

High school seniors losing trust in law enforcement, justice system

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High school seniors' confidence in law enforcement and the justice system significantly declined from 2006 to 2017 while their faith in religious organizations and schools was comparatively higher and more stable, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

"We found that adolescents' trust in law enforcement in particular declined more rapidly in recent years than their confidence in any other authority," said Adam D. Fine, Ph.D., of Arizona State University's Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions, and lead author of the study. "Our results contradicted the common stereotype that teens have 'anti-authority' attitudes because trust in schools and religious organizations was not affected. This shows that by 12th grade, teens are clearly able to differentiate among different types of authority."

The study was published in the journal *Developmental Psychology*.

Several previous studies that included surveys of adults and [high school seniors](#) have shown that trust in U.S. authority institutions, such as news media, businesses, religious institutions and Congress, has declined in recent decades, reaching all-time or near-all-time lows by 2012, according to Fine.

Fine and his co-authors, Emily Kan, a [graduate student](#) in psychological science at the University of California, Irvine and Elizabeth Cauffman, Ph.D., University of California, Irvine professor of psychological science, wanted to examine whether teens exhibited a general anti-authority attitude.

"As children become teenagers, they begin to question authority more frequently and more skillfully," said Fine. "Adolescents may critically evaluate authority figures in all aspects of their lives, including at home, at school and in their communities."

The researchers used data from the Monitoring the Future study, which consists of annual, self-reported surveys of 12th grade students in the 48 contiguous United States. Data from more than 10,000 teens was used from four time periods: 2006 to 2008, 2009 to 2011, 2012 to 2014 and 2015 to 2017.

Teens were asked to rate how good or bad a job was being done for the country by police and [law enforcement agencies](#), the [justice system](#), public schools and churches/[religious organizations](#) on a scale of one (very poor) to five (very good).

Fine and his co-authors found that over those 11 years, adolescents tended to have the most confidence in religious institutions, followed by public schools, and then law enforcement, while they viewed the [justice](#) system least favorably.

From 2015 to 2017, however, there was a critical shift as teens perceived both law enforcement and

the justice system equally negatively, he said.

"Given the current conversations surrounding unjust policing in the United States, we were not surprised to find that youth do, in fact, differentiate among authorities, and something unique is happening when it comes to their perceptions of law enforcement and the justice system," said Fine. "However, America's teens do not have a ubiquitous 'anti-authority' attitude as their confidence in [social institutions](#) remained higher and more stable."

The researchers also examined differences among racial and ethnic minorities.

Black teens reported the lowest confidence in law enforcement and the justice system, followed by Latino youths, then white adolescents.

"In direct contrast to our findings about [legal authorities](#), black youth reported significantly more confidence in social institutions, more so than their white peers," said Kan.

These findings surprised the researchers. They expected that because racial and [ethnic minority](#) students in the U.S. tend to receive more and harsher discipline in [school](#), youth of color would perceive schools as being more closely aligned with legal authorities, said Fine.

"This may indicate that despite the statistics on disproportionate discipline, youth of color may still perceive schools as generally supportive social authorities. Considering black youth reported more positive perceptions of social authorities than white youth, the fact that their perceptions of law enforcement and the justice system are so poor becomes even more salient," he said.

The authors believe these findings highlight the immediate need for policymakers and officials in [law enforcement](#) and the justice system to focus on gaining back adolescents' trust.

"Considering that negative perceptions of legal authority have been linked to involvement in crime and crime reporting, the real-world implications are quite clear. Efforts must be made to improve biased

and unjust policing practices," Cauffman said.

More information: "Adolescents' Confidence in Institutions: Do America's Youth Differentiate Between Legal and Social Institutions?" by Adam D. Fine, PhD, Arizona State University, and Emily Kan, MA, and Elizabeth Cauffman, PhD, University of California, Irvine. *Developmental Psychology*. Published June 20, 2019.

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