

Penal Issues

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Students' representations of and experience with the police. A survey.

Little is known about students' representations of the police and the gendarmerie forces, or about their everyday experience with those institutions. In this issue of *Penal Issues*, **Jacques de Maillard, Jérémie Gauthier and Sophie Peaucellier** present a questionnaire survey of students at the Versailles-Saint Quentin-en-Yvelines University (UVSQ) and Sciences-Po Saint-Germain en Laye.

Introduction

Now that French surveys, following the English-language countries, have taken to studying attitudes toward the police, they are gaining a better understanding of the complex relations between police officers and gendarmes and the various segments of the population¹. One major focus of these studies has been the attempt to ascertain on what grounds people judge law-enforcement officers, and above all, to connect these judgments to concrete experience with the police. Three such research projects focus particularly on young people. The study conducted by Nicolas Jounin *et al*² among students in the Ile-de-France region deals primarily with the issue of ID checks and the resulting discrimination. The Escapad survey (conducted among young Parisians on their military defense preparation day) provided a more accurate picture of which individuals are given ID checks by the police, on the basis not only of their social attributes, but mainly of their behaviour (participation in fights, for instance) and the neighbourhood they come from³. Last, the survey conducted by Sebastian Roché in the framework of the ANR⁴ *Polis* deals with the various aspects of attitudes toward and experience with the police, but focuses on secondary school students⁵. Our own survey, complementary to the aforementioned, explores the connections between students' representations and their concrete experience with the police force.

1. The sample

First of all, our sample is characterized by its youthfulness: the median age of respondents is 20, and 74% were under 22. Secondly, it is comprised of a large proportion of women (73% of the

Methodology

The survey was conducted in November and December 2016. The questionnaire was conceived and circulated with the help of senior year students working on a Master's degree in Prevention and Security Policies at the UVSQ⁶. It comprised 81 questions in all, divided into four parts ("Urban habits", "The State and the police", "Interactions with the police", and "Personal situation"). The questionnaires were completed in classrooms and lecture halls with the teachers' consent. We were thus able to collect 1,535 exploitable questionnaires within six academic programmes: Law and political science (539 students), Health sciences (496 students), Social sciences (164 students), Sciences-Po Saint-Germain en Laye (150 students)⁷, the Institute for Managerial sciences (138 students), and the Institute for cultural and international studies (34 students). About 25 minutes were required to fill out the form.

⁶ University of Versailles Saint-Quentin. Our warmest thanks to the M2 students who participated in the questionnaire development lab and in arranging for students to complete the questionnaire. Our thanks, too, to our colleagues, who agreed to have the questionnaire distributed during their classes.

⁷ Sciences-Po Saint-Germain en Laye is supported by the UVSQ and Cergy-Pontoise University.

sample), as well as of students from prosperous families. Indeed, the variable "social status", based on their parents' social and occupational category, whether or not they have a scholarship and their income bracket shows that 48% of the students came from a privileged family as opposed to 24% from a middle-class background and 28% from an unprivileged background. The proportion of students who reported that their father and mother both belonged to the category "Executives and high-level intellectual professions" was respectively 48% and 36%, (then, respectively,

