



Thin Blue Line: The Effect of Racial Attitudes on Perceptions of Police

Brandon N. Bledsoe¹ · Leah C. Butler¹

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Abstract

Research on racial attitudes and public perceptions of the police have generally been limited to examining the effect of animus toward Black Americans, (i.e., racial resentment). Many of these studies have not examined a set of distinct racial attitudes (e.g., racial sympathy, White nationalism) and their effects on general orientations toward police. Considering recent social justice movements that have spurred extensive discussions about police reform and equity in the criminal justice system, it is important to evaluate the influence that both positive and negative racial attitudes has on perceptions of police. Using a 2022 YouGov public opinion survey ($n=1,590$), the current study evaluated whether three distinct racial attitudes—racial sympathy, racial resentment, and White nationalism—predicted perceptions of police among an approximately nationally representative sample of White U.S. adults. An ordinary least squares (OLS) multiple regression model was estimated. Results indicated that racial sympathy and racial resentment are positively associated with positive perceptions of police. White nationalism did not significantly influence positive perceptions of police. Implications for policing and public opinion research are discussed.

Keywords Public opinion · Policing · Racial attitudes · White nationalism

Racial inequity in the criminal justice system has been a salient topic of public discourse for decades. Videos and personal accounts of mistreatment by law enforcement toward Black Americans have circulated the internet. This documented mistreatment has increased awareness of discriminant policing and facilitated the growth of social justice groups and movements (Lake et al., 2021). The murder of George Floyd by police in

✉ Brandon N. Bledsoe
bledsobn@mail.uc.edu

¹ School of Criminal Justice, University of Cincinnati, 2610 University Cir., Cincinnati, OH 45221, USA

2020 became a pivotal event as protests erupted internationally, with protestors seeking to bring awareness to police brutality and systemic racism (Westerman et al., 2020). In 2020, the percentage of Americans who said they had confidence in the police dropped below 50% for the first time since 1993 (Confidence in institutions, 2023). This shift may be at least in part explained by White Americans' greater awareness of systematic marginalization of Black Americans (Pew Research Center, 2019, 2020).

Racial attitudes have been consistently identified as predictors for policy support and other social orientations (for a review see Cullen et al., 2021). However, research on racial attitudes regarding perceptions of the police predominantly focus on negative out-group attitudes (especially racial resentment), failing to account for positive out-group attitudes or in-group attitudes (e.g., Baranauskas, 2022; Carter & Corra, 2016; Carter et al., 2016; Cullen et al., 2021; Hannan et al., 2022; Morris & LeCount, 2020). Racial sympathy (Chudy, 2021) has become an important addition to public opinion and racial attitudes literature (e.g., Butler, 2020; Butler et al., 2023; Hannan et al., 2022) but remains relatively understudied. Additionally, Kulig and colleagues (2021) note that White nationalism is a distinct in-group attitude that has become increasingly evident among U.S. White adults. Analyzing data from a 2022 YouGov survey ($n=1,590$), the current study explores whether racial sympathy, racial resentment, and White nationalism are associated with the degree to which White U.S. adults hold positive perceptions of police.¹

Racial Attitudes and Public Opinion of Policing

Police legitimacy is defined as “the degree to which citizens recognize the police as appropriate and justified representatives of government” (Skogan & Frydl, 2004, pp. 5–6). Research suggests that perceptions of police legitimacy influence law-abiding behavior and citizens' cooperation with legal authorities (Engel, 2005; Jackson et al., 2020; Murphy & Cherney, 2012; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Tyler, 1990). Those who perceive the police as legitimate are more likely to comply with orders because they view compliance as a positive, acceptable response (Jackson et al., 2020). Additionally, police often rely on public support and cooperation to effectively control crime and hold offenders accountable (Braga et al., 2019). If community members do not perceive police as legitimate authority figures, they are less likely to participate in collaborative efforts (Tyler & Fagan, 2010).

A related construct measured in public opinion research is perceived procedural justice. Sunshine and Tyler (2003) define procedural justice as “the fairness of the processes through which the police make decisions and exercise authority” (p. 513). When citizens perceive the police as being impartial and just in proceedings, they tend to hold more positive views of law enforcement, whereas perceived abuse or an unfair process contributes to negative views of police (Hinds & Murphy, 2007; Nivette & Akoesni, 2019). Individuals' perceived procedural justice have been found to be associated with perceived police legitimacy (Hough et al., 2010; Mazerolle et al., 2013; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Tyler, 1990). Thus, procedural justice and police legitimacy have impor-

¹ It is worth noting here that while we measure diverse racial attitudes, there are many other racial attitudes that may be relevant to perceptions of police. We discuss this point further in the limitations section.

tant implications for community-police relations, particularly among groups who have historically experienced marginalization and abuse by law enforcement.

Discriminatory policing tactics against Black communities have been documented extensively. Blacks have disproportionately experienced stop-and-frisks, traffic stops, excessive use of force, and over-policing in their neighborhoods (Ajilore & Shirley, 2017; Alexander, 2010; Crutchfield et al., 2012; Edwards et al., 2019; Warren et al., 2006). Such practices have substantially contributed to strained community-police relations in many Black communities (Brunson & Miller, 2006). Although there is an extensive history of protests against police mistreatment that have been led largely by Black people, research shows increasing awareness of the unjust treatment of Blacks within the criminal justice system among White people (Lake, et al., 2021; Onwuachi-Willig, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2019).

