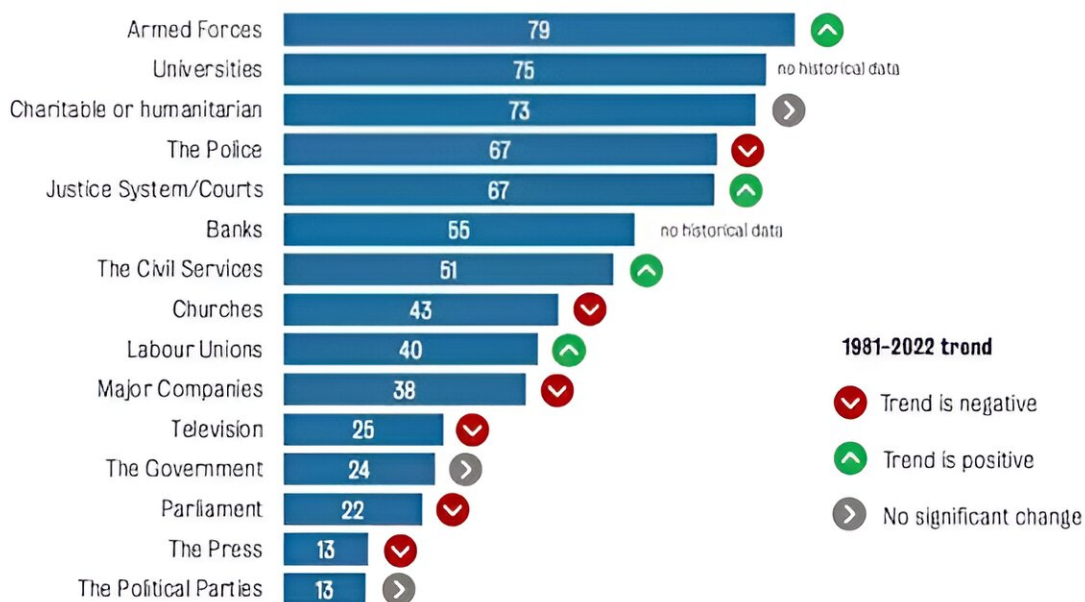


Gen Z has a trust problem with British institutions—especially the police

August 17 2024, by Paolo Morini

Trust trends for 15 UK institutions



UK base: 3,066 people in the UK aged 18+, fieldwork by IPSOS, 1 Mar-9 Sept 2022.

Credit: Policy Institute, King's College London

The new government has come to power at a time when trust in politics is, in the Labor party's words, "[shattered](#)." Keir Starmer has set out his government's aim to restore "the highest standard of integrity and

honesty" in political life.

Just how low can this crisis of [trust](#) go? We find some answers by looking at data from the [World Values Survey](#). This global study has been running since 1981 to investigate the evolution of attitudes and values on social, economic and political issues worldwide. In 2022, our team at the Policy Institute, King's College London, collected new data in the UK as part of this project.

Our findings show the extent of [low confidence](#) and negative attitudes towards the UK's institutions.

Back in 1990, 46% of the British public said they had confidence in parliament. By 2022, this had halved to 22%, placing the country behind many of its European neighbors such as Germany, France and Spain. Of more than 20 countries we looked at in our research, the UK now also ranks in the bottom third of nations for confidence in the government—far behind many peer nations—while an internationally low share of 13% reported confidence in political parties in 2022.