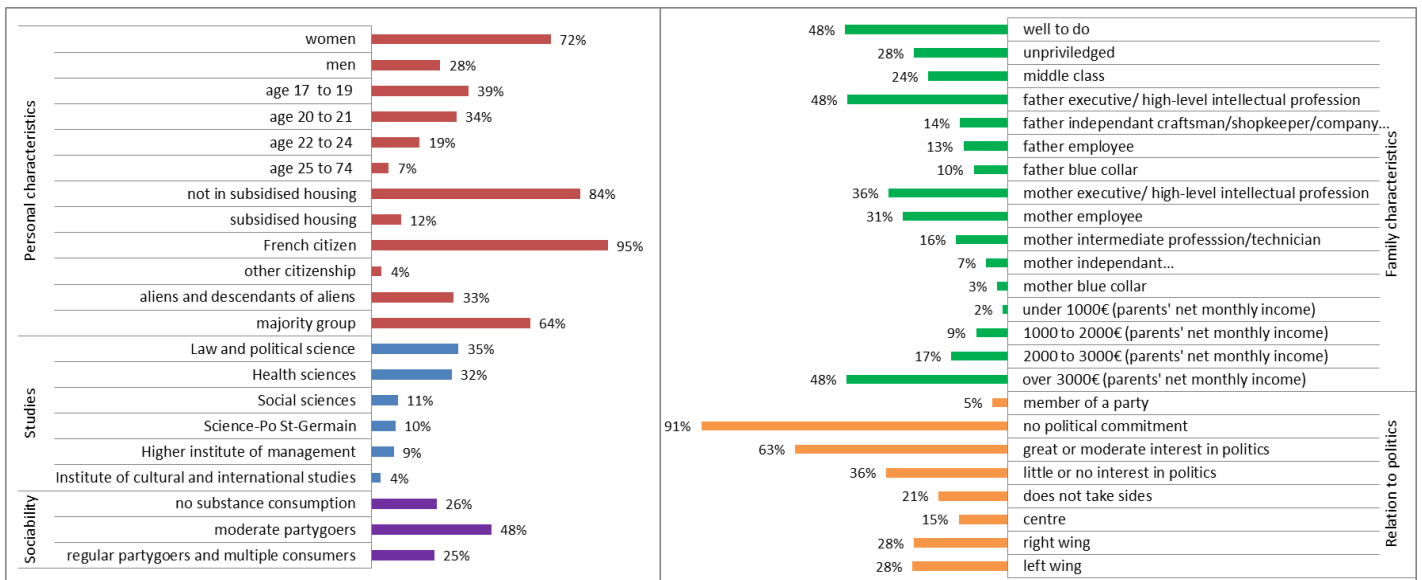
¹ A great many publications are available. See : Sebastian Roché, *De la police en démocratie*, Paris, Grasset, 2016.

² Nicolas Jounin *et al*, Le faciès du contrôle. Contrôle d'identité, apparence et modes de vie des étudiants en Ile-de-France, *Déviance et société*, 2015, vol. 39, n°1, pp. 3-29.

³ Sophie Peaucellier, Stanislas Spilka, Fabien Jobard, René Lévy, Identity Checks and Youthful Parisians. Analysis of the Paris Section of the 2010 Escapad Survey, 2016, vol. 29, n° 2, pp. 1-4.

⁴ The *Agence nationale de la recherche* is the project-based funding agency for research in France.

⁵ Sandrine Astor, Sebastian Roché, *Enquête 'POLIS-autorité' : Premiers résultats*. Rapport à l'attention de l'Éducation Nationale, 2013.



14% and 7% for “craftspeople/business people/company head”, 13% and 31% for “employees”, 10% and 3% for “blue collars”, 7% and 16% for “intermediate professions/technicians”). Furthermore, 48% of students claimed their parents had a monthly income exceeding 3,000 euros (but 22% did not know their parents’ earnings) and 12% lived in subsidised housing or the equivalent. Our sample is more privileged than the average Ile-de-France student. For example, twice as many students reported that their mother was in the “executives and high-level intellectual professions” category than in Nicolas Jounin’s study.

We also attempted to determine the respondents’ citizenship, descent and appearance. Approximately 92% were born in France, and 95% were French citizens. The proportion of foreigners in our sample (5%) is lower than among the student population as a whole.⁸

The issue of descent and appearance proved more complex to deal with. In our questionnaire, we resorted to the formulation used in N. Jounin’s study: “in everyday life, what descent (or skin color) are you considered?” However, since the question was an open one, it induced an unusual number of unexpected responses: 32% of respondents did not answer the question, or responded “French”, a fact which is (perhaps) revealing, but impossible to interpret, at any rate.

