

## *Ethnic Perceptions of Legal Authority*

Although California has always been home to many ethnic and cultural groups, the state's population is reaching new levels of diversity. Demographic projections from the California Department of Finance indicate that by the year 2020, over 60 percent of the state's residents will identify themselves as non-white. Large influxes of immigrants from Latin America and Asia, coupled with higher birth rates among these groups, are largely responsible for this increasing diversity.

Some policymakers are concerned that these demographic trends may affect the state's legal system in at least two ways. First, widely reported tensions between minority communities and legal authorities may impede the day-to-day functioning of that system. In particular, perceptions of unfairness could negatively affect the way residents respond to legal authorities and their directives. Second, higher levels of diversity raise difficult questions about whether and to what extent the state's legal institutions should accommodate the differing values, beliefs, and expectations that members of various ethnic groups may bring to their interactions with legal authorities. If such differences are pronounced in communities with high proportions of minorities, they could make law enforcement in these communities more difficult.

In *How Different Ethnic Groups React to Legal Authority*, Yuen J. Huo and Tom R. Tyler address these concerns by analyzing accounts of interactions between members of different ethnic groups and legal authorities. In particular, they investigate how African Americans, Latinos, and whites in Los Angeles and Oakland viewed the police, judges, and court officials they encountered during the previous year. Drawing on telephone surveys conducted between November 1997 and July 1998, the authors focus on:

- Reactions to these encounters, including the levels of satisfaction people report and their willingness to comply with authority directives
- Perceptions of the encounters, including reports about outcomes and the ways authorities handled the situation

- Expectations of the encounters, including the standards of fairness people bring to their dealings with legal authorities

### *Summary of Major Findings*

When evaluating their interactions with court authorities, the three ethnic groups did not differ in their level of satisfaction or their willingness to comply with court directives. Compared to whites, however, African Americans and Latinos reported more negative reactions to all types of experiences with the police. Whether they initiated contact with police officers or were stopped by them, African Americans and Latinos reported lower levels of satisfaction with these encounters. Members of these ethnic groups were also less willing than whites to comply with directives from police officers.

These differences can be traced to perceptions of how fairly or unfairly the respondents were treated. Compared to whites, African Americans and Latinos reported experiencing less procedural fairness in their dealings with the police. Moreover, the perception of fair treatment was the most important factor in shaping responses to encounters with legal authorities of all kinds, even more important than reported outcomes. This pattern held for all ethnic groups and across all types of encounters.

Despite differing levels of satisfaction in their dealings with the police, most members of all three ethnic groups held similar views of what constituted procedural fairness. Authorities are perceived to have acted fairly if they are judged to be unbiased, respectful, and concerned about the needs of the individual. This consensus suggests that authorities do not have to adopt different approaches for dealing with members of different ethnic groups.

Although studies of the legal system have shown that minorities often receive worse outcomes than whites, the authors found that minorities did not differ from whites in

the outcomes they reported. The authors note, however, that drawing conclusions from this similarity is complicated by the study's other findings. For example, the data also show that minorities are more likely than whites to report being stopped by the police. This difference itself may reflect an important form of outcome inequality.

Most African American and Latino respondents reported interactions with a legal authority from a different ethnic background. Compared to those who dealt with an authority from their own ethnic group, these respondents paid more attention to outcomes when deciding whether or not to comply with police and court directives. Likewise, minorities with weak attachments to American society paid relatively more attention to outcomes and less attention to how they were treated when deciding whether to comply with such directives.

## ***Conclusion***

For the justice system, the bad news to emerge from the study is that African Americans and Latinos report more negative treatment from legal authorities than whites do. Because the perception of fair treatment is the most important factor in shaping reactions to legal authorities, these reports have important implications for compliance rates among these groups. The good news for law enforcement is that members of all three ethnic groups bring similar concerns and expectations to their interactions with legal

authorities. Specifically, members of all three groups were concerned about receiving favorable decisions from legal authorities, but they were *more* concerned about being treated fairly. Furthermore, a majority of all three groups agreed on what constitutes fair treatment. Taken together, these findings suggest the need for, and the possibility of, more positive relations between minority groups and legal authorities. In particular, they indicate that efforts by legal authorities to act more fairly will lead to more positive reactions and higher rates of compliance.

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The findings also show that a strong sense of ethnic identity among residents does not impede law enforcement, but that a weak sense of American identity does. Because most of the respondents identified strongly both with their ethnic group and with American society, the authors conclude that public discussion about law enforcement should focus less on the detrimental effects of strong ethnic identities and more on reinforcing identifications with American society.

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*This research brief summarizes a report by Yuen J. Huo and Tom R. Tyler, How Different Ethnic Groups React to Legal Authority (2000, 102 pp., \$10.00, ISBN 1-58213-017-5). The report may be ordered by phone at (800) 232-5343 [mainland U.S.] or (415) 291-4415 [Canada, Hawaii, overseas]. A copy of the full text is also available on the Internet (www.ppic.org). The Public Policy Institute of California is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to independent, objective, nonpartisan research on economic, social, and political issues affecting California.*

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**PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE OF CALIFORNIA**  
500 Washington Street, Suite 800 • San Francisco, California 94111  
Telephone: (415) 291-4400 • Fax: (415) 291-4401  
info@ppic.org • www.ppic.org