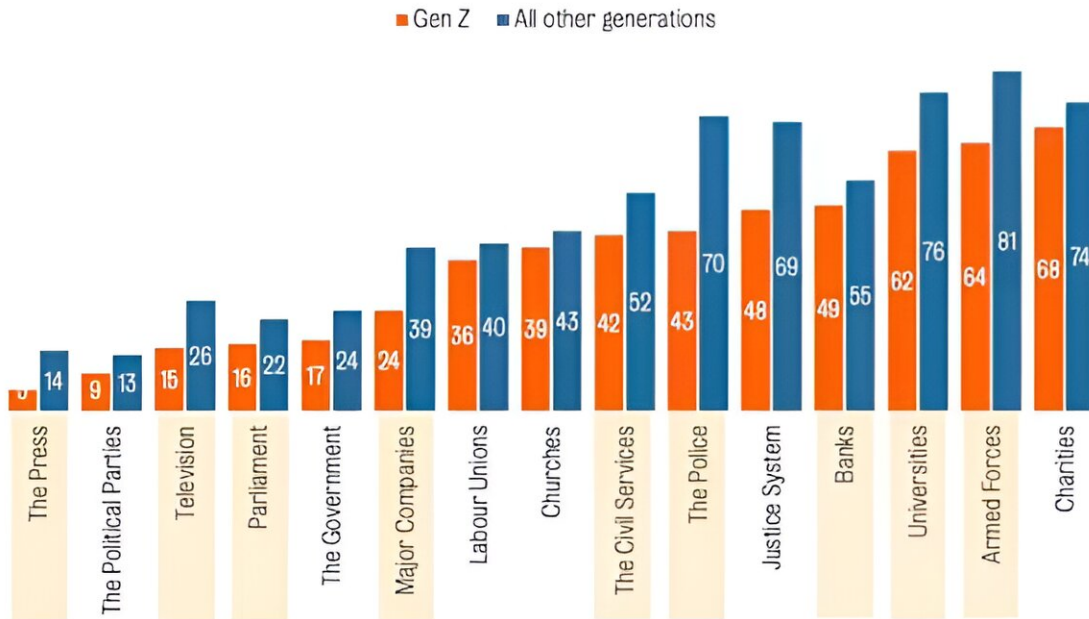
And it's not just political institutions. Since the 1980s, when [data collection](#) began, confidence has fallen significantly for six of the 13 institutions for which we have data on long-term trends. Notably, 86% of Britons said they had confidence in the police in 1981. This had fallen to 67% by 2022, undermined by high-profile failures and officer misconduct.

The UK has a specific challenge with young people—institutional confidence levels are much lower among gen Z (aged 18–25), than among other generations. For the eight institutions highlighted in yellow, including the armed forces, universities, the police, parliament and the media, these differences are statistically significant. Confidence in the police stands out once again, with a gap of 27 percentage points between

gen Z and other generations.

Gen Z institutional trust compared to other generations

Below is a list of organisations. For each one, please indicate how much confidence you have in them (% who say they have some/a great deal of confidence). Data broken down by generations.



UK base: 3,056 people in the UK aged 18+, fieldwork by IPSOS, 1 Mar–9 Sept 2022.

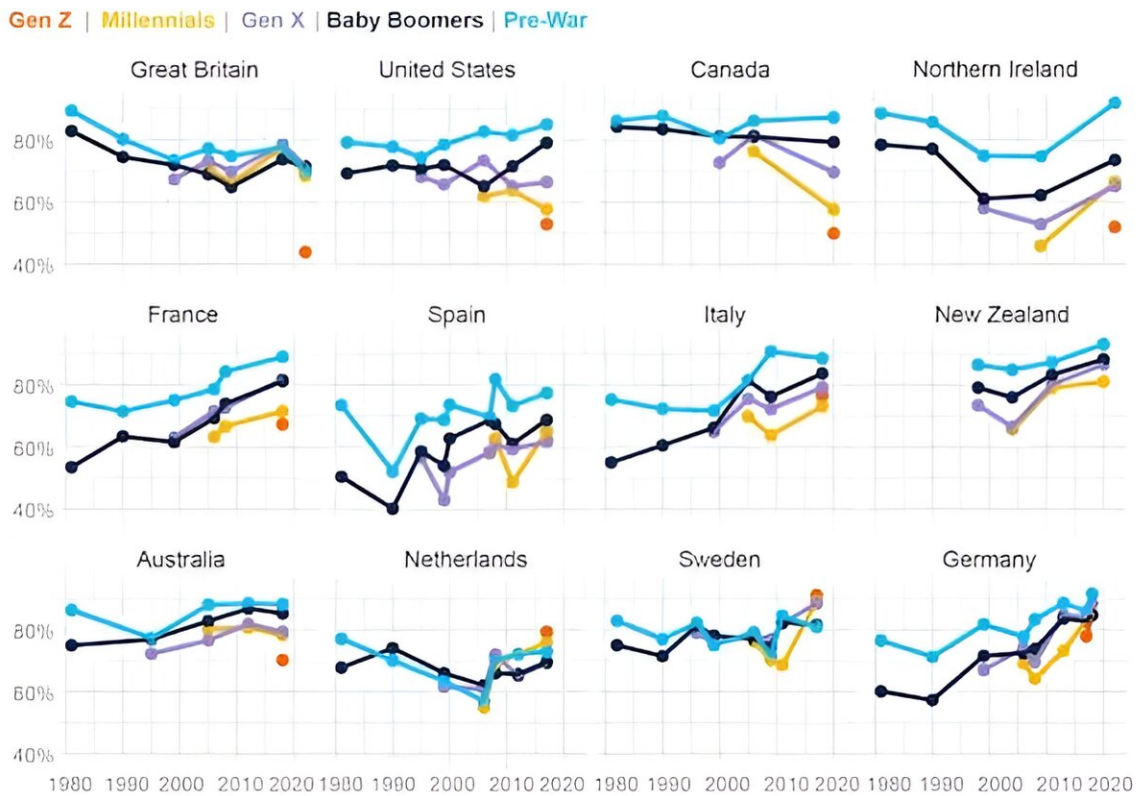
Credit: Policy Institute, King's College London

