

# *Trust in the German police*

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## TRUST IN THE GERMAN POLICE



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**Keywords:** Ethnic minorities, European Social Survey, police, rule adherence, procedural justice, trust

**Abstract:** The relative levels of trust in the police are explored, using data from the fifth round of the European Social Survey (ESS) which covered mainly 28 European countries. In this article, the position of Germany is examined within the international context. German trust in the police, for both German natives and ethnic minorities, for those 15 and over is high in comparison to other European countries. The article also tests if it is the fair treatment of citizens by the police, or the high value placed on rule adherence and conformity, that is driving the German citizen's trust. It shows that the German police is trusted due to their perceived fairness, effectiveness and shared moral values, rather than on value placed on conformity to authority.

### INTRODUCTION

The 1960s through to the 1980s was a challenging period for the German police, as they were faced with the tasks of managing public disorders, riots, left-wing extremist terrorism, and environmental demonstrations, their handling of which tainted their positive image (Cao 2001: 170). In 1995, Amnesty International published a report damaging for the German police concerning their use of excessive force in restraining or arresting citizens, and the ill treatment of detainees in police custody (Amnesty International 1995). The report also argued that the ill treatment appeared to be racially motivated, many of those targeted being foreign nationals including refugees, asylum seekers and people from ethnic minority backgrounds (Ibid.).

More recent studies of the German police, mainly focusing on adolescents, however, depict a 'bürgernahe (citizen friendly)' security force. In a comparative study between German and French adolescents, the preliminary analysis

showed that the degree of positive experience with, and perception of, the police was much higher in Germany than in France (Oberwittler & Roché 2013). Whilst in France African and Turkish migrants have particularly low opinions of the police in comparison to native French adolescents, the German data show very little or no difference between the amount of contact, the quality of contact, and general perceptions of the police between Turkish migrants and native Germans adolescents (Ibid.) Other studies of German adolescents also paint a similar picture with small or no ethnic difference in the levels of trust in the police (e.g. Heitmeyer et al., 2010; Baier *et al.*, 2010). Studies exploring the everyday relationship between migrants and the police such as Hüttermann's qualitative analysis (2000) and Gesemann's (2003) survey showed that while migrants tend to be less accepting of the police in comparison to native Germans, the police also manage to establish informal styles of interaction with migrants, thus being accepted 'on the street' within the community.

In a project titled 'Police in conflict with ethnic minorities and social marginalised groups',

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it showed that Russian Germans who are segregated in Germany have low trust in the police because they import their mistrust from their country of origin (Strasser & Zdun, 2006). In the same project, many young Turkish men living in three problematic city quarters expressed mistrust in the police because of the random stop-and-search, and other negative encounters with the German police (Celikbas & Zdun, 2008). Nevertheless the authors of these studies conclude that overall, the majority of the foreign population trusts the police (Schweer & Strasser, 2008). In a recent study of western German juveniles and adults, trust in the police was analysed from 1984 to 2011 by using nationwide surveys to enable a longitudinal analysis (Reuband, 2012). The study showed that the police enjoyed an extraordinary high reputation among the population that was quite stable over time with a modest rise (Ibid.). The most remarkable finding was the change of the socio-structural determinants of trust in the police in the course of time: in the past, younger and better educated people tended to have reservations against the police; however, the recent data shows the level of trust is overall higher and shared across various socio-structures (Ibid.).

The aforementioned change in attitudes towards the police in Germany is partly explained by changes in values and life conditions (Reuband, 2012). The development to post-materialism which characterises younger people fell over and has proceeded at the expense of autonomous values and in favour of conformist values (Ibid.). Under the conditions of this change Reuband presumes that state institutions gained more trust of sub-groups that are particularly affected by this change. Additionally, the connection between post-materialistic values and the evaluation of the police and other state institutions seems to dissolve. This suggests that the evaluation of the police is becoming less dependent on people's value orientation, but more and more on direct experience with the police or perceived performance of the institutions (Ibid.).