An increase in White awareness of systemic marginalization of Blacks by the criminal justice system is evidenced by a series of studies conducted by the Pew Research Center from 2007 to 2020. The 2007 survey asked respondents whether they trusted police to treat races equally. Eighteen percent of White respondents indicated that they had “very little” or a “just some” trust in police to treat races equally (Pew Research Center, 2007, p. 9). In other words, most Whites at the time believed police *do* treat races equally. Twelve years later, the data told a different story. The 2019 version of the study found that 63% of Whites felt that Blacks are treated less fairly than Whites by police, which slightly decreased to 58% in September 2020 (Pew Research Center, 2019, 2020). Also in the September 2020 survey, a larger percentage of Whites said there was discrimination in policing than the percentage who said there was discrimination in any other category (i.e., hiring, medicine, voting, loan approval practices) (Pew Research Center, 2020).

Onwuachi-Willig (2021) argues that the killing of George Floyd contributed to a “White cultural trauma” that led to more Whites acknowledging and confronting systemic racism (p. 6). She provides several examples of Whites from across the political spectrum who describe how the video of George Floyd made them reflect on White privilege and confront the discrimination that Black communities have endured. This is further demonstrated through the substantial efforts of Whites in 2020 to express solidarity with the Black community. Compared to past protests against police brutality, news outlets documented higher participation by Whites in the 2020 protests (Cheung, 2020; Harmon & Tavernise, 2020; Wierson, 2020). During the same time, sales of books about systemic racism and anti-racism practices spiked, including books specifically aimed at White audiences (Grady, 2020). In short, there is evidence that Whites in the United States are becoming increasingly aware of and concerned about racism, especially in the criminal justice system. Thus, it may be time to develop a more nuanced understanding of how racial attitudes influence public opinion of police.

Racial Sympathy

Racial sympathy is defined as “White distress over Black misfortune” (Chudy, 2021, p. 122). Chudy (2017) introduced the concept of racial sympathy, and it has since been examined in criminal justice public opinion research (e.g., Butler, 2020; Butler et al., 2023; Chudy, 2021). Chudy (2021) explains that Whites have significantly con-

tributed to Black oppression but emphasizes that some have also contributed to Black liberation in the United States. Examples of these efforts include assisting escaped slaves from the South, participating in the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, and, more recently, participating in social justice protests targeting racial inequality in the criminal justice system. Whites who have been advocating for racial equity have frequently referred to themselves as “allies” and have attempted to provide a voice for communities that have been historically marginalized (Selvanathan et al., 2023).

Empirical inquiry of racial sympathy is still in its genesis. But in the few studies that have measured its effects, racial sympathy has been found to increase belief in redeemability of people who have committed crime in general and Black people who have committed crime specifically (e.g., Butler, 2020; Butler et al., 2023) and decrease support for capital punishment (Hannan et al., 2022). However, the current study is among the first to evaluate how racial sympathy relates to perceptions of police.

Historical and contemporary instances of police harassment and brutality in Black communities have been associated with increased psychological distress during police encounters and widespread perceptions in Black communities that the police do not serve their interests (Alang et al., 2017; Brunson, 2007; Graham et al., 2020; McLeod et al., 2020; Peck, 2015). These experiences have contributed to broader critiques of the role of policing as a form of racialized social control (Neil & Legewie, 2024; Williams, 2021). Given the increasing awareness of racial inequities in policing and the emergence of social justice movements that have garnered substantial White support, those with high racial sympathy may be more likely to adopt critical perspectives of law enforcement. Thus, we expect higher racial sympathy to be associated with and less positive perceptions of police.

Racial Resentment

Racial resentment has been evaluated extensively in research on racial attitudes (e.g., Baranaukas, 2022; Butler et al., 2023; Hannan et al., 2022; Kinder & Sanders, 1996). Kinder and Sanders (1996) define racial resentment as “resentment toward Blacks for getting ahead unfairly” (p. 110). Racial resentment is rooted in subtle, symbolic forms of racism and is distinct from traditional explicit forms of racism (Kinder & Sanders, 1996). Butler and colleagues (2023) note that this form of racism is not expressed as believing in a racial hierarchy rooted in biological differences. Rather, racial resentment is reflected through the following beliefs outlined by Sears and Henry (2005): “Blacks no longer face much prejudice, their failure to progress results from their unwillingness to work hard enough, they are demanding too much too fast, and they have gotten more than they deserve” (p. 100). A considerable body of research shows that racial resentment is associated with more punitive attitudes and a range of other criminal justice policy opinions (for a review, see Cullen et al., 2021).

Researchers have also demonstrated a relationship between racial resentment and attitudes about policing. For example, Strickler and Lawson (2022) found that Whites with the strongest racially resentful attitudes had the most pronounced pro-police attitudes. They argue that racial resentment has the strongest influence on issues with a “clear racial dimension,” such as policing (Strickler & Lawson, 2022, p. 259). Relatedly, racially resentful attitudes are frequently associated with moral

traditionalist orientations, where police are likely to be viewed positively as a symbol of law and order (Strickler & Lawson, 2022).

Racial resentment is also associated with attitudes about police funding. Baranauskas' (2022) opt-in survey results from a nationally representative sample ($n=677$) showed that racial resentment is a highly consistent predictor of opposition to defunding the police. As another example, using data from the American National Election Services, General Social Survey, and the Cooperative Congressional Election Survey, Morris and LeCount (2020) found that higher punitiveness and racial resentment predict support for increased spending on law enforcement. Racial resentment has also been consistently identified as a strong predictor of support for police use of force and higher perceived justification of police shootings (Carter & Corra, 2016; Carter et al., 2016; Porter et al., 2021; Strickler & Lawson, 2022). Given these previous findings, we expect racial resentment to be associated with more positive perceptions of police.

