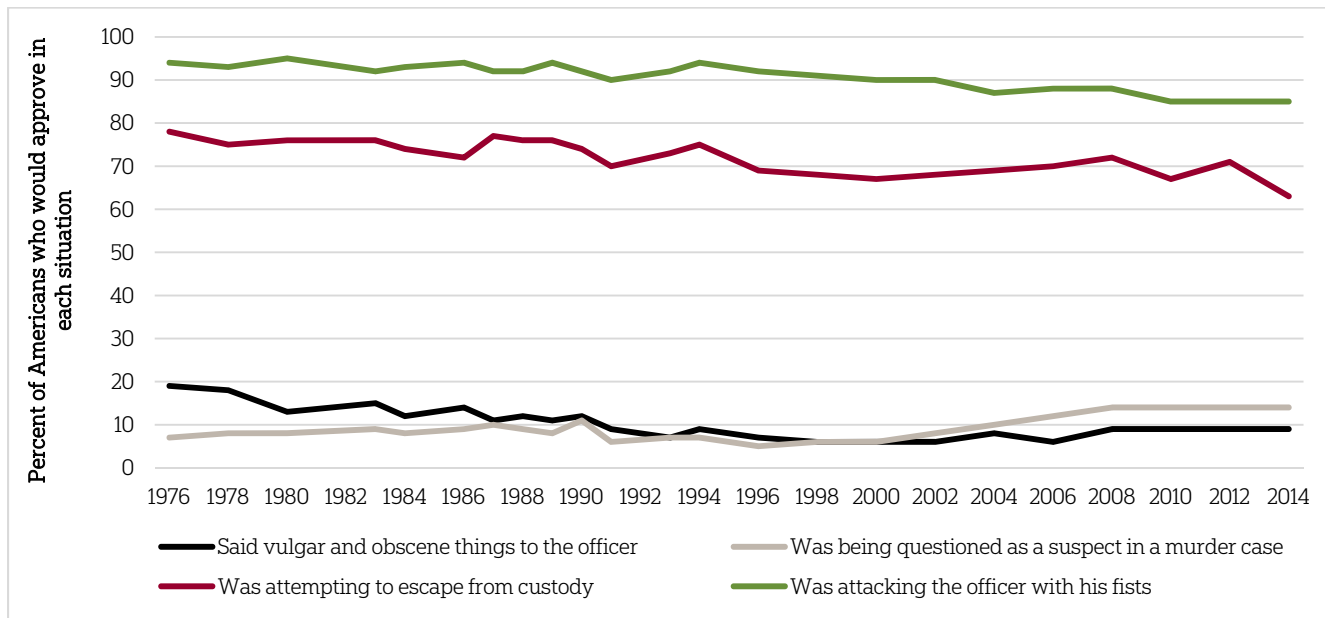
In 2014, just 9 percent of Americans say they would approve of a police officer striking a citizen who had said vulgar and obscene things to the officer. This percentage has remained relatively stable over the past 20 years.

Fourteen percent say they would approve of a police officer striking a citizen who was being questioned as a suspect in a murder case. This approval has slowly but steadily trended upwards since 1996, when just 5 percent said they would approve of a police officer striking a detained murder suspect, an all-time low.

Sixty-three percent of Americans would approve of an officer striking a citizen who was attempting to escape from custody. This represents an 8 percentage point decline in approval since 2012, the largest decline among all use of force items over any two-year period.

Twenty years ago, 94 percent of Americans would approve of an officer striking a citizen who was attacking the officer with his fists. While this near universal approval has declined 9 percentage points over the past 20 years, a large majority, 85 percent, still say they would approve of a police officer striking a citizen in this instance.

The severity of the situation dictates whether Americans would support police use of force against a citizen



Questions: Would you approve of a policeman striking a citizen who had said vulgar and obscene things to the policeman? Would you approve of a policeman striking a citizen who was being questioned as a suspect in a murder case? Would you approve of a policeman striking a citizen who was attempting to escape from custody? Would you approve of a policeman striking a citizen who was attacking the policeman with his fists?

WHITES, BLACKS, AND HISPANICS DIVERGE SIGNIFICANTLY IN THEIR APPROVAL OF POLICE USE OF FORCE AGAINST CITIZENS.