Perhaps the efforts made during the 1980s and 1990s to modernise the German police, such as the integration of women and ethnic minorities into the police force, may also have contributed to the more recent high levels of trust reported in the above studies. For example, the proportion of female police officers has risen

from approximately 3 % in 1986 to 43 % in 2009 in the North Rhine-Westphalia police (Frevel & Kuschewski, 2009: 66). As for immigrants in the police force, the German Ministry of Interior took the official position that 'employment in the police service of candidates from immigrant families is the right path to controlling specific forms of crime particularly by young non-integrated members of the foreign population and to reach more normality in this population group' (German Ministry of Interior 1993 cited in Frevel & Kuschewski, 2009: 66). While the aim was to incorporate those with Turkish or ex-Yugoslavian migration backgrounds, in reality, it was difficult to recruit a substantial number of such officers that satisfied the entry-level conditions, such as minimum levels of education, to enter the police force (Ibid.)

Procedural Justice theory, tested and confirmed in the UK and the US, argues that public perceptions of the fairness of the police is a critically important factor in shaping public cooperation with the police and compliance with the law. Indeed perceptions of police fairness turn out to be better predictors of cooperation and compliance, as opposed to public perceptions of their effectiveness (eg Hough *et al.*, 2013a, 2013b; Jackson *et al.*, 2012; Tyler *et al.*, 2007; Tyler, 2011). In this sense, for the police to be seen as fair and respectful by the ethnic minorities may be particularly important. A sense of isolation or exclusion that they may already be facing due to their minority status may significantly increase if the police treats them unfairly or make them feel that they have been approached due to their negative group stereotype. The negative experience, either direct or vicarious, may decrease their willingness to turn to the police when they become a victim of crime and make them much less likely to cooperate with the police (e.g. Tyler, 2005; Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003).

While fair and respectful treatment may also be the reason for the high levels of trust in the German police reported above, Cao (2001) offers an alternative theory in explaining the nature of public trust in the German police. Using data from the 1990 World Values Survey, he confirmed that confidence in the German police was overall positive (though lower than the US), but proposed that levels of trust may simply be an expression of the German value of Rechtsstaat (the law-centred state) — 'the culture that emphasises legalism, or close





adherence to rules' rather than actually 'liking the police' (Cao, 2001: 170). He argued that:

'Germans are basically Hobbesian in their approach to government. Their fear is that questioning the legitimacy of a particular government action questions the legitimacy of the entire governmental structure and can lead back to the "state of nature"', described by Hobbes, 'in which no government exists. In other words, any order is better than disorder. That is why Germans respect the police.' (Cao, 2001: 179)

In this article we first explore relative levels of trust in the police, and examine the position of Germany within the international, mainly European, context. Secondly, we focus on the German data, which includes not only adolescents but also adults, and compare the level of contact with, and trust in, the police for ethnic minorities and German natives. We will also test if it is the fair treatment of citizens by the police, or the high value placed on rule adherence and conformity, that is driving the German citizen's trust.

## DATA

This article uses data from the fifth round of the European Social Survey (ESS). In this round, the ESS covered 28 countries with a rotating module on trust in the police and the courts. The sample used in the ESS is a random probability sample, with a minimum target response rate of 70 %. Germany was one of the participating countries of the fifth round of the ESS, funded by *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*. The German sample covered those aged 15 and over, and used stratified two-stage probability design separately for East and West Germany <sup>(3)</sup>.

## TRUST IN THE POLICE: GERMANY'S POSITION WITHIN EUROPE

The ESS data paints a positive rating of the German police relative to other European countries (Figure 1). Germany ranked sixth out of 28 countries on a scale of zero to ten. Ten being