White Nationalism

White nationalism is defined as “a desire to keep the United States White demographically and culturally” (Graham et al., 2021, p. 1). It is important to distinguish White nationalism as a racial attitude from White supremacy and from the organized White nationalist movements. Whereas White *supremacists* have traditionally used biological factors to justify a distinct racial hierarchy, White nationalists have attempted to make their message more acceptable or tame to improve the presence and agreeability of the ideals in White culture (Butler et al., 2023; Hughey, 2009; Jacobs, 2017; Swain, 2002). As such, research has found that a considerable minority of the U.S. adult population agrees with White nationalist attitudes, regardless of whether they view themselves as “White nationalists” or even as “racist” (Butler et al., 2023; Graham et al., 2021; Kulig et al., 2021).

Although White nationalism and racial resentment are moderately correlated (Butler, 2020; Butler et al., 2023; Graham et al., 2021), they represent distinct racial attitudes. Racial resentment measures attitudes toward Black Americans; White nationalism measures attitudes toward White Americans. Exploring different types of prejudiced attitudes enables a nuanced understanding of their unique manifestations and their independent effects on perceptions of policing.

Most research relating to White nationalism and perceptions of police focuses on Christian nationalism—a related but distinct ideology from White nationalism (Perliger, 2020; Perry et al., 2019). Despite scant research on White nationalism and perceptions of police, the group-position model of race relations is valuable to consider. Similar to conflict theory, race relations are thought to be driven by group competition over resources, power, and status (Blumer, 1958; Bobo & Hutchings, 1996; Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). The group position perspective posits that the dominant group's views of others are positional; they see themselves as superior and are motivated to maintain their group's power to guard against perceived threats from other groups (Blumer, 1958; Bobo & Hutchings, 1996; Weitzer & Tuch, 2004).

Law enforcement in the United States has historically been employed as a tool to uphold traditional power structures that favor Whites (Alexander, 2010). The origins of policing can be traced to slave catchers and have continued to function as a mechanism of control over minority populations (Williams & Murphy, 1990). Those who

have a vested interest in keeping the United States demographically and culturally White may perceive law enforcement as a way to protect their interests. Additionally, because prejudiced Whites tend to associate racial minorities with criminal behavior (Chiricos et al., 2004, 2020; Unnever & Cullen, 2012), they frequently endorse over-policing minority communities (Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). By this logic, we expect White nationalist attitudes to be associated with more positive perceptions of police.

The Current Study

Research on racial attitudes and perceptions of law enforcement have failed to examine a distinct set of positive and negative racial attitudes. Given the centrality of race in contemporary police reform discussions, it is imperative to explore how positive and negative racial attitudes influence public perceptions of police. The current study tested the following hypotheses:

- (H1) Racial sympathy is significantly and inversely related to positive perceptions of police, net of racial resentment, White nationalism, and all controls (i.e., political ideology, political party, religiosity, egalitarianism, fear of crime, age, gender, education, and employment status).
- (H2) Racial resentment is significantly and positively related to positive perceptions of police, net of racial sympathy, White nationalism, and all controls.
- (H3) White nationalism is significantly and positively related to positive perceptions of police, net of racial resentment, racial sympathy, and all controls.

Methods

Data and Sample

The data used in this study are drawn from an online public opinion survey administered via the opt-in survey research firm, YouGov, from August 9–18, 2022. YouGov employed a multi-step process to ensure an approximately representative sample of the U.S. population on a range of characteristics. First, a synthetic sampling frame was constructed through stratified sampling of the 2019 American Community Survey. YouGov panelists were then matched to the synthetic sampling frame based on gender, age, race, and education and invited to participate in the survey. Finally, YouGov included a weight variable that was used in all the following analyses to increase the representativeness of the final sample to the U.S. adult population. Non-probability internet surveys like YouGov have garnered consistent empirical support as reliable sources of data collection (Ansolabehere & Schaffner, 2014; Sanders et al., 2007; Simmons & Bobo, 2015; Twyman, 2008). A total of 2,400 adults residing in the United States completed the survey. The full weighted sample is similar to the U.S. population across several demographics according to the U.S. Census (in parentheses): non-Hispanic White 65.1% (58.4%), male 48.6% (49.5%), older than 65 years 20.7% (17.7%) (QuickFacts, 2023).

Research on racial attitudes frequently excludes non-White respondents because the racial attitudes were conceptualized to capture attitudes among Whites (e.g., Butler, 2020; Butler et al., 2023; Chiricos et al., 2004; Chudy, 2021; Kulig et al., 2021). Chudy's (2021) definition of racial sympathy, "White distress over Black misfortune" (p. 122), specifically refers to White individuals' sentiments. Additionally, White nationalism is a concept that is restricted to Whites' perceived need to maintain their demographic and cultural dominance. Therefore, all non-White respondents ($n=810$) were removed from the analytical sample. The removal of these cases resulted in a final analytical sample of $n=1,590$. There were no cases with missing data on the study's variables and indices, so no cases were listwise deleted. All data cleaning and analyses were conducted in the statistical analysis software, Stata version 18 (StataCorp, 2023).

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics for the full analytical sample ($n=1,590$). The mean *age* of respondents was 52 years of age ($SD=18.03$) with a range of 18 to 91. The modal category for *education* was "High school graduate" (31.07%) followed by "4-year degree" (21.32%). Approximately half (49.77%) the analytical sample were *male* and 42% of all respondents were *employed full-time*.

