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Iowa Policy and Opinion Lab: Iowans Support Many Policing Reforms

A recent Iowa Policy and Opinion Lab poll survey conducted by University of Iowa faculty and students between the dates of January 13 and February 3 found that almost half of Iowans support the Black Lives Matter movement while a majority oppose calls to “defund” the police. This opposition dropped dramatically when specific shifts in funding were described in place of a call to “defund” the police.

Overall, 45.2% of Iowans reported some level of support for the Black Lives Matter movement, with 22.8% showing strong support. On the other hand, 31.8% of Iowans reported some level of opposition to the Black Lives Matter movement, with 20.2% reporting strong opposition. Iowans reported greater support than opposition for the Black Lives Matter movement by 13.4 percentage points. Additionally, 15.5% of Iowans reported that they either feel neutral towards the movement or declined to answer.

Responses in support of the Black Lives Matter movement varied greatly by the type of community that the respondent reported residing in. Overall, urban respondents are much more likely to support the Black Lives Matter movement, whereas rural respondents are much more likely to strongly oppose the movement. 33.4% of respondents from urban communities reported strong support for the movement compared to only 15.2% reporting strong support for the movement in rural communities. Strong opposition shows a nearly identical pattern, with 26.2% of respondents living in rural areas reported strongly opposing the Black Lives Matter movement compared to only 15.0% of respondents living in urban areas reporting strong opposition for the movement. Suburban respondents fell in between.

When analyzing support for the Black Lives Matter movement by age, support tends to decline with age. Findings show that 58.8% of Iowans aged 18-34 reported some level of support for the movement, 44.8% of Iowans aged 35-54 reported some sort of support for the movement, 34.2% of Iowans aged 55-69 showed some level of support for the movement, and 37.1% of Iowans over the age of 70 showing some level of support for the movement. This depicts a 21.7 percentage point decline in support from the youngest age group (18-34) to the oldest (70 and older). In contrast, respondents aged 70 or older reported the highest rate of some level of opposition at 43.4%, compared to 19.9% of respondents aged 18-34 reporting some level of opposition for the movement.

In addition, respondents were asked for their opinion on recent calls to reform policing. A majority supported all of the reforms offered with the exception of “defunding the police”, which was opposed by a majority. 80.6% responded that they support (39.0%) or strongly support (41.6%) training to prevent bias among law enforcement officers. 72.3% responded that they support (33.9%) or strongly support (38.4%) de-escalation training for law enforcement officers. 67.9% responded that they support (27.2%) or strongly support (40.7%) banning chokeholds and excessive force by law enforcement. 56.0% responded that they support (30.9%) or strongly support (25.1%) collecting information on who police stop in order to reduce racial profiling by law enforcement.

When asked whether they supported “defunding the police” a majority of respondents (63.0%) responded that they opposed (16.3%) or strongly opposed (46.7%) this. Yet the results varied significantly by how these reforms were described. Half the respondents were asked about “defunding the police” as just described while the other half were asked whether they supported or opposed “shifting resources from law enforcement to social services, youth services, housing, education, healthcare and other community resources”. Respondents were randomly assigned to receive one of these two versions of the question. Opposition dropped by nearly half when the “shifting resources” phrasing was used: instead of 63.0% combined opposition, 33.5% total were opposed, including 17.9% strongly opposed and 15.6% opposed. Support exceeded opposition, increasing to 41.3%, with 21.6% responding support and 19.7% support. In contrast, 7.6% strongly support and 11.9% support “defunding the police”. “The responses show that Iowans are open to many of the proposal associated with call to ‘defund the police’, but that the slogan itself is a major obstacle to reform” said Prof. Fred Boehmke. “Opposition and support change dramatically between these two wordings, suggesting there may be opportunities for agreement on some of the proposed reforms if the debate focuses on the content rather than the slogan.”

Respondent Identification: The Iowa Social Science Research Center (ISRC) contracted with a web panel vendor, Ipsos Observer, to field the survey to a demographically representative sample of 1,000 respondents. Respondents invited to complete the web survey were Iowa adults, aged 18-120 years, recruited for participation via web panel. To obtain a census-representative sample, quotas were set on the following demographics: sex, age, and urbanicity.

Sample: 1000 voting-age resident in Iowa, margin of error +/-3.2%

Weighting: Reported results are weighted by sex and region. Alternate weighting schemes, such as by age, party identification, and education produced substantively similar results.

About the Iowa Policy and Opinion Lab

The poll was designed by the Iowa Policy and Opinion Lab, composed of University of Iowa faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students. The Iowa Policy and Opinion Lab is co-directed by Profs. Fred Boehmke in Political Science and Kajsja Dalrymple in Journalism and Mass Communication. The poll is a teaching, research, and service project, and was implemented in collaboration with the Iowa Social Science Research Center directed by Frederick J. Boehmke. The University of Iowa Public

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Noelle Hass, Marissa Good, Stephanie Gutierrez, Amelia Thoreson, and Sam Avery, Research Fellows for the Iowa Policy and Opinion Lab, assisted with the preparation of this release.

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