To circumvent this difficulty, we attempted to determine the respondents’ extraction on the basis of the categories used by the *Trajectoires et Origines* (Trajectories and Origins, TeO) survey conducted by the National Institute for Demographic Studies⁹. The idea was to differentiate the “majority group” (individuals residing in metropolitan France and who are neither offspring of aliens nor natives of a French overseas *département* – DOM – nor descendants of aliens or DOM natives) from “aliens” (individuals born foreign citizens in a foreign country) and “descendants of aliens” (individuals born in metropolitan France and at least one of whose parents is an alien). According to this method, “majority group” students represent 64% of the sample, aliens 6% and descendants of aliens 27%. We then dichotomized this variable, given the small number of aliens among these students: 33% of respondents are aliens or at least one of their parents is an alien (510 individuals). The main limitation of this method resides in the fact that our data provides no information on foreign origin beyond the second generation. It may be assumed, then, that the “majority” group includes students whose foreign descent goes back to earlier generations.

Other questions enabled us to determine how these students related to politics. They show that 91% of respondents claim they have no political involvement, whereas 5% are members of

a political party; 63% are “very” or “quite” interested in politics, 27% take “little” interest, 9% have no interest in politics. Last, 28% of students position themselves on the left, 28% with the right, 15% with the moderates and 21% “do not take sides”.

In N. Jounin’s study, lifestyles (evening outings, types of transportation used, etc.) constituted a variable linked with ID checks. In the present study a synthetic indicator of “sociability” was also constructed on the basis of questions pertaining to “going out in the evening” and “consumption of tobacco, alcohol, cannabis and other drugs”: 48% of respondents belong to the category labelled “moderate partygoers”, 26% were “not partygoers”, and 25% were “regular partygoers and multiple consumers”.

Following this presentation of our sample, let us see how the issue of relations with the police is perceived.

2. Representations and experience

To grasp attitudes toward the police forces, it is essential to go beyond the usual questions as to a good image of the police as well as to some vague measurement of trust and confidence: we attempted to do so by introducing a series of questions aimed at determining how these students perceive the police forces, along with others focusing more specifically on their recent experience.

2.1. Image, confidence, legitimacy, and fairness

In our survey, students have a good general image of the police and *gendarmerie* and a relatively high level of confidence in them. Indeed, 72% of students have a “good image” of the police and 80% a “good image” of the *gendarmerie*. Moreover, 73% of students claim to trust (definitely or relatively) the police and 79% the *gendarmerie*. The percentage of students who feel that the police forces (with no differentiation of police and *gendarmerie*) do a satisfactory job (relatively or definitely) is 68%.

Confidence in the police and *gendarmerie* is significantly higher than confidence in the tax administration (34%), the government (27%), the justice system (60%), the welfare system (*la sécurité sociale*) (61%) but lower than confidence in schools (81%), the university (85%) or the fire department (97%). In comparison with the Polis survey¹⁰ of secondary school students, the level of confidence is higher (66% for the police, 71% for the *gendarmerie* among high school students in the Polis study) and the structure of the findings differs (51% trust the government, 68% the justice system, 71% schools, 95% for universities).

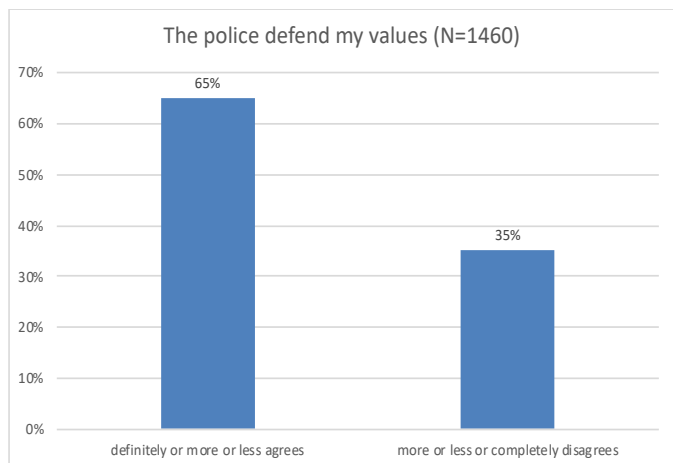
⁸ This proportion is 13% according to the National Survey of Students’ Living Conditions conducted in 2016 (http://www.ovenational.education.fr/medias/Fiche_sociodemo_CdV_2016.pdf).

⁹ Vincent Tibéri, Patrick Simon, Vie citoyenne et participation politique, in *Trajectoires et origines. Enquête sur la diversité des populations en France*. Paris, Ined, working paper 168, 2010, pp. 117-122.

