

LGBTQ+ people's views of the police: friend or foe?

by stefan vogler and valerie jenness

Police relationships with marginalized and minoritized groups, especially Black communities, are fraught, historically and in the present moment. We continue to witness police misconduct and abuse of power on full display in the media, including brutal beatings and murders of people of color. Less prominent in this national discussion is another group: LGBTQ+ people. The oversight is surprising given that police violence against LGBTQ+ people, and the community responses to it, was a primary driver of the “gay liberation” movement from the 1970s onward. Indeed, the Stonewall Riots, which many consider the symbolic beginning of that movement, were a response to pervasive police violence against LGBTQ+ people. Recognizing this history and the current mistreatment of LGBTQ+ individuals, police departments across the country have adopted policies and enacted efforts to improve their relationships with LGBTQ+ communities. History has consequential legacies, and times do change.

A growing body of research reveals that LGBTQ+ people experience criminal victimization at higher rates than the gen-



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Increasingly, activists have called for barring uniformed police officers from participating in U.S. Pride events.

movement against such violence, segments of the LGBTQ+ community that stood in alliance with Black communities have begun drawing connections between police violence against Black and LGBTQ+ people. This solidarity has, for instance, prompted activists around the country to bar uniformed police officers from participating in Pride events. Headlines in major news outlets highlighted a

How do LGBTQ+ people across the U.S. perceive the police today? Do they see them as friends or foes? And how do answers vary among the diverse types of people who comprise LGBTQ+ communities? To answer these questions, we fielded a first-of-its-kind survey to a national sample of LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ adults in the United States, using NORC's AmeriSpeak panel, which is representative of 97% of U.S. households. Completed by 798 LGBTQ+ and 682 non-LGBTQ+ adults, the survey included the following question: “Which statement best describes your view of the police, in general?” Response options included, “I see the police as a friend,” “I see the police as a foe,” “I see the police as both a friend and a foe,” and “I see the police as neither a friend nor a foe.”

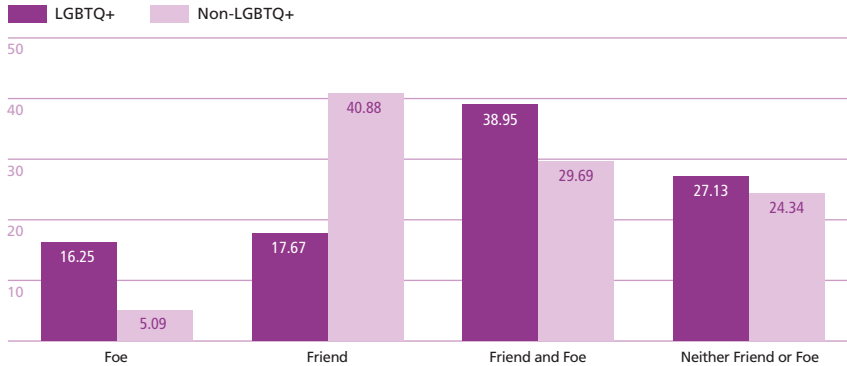
A plurality of LGBTQ+ respondents, our results show, perceive the police as “both friend and foe” (~39%), followed by “neither friend nor foe” (~27%),

When compared to non-LGBTQ+ adults, LGBTQ+ people are considerably more likely to see the police as a foe.

eral population, report crime victimization to police at lower rates than their non-LGBTQ+ counterparts, and have disproportionate contact with the criminal legal system. In the wake of the high-profile murders of Black people by police and the mobilization of the Black Lives Matter

