UC Office of the President
Student Policy Research Papers

Title

Public Opinion and Police Reform: A Comparative Analysis Between California and Texas

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/72t8g6n3

Author

Garcia, Theo

Publication Date

2024-07-01

Data Availability

The data associated with this publication are available upon request.

Theo Garcia

POL 195

Professor Pellaton

8/19/24

Public Opinion and Police Reform: A Comparative Analysis Between California and Texas

Police reform has been a significant issue in the United States as a whole, with many individuals being killed by police officers every year. It is especially prevalent in bigger states such as California and Texas, which have the highest number of police killings in the U.S. since 2013 (Mapping Police Violence, n.d.). Racial disparities in police killings are also notable, particularly in communities of color (Sinyangwe, 2023). The failure to implement changes to the policing system in the United States not only costs lives but can also have effects on the public perception of police in general. To address these issues, California and Texas have approved various bills regarding police reformation. To gain an understanding of why these bills are passed, I ask how public support affects police reform. Specifically, how does public support for police reforms affect the passage and quality of bills regarding police reform in California and Texas? To answer these questions, I will use survey data collected in 2021 on police reform and compare it to the quantity and quality of police reforms passed in 2021 and 2022 in the two states. Upon my research, I find that there is a positive correlation between the increase in public support and the increase in quantity and quality of reforms in California and Texas.

Context and Significance

Police brutality has been and continues to be a prevalent issue in our country today. In California, the problem has been especially obvious. Black individuals were seriously injured or killed during police encounters in a share roughly three times their share of the state population (PPIC, 2021). In addition to racial disparities, mental health is also a factor to consider when it comes to police violence, with more than 40% of people treated for non-fatal gunshot wounds by police being diagnosed with a mental health or substance abuse condition (PPIC, 2021). As a result, police reform has had tremendous support from Californians overall (Rector, 2020). To address these issues, the California legislature has passed numerous bills to address the use of force and accountability among officers, including Senate Bill 2, which allows the state to decertify police officers who were found to be involved in misconduct, AB 26, which requires officers to intervene and report colleagues who are using excessive force, and AB 490, which bans certain restraint techniques, such as carotid chokeholds (NCSL, 2021).

In Texas, racial disparities in police violence are also apparent. According to Mapping Police Violence, Black individuals were 2.3 times more likely to be killed by police (Mapping Police Violence, n.d.). Texas legislature has also enacted various policies such as HB 3712, which requires extra training for officers in de-escalation, HB 1545, which strengthens the process for investigating officers who commit misconduct, and HB 162, which requires agencies to implement policies that prohibit racial bias (NCSL, 2021). By comparing the public support for police reform and the quantity and quality of police reforms in both states, we can gauge the strengths and weaknesses of each measure to eliminate the impact of police violence on different communities across the nation.

Literature Review

One relationship that is important to the sequence between public opinion and police reform is the willingness of lawmakers to listen to the requests of their constituents. One part of that relationship is, firstly, how public opinion on crime and police is formed among people. As Drakulich pointed out, crime can often be over-represented in people's minds, and perception of crime may be skewed when compared to actual crime data (Drakulich, 2022). This may affect how individuals view police, because when perception of crime is high, support for police could increase as well. Secondly, views of police reform are also affected by racial stereotypes, and people's views on police reform are largely shaped by implicit racial biases, which are exacerbated by the media (Drakulich, 2022). Lastly, public opinion is also shaped by political ideology. According to Drakulich, the perception of crime is altered depending on who is in office, and voters tend to view crime as more of a problem when a member of the opposing party is in office, as shown with voters in the Obama and McCain election (Drakulich, 2022). With all of these factors taken into account, the next part of the relationship is between public opinion and the willingness of lawmakers to listen to public opinion. In general, public opinion does not have much of an effect on politicians, because most issues they deal with do not have a "singular, coherent public opinion" on it (Burnstein, 2014). Despite this, politicians may be swayed by the overall policy mood of the public (Drakulich, 2022). Because of this reason, lawmakers may become more flexible in popular policy issues, such as police reform. With the help of Drakulich and Burnstein's research, I aim to compare the support of police reforms in California and Texas specifically and observe how that affects the development

of those policies in each state. This will offer a clearer understanding of the link between public views and legislative outcomes.