¹⁰ Sandrine Astor, Sebastian Roché, *Enquête “POLIS-autorité” : Premiers résultats, op. cit*

These variations may be due to a differential in social status, the Polis sample group being more working class.

These opinions concerning the police may also be measured using indicators assessing the legitimacy of the police; that is, the belief that individuals who exert some authority do so justifiably. Two questions broached this issue in our questionnaire: 52% of students agree (definitely or more or less) with the phrase “you should always comply with orders from the police”, whereas 62% agree that “the police defend my values”.



The issue may be pursued further on the basis of judgments of the police expressed in terms of values. When students are asked whether they believe that the police respect the ideals of freedom, equality, and justice, the responses reveal a disconnection between “freedom” (67% of “yes”) and justice (67% of “yes”) on the one hand, and “equality” (31% of “yes”) on the other hand. Answers to the question on equal treatment point in the same direction: only 16% of respondents think that the police give everyone the same treatment, whereas 83% think that they treat people differently (34% depending on their gender, 59% depending on their social background, 76% depending on their descent and/or appearance, 43% depending on where they live and 1% depending on the context).

The police as an institution is perceived as much less equitable than some other public services (in our questionnaire, belief in equal treatment represents 65% for schools, 67% for the university, 91% for the government and 91% for the fire department). Those public services judged least equitable are the welfare system (36% think it treats everyone equally), the justice system (25%), the police, and last, the tax administration (15%). An interesting point is the absence of a clear connection between

the belief that an institution gives everyone the same treatment and the degree of trust: the administration is believed to grant “equal” treatment but is not trusted, the fire department is both fair and trusted, whereas the tax administration is neither fair nor trusted. These cross-tabulations, which should certainly be given further attention, point out a paradox, to which we return below: the police is believed to be a non-egalitarian institution, but one that benefits from a good image¹¹.

Would you say that police officers and gendarmes	%
everyone in the same way	16
people differently depending on (multiple answers allowed)	83
- their gender	34
- their social milieu	59
- their descent and/or appearance	76
- where they live	43
- the context	1

2.2. Contacts with the police

Forty-three percent of the 600 students questioned had had at least one contact with the police or the *gendarmerie* during the past 12 months. In addition, these contacts could be divided into direct experience and indirect ones (a story about interaction with the police forces told by someone they know well).

For those students who had at least one contact during the past 12 months, the most frequent situations were roadside checks (29%), solicitation of the police (filing a complaint or requesting action, 24%), ID checks (22%), and “other” (which embraces a very large range of experience). The latter group may be divided into those (59%) who were “subjected” to contact and 24% who “solicited” the contact¹².

We also measured the attitude of the police and the *gendarmerie*¹³ during the latest contact: 35% of students judged the attitude of the police to be polite during the last contact, as against 42% who felt it was neutral and 20% hostile. These judgments varied with the nature of the contacts. When the contact was solicited, police officers were felt to be polite in almost half of cases (48%) and hostile in only 12%. When the contact was not sought, only 29% of respondents judged the officers’ attitude polite, whereas 46% found it neutral and 25% hostile.

A person in their circle reported a police officer/gendarme being disrespectful	%
never	40
at least once	60
- once	31
- several times	28

A person in their circle reported physical violence by a police officer/gendarme	%
never	78
at least once	21
- once	13
- several times	8