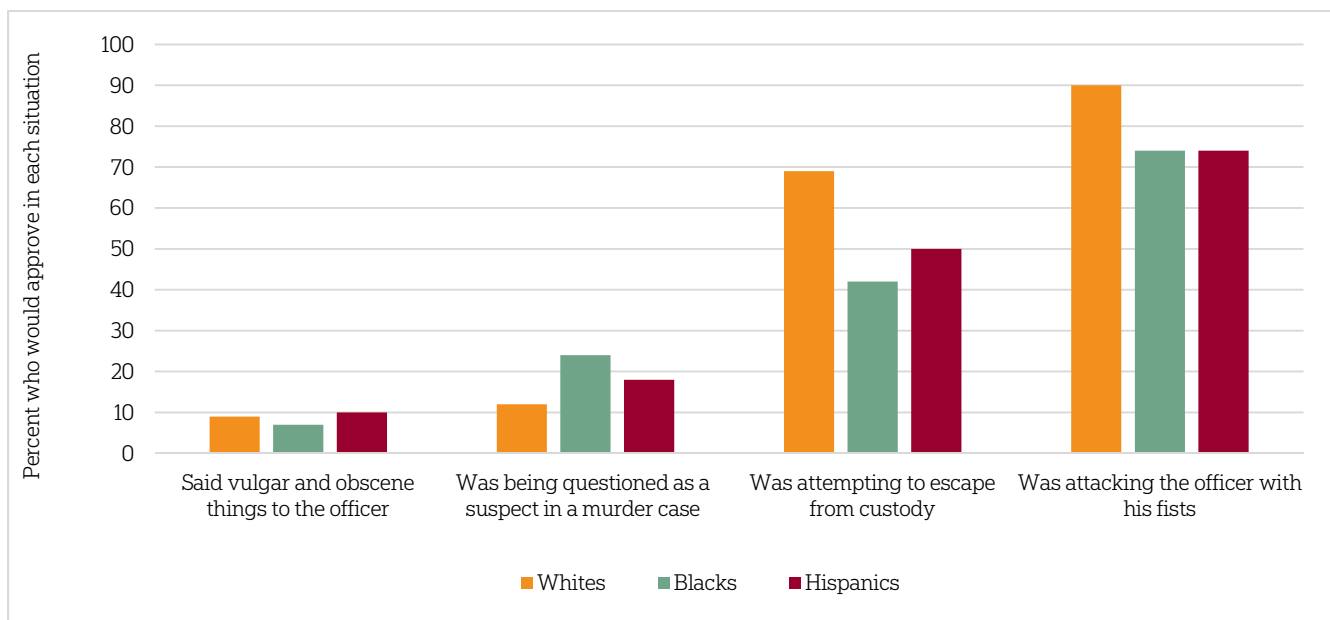
Mirroring the overall trend in recent years, approval of a police officer striking a murder suspect has steadily trended upwards for both blacks and whites, although the percentages vary significantly between the two groups. Today, twice as many blacks as whites say they approve of police use of force in this instance, but still well below majorities (24 percent vs. 12 percent). The number of Hispanics who approve of a police officer striking a citizen in this instance has doubled since 2000 to 18 percent in 2014.

Approval among whites has steadily declined for a police officer hitting a citizen attempting to escape from custody, again mirroring the overall trend, while black approval hasn't followed a clear pattern. Today, 69 percent of whites and 42 percent of blacks say they approve of a police officer striking a citizen attempting to escape from custody.

Large majorities of whites, blacks, and Hispanics say they approve of a police officer using force against a citizen who was attacking the officer with his fists. Yet, whites (90 percent) are more likely than blacks (74 percent) or Hispanics (74 percent) to say they approve of a police officer striking a citizen in this instance.

In addition to race and ethnicity, other demographic factors, including age, gender, income, and educational attainment, are associated with approval of police use of force against citizens.

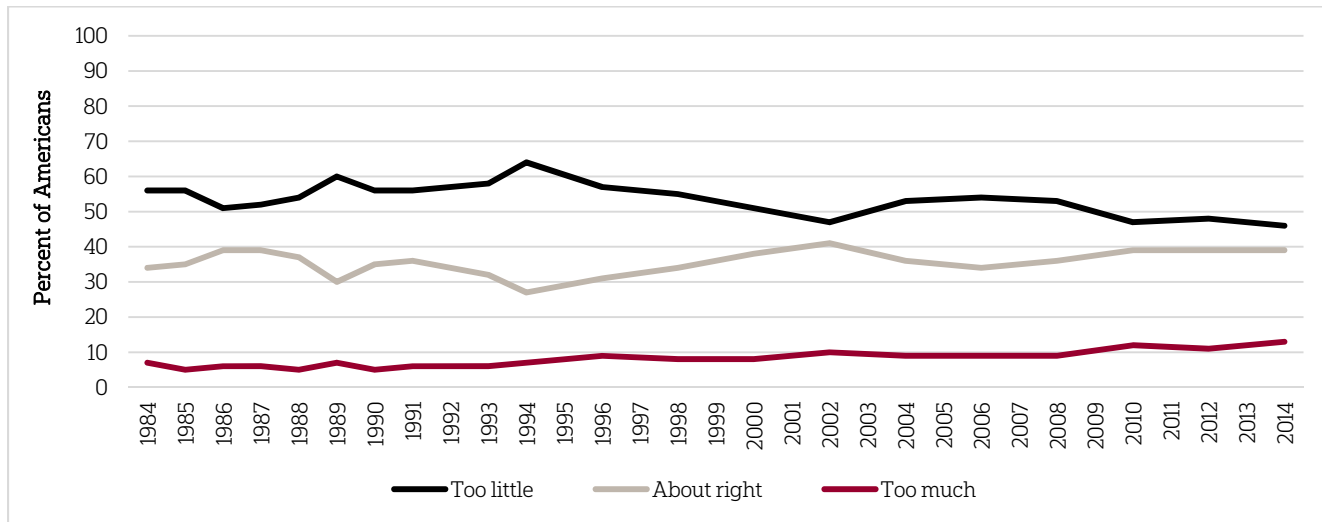
In 2014, whites, blacks, and Hispanics diverge in approval of police use of force in various instances



PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR SPENDING MORE ON LAW ENFORCEMENT HAS FALLEN IN RECENT YEARS.

Support for spending more on law enforcement peaked in 1994, and since 2000, about half of Americans say we aren't spending enough. In 2014, 46 percent of Americans say we are spending too little on law enforcement, 13 percent say we are spending too much, and 39 percent say we are spending about the right amount.

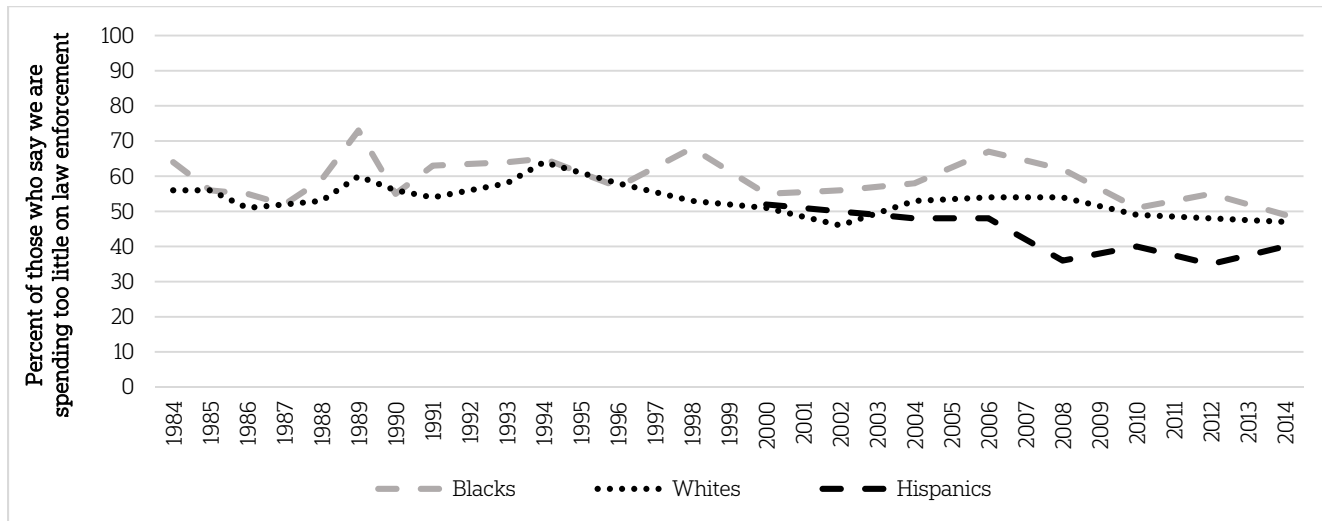
Fewer than half of all Americans say we aren't spending enough on law enforcement



Question: We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. I'm going to name some of these problems, and for each one I'd like you to name some of these problems, and for each one I'd like you to tell me whether you think we're spending too much money on it, too little money, or about the right amount. Are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on law enforcement?

Overall, there are very few demographic differences in attitudes toward national spending on law enforcement in 2014, including by race or ethnicity. While there has been some divergence in attitudes over the past decade, in 2014, relatively similar percentages of whites, blacks, and Hispanics said we are spending too little on law enforcement (47 percent of whites vs. 49 percent of blacks vs. 40 percent of Hispanics).

In 2014, similar percentages of whites, blacks, and Hispanics say we are spending too little on law enforcement



ABOUT THIS STUDY

The GSS is administered by NORC at the University of Chicago, primarily using in-person interviewing. The GSS started in 1972 and completed its 30th round in 2014. For the last 40 years, the GSS has been monitoring societal change and the growing complexity of American society. The GSS is the largest project funded by the Sociology Program of the National Science Foundation. The typical sample size was 1,500 prior to 1994, but increased to 2,700-3,000 until 2008 and decreased to 2,000-2,500 for the most recent surveys. Resulting margins of error are between +/- 3.1 for the smaller sample sizes and +/- 2.2 percentage points for the larger sample sizes at the 95 percent confidence level. The GSS 1972-2014 Cumulative File was utilized to produce the statistics presented.