Since the murders of unarmed Black individuals by police such as George Floyd, Stephon Clark, and Micheal Brown, protests and outrage have sparked across the nation regarding police reform. With popular support for organizations such as Black Lives Matter (BLM), it has been found that most individuals tend to support policing reforms (Boudreau et al., 2022). With Boudreau et al. (2022) survey results, support for police reforms such as accountability and intervention from police officers who witness excessive use of force, was starkly related to respondent's support for BLM. Despite this, there was an overwhelming multiracial and bipartisan support for overall police reforms (Boudreau et al, 2022). Although Boudreau's survey does offer insight into public opinion on police reform, it does lack context into the varying support levels of different police reform policies, which Vaughn et al. discuss in their paper. According to them, despite movements supporting the defunding of police having garnered much attention across the country, the public remains largely opposed to it (Vaughn et al., 2022). Other types of reforms, such as having to do with accountability and use of force, are relatively more popular, as shown in two different surveys done in California and Texas, which will be heavily relied on in my research (Adams et al., 2021; Gardiner, 2021).

The first key survey done by Gardiner from Cal State Fullerton dives into public attitudes towards police and police reforms in California specifically. The survey highlights attitudes across different categories of demographics such as race, income, age, LGBTQ status, and partisanship (Gardiner, 2021). The survey questions respondents about their feelings towards police in general, asking questions such as how much they respect

police, if they feel the police in their communities are trustworthy, and if they feel the police treat everyone equally in their communities. Nearly half of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with these responses, with Republican respondents having an overwhelming majority that agreed (Gardiner, 2021). In addition to these questions, the survey asks respondents if they support or oppose various police reforms, such as de-escalation training, outfitting officers with body-worn cameras, defunding the police, and de-arming the police. The respondents were generally favorable to the reforms, with Republican respondents having a majority that opposed the reforms (Gardiner, 2021). I plan to use the results of this survey to capture the overwhelming support for police reform in 2021 in California and use the broken-down data by demographic to show the varying support between different groups. This survey was limited to only California respondents, leading to a knowledge gap needing to be filled regarding Texas respondents.

The other key survey for my research project was done by Adams et al. from the University of Houston. It highlights various police reforms and their level of support from various demographic groups in Texas, similar to the one done by Cal State Fullerton. Some of these demographics that were similar between the two surveys included race, age, and partisanship. This survey differed from the Cal State Fullerton survey in its inclusion of different demographics such as gender and voters in the 2020 election (those who voted for Donald Trump vs. those who voted for Joe Biden vs. those who did not vote). In addition to this, Adams et al. survey also differs because they did not include questions regarding respondents' feelings toward police and only focused on their support for specific police reforms. The relative levels of support across the groups were like those in California, however, the overall levels of support for the police reforms were lower

(Adams et al, 2021). I also plan to use the results from this survey to measure the support for policing reforms in Texas in 2021.

Existing research done by Shjarback does investigate the comparison between racial disparities in police shootings in California and Texas. In his research, he discusses the overrepresentation of people of color in statistics regarding police-involved shootings, and how recent research has introduced including instances where police point their weapons at citizens and discharge their weapons (Shjarback, 2020). Changing the parameters of the benchmarks used to include these instances resulted in findings that showed that Black individuals were more likely to be fatally shot by police than White individuals in California (Shjarback, 2020). However, Shjarback found that Black individuals were not more likely to be fatally shot by police than White individuals in Texas (Shjarback, 2020). This research helps provide greater context to the survey results from Adams et al. and Gardiner, showing that racial disparities in police shootings may be more prevalent in California than in Texas. These results could potentially be reflected in the survey results as well, since less racial disparities in police could make individuals feel less strongly about the issue, which in turn could affect the policy mood on police reform discussed by Drakulich and Burnstein.

Overall, the existing literature suggests that public opinion on police reform is influenced by perceptions of crime, racial biases, and political ideologies, which in turn affect the willingness of lawmakers to pursue reform. While there is general support for police reforms, especially in the aftermath of high-profile police violence cases, this support differs across different demographics and states. The comparative analysis of California and Texas I plan to conduct will fill the gap by better understanding how

geographical differences in public opinion can shape policy outcomes regarding police reform.