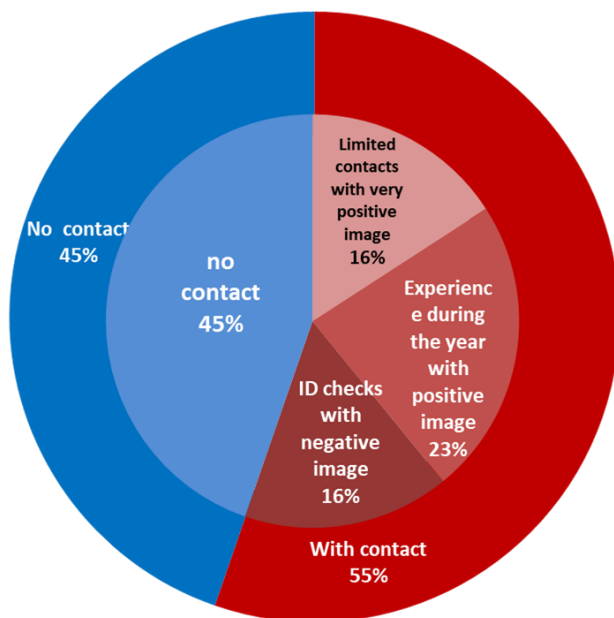
¹¹ The quantitative part of the survey on “Ordinary practices and representations of citizens with respect to the Administration (coordinated by Alexis Spire) based on the ELIPSS survey, covering a representative sample of the French population, yields the same result with respect to the police (Alexis Spire, Jérémie Gauthier, *Pratiques et représentations ordinaires de la police et de la justice en France*, Marc Bloch Center, Berlin, February 12, 2018).

¹² In the Escapad survey, 28% of 17-18 year-old Parisians reported they had undergone an identity check during the past year (Peaucellier, Sophie *et al*, *Identity Checks and Youthful Parisians*, quoted above).

¹³ The questions in this part do not differentiate between the police and the *gendarmerie*.

Some questions dealt with stories told by someone in their circle who reported that a police officer of a gendarme had lacked respect and/or exerted physical violence. Sixty per cent of respondents claim to have heard stories of lack of respect (31% only once and 28% on several occasions), as opposed to 21% for physical violence (including 13% once and 8% several times).

3. A typology of experience and opinions: what multivariate analyses tell us



For the simultaneous study of all variables and their possible mutual influence, we first conducted multiple correspondences analysis (MCA), followed by a typology of individuals based on the results of that MCA, via hierarchical cluster analysis, which places individuals in the most homogeneous possible groups on the basis of their resemblances.

A series of 21 variables affecting 1,501 individuals was subjected to this multivariate analysis:

- seven sociodemographic variables (gender, social status, urban sociability, apparent origin according to the INED classification, academic programme, political orientation);
- three variables for contact with the police (contact with or without ID check, reason for the contact, attitude of the police during the last check);
- nine variables for opinion of the police (confidence, image, equal treatment, reason for unfair treatment, satisfaction with police work);
- two variables for indirect experience (stories of police violence or of lack of respect told by someone in their circle).

Each group yielded by hierarchical cluster analysis corresponds to an average profile, drawn using the features most frequently shared by members of this group. The analysis brings out four profiles of students, which may be divided into two broad categories according to their experience with the police. On the one hand we have a group claiming to have had no contact and on the other hand three groups alleging various degrees of contact.

a) Individuals having had no contact with the police

All of the 671 individuals in this first group claim to have had no contact with the police during the 12 months prior to the survey. These students thought quite well of the police. They are significantly more trustful of the police than the average (77% vs an average of 73%) and are located within the average with 71% of satisfaction with police work. Furthermore, almost everyone in this group feels that the police treat people differently (98%), es-

pecially according to their appearance (88%), social milieu (67%) and neighbourhood where they live (49%). Thus, in spite of the absence of recent experience with the police, this group seems to have some a priori assumptions, although they were less exposed to stories about police violence (14% vs. 21% on the average) and disrespect (55% vs 60%).

These individuals with no experience include an above-average number of women (79% vs 72%), who do not or rarely go out in the evening (33% not at all vs. 27%, and 51% of moderate partygoers vs 48%) and who are enrolled in Health sciences (43% vs 33%). Like the average in our sample, students in this group are mostly well-to-do (46%), less than a third are middle class and a fourth are unprivileged. Almost two thirds of these individuals (62%) belong to the "majority group" category.