Measures

Dependent Variable Ten *positive perceptions of police* items were drawn from Merenda and colleagues' (2021) "procedural justice for all" scale. On a five-point Likert scale, respondents were asked to indicate the extent they agree with 10 statements about their local police: (1) "Police in my community are perceived authority figures." (2) "I generally support how the police act in my community." (3) "Police in my community make fair and impartial decisions in the cases they deal with." (4) "The police do not act based on personal prejudices or biases." (5) "The police are often dishonest." (6) "I feel comfortable around the police." (7) "I personally trust the police." (8) "I DO NOT feel safe around the police." (9) "Police DO NOT use excessive force against residents." (10) "The police are part of my neighborhood." Items were coded such that higher numbers were associated with increasingly positive perceptions of police (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree,²³). The items were combined into a continuous mean index by averaging scores of each respondent across the 10 items measuring *positive perceptions of police*, where higher scores indicate stronger agreement with positive statements about police. The items load onto one factor (factor loadings⁴⁴ range from .50 to .88) and the measure has high internal consistency ($\alpha=.93$). The *positive perceptions of police* measure is approximately normally distributed (Skew=-.52; Kurt=2.73), showing only a mild negative skew with no substantial deviation from normality.

² All measures of agreement used this response set.

³ The wording of items 5 and 8 were posed in the opposite direction from other items to avoid acquiescence bias. These items were reverse coded. One item in the original 11-item scale did not load onto one factor and was removed from this analysis.

⁴ Principal components analysis with promax rotation was used for all multi-item measures to ensure that all items load well onto a single factor to measure a single construct, as intended. Full results are available upon request.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of full analytic sample ($N=1,590$)

Variable	Univariate statistics			Bivariate correlations				
	Mean or Percent	SD	Min	Max	Positive perceptions of police	Racial sympathy	Racial resentment	White nationalism
Dependent variable								
Positive perceptions of police	3.52	0.88	1	5				
Independent variables								
Racial sympathy	3.68	0.97	1	5	-.27*			
Racial resentment	3.10	1.17	1	5	.53*	-.61*		
White nationalism	2.28	1.06	1	5	.34*	-.57*	.64*	
Control variables								
Conservatism	3.14	1.22	1	5	.51*	-.43*	.68*	.54*
Republicanism	4.17	2.22	1	7	.42*	-.38*	.63*	.50*
Religiosity	0.08	0.91	-2	2	-.40*	.16*	.40*	.31*
Egalitarianism	3.33	0.95	1	5	-.46*	.62*	-.79*	-.62*
Fear of crime	2.87	0.96	1	5	-.05	-.05*	.08*	.17*
Age	52.35	18.03	18	91	.32*	-.05*	.21*	.13*
Education	3.50	0.49	1	6	-.10*	.18*	-.20*	.21*
Male (%)	49.77%	—	0	1	.01	.18*	.06*	.10*
Employed full-time (%)	42.15%	—	0	1	-.02	-.05	-.01	-.06*

SD standard deviation. Religiosity is a standardized mean index

Independent Variables Three racial attitudes are employed as primary independent variables: *racial sympathy*, *racial resentment*, and *White nationalism*. Adapted from Chudy (2021), four short *racial sympathy* vignettes were used in the survey. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of sympathy with the people/groups in the vignettes using a five-point scale (1=I do not feel sympathy; 2=A little sympathy; 3=Some sympathy; 4=A lot of sympathy; 5=A great deal of sympathy). The short vignettes included: (1) “A group of Black job applicants, who an employer refuses to interview once he realizes they are Black.” (2) “A young Black man named Michael who is stopped by police for jaywalking. The police question him and give him a pat down to see if he is carrying weapons. Michael feels upset by this treatment.” (3) “Community members in a majority Black neighborhood who are upset that a bus depot, which produces harmful pollution, is placed close to their homes. The city officials refuse to move the bus depot.” (4) “A Black woman named Laurette, with a great deal of experience as a nanny, who is denied a job interview by a White mother once the mother realizes Laurette is Black.” The items were combined into a continuous mean *racial sympathy* index where higher scores represent higher levels of sympathy.⁵ The index was constructed by averaging each respondent’s *racial sympathy* scores across the four items. The items load onto a single factor (factor loadings range from .73 to .87), and the measure has high internal consistency ($\alpha = .81$).

Five *racial resentment* items were drawn from Kinder and Sanders (1996) scale. This scale is the standard measure of this concept (e.g., Butler et al., 2023; Hannan et al., 2022; Unnever & Cullen, 2007). Respondents reported their level of agreement or disagreement with a series of statements regarding the existence of prejudice and expectations for Blacks to overcome barriers on a five-point Likert scale. Statements included: (1) “There is a lot of discrimination against Blacks in the United States today, limiting their chances to get ahead.” (2) “It is really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if Blacks would only try harder, they could be just as well off as Whites.” (3) “Irish, Italians, Jewish, and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors.” (4) “Over the past few years, Blacks have gotten less than they deserve.” (5) “Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Blacks to work their way out of the lower class.” Items were coded so that higher scores represent higher *racial resentment*.⁶ The items were combined into a continuous *racial resentment* mean index that averaged the scores of each respondent across the five items. The items load onto a single factor (factor loadings range from .84 to .89), and the measure has high internal consistency ($\alpha = .93$).