Hypothesis

I hypothesize that as support for police reforms increases in California and Texas, the quantity and quality of police reforms will increase as well. The increase in support for reforms will lead to a stronger policy mood toward supporting police reform, which will cause lawmakers to be more willing to enact police reforms in their states. This will lead to a great amount of quantity and quality of police reform legislation in each state. I will be specifically using and testing Drakulich's and Burnstein's theory and framework on the connection between public opinion and lawmakers' willingness to pass bills because of it. With that in mind, I suspect that with California being a majority democratic state, and pro-police reform being a generally democratic stance, the support for police and police reforms will be higher there than in Texas, which will lead to a higher amount of quantity and quality of police reforms in California than in Texas (McGhee, 2020).

Research Design

For my project, I will be conducting a small-n comparative analysis and will be looking at two states, California and Texas, over the years 2019 to 2023.

The independent variable I am choosing to work with is the public support for police reforms in California and Texas. To measure this, I am using the survey data from Cal State Fullerton and the University of Houston. The surveys focus on police reform and feelings toward police; however, I will be specifically focusing on the support for police reforms among the respondents. The respondents of each survey were randomly

selected residents of their respective states and tasked to measure their support for several different police reforms. The two police reforms I will be focusing on for this project are prosecuting officers for use of excessive force and cutting police budgets. When looking through the survey results, I found that support for police reforms varied depending on the type of reform discussed. Because of this, I chose to include one reform that was highly favorable among the respondents of both surveys (prosecuting officers for excessive force) and one reform that was highly unfavorable (cutting police budgets) as a way to capture overall support for police reforms. I will then find the average of the percent of respondents who support the reforms in each state and compare them to find the overall higher support between the two states.

The dependent variable in my research will be the quantity and quality of police reforms in California and Texas. I will measure the quantity of police reforms by using data collected by the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) on enacted bills in 2021 and 2022 regarding police reform. I filtered for bills that relate to the following categories: "Data and Transparency, "Decertification", "Oversight", "Training", and "Use of Force". I then will look at the number of bills enacted in each state and compare the raw number of bills between the states. I measured it this way to look at the number of bills overall, because it may be difficult to find a correlation between specific police reform bills and the other variables in my research. To measure the quality of bills, I will take statistics regarding police-caused deaths and compare trends before and after bills were enacted. Specifically, I am comparing the rates of police-caused deaths per one million residents over the years 2019 through 2023 and paying attention to the trends before and after 2021 and 2022.

One control variable I want to take into account is race. People of different races may view police differently or may have had different interactions with police in their lives or the lives of the people they know. This would affect their overall perception of police reform, and individuals who have experienced unfair treatment of police based on race may feel more strongly about police reform. I can measure this by using the same survey data from Cal State Fullerton and the University of Texas, specifically focusing on the data on race. Another control variable I want to consider is partisanship. Since political ideology plays a big part in the policy-making process, it would be important to see how levels of support are different between partisanship groups (Achen and Bartels, 2016). This may give insight into lawmakers' willingness to pass legislation. I will also measure this with the survey data from Cal State Fullerton and the University of Houston.

Findings

From the data analyzed, there appeared to be a greater level of support for the two proposed police reforms across the racial groups in California than their Texas counterparts. In California, White, Latino, and Black respondents were generally favorable toward police reforms regarding prosecuting officers who use excessive force, with an 88%, 89%, and 99% support rate respectively, with an average of 92% (Fig. 1). When it came to the support rate for reforms regarding cutting police budgets, the number of respondents who supported such reforms dropped significantly. This type of reform had a 39%, 46%, and 80% support rate among White, Latino, and Black respondents, respectively, with an average of 55% (Fig. 1). Noticeably, Black respondents had a significantly higher level of support for the two reforms than the other two groups did.