b) Individuals having had a contact with the police: three profiles

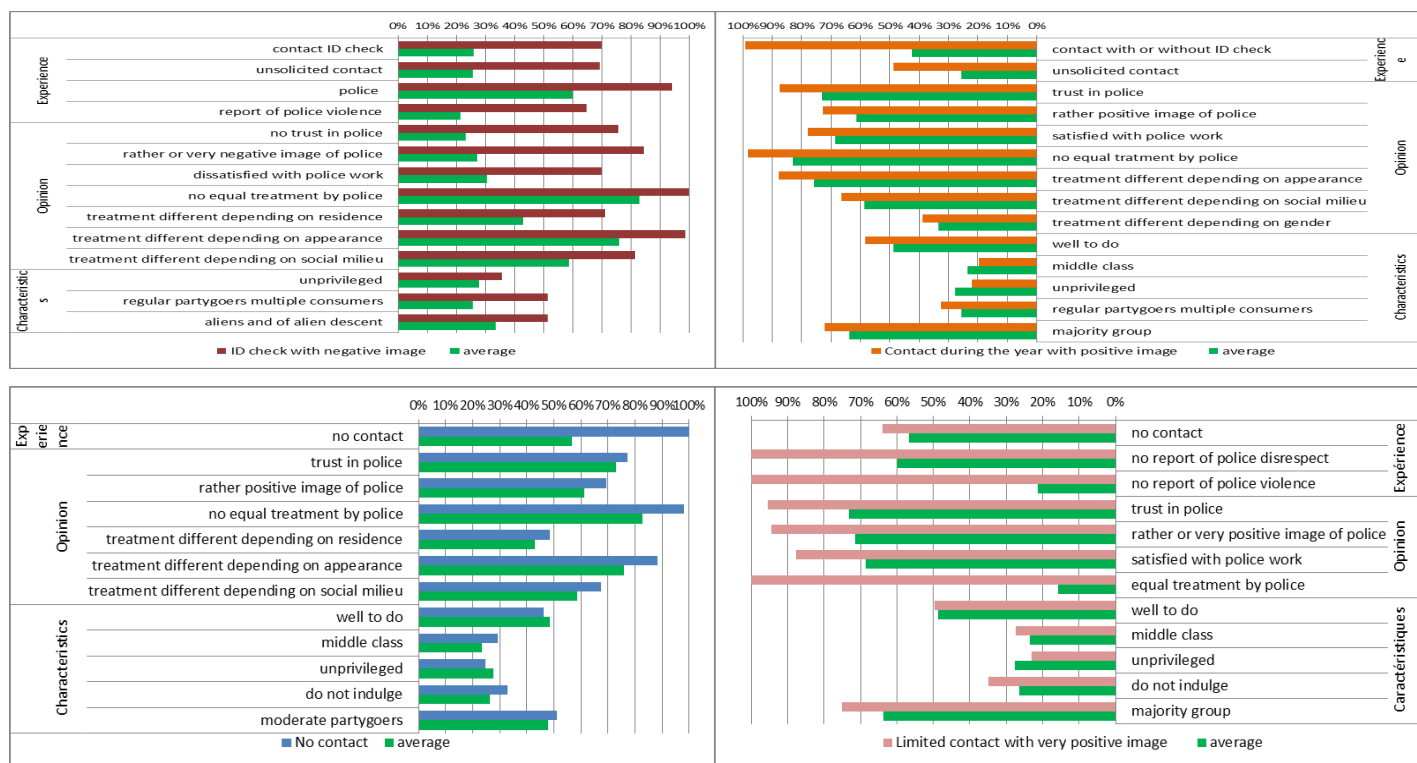
Our statistical operations brought out three other groups, composed of individuals who had been in contact within the year, and most of whom had undergone an ID check at some point in their life. While they have this experience in common, they differ with respect to other features (number of contacts and degree of confidence in particular), leading us to define three profiles: "limited contacts and very positive opinion", "experience in the past year and positive opinion", and "ID check with negative opinion".

The group with "limited contacts and a very positive image" (238 individuals), is mostly composed of individuals who report no contact (64%) with only 16% given a check. These individuals describe, more than average, a polite attitude (57% vs 35%) and claim to have a relatively (71% vs 61%) or very (23% vs 10%) positive image of the police. They also place great trust in the police (95% vs 73% on the average) and all viewed it as relatively fair.