The final measure of racial attitudes, *White nationalism*, is intended to capture the desire for the United States to remain a predominantly White nation (Graham et al., 2021). Four items were used from Kulig and colleagues (2021), which asks respondents to rate their agreement on a five-point Likert scale with the following statements:

⁵ Chudy (2021) used longer versions of the vignettes, but this survey provided shortened versions to reduce the amount of material respondents had to read.

⁶ The wording of items 1, 4, and 5 were posed in the opposite direction from the other items to avoid acquiescence bias. These items were reverse coded.

(1) “The immigrants now invading our country – and their liberal supporters – want to turn America into a third-world country where White people are a tiny minority.” (2) “Although people won’t admit it, White people and their culture are what made America great in the first place.” (3) “Although everyone is welcome in the country, America must remain mostly a White nation to remain #1 in the world.” (4) “We need to reduce immigration to keep the U.S. a mostly White nation, which is what God meant it to be.” Items were coded so that higher scores indicate greater endorsement of *White nationalism*. These four items were combined into a continuous *White nationalism* mean index, averaging each respondent’s scores across the four *White nationalism* items. The *White nationalism* items load onto a single factor (factor loadings ranged from .80 to .88), and the measure has high internal consistency ($\alpha = .86$).

Control Variables

Political Affiliations Political orientations are typical control measures used in public opinion literature (e.g., Butler et al., 2023; Graham et al., 2021). Politically right-leaning individuals tend to hold more positive views of law enforcement, believe that the criminal justice system treats everyone equally, as well as justify police use of lethal force compared to those who are left-leaning (Ekins, 2016). Conservatives also typically endorse individualistic values and policies emphasizing personal responsibility, whereas liberals tend to place more value on structural and communal support systems (Haidt, 2012). Panelists reported their political ideology and political party affiliations. *Conservatism* was captured through the question: “In general, how would you describe your own political viewpoint?” where panelists reported their ideology on a five-point scale (1 = Very liberal; 2 = Liberal; 3 = Moderate; 4 = Conservative; 5 = Very conservative). *Republicanism* was measured through the question: “Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as...” *Republicanism* is a seven-point scale (1 = Strong Democrat; 2 = Not very strong Democrat; 3 = Lean Democrat; 4 = Independent; 5 = Lean Republican; 6 = Not very strong Republican; 7 = Strong Republican). Consistent with other public opinion studies (e.g., Butler et al., 2023), “Not sure” responses were recoded as “moderate” and “independent” in their respective categories.

Cultural Beliefs Two cultural beliefs, *religiosity* and *egalitarianism*, were controlled for. Regarding the influence of *religiosity*, Perry and colleagues (2019) indicated that individuals who reported higher *religiosity* were less likely to agree that police treat Whites and Blacks equally. There are three measures used for *religiosity*: (1) importance of religion (4 = Very important; 3 = Somewhat important; 2 = Not too important; 1 = Not at all important); (2) frequency of church attendance (6 = More than once a week; 5 = Once a week; 4 = Once or twice a month; 3 = A few times a year; 2 = Seldom; 1 = Never); and (3) frequency of prayer (7 = Several times a day; 6 = Once a day; 5 = A few times a week; 4 = Once a week; 3 = A few times a month; 2 = Seldom; 1 = Never). Because these items are measured on different scales, each item was standardized (z-scored). The three standardized variables were averaged into a continuous *religiosity* mean index where higher values indicate stronger religiosity. The items load onto one factor (factor loadings range from .87 to .93), and the measure has high internal consistency ($\alpha = .88$).

Egalitarianism refers to the extent to which one believes in a communal, equitable society (O’Leary, 2007). A prominent criticism of the Kinder and Sanders (1996) racial resentment measure has been that some items capture race-neutral individualistic orientations rather than true racial resentment (Feldman & Huddy, 2005; Wilson & Davis, 2011). Therefore, it is important to control for egalitarianism to isolate the effect of the racialized individualism captured by the racial resentment index.

Adapted from Feldman and Huddy (2005), respondents were asked to indicate their agreeableness with six statements about *egalitarianism* on a five-point Likert scale. Statements include: (1) “Our society should do whatever is necessary to make sure that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed.” (2) “We have gone too far in pushing equal rights in this country.” (3) “One of the biggest problems in this country is that we don’t give everyone an equal chance.” (4) “This country would be better off if we worried less about whether everyone is equal.” (5) “If people were treated more equally in this country, we would have fewer problems.” (6) “It is okay if some people have more of a chance in life than others.” Items were coded to ensure that higher numbers are associated with higher levels of *egalitarianism*.⁷ The six items were averaged into a continuous *egalitarianism* mean index. The items load onto one factor (factor loadings range from .65 to .83), and the measure has high internal consistency ($\alpha = .87$).

Fear of Crime Policing literature has highlighted that high *fear of crime* is frequently associated with low perceptions of police protection (Lytle & Randa, 2015; Reisig & Parks, 2004). If the public feels like the police are not providing adequate protection, their perceptions of police may be negatively affected (Reisig & Parks, 2000; Taylor et al., 2010). Respondents indicated their level of fear on a five-point scale of someone committing the following crimes against them personally or a member of their household within the next five years: (1) “Steal money or property from you.” (2) “Break into your house.” (3) “Rob or mug you on the street.” (4) “Rape or sexually assault you.” (5) “Murder you.” All items were coded so that higher numbers indicate higher *fear of crime* (1 = very unafraid, 2 = unafraid, 3 = neither afraid nor unafraid, 4 = afraid, 5 = very afraid). The five items were averaged into a *fear of crime* mean index. The items load onto one factor (factor loadings range from .76 to .88), and the measure has high internal consistency ($\alpha = .91$).