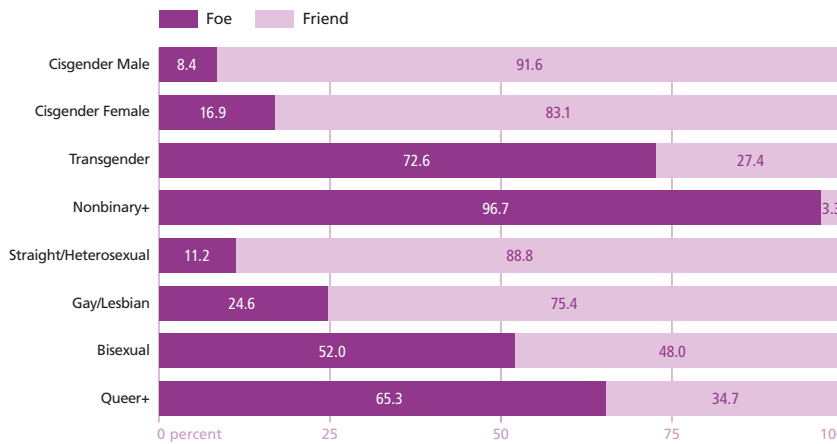
relationship between LGBTQ+ communities and the police. *The Guardian* reported, “Police are a Force of Terror: The LGBT Activists Who Want Police Out of Pride,” while the *New York Times* questioned, “Do the Police Belong at Pride?”

Views of the police, by LGBTQ+ (N=1467)



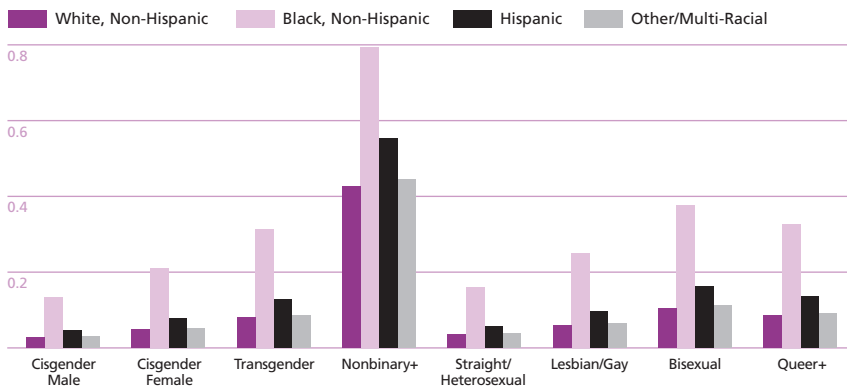
Note. LGBTQ+ includes gender and sexual minorities, such as respondents who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer+, transgender, or nonbinary+. Nonbinary+ includes gender minorities who are nonbinary, genderqueer, genderfluid, two-spirit, or another gender. Queer+ includes sexual minorities who are asexual, demisexual, pansexual, queer, or another sexuality.
Source. Survey conducted August 5-26, 2022 by AmeriSpeak, operated by NORC at the University of Chicago.

Views of the police, by gender and sexuality (N=569)



Note. Nonbinary+ includes gender minorities who are nonbinary, genderqueer, genderfluid, two-spirit, or another gender. Queer+ includes sexual minorities who are asexual, demisexual, pansexual, queer, or another sexuality.
Source. Survey conducted August 5-26, 2022 by AmeriSpeak, operated by NORC at the University of Chicago.

Predicted probabilities of viewing the police as “foe” by gender, sexuality, and race



Note. Predicted probabilities with all other control variables (age, SES, and political ideology) set at their means. Nonbinary+ includes gender minorities who are nonbinary, genderqueer, genderfluid, two-spirit, or another gender. Queer+ includes sexual minorities who are asexual, demisexual, pansexual, queer, or another sexuality.
Source. Survey conducted August 5-26, 2022 by AmeriSpeak, operated by NORC at the University of Chicago.

“friend” (~18%), and “foe” (~16%) (top figure, left). When compared to the findings for non-LGBTQ+ adults, these numbers reveal that LGBTQ+ people are considerably more likely to see the police as a foe and considerably less likely to see the police as a friend.