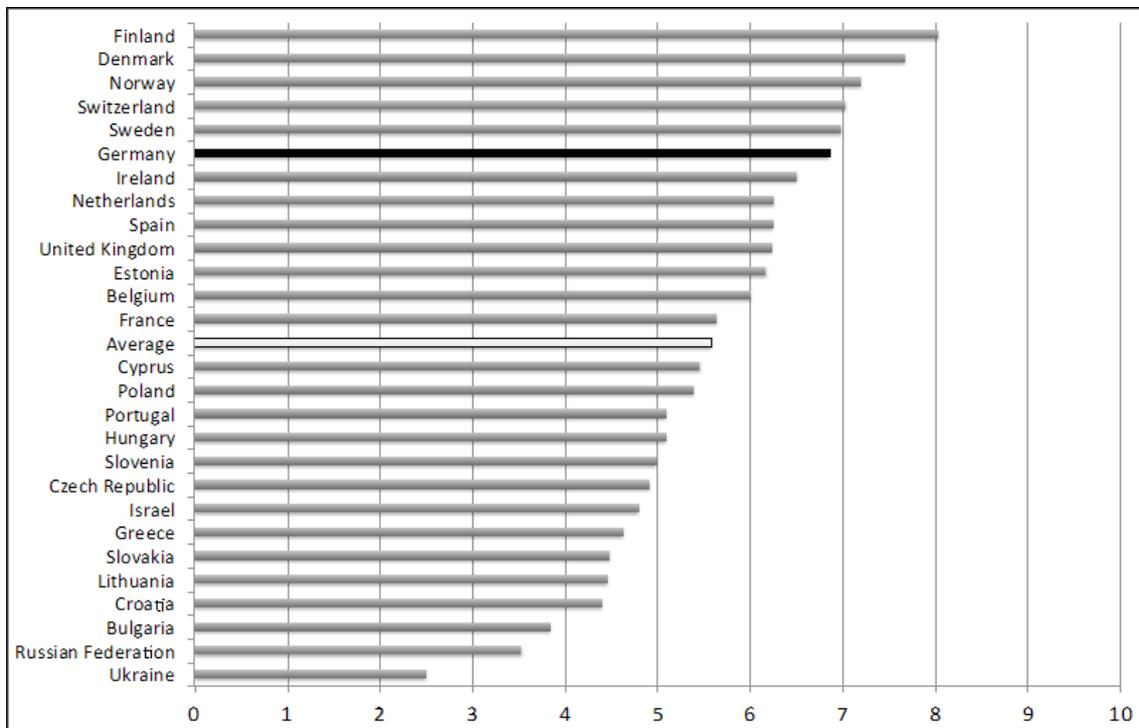


Figure 1: The level of trust in the police (0-10; 0: 'no trust at all' — 10: 'complete trust')

<sup>(3)</sup> For more information concerning the methodology of the German data, go to the European Social Survey Website: <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/essdoc/doc.html?ddi=2.3.1.4&year=2010&land=276>.

<sup>(4)</sup> While the native German group were slightly more positive about the police, the difference was not statistically significant.



the highest level of trust, Germany scored 6.9. It was preceded mostly by Scandinavian countries, Finland (8.0), Denmark (7.7), and Norway (7.2), and scored very close to Sweden (7.0) and Switzerland (7.0). The gap between the most trusting country and the least trusting country was quite large, with Finland scoring 8.0 and Ukraine scoring 2.5. Countries that scored below the overall average (5.6), shown in a white bar in Figure 1, tended to be Eastern European.

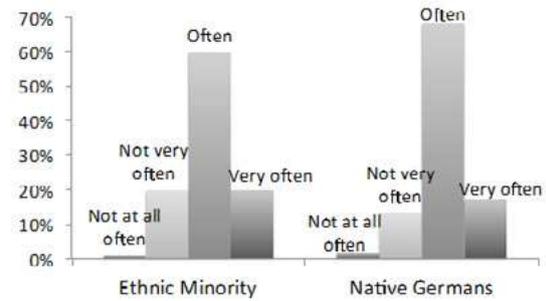
## COMPARISON: ETHNIC MINORITY VS NATIVE GERMANS

The ESS asked several questions on ethnicity and citizenship, including the interviewees' parent's native country of origin. One of which contained a self-reported assessment of whether the respondents 'belong to a minority ethnic group in Germany'. We used this variable to compare those who considered themselves as an 'ethnic minority' and those who did not, referred to as 'German natives' in this article.

First, we looked at the trust in the police question used in Figure 1 which ranged from 'no trust at all (zero)' to 'complete trust (ten)', and compared the overall level of trust between the two groups. This comparison showed that there was almost no difference between both groups: ethnic minority group scored 6.8 and the German natives scored 6.9. The lack of difference between the two groups was further confirmed when we examined particular aspects of public perception of the police. We compared the questions about public perception of fair treatment by the police ('How often do police treat people in [Germany] with respect?') and public perception of 'moral alignment' (Jackson *et al.* 2013) with the police ('Police stand up for values that are important to people like me'). Figure 2 shows the distribution of these questions by ethnic group. Again, we see very similar distributions of opinions (4). Both the ethnic minority group and the native German group considered the German police 'often' treat people with respect, and that they also largely 'agree' that the police share the important values with them (Figure 2).

