

The Vector Poll™

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Caught on video: Help — It's the police!

By Marc Zwelling

The Vector Poll™

Sometimes public opinion changes swiftly, sometimes so gradually people do not notice. Suddenly across the world people are discussing racism and rethinking how policing works.

Even as the world battled Covid-19, from Canada's biggest cities to smallest towns protesters went into the streets to decry racism, proclaim "Black Lives Matter" and call on political leaders to curb police powers.

Millions watched the black American George Floyd die under the knee of a white police officer on May 25. Not for the first time, racism was caught on video. Why is this time different?

Two slowly moving, forceful trends in public opinion explain the change: how we think about race and our impressions of the police.

Twenty-five years ago, in a poll conducted in 1995 by Decima Research for the Canadian Council of Christians and Jews, just 25% said there was a "great deal" of racism in Canada. Barely 13% said racism was a "very serious" problem.

Two decades later, in a 2014 Léger survey for the Canadian Race Relations Foundation and the Association for Canadian Studies, 62% were worried about a rise in racism.

Last year 41% thought "racism has become a more significant problem in Canada over the past two years" (in a poll conducted by Research Co.).

In June this year, as protesters filled streets — and screens on cell phones, devices and tablets — 69% said "prejudice against people who are part of a visible minority in Canada" is a serious problem (22% very serious, 47% somewhat serious) in a survey for Dart C-Suite Communications.

In a Léger poll in June confirmed the shift in the public mood.

- 48% of whites said “deep rooted, systemic racism, either based on the colour of one’s skin, ancestral origin or religious beliefs” is a very or somewhat serious problem in Canada. Among racial minorities, 61% said so.

Opinion about the police also was changing. In their 1990 book *The Big Picture*, pollster Allan Gregg and journalist Michael Posner noted that throughout the 1980s in terms of confidence in the nation’s institutions “the highest mark of the decade... went to local police forces.”

In a 1992 Canadian Gallup poll on ethics and honesty, 53% of the public gave the police a “high” or “very high” rating, behind doctors (64%) and ahead of university teachers (51%). According to Gallup’s 1995 poll, a majority of Canadians had confidence in the leadership of only one institution — the police (68%) — compared with 14 other institutions (including local government, newspapers, schools and unions).

Between polls in 1993 and 1997 the share of Canadians saying they had “a lot” or “some” confidence in the police actually rose from 77% to 82% (the findings are from the Canadian Election Studies).

But as the 21st century evolved, the public changed its forbearing attitude toward the people behind the badge while growing increasingly conscious of racism.

In a 2012 Ipsos poll, compared with five years earlier, trust in the police had declined 12 percentage points (57% said they trust them). Except for financial advisors it was the largest decline in public confidence in any of the 15 occupations covered in the polls.

Ipsos said the drop in trust was “likely due...to the publicity of police corruption scandals and criticism with how the police dealt with protests and riots that have occurred in the last number of years in cities such as Vancouver, Toronto and Montréal.”

Polltakers revealed how the views of white Canadians and non-whites were diverging, another trend foretelling trouble for the police because the nation’s racial demographics were becoming steadily more diverse.

In a 2001 Léger poll just 29% said police officers “discriminate against visible minorities.” By 2006, however, in a Vector Poll™, 54% of visible minorities and 51% of whites agreed that police officers “often” or “very often” were “stopping people of certain racial or ethnic groups because the police believe these groups are more likely than others to commit crimes, which is known as racial profiling.”

In an Ipsos survey in 2012, 65% of whites had confidence in their local police or RCMP detachment; among racial minorities only 50% agreed.

Today, like a company recalling contaminated products, the police have a problem with their brand. In Léger polls, the share of the population with a good opinion of their “local police service” was 57% in 2018, 55% in 2019 and 47% in June this year. Compared with 50% of whites, 38% of racial minorities have a good opinion of their local police.

In the Dart Communications national poll in June, 75% said at least “a few” members of their local police force “unfairly racially profile black and dark-skinned citizens.”

- 80% said during arrests at least a few local police officers “rough up suspects, especially if they are black, dark skinned or from certain neighborhoods”
- 65% of whites but only 47% of non-whites agreed that “people like me are represented on my local police service”
- 66% of whites versus 53% of racial minorities felt “my local police service is concerned about people like me.”

Léger asked Canadians in June how much they support different groups in the protests in America against anti-black racism. The survey introduced the question this way: “The past week has seen a combination of peaceful protests along with protests that have turned violent and involved widespread looting of shops and the destruction of public and private property.” Even while thinking about looting, 72% strongly or somewhat supported the protesters, 39% supported the police.

Having a tarnished brand, Canada’s police now have a diluted reservoir of goodwill with the public. As a result, police chiefs, unions and rank-and-file officers will have less say in the future of policing. They ignored the opinion trends.

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