Focusing on respondents who indicated *either* “friend” or “foe” (and thus excluding those who responded with “friend and foe” or “neither friend nor foe”) reveals considerable variation among LGBTQ+ individuals who made a clear and specific choice (see middle figure). Among this group ($n=569$ respondents), about a quarter of gay men and lesbians perceive the police as foe, while more than half of bisexuals and about two-thirds of those who identify in ways other than gay, lesbian, or bisexual (e.g., queer, pansexual, asexual—what we label “queer+”) deem the police “foe,” compared to only about 11% of straight people who say the same. Almost three-quarters of transgender adults and 97% of those who identify as nonbinary, genderqueer, gender fluid, two-spirit, or another gender (what we call “nonbinary+”) identify the police as “foe,” while only about 8% and 17% of cisgender men and women, respectively, say the same.

The predicted probabilities of viewing the police as “friend” or “foe” reveal additional and sizable variability by gender, sexuality, and race (see bottom figure). Controlling for demographic factors, nonbinary+ adults have the highest predicted probabilities of viewing the police as foe, especially those who are Black, non-Hispanic. In every sexuality and gender category, Black, non-Hispanic adults have the highest predicted probability of seeing the police as foe, with higher predicted probabilities for those who report an LGBTQ+ identity. White, straight, cisgender males and females have the lowest predicted probabilities

of perceiving the police as foe. Notably, among sexual identity groups, bisexual individuals evince higher predicted probabilities of viewing the police as “foe” across all racial groups.

Why might this be the case? In additional analyses not presented here, two factors warrant consideration: age and race. Bisexual people in our survey are, on average, younger than gay and lesbian people. This finding aligns with recent Gallup data showing that 20% of Gen Z identifies as LGBTQ+. Overall, 15% of Gen Z adults report a bisexual identity, while only 6% of Millennials and less than 2% of Gen X report the same.

Our findings demonstrate that the importance of bringing LGBTQ+ people into national assessments of the police and policing cannot be underestimated.

Research also shows that young people generally have more negative views of the police than older people. LGBTQ+ people appear to reflect this more general finding.

Race and ethnicity may also be an important consideration. A higher percentage of bisexual people in our survey are people of color compared to those with other sexual identities. As sociologists Tristan Bridges and Mignon Moore have shown, a significant source of growth in the “bisexual” category has been among women of color, especially Black women. Decades of research shows that race profoundly affects individuals’ experiences of policing, whether through processes of criminalization, over-policing, or racial discrimination. It is unsurprising, then, that research routinely finds that people of color, especially Black people, have more negative perceptions of the police than white people. Our data

show that this general finding holds for LGBTQ+ people of color.

Our third figure (p. 69) also reveals considerable variability by gender identity. What might explain this divergence? As we saw with bisexual people, transgender and non-binary individuals are, on average, younger. Another likely explanation relates to gender expression and gender nonconformity. As queer and trans studies scholar Brandon Robinson has argued, much of the policing of sexuality occurs via the policing of gender expression. People who do not conform to traditional norms of gender expression are often seen as deviant and perhaps

even criminal, as expressed in the saying, “walking while trans,” which captures the way that transgender and gender expansive people are often profiled as sex workers or otherwise criminal by virtue of simply existing. As one of our interviewees, a White transgender woman in her early 40s, described her experience interacting with the police, “I was being forced to navigate a world that wasn’t prepared to handle who I was.”

Our findings suggest two important lessons. First, they emphasize the importance of examining intersectional identities. Our data show that LGBTQ+ people are more likely to view the police as foe than non-LGBTQ+ people. But unpacking this broad and general finding is illuminating because it shows that considering the role of race, gender, and sexual identity within the LGBTQ+ community yields a more nuanced story.

Second, our findings demonstrate

that the importance of bringing LGBTQ+ people into national assessments of the police and policing cannot be underestimated. The disparities we identify along the lines of race, gender, and sexual orientation evoke new questions and point to the need for more research. What explains this variation? Are there other axes of difference, such as age and class, that complicate the picture? How do LGBTQ+ people’s direct and indirect experiences with police affect their views about the police? Ongoing research, including our own work based on more than 50 in-depth interviews with LGBTQ+ people who completed the survey, is well poised to address these and other vital questions.

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