The similar positive evaluation of the police continues when we turn to police contact, rather than perception, and the level of satisfaction concerning that contact. In the ethnic minority

'How often do police treat people in Germany with respect?'



'Police stand up for values that are important to people like me.'

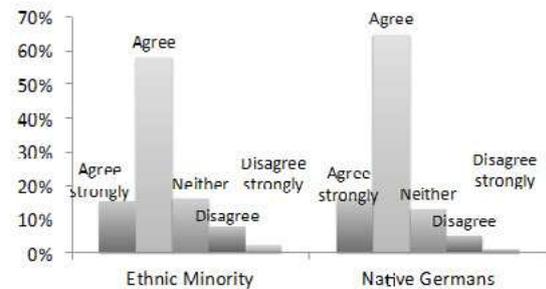


Figure 2: Fairness and moral alignment: comparison

group, 38 % had been 'approached, stopped or contacted by police in the last two years' while native Germans also reported the same frequency of police-initiated contact (37 %). It is only when we start looking into the level of satisfaction concerning the police-initiated contact that we see a difference in experience (Figure 3). Of those who were contacted by the police, 40 % of the ethnic minority group was dissatisfied in comparison to 22 % native Germans. That said in both groups the majority of those contacted were satisfied though native Germans reported a higher satisfaction rate.

In sum, the analyses conducted on the ESS echo earlier findings on German adolescents such as Oberwittler & Roché, 2013; Heitmeyer *et al.*, 2010, and Baier *et al.*, 2010, showing similar levels of contact, trust and satisfaction between ethnic minority and native Germans. However, it should be noted that while overall findings show that a high share of German and non-German young people trust the police (Weidacher, 2000), there are differences between and within migrant



Ethnic Minority

Native Germans



**Figure 3: Police contact and satisfaction with police among ethnic Germans and ethnic minorities in Germany**

groups. For example, eastern German and Turkish migrants have less trust in the police than Greek and Italian migrants as well as western German youths (Gesemann, 2003). Low levels of trust were also expressed by segregated Russian Germans (Zdun, 2008). The German Centre for Studies on Turkey states that Turkish migrants aged 30 and below have the least trust in the police whereas senior citizens emanating from the first generation of Turkish immigrants are more sympathetic to the police (Der Spiegel 30/2006). Research on perceptions of, and attitudes towards, the police of socially disadvantaged population groups illustrate that low levels of trust in the police corresponds with direct negative experiences rather than with the general image of the police held within that ethnic community (Oberwittler & Lukas, 2010).

## WHAT DETERMINES TRUST?

In this section, we examine what explains trust in the German police. The analysis focuses on the predictive power of ethnic status, evaluations of the police, including their fairness, and the level of importance placed on rule adherence. For this, multiple linear regression was used to predict trust. The dependent variable is trust in the police measured from zero to ten (ten being high trust) as used above. The independent variables were divided into three blocks: conformity, evaluations of the police, and demographics. All variables used in the analysis were tested for multicollinearity.

### ‘CONFORMITY’ BLOCK

- Schwartz human value scales (5) — ‘important to do what is told and follow rules’ 1-6 (1: ‘not like me’)
- Schwartz human value scales — ‘important to behave properly’
- Duty to obey the police scale, 0-30 (0: ‘no duty’) created from three variables: ‘duty to back decisions made by police, even if disagree’, ‘duty to do what the police say, even when you don’t understand’, and ‘duty to do what the police say, even if treated badly’ (6).

### ‘EVALUATION OF THE POLICE’ BLOCK

- Perceived fairness of the police scale, 0-10 (0: ‘low fairness’) created from three variables ‘how often do the police treat people in Germany with respect’, ‘how often do police make fair, impartial decisions’, and ‘how often do the police explain their decisions and actions when asked’ (7).
- Perceived effectiveness of the police scale, 0-20 (0: ‘low effectiveness’) created from two variables ‘how successful the police are at preventing crimes in Germany’, and ‘how successful the police are at catching house burglars in Germany’ (8) (9).

(5) Schwartz human value scale consists of ten human values (power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformity, and security) which are included in the core questions of the ESS. For more detail, see: [http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/docs/methodology/core\\_ess\\_questionnaire/ESS\\_core\\_questionnaire\\_human\\_values.pdf](http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/docs/methodology/core_ess_questionnaire/ESS_core_questionnaire_human_values.pdf).