Demographics YouGov requires all panelists to complete a series of socio-political profile items. Four demographic variables are drawn from these profile items—*age*, *male*, *college degree*, and *employed full-time*. These variables are included as control measures, which are standard in public opinion and policing research (e.g., Butler et al., 2023; Graham et al., 2021; Merenda et al., 2021). An *age* estimate was generated by subtracting panelists’ reported birth year from the year the survey was conducted, 2022. Further, respondents were asked “are you male or female?” *Male* was coded (0 = Female; 1 = Male). Panelists also reported their highest level of education completed (1 = No high school degree; 2 = High school degree; 3 = Some college, no degree (yet); 4 = 2-year college degree; 5 = 4-year college degree; 6 = Postgraduate

⁷ The wording of items 2, 4, and 6 were posed in the opposite direction from the other items to avoid acquiescence bias. These items were reverse coded.

degree). Employment status was recoded into a binary *employed full-time* variable (0=Not employed full-time; 1=Employed full-time) where the “Not employed full-time” category includes all responses other than full-time employment.

Analytical Strategy

To examine the effects of *racial sympathy*, *racial resentment*, and *White nationalism* have on *positive perceptions of police*, bivariate associations were assessed using Pearson’s r , and a series of stepwise OLS regression models were estimated. OLS regression was used because the *positive perceptions of police* measure was constructed as a multi-item mean index that was averaged to form a continuous measure. Model 1 of the stepwise OLS regression assesses covariates only, while Models 2, 3, and 4 assess the independent effects of each racial attitude on the model net of all controls. Model 5 is the full model where all racial attitudes are introduced together, along with the controls. A variance inflation factor (VIF) test is also employed to assess multicollinearity. VIF scores under 10 are frequently considered negligible (O’Brien, 2007). The highest VIF score is 3.82 indicating that multicollinearity is not a concern.

Results

Bivariate Results

Table 1 displays a bivariate correlation matrix between all variables ($n=1,590$). Statistical significance was assessed using an alpha value of .05. Pearson’s r was computed for all bivariate correlations. The results indicate that there is a weak to moderate negative association between *racial sympathy* and *positive perceptions of police* ($r=-.27, p<.05$). There is a moderate positive association between *racial resentment* and *positive perceptions of police* ($r=.53, p<.05$), and a weak to moderate positive association between *White nationalism* and *positive perceptions of police* ($r=.34, p<.05$). Finally, all control variables are associated with *positive perceptions of police* or at least one of the key independent variables ($p<.05$).

Multivariate Results

The results of the stepwise OLS multiple regression model estimating the marginal associations between each of the three racial attitudes and *positive perceptions of police* are reported in Table 2 ($N=1,590$).

First, we will report how the results change across the five steps of the stepwise regression. Model 1 demonstrates that several of the control variables are significantly associated with *positive perceptions of police*: *conservatism*, *religiosity*, *egalitarianism* (negative association), *fear of crime* (negative association), *age*, and *employed full-time*. Models 2–5 show the results for the racial attitudes. In Model 2, *racial resentment* has a significant positive effect on *positive perceptions of police*; this effect remains after the inclusion of the other racial attitudes (Model 5). In Model 3, *racial sympathy* is non-significant, but its association becomes significant after *racial resentment* and *White*

nationalism are introduced into the model (Model 5). Notably, in Model 4 the effect of *White nationalism* on *positive perceptions of police* is not statistically significant; nor is it significant when the other two racial attitudes are included in the model (Model 5). *Racial resentment* was the only racial attitude to improve the adjusted R^2 (from .365 in Model 1 to .386 in Model 3). After all racial attitudes were included in Model 5, the adjusted R^2 slightly rose to .388 (up from .365 in Model 1 with just the controls).

We now turn to the detailed results of the full model. Although *racial sympathy* is positively associated with *positive perceptions of police*, this effect is weak ($\beta = .055$, $p = .046$). For every one-unit increase in *racial sympathy*, there is a .05 unit increase in *positive perceptions of police*. The largest coefficient in the model is the moderate effect of *racial resentment* ($\beta = .296$, $p < .001$). For every one-unit increase in *racial resentment*, there is a .22 unit increase in *positive perceptions of police*.

Other variables in the full model were also statistically significant when controlling for all other variables. Several variables—*conservatism* ($\beta = .175$, $p < .001$), *religiosity* ($\beta = .154$, $p < .001$), and *egalitarianism* ($\beta = -.081$, $p = .021$)—were significantly and positively associated with *positive perceptions of police*. Higher scores on *fear of crime* ($\beta = -.077$, $p < .001$) were significantly and negatively associated with *positive perceptions of police* (in other words, *fear of crime* is associated with negative perceptions of police).

The only demographic variables that were statistically significant when controlling for other variables in the model were *age* and *employed full-time*. *Age* ($\beta = .201$, $p < .001$) is significantly and positively associated with *positive perceptions of police*. Though the effect of *age* was fairly weak, its coefficient was the second largest in the model. Finally, *employed full-time* ($\beta = .054$, $p = .013$), was significantly and positively related to *positive perceptions of police*, though its effect was very weak.

