

Harvard study: Millennials believe U.S. justice system unfair

By Philip Marcelo, Associated Press on 04.30.15

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About 600 people, including the family of Freddie Gray, protested Gray's death while in the custody of Baltimore police by marching from the site of the arrest to the Western District police station, about six blocks away, on Tuesday, April 21, 2015. Photo: Kenneth K. Lam/Baltimore Sun/TNS

BOSTON — A Harvard University survey released Wednesday found that nearly one in two millennials believe America's criminal justice system is unfair and few believe that protests triggered by the killings of black men at the hands of police will make a significant difference.

The findings, from a survey of 18-to-29-year-olds conducted from March 18 to April 1, come as anger over the death of Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old Baltimore man who suffered a spinal cord injury in police custody, turned violent this week.

Rioters looted and burned businesses in the Maryland city and clashed with police after Gray's funeral Monday, prompting Gov. Larry Hogan to deploy the National Guard. Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake imposed a weeklong curfew.

John Della Volpe, director of polling at Harvard's Institute of Politics, said the findings suggest young people are genuinely interested in seeing real change in the criminal justice system — not just rhetoric.

"What I think they're asking us through this data is to have a meaningful, non-ideological conversation about this," he said. "Even before the violence in Baltimore, you only had a minority of 18-to-29-year-olds believing the protests would create change."

The survey polled over 3,000 millennials across the country.

It showed about 49 percent of millennials have little to no confidence that the judicial system can fairly judge people without bias for race and ethnicity. Another 49 percent have "some" to "a lot" of confidence in the judicial system.

The disparity is more pronounced among black millennials, with 66 percent expressing little to no confidence compared to about 43 percent of white millennials and 53 percent of Hispanic millennials.

Black millennials also, unsurprisingly, showed much stronger support than their white and Hispanic counterparts for "Black Lives Matter," the protest movement sparked by recent police killings of black men in Ferguson, Missouri; New York City, and other cities.

Overall, though, American millennials aren't confident that the movement will be effective in bringing meaningful change. Just 39 percent of those polled believed the efforts would be "somewhat" or "very" effective.

"This is a more cynical generation," Della Volpe said. "They're willing to volunteer and participate if they're inspired, feel like it matters and believe it can create change. But right now, they feel like no one is really listening to them."

Many polled strongly agreed with some solutions that protest movements have helped bring to the forefront. About 80 percent believe requiring police officers to wear body cameras can be effective, for example.

On other topics, a solid majority of millennials — about 57 percent — supported sending U.S. ground troops to fight the Islamic State group in the Middle East, and a growing number support pre-emptively attacking potentially hostile countries.

Della Volpe suggested that result points to a growing desire among young adults for more aggressive foreign policy.

And more than one-third of young women said they've had a personal experience with sexual assault, either as a survivor or through close friends or family members. Of those, 91 percent said the assault occurred outside college campuses.

"It's an issue that clearly transcends college campuses," Della Volpe said. "It's a societal, not a collegiate, issue, unfortunately."