(6) Cronbach’s Alpha for the three variables was .86.

(7) Cronbach’s Alpha for the three variables was .62.



- Perceived moral alignment with the police scale, 1-9 (1: 'low moral alignment') created from two variables 'police have the same sense of right and wrong as me' and 'police stand up for values that are important to people like me' <sup>(10)</sup>.

### DEMOGRAPHICS BLOCK

- Age
- Gender
- Education
- Being an ethnic minority ('belonging to an ethnic minority group').

The result of this analysis is displayed in Table 1. Firstly, all three blocks contributed in explaining trust in the police; however, by far, the 'evaluation of the police' block was the most powerful in explaining trust in the police, as can be seen when comparing the R<sup>2</sup> change. This means that the ESS does not provide support for Cao's (2001) hypothesis that the importance placed on rule adherence is the main driving factor for the high levels of trust in the German police. In other words,

support for the police flows from evaluations of the police, rather than from a generalised sense that state institutions ought to be obeyed.

Secondly, we look at individual variables and scales used within blocks. In the 'conformity' block, the two personality variables measuring conformity were not statistically significant, while the felt duty to obey the police was a statistically significant predictor. In the 'evaluation of the police' block, all scales were statistically significant. From the procedural justice literature examined above, we expected perceived fairness and moral alignment to be significant. What makes the German data distinctive, however, is that perceived effectiveness of the police is an equally strong predictor.

Lastly, as already illustrated in the previous section, being from an ethnic minority group was not a statistically significant predictor in explaining trust in the police. Similarly, gender and education were also not significant. The only significant predictor within the demographics block was age, with younger people having higher trust in the police.

#### Dependent variable: Trust in the Police

	<i>b</i>	SE <i>B</i>	$\beta$	<i>p</i>	R <sub>2</sub> Change	Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	.067	.499		<i>p</i> =.89			
<b>Conformity</b>					<b>.08 (p&lt;.001)</b>		
<b>Duty to obey the police</b>	<b>.034</b>	<b>.006</b>	<b>.103</b>	<b>p&lt;.001</b>		.83	1.21
Importance: Rule adherence	-.05	.031	-.032	<i>p</i> =.11		.77	1.3
Importance: Behave properly	.017	.034	.009	<i>p</i> =.63		.79	1.27
<b>Evaluation of the police</b>					<b>.21 (p&lt;.001)</b>		
<b>Effectiveness</b>	<b>.143</b>	<b>.012</b>	<b>.222</b>	<b>p&lt;.001</b>		.82	1.23
<b>Fairness</b>	<b>.29</b>	<b>.03</b>	<b>.193</b>	<b>p&lt;.001</b>		.78	1.29
<b>Moral alignment</b>	<b>.426</b>	<b>.033</b>	<b>.259</b>	<b>p&lt;.001</b>		.74	1.35
<b>Demographics</b>					<b>.01 (p=.01)</b>		
<b>Age</b>	<b>-.007</b>	<b>.002</b>	<b>-.058</b>	<b>p=.002</b>		.90	1.12
Gender	.015	.078	.003	<i>p</i> =.84		.99	1.01
Ethnic minority	.115	.199	.01	<i>p</i> =.56		.98	1.02
Education	.017	.012	.026	<i>p</i> =.15		.95	1.06

**R<sub>2</sub> =.30**

Table 1: Predicting German citizens' trust in the police

<sup>(6)</sup> Cronbach's Alpha for the three variables was.69.

<sup>(9)</sup> These three variables originally intended to measure 'police legitimacy' have been used as a proxy to measure German respondents' importance placed to rule adherence as these variables all provide scenarios' where the respondent is in disagreement with the police but feel the duty to obey and cooperate with the police.

<sup>(10)</sup> Cronbach's Alpha for the three variables was.76.





## CONCLUSION

Three findings emerged from this article. Firstly, German trust in the police is high relative to other European countries. Secondly, being a member of an ethnic minority group is not a significant predictor of levels of trust in the police. Native Germans and those from an ethnic minority group have virtually no difference in the level of police-initiated contact, or in their perceptions of police fairness and moral alignment with the police. Thirdly, the German respondents trusted the police because they considered the police to be fair, effective, and to be in line with their own values. A generalised value placed on rule adherence was not a significant factor in explaining trust in the police.

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