On the Texas side, the breakdown of support between the racial groups was similar. For prosecuting officer related reforms, the support rate was 78% for both White and Latino respondents, and 87% for Black respondents, with an average of 81%, which is slightly lower than the California respondents (Fig. 1). Cutting police budgets had a very low support rate among White and Latino respondents, with a 20% and 23% support rate respectively. Black respondents also had a relatively lower rate of 51%, which came out to an average of 31% overall (Fig. 1).
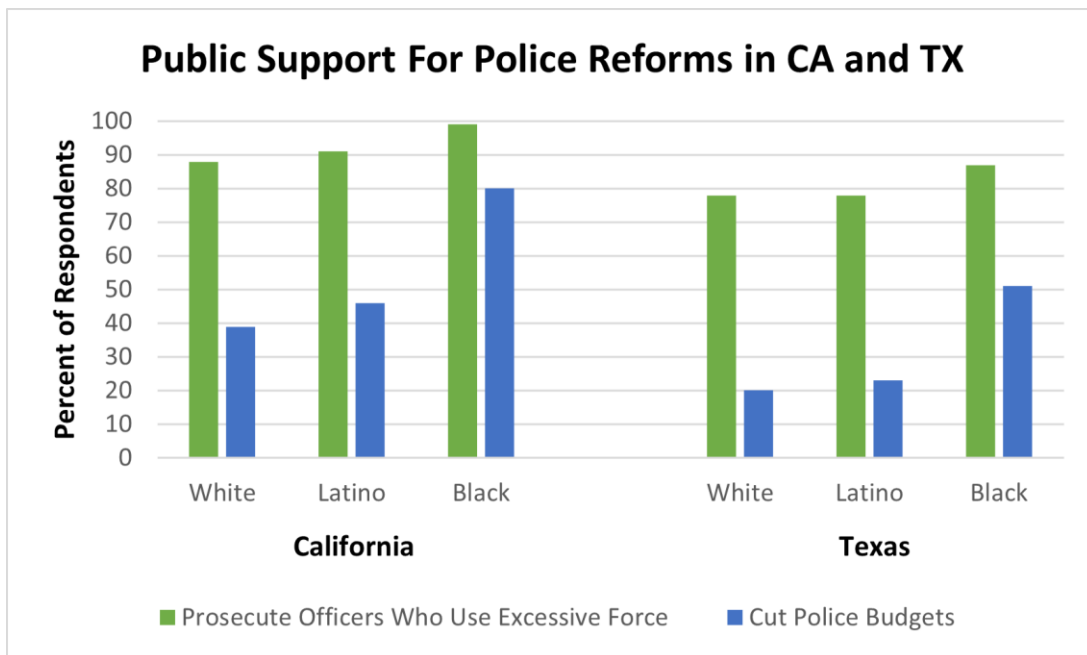

Fig 1. Data Source: University of Houston and Cal State Fullerton

In addition to support across racial groups, the levels of support across partisan lines also varied between states. In both states, Democrats, Independents, and Republicans were highly favorable toward punishment for officers who use excessive force, with a 95%, 90%, and 68%, support rate respectively in California, and 90%, 78% and 70% in Texas, which came out to an average of 84% and 79% respectively (Fig 2.). Similar to Fig. 1, support distribution was also lower for reform regarding cutting police

budgets, with support from 64% of Democrats, 35% of Independents, and 8% of Republicans, with an average of 36% in California, and in Texas, it was 40% for Democrats, 24% for Independents and 14% for Republicans, with an average of 26% (Fig. 2).
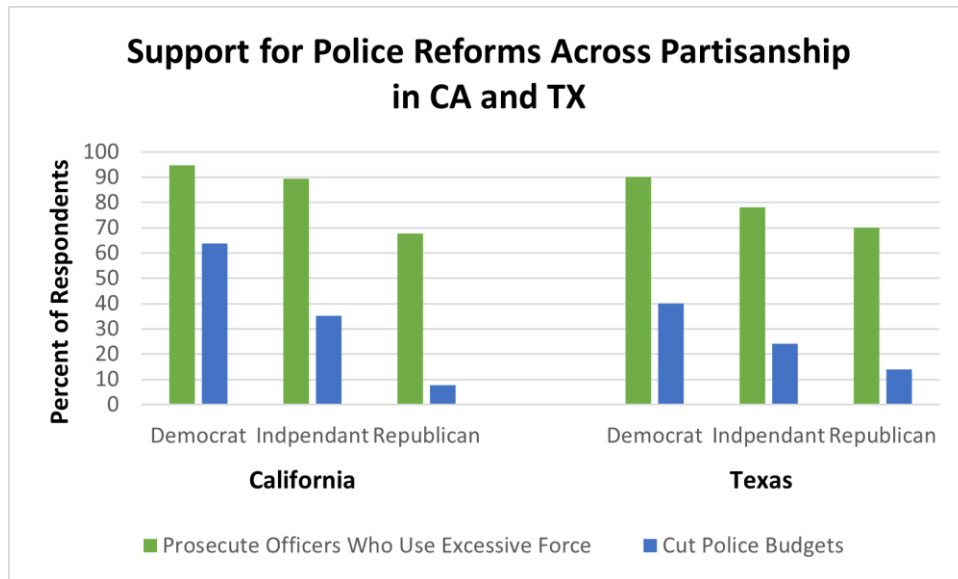