Discussion

Given the rise in awareness of racial disparities in policing and calls for police reform, the purpose of this study was to evaluate whether racial sympathy, racial resentment, and White nationalism influence perceptions of police. To date, no studies have evaluated the influence that all three of these racial attitudes have on general perceptions of police. Including all three attitudes is important, because together they represent positive (racial sympathy) and negative (racial resentment and White nationalism) orientations as well as out-group (racial sympathy and racial resentment) and in-group (White nationalism) orientations. It is also important because, as discussed above, recent research has found effects of all three attitudes; failing to include all three when predicting perceptions of police could result in omitted variable bias.

Only one of our three hypotheses were supported by the results of the OLS regression model we estimated. As stated in Hypothesis 2, racial resentment was associated with increased positive perceptions of police, net of all controls and the other racial attitudes. This was to be expected because racial resentment has been associated with pro-police attitudes (e.g., Stickler & Lawson, 2022) and the research has found a tendency for racially resentful individuals to perceive themselves as being “defenders of the law” (Dixon & Linz, 2000). Our findings are nonetheless notable

Table 2 OLS regression predicting positive perceptions of police ($N=1,590$)

Variables	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
	<i>b</i> (SE)	Beta	<i>b</i> (SE)	Beta	<i>b</i> (SE)	Beta	<i>b</i> (SE)	Beta	<i>b</i> (SE)	Beta
Racial attitudes										
Racial sympathy			.006 (.024)	.007					.050 (.025)*	.055
Racial resentment					.202 (.027)*	.268			.222 (.028)*	.296
White nationalism							.001 (.023)	.002	-.023 (.023)	-.028
Control variables										
Conservatism	.146 (.026)*	.204	.147 (.026)*	.204	.124 (.026)*	.172	.146 (.026)*	.203	.126 (.026)*	.175
Republicanism	.021 (.013)	.052	.169 (.023)	.052	.002 (.013)	.005	.021 (.013)	.052	.002 (.013)	.005
Religiosity	.169 (.023)*	.175	.169 (.023)*	.174	.158 (.022)*	.163	.169 (.023)*	.175	.154 (.023)*	.159
Egalitarianism	-.193 (.025)*	-.207	-.197 (.029)*	-.211	-.049 (.031)	-.053	-.192 (.027)*	-.206	-.076 (.033)*	-.081
Fear of crime	-.067 (.019)*	-.074	-.067 (.019)*	-.073	-.075 (.019)*	-.082	-.068 (.019)*	-.074	-.071 (.019)*	-.077
Age	.011 (.001)*	.229	.006 (.024)*	.229	.010 (.001)*	.204	.011 (.001)*	.229	.010 (.001)*	.201
Education	-.016 (.012)	-.027	-.016 (.012)	-.028	-.005 (.012)	-.008	-.016 (.012)	-.027	-.008 (.012)	-.013
Male	-.038 (.037)	-.021	-.036 (.037)	-.021	-.038 (.036)	-.022	-.038 (.037)	-.022	-.023 (.037)*	-.013
Employed full-time	.107 (.039)*	.060	.108 (.039)*	.060	.099 (.039)	.055	.108 (.040)*	.060	.097 (.039)*	.054
Adjusted R-square	.365		.364		.386		.364		.388	

* $p \leq .05$

because the extant body of research on how racial resentment affects policing attitudes largely focuses on attitudes toward use of force and support for specific policies (e.g., increased funding). Our results add to research on how racial resentment influences broader perceptions of whether police are fair, just, and serve the public good. Researchers should continue to investigate how racial resentment influences more general perceptions of police, especially when policing returns to the forefront of national attention and calls for change are renewed.

Our other two hypotheses were not supported, but the results regarding these hypotheses are nonetheless interesting. As stated in Hypothesis 1, we expected racial sympathy to be associated with *negative* views of police, net of all controls and the other racial attitudes. Public opinion research has illustrated that racially sympathetic attitudes are associated with support for policies that are less punitive and benefit the Black community (Chudy, 2021). Given recent public scrutiny of policing and calls for racial justice-oriented reforms, we did not expect more racially sympathetic individuals to hold more positive perceptions of police.

Contrary to Hypothesis 1, our model shows that racial sympathy was associated with *positive* perceptions of police, not negative perceptions. This finding could be due to racially sympathetic Whites not perceiving the police as being inherently punitive or being an institution that is particularly harmful to the Black community. Relatedly, research has consistently identified Whites as being the racial group that is most supportive of police (Ekins, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2007, 2019, 2020). It is possible that most racially sympathetic Whites acknowledge historical harms but simultaneously believe that the police are a necessity for the greater good. Given that racial sympathy became significant in the full model, racial resentment may have also acted as a suppressor variable. In other words, the inclusion of racial resentment in the model increased the predictability of racial sympathy on positive perceptions of police.

Hypothesis 3 was also not supported. White nationalism was hypothesized to increase positive perceptions of police because police have historically been used as a tool for maintaining White control. The group-position model of race relations contends that race relations are driven by group competition over resources, power, and status (Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). Those who endorse White nationalist values were anticipated to view the police as a way to maintain their sense of power and status in society due to police practices that have historically marginalized minority groups.

However, net of controls, the effect of White nationalism was non-significant in the stepwise OLS models we estimated whether it was included in the model alone or alongside the other racial attitudes. Research investigating White nationalism in relation to perceptions of police is scant, with much of the literature focusing on Christian nationalism and views on racialized policing (e.g., Perry et al., 2019, 2022; Seto et al., 2025). White nationalists have worked to market their ideas to a broader range of people, including those who reject White supremacy and ideas about a biologically rooted racial hierarchy (Hughey, 2009; Jacobs, 2017; Swain, 2002). Given the broader range of individuals to whom White nationalist ideas now appeal, one possibility is that views of policing among those high in White nationalism are more complex than the current study captures. More research is needed to gain a greater understanding of how White nationalist and supremacist ideologies differ and uniquely influence perceptions of law enforcement.