The group with "experience in the past year and positive opinion" (349 individuals) contains those respondents who had at least one contact with the police during the last 12 months. 52% of them had undergone an ID check at some time in their life. Although an above average number finds the police usually polite (45% vs 35%) this is less true than for the previous group and the proportion of neutral attitudes is higher (44%). The proportion of individuals with a relatively positive image of the police is comparable to that of the previous group, but those with a very positive image is halved, whereas the proportion with a relatively negative perception triples. Almost all (98%) think that the police do not give everyone the same treatment, depending especially on appearance (88% vs an average of 76%) and social milieu (66% vs 59%). This group has not heard many stories of police violence (15%), but 60% report having heard talk about a lack of respect (as against 37% for "limited contact").

Last, the group with "ID check with negative opinion" (243 individuals) is mostly composed of individuals who had undergone an ID check at least once in their life (70% vs. an average of 26%). For this group, all of the indicators plummet. Compared to the average, politeness in the police is twice less frequent (8% vs. 15%), whereas an attitude described as hostile is multiplied by four (39% vs. 9%). Most individuals in this group have a relatively negative perception of the police (22% vs. 4%). Three-fourths of individuals in this group do not trust the police (76% vs. an average of 23%) and the latter also express definite dissatisfaction with the way they work (70% vs. 30% on the average). In addition, all believe that the police treat people differently depending on their appearance (99%), social milieu (81%), where they live (71%) or gender (55%). Unsurprisingly, we also find a very high proportion of stories of police violence (65% vs. 21% on the average) and of lack of respect (94% vs 60%).

While the groups with "limited contacts" and "experience during the year and a positive opinion" are mostly composed of women (respectively 68% and 72%), there is a significantly above-average number of men among those given an ID check (42% vs 28%), which is not surprising since we know that



men are overrepresented among individuals given ID checks. The distribution of social status in the group with "limited contact" is very similar to that of the group with "no contact", with 50% of well-to-do individuals. For "students with an experience during the year and a positive opinion" the proportion of wealthy individuals is significantly higher than average (58% vs 49%). Conversely, about 72% of the "ID check with a negative image" was middle class or unprivileged, the latter being significantly more frequent than the average, with a figure of 36% (vs 28%). Like those with "no contact", individuals in the "limited contacts" group tend not to go out in the evening (35% vs. an average of 27%) or only moderately often (50%). Those in the group "experience during the year and a positive opinion" and "ID checks with a negative opinion", in turn, had a much more festive profile: moderate and regular partygoers represent slightly over 80% of individuals in these two groups, and they also have an above-average tendency to belong to the category of regular partygoers and multiple consumers (respectively 33% and 51% vs 26% on the average). Last, the group with "ID checks and a negative opinion" also differs from the other groups in that it contains an above-average number of "alien or of alien descent" students (51% vs 33% on the average)¹⁴.

Conclusion

Our survey shows that students do not form a homogeneous group with respect to attitudes toward and experience with the police, in spite of the relatively privileged social status of our sample. Gender, social status, political positioning, type of academic programme, urban sociability and descent are linked to contrasting representations and experience with the police. We have defined four profiles, based on the individual's opinions, contacts with the police, sociodemographic features and life style:

individuals with no contact with the police ("no contact"), those with limited contacts but a very positive image, those with some contact during the year but with a positive image, and last, those who were in contact, often for an ID check, and who have a more negative perception of the police.

Above all, this study reveals a paradox: whereas attitudes toward the police forces are positive, on the whole, in terms of confidence and perception of the quality of their work, the police are widely viewed as acting unfairly, depending on a person's origin and/or appearance. This gap between trust and fairness, which requires elucidation, questions the postulates of the theory of procedural justice¹⁵ according to which confidence in the police and its legitimacy rest for a large part on perception of the fairness of procedures. To the contrary, students express a high degree of confidence in the police, on the whole, but at the same time they are convinced that officers treat people differently (depending, in descending order, on their descent and/or appearance, place of residency, social milieu, and last, their gender). This constitutes a path worth exploring so as to examine the issue of police legitimacy from a new angle.

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¹⁴ At this point, it is important to specify that multivariate analysis does not deal with any possible causal relationship between membership in a class and individual characteristics of respondents. Thus, our analysis is confined to noting that the proportion of students who are aliens or of alien descent is higher than average in the group with "ID checks and a negative opinion". As things stand, we cannot conclude as