Fig 2. Data Source: University of Houston and Cal State Fullerton

On the dependent variable side of my research, I looked at the number of bills enacted during 2021 and 2022 to measure the quantity of reforms. According to the data, California enacted 13 bills concerning police reform for the previously mentioned categories. Of those bills enacted, the majority that were enacted fell into the "data and transparency" and "use of force" categories (Fig. 3). In contrast, Texas had enacted 5 bills during those years, with the most falling into the "oversight" category. However, both states had the smallest number of bills enacted in the "decertification" category, with California having one and Texas having zero (Fig. 3).
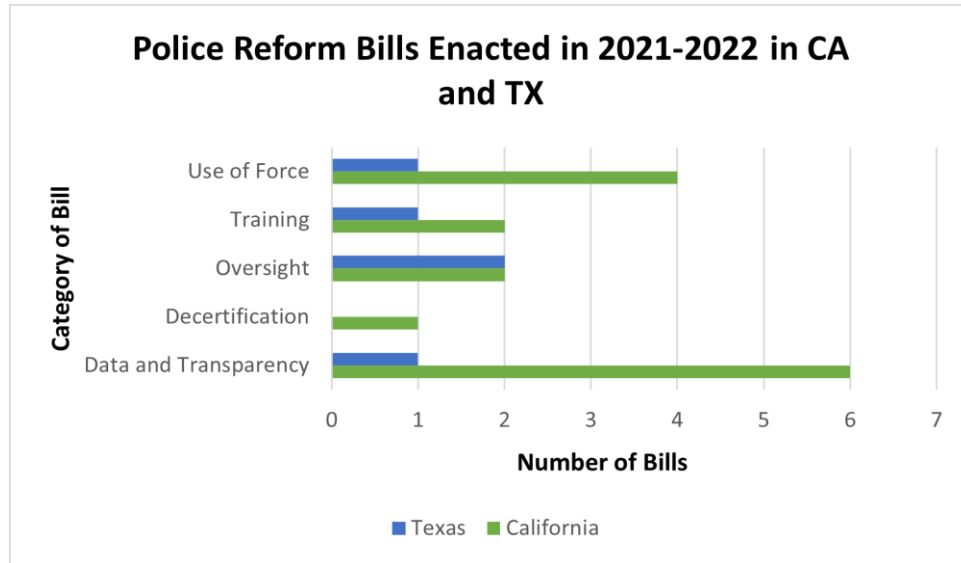
Police Reform Bills Enacted in 2021-2022 in CA and TX

Fig 3. Data Source: National Conference of State Legislatures[1]

In terms of the quality of reforms that were enacted, when comparing the trends of police-caused deaths in California and Texas in 2019-2023, I found that since around 2020 and 2021, California has been on a decreasing trend of police-caused deaths per one million residents (Fig. 4). Conversely, since the same years, Texas has been on an increasing trend (Fig. 4).
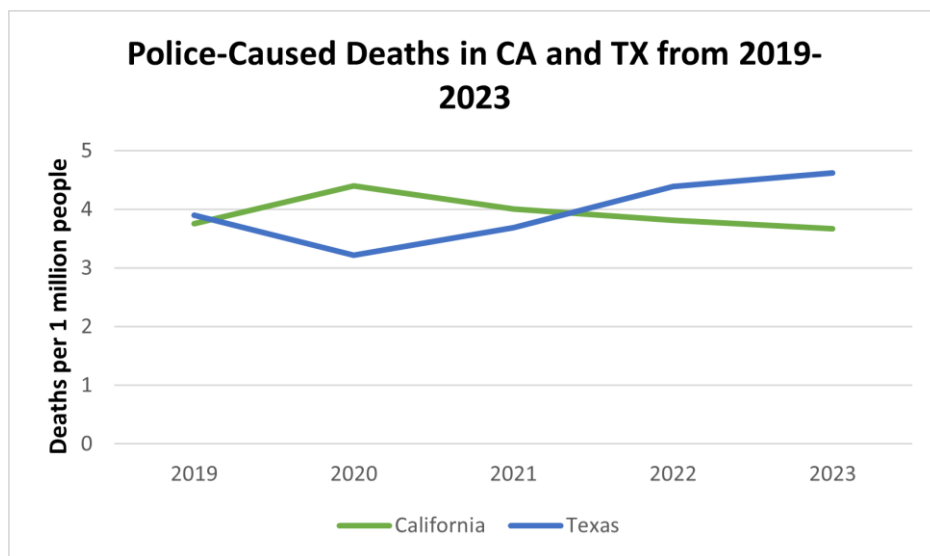
Police-Caused Deaths in CA and TX from 2019-2023