Limitations

There are limitations to this study that should be considered. First, measures of racial resentment have been a contested topic among scholars. For example, Wilson and Davis (2011) have critiqued the item “over the past few years, Blacks have gotten less than they deserve” is intended to indicate the inverse racial resentment. Wilson and Davis (2011) argue that a respondent could disagree with the statement and feel that Blacks have gotten exactly what they deserve which is not an inherently racist or resentful stance. Thus, although this scale demonstrates strong psychometric properties, future research should work to improve upon and/or update the conceptualization and measurement of racial animus. Further, although our study measures three distinct racial attitudes, there are other racial attitudes that may be relevant to understanding perceptions of police (e.g., racial empathy; Baranauskas, 2025; Sirin et al., 2021). Future research should assess the relationship between these attitudes and perceptions of police.

Additionally, this study only accounts for White U.S. adults’ perceptions to remain consistent with other racial attitude studies (e.g., Butler et al., 2023; Chudy, 2021). White-only samples have been necessary due to the conceptualization of racial attitudes largely being limited to the White experience (for an exception, see Kam & Burge, 2019). But Whites are not the only racial group who can hold racially sympathetic, racially resentful, or White nationalist attitudes and the views that individuals in other racial groups hold about the police are important to understand. This is particularly important for groups who have historically experienced marginalization by Whites and by the police—an institution that has been historically White-dominated. Future research should continue to conceptualize and refine measures of racial attitudes to account for those held by other racial and ethnic groups. It is possible that the measures used in this study could appropriately measure attitudes among other racial groups. Researchers should assess whether these items function differently depending on a respondents’ race. The relationship between racial attitudes and perceptions of police may be different for respondents of different racial backgrounds than the results reported here for White U.S. adults.

Finally, this study uses an opt-in sample, rather than a sample drawn using a probability-based sampling method. Opt-in samples have potential to be biased if the opt-in panel from which sample members are selected is not representative of the population (Kennedy et al., 2016). Thus, results from opt-in samples should be considered in the context of how closely they mirror the population on key characteristics (Kennedy et al., 2016). Further, although probability-based sampling is considered by some to be the gold-standard, it is worth noting that probability-based samples tend to have much lower response rates than samples from opt-in panels (Groves & Peytcheva, 2008). Research suggests that probability-based survey samples are often biased by nonresponse (Groves, 2006; Groves & Peytcheva, 2008). As such, non-probability-based sampling should not be considered as *always* inferior to probability-based sampling, especially when additional steps (e.g., sample matching and weighting) are taken to increase the representativeness of a non-probability sample. Regardless, future research should aim to replicate our findings with other representative samples.

Conclusion

Understanding the foundations of public perceptions of police is crucial for maintaining community-police relations and contextualizing police reform. Notably, conservatism and age were both positively associated with positive perceptions of police and exhibited stronger effects than two of the three racial attitudes (i.e., racial sympathy, White nationalism). Efforts to improve community-police relations may benefit from targeted engagement strategies aimed at younger and politically liberal groups. Further, many efforts to improve police-community relations are focused on how police interact with minority populations (e.g., Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2014). Our study finds that the more racial resentment Whites hold toward Blacks, the more positive attitudes they tend to hold toward the police. Thus, stakeholders might also consider thinking critically about why this is the case and whether this is something police need to address in order to improve their relations with the broader public.

On April 28, 2025, the Trump administration released an executive order with the purpose of “ensur[ing] that law enforcement officers focus on ending crime, not pursuing harmful, illegal race- and sex-based ‘equity’ policies” (Exec. Order No. 14,288, 2025, n. p.). The executive order further states that the federal government will take steps to provide legal defense to officers who “unjustly incur expenses and liabilities for actions taken during the performance of their official duties to enforce the law,” to maximize resources and training for “aggressively polic[ing] communities against all crimes, and to use military assets for law enforcement (Exec. Order No. 14,288, 2025, n. p.). This executive order demonstrates the current presidential administration’s pro-police stance.

Scholars should continue to evaluate the influence of racial attitudes on public opinion, especially on opinions of new policies that are proposed or established in response to the Executive Order 14,288. If policing is to undergo substantial changes—including changes that reduce efforts to diversify police forces, defend police against being held legally accountable for on-duty misconduct, and increase police access to military equipment—it is worth knowing whether these changes reflect the public will. It is also worth knowing whether support for such policies is driven by racial animus toward Black Americans and/or sympathy toward Black communities affected by crime. Understanding how racial attitudes inform policy support among the public will contextualize public demands for change and how well they align with the policies government officials seek to enact.

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Brandon N. Bledsoe is a doctoral student in the School of Criminal Justice at the University of Cincinnati. His research focuses on community-police relations, public opinion of police, and police effectiveness. He has also assisted with program evaluations of criminal justice deflection teams targeting substance users. He has published his research in *Police Practice and Research*.

Leah C. Butler is an assistant professor in the School of Criminal Justice at the University of Cincinnati. Her research centers on corrections, with an emphasis on the effects of racial attitudes on public opinion of correctional policy. She also conducts research in victimology, with a focus on intimate partner violence and sexual violence. Her recent research has been published in *Criminology*, *Justice Quarterly*, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, and *Crime and Justice: A Review of Research*.