This is a new generational pattern. Our analysis shows neither millennials nor gen X Britons in previous surveys had a similar "low start" in police confidence. It is also unique to Great Britain. Some countries, including the US and Canada, show confidence levels ranging more across all generations.

In the US for example, in 2017 confidence ranged from a high of 85%

for pre-second World War respondents born 1944 or earlier, to a low of 53% for gen Z respondents. Confidence dropped with each younger generation. Other countries, like the Netherlands and Sweden, show little difference across groups. In 2017 91% of Swedish gen Z respondents said they had confidence in the police, much closer to the 81% of pre-second World War respondents who said they had confidence in the police. No other country apart from Great Britain shows gen Z standing out so starkly from all the others.

Police trust measured around the world



Credit: Policy Institute, King's College London

What could explain this dynamic among Britain's gen Z population? Personal experience is likely to be key. [Government data](#) shows that in 2022, two thirds of all stop and searches involved people aged between 10 and 29. This is a pretty close match to the current gen Z age range.

Recent findings from a [national survey](#) in a [report by the police watchdog youth panel](#) show that young people, especially from minority ethnic and LGBTQ+ communities, did not feel like they were heard, taken seriously or treated fairly by the police.

In the same report, study participants said that police's heavy-handed responses to protests, including the vigil for Sarah Everard in 2021, had negatively affected their trust.

Gen Z are also likely to form impressions about the police from what they see on social media. At a formative stage of their lives, this generation was heavily exposed to coverage of high-profile police failings around the world, and to engage more with movements that originated in the US, such as Black Lives Matter and Defund the Police.

Rebuilding trust

Funding cuts over the last 14 years have meant a reduced police presence in many communities in Britain. This has left a vacuum for younger generations, and has lost opportunities to build trust.

The Police Foundation's [2022 review](#) showed more community policing increases public confidence, and the [survey mentioned above](#) found young people have higher levels of trust in the police if they get involved with police volunteering.

The government and police must focus on improving training standards so that the public's interactions with police, including stop and search, are more positive. Evidence shows that perceptions of "procedural justice," or the sense that the police act in a fair way, [can also affect trust in the police](#).

A report by crime and justice consultancy [Crest Advisory](#) has recommended an independent national taskforce to develop standards for training and vetting of officers, and better approaches to directly engage with communities they serve. Similar proposals were echoed in the Labor manifesto.

Without [public confidence](#), the core principle underpinning UK law enforcement—"policing by consent"—can't survive. It is only through the trust and cooperation of the public they serve that the police derive their authority. That's why it's vital that the new government must act to fix this.

With stronger and more engaged communities, and a more [systematic evaluation](#) of good practice we already see across the country, the UK can begin to rebuild trust in the police. But the government and the [police](#) need to act quickly and decisively, or risk seeing low confidence levels become entrenched among young Britons for their entire lifetime.

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