Fig 4. Data Source: mappingpoliceviolence.org

[1] Bills that spanned over two categories were counted once in each category.

Analysis and Implications

The question I focused on for my research was how public opinion on police reforms among California and Texas residents affects the quantity and quality of reforms in those states. Overall, this study did support my hypothesis, as the higher average level of support among California respondents did correlate with the higher quantity of reforms, as measured through the raw number of bills enacted, and quality of reforms in the state during the years under study, as tentatively measured by the lower rate of police-caused deaths. On the Texas side, the lower average support for the police reforms also correlated with the lower number of reforms enacted and the increasing rate in police-caused deaths in the state.

One part of the findings that surprised me was the level of support among California and Texas Republicans. Recalling back to my hypothesis, I suspected that the higher level of Democratic support in California would lead to a higher level of support for police reform, which was reflected in my findings. However, I did not anticipate the level of support for Republicans in both states. Interestingly, the level of support for both reforms was slightly higher from Republicans in Texas than Republicans in California, implying that if my research was solely focused on their support, my hypothesis would be disproven.

These results also raise the question of what kind of policy implications can be taken from them. Firstly, the varying types of police reform enacted speak to the priority level of different police reforms for the California and Texas legislatures. With the lowest amount of bills falling into the "decertification" category, this highlights a potential area of improvement for both states' legislatures. For California specifically, bills revolving around

data and transparency were abundant, suggesting that this was a big focus for the lawmakers at the time. Secondly, the correlation between the quantity and quality of reforms suggests that enacting more reforms could have an impact on lowering the number of police-caused deaths, however, more research is needed into the link between these variables.

Research Limitations and Extensions

It is important to acknowledge the many limitations that were present in my research. One limitation I found was the reliability of survey data as a way to measure my independent variable. Both surveys done by Cal State Fullerton and the University of Houston were thorough in the types of questions they asked; however, the number of respondents cannot be representative of the entire population in the two states. Therefore, if a statewide survey with more respondents were to be conducted in California and Texas regarding police reform, the results of my research could potentially be entirely different. Another limitation that I encountered with the survey data was the questions asked in each survey. In the University of Houston survey specifically, I found two similar questions had significantly different results, with those being asking respondents their support for reforms regarding defunding the police and reforms regarding reallocating police funds to social services. As previously shown, defunding the police was unpopular among the respondents in both the California and Texas surveys, however, reallocating police funds was significantly more popular (Adams et al, 2021). Seemingly, police funds prove to be an elusive topic for the respondents of the survey, and re-wording or providing context to those types of bills in the survey may have impacted the respondents' answers to those questions.

One overall limitation of the results of my research was the causal link between the variables. Because my research was heavily focused on the correlative link between public support for reforms and the quantity and quality of those reforms, it does not prove that the support for police reforms causes the increase in quality and quantity. Therefore, the direct link between my variables is not proven by my research, and it cannot be said that public support has any impact on the reforms in California and Texas at all.

