

FAS releases survey results on the attitudes of scientists toward law enforcement

December 22 2008

A survey conducted by the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) revealed that while scientists are disposed to assist in criminal investigations, they often fear working with law enforcement agencies. The survey questions were designed to evaluate the working relationship between FBI field agents and scientists, and the results, published on 22 December 2008 in *Science Progress*, indicate a reluctance to discuss research with law enforcement and other issues that are specific to the science community.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that some scientists hold negative views of law enforcement. This survey is the first step in recognizing the scope of the problem and addressing it directly.

"The results suggest a larger percentage of scientists show cooler feelings towards the FBI than the general public, and often misunderstand why FBI agents might be contacting them," said Michael Stebbins, Director of Biology Policy at the Federation of American Scientists. "FAS is now working with the FBI to develop specific solutions for alleviating the concerns of scientists and strengthening the relationship between law enforcement and the scientific community."

"The FBI proactively initiated this outreach effort with FAS to engage the scientific community, seek their input, and gather useful information enabling us to improve the relationship. The results of this survey will go a long way to helping us better understand the challenges we face and to overcome some of the misconceptions that exist between law

enforcement and scientists," said Dr. Vahid Majidi, Assistant Director of the FBI's Weapons of Mass Destruction Directorate. "This information will enable us to devise a strategic plan to address this matter and to continue working with the scientific community to enhance our relationship."

FAS and the FBI will apply the lessons learned in this survey towards developing training materials for field agents to improve the relationship between scientists and law enforcement.

"Perhaps the most important step toward building a better working foundation is for law enforcement agencies, like the FBI, to establish procedures for contacting science experts," said Stebbins. "Many of the scientists' concerns would be alleviated if the specific goals the agent hoped to achieve were clarified. If clear boundaries are established then the cooperation of scientists and law enforcement agents will likely improve."

The Survey:

FAS collaborated with the FBI, the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research to develop the survey questions and distribute it to the scientific community. The survey contained a mix of multiple choice and open-ended questions and was distributed to 10,969 AAAS member scientists. 1,332 surveys were completed and the resulting data produced an average margin of error associated with the total data set of +/- 2.7 percent.

Key findings of the survey:

-- Despite suspicions of the FBI and opposition to law agencies

monitoring scientific research, scientists are willing to aid in certain situations.

-- Scientists feel that the FBI does not work well with the scientific community, specifically that law enforcement officers don't understand their work (76%), that these agencies are more interested in restricting research for security purposes than they are in the scientific value of the work (71%), that officers have an overzealous approach to security issues and an interest in censorship (63%), and that research will be restricted from publication (55%).

-- Only 15% of surveyed scientists indicated any personal past contact in a professional capacity and these attitudes are likely based on stereotypes instead of actual experiences.

-- Relations with the FBI would improve if law enforcement agents approached scientists in a professional manner by setting up an appointment or initiating contact through official channels such as the scientist's department head or supervisor.

-- Increasing scientific literacy among agents and officers will ensure clearer communication since scientists are most comfortable talking about their work with others familiar with scientific concepts, possibly because they are less concerned that the research will be misunderstood.

Link: <http://www.scienceprogress.org/2008/12/science-and-law-enforcement>

Source: Federation of American Scientists

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