The limitations of this study also bring forward several extensions for the research. One way this research could be built upon is by comparing and focusing on more or even all of the states in the U.S. to provide a greater context for the topic. Adding more states to the research possibly offers a better insight into the connection between public support and police reforms and shows policymakers what works best in terms of policy for their respective states. In addition to the inclusion of more states, increasing the temporal scope of this research could also be beneficial. Similar to geographic scope, adding more years to the study will provide researchers with a look into long-term trends of support for police reforms as well as the types of reforms passed and the consequences of them. Considering the limitation of the survey data I found, future researchers could consider conducting surveys with more respondents, measuring their support for specific police reforms, similar to the Cal State Fullerton and University of Houston surveys. Having more respondents can increase the accuracy of measurement for public support, which can be beneficial to this type of study.

Another research extension that arises is research into looking at the causation effect between public support for police reform and the quantity and quality of reforms. As previously mentioned, this research solely focuses on the correlation between the two,

and not the causation. Providing evidence for lawmakers on the high level of support for police reforms and its connection to the effectiveness of the police reforms could benefit them in making more informed decisions about enacting police reform bills, bringing about a positive change in policing in United States as a whole.

Conclusion

Overall, police violence has shown itself to be a wide-ranging issue affecting many people. When compared to Texas, California seemingly does better when it comes to having a higher level of police reform. This study has demonstrated the higher level of support among residents in California compared to their Texas counterparts, and the correlated higher quantity and quality of reforms in recent years. Despite this, California remains the state with the highest number of police-caused deaths each year (Sinyangwe, 2023). This suggests that there is more work to be done by the state government in order to improve the policing situation. Because of this, it is important to understand the root causes of police reforms, which I aimed to contribute to with my research.

It is also important to understand that police violence is a very complex issue and that police reforms can only be a surface-level fix to a deeper-rooted issue. Therefore, as mentioned before, more research into the issue with fewer limitations is needed. The research presented here only scratches the surface in terms of grasping the issue as a whole, although it can lay the groundwork for future research and understanding in not just California and Texas, but all states as well. With this research and understanding, it will, hopefully, help bring about better police reforms in the United States.

Works Cited

Achen, C., & Bartels, L. (2016). Democracy for realists: Holding up a mirror to the electorate. *Juncture*, *22*(4), 269–275. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2050-5876.2016.00873.x

Boudreau, C., MacKenzie, S. A., & Simmons, D. J. (2022). Police Violence and Public Opinion After George Floyd: How the Black Lives Matter Movement and Endorsements Affect Support for Reforms. *Political Research Quarterly*, *75*(2), 497–511. https://doi.org/10.1177/10659129221081007

Drakulich, K. (2022). Public Opinion and Criminal Justice Reform. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-022-09716-2

Rector, K. (2020, August 12). Most California voters support police reform, poll shows. Los Angeles Times; Los Angeles Times. https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-08-12/californians-back-police-but-also-police-reform-poll-finds#:~:text=Across%20California%2C%2080%25%20of%20respondents

Premkumar, D., Gumbs, A., McConville, S., & Hsia, R. (2021, October). *Police Use of Force and Misconduct in California*. Public Policy Institute of California. https://www.ppic.org/publication/police-use-of-force-and-misconduct-in-california/

Vaughn, P. E., Peyton, K., & Huber, G. A. (2022). Mass support for proposals to reshape policing depends on the implications for crime and safety. *Criminology & Public Policy*, *21*(1), 125–146. https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9133.12572

Gardiner, C. (2021). *CALSPEAKS: Californians' Views on Police and Police Reform*. Matthew Gush. https://cpp.fullerton.edu/projects/Gardiner_CSUF_CALSPEAKS_FINAL%20REPORT_2103.pdf

Adams, M.O. (n.d.). *Texas Trends Survey 2021*. https://uh.edu/hobby/txtrends/txtrends2021_report3.pdf

Burstein, P. (2013). *American Public Opinion, Advocacy, and Policy in Congress*.
https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139628723

NCSL 50-State Searchable Bill Tracking Databases. (n.d.). Www.ncsl.org.
https://www.ncsl.org/technology-and-communication/ncsl-50-state-searchable-
bill-tracking-databases

Sinyangwe, S. (2023). *Mapping Police Violence*. Mapping Police Violence.
https://mappingpoliceviolence.us/

Shjarback, J. A., & Nix, J. (2019). Considering violence against police by citizen
race/ethnicity to contextualize representation in officer-involved
shootings. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 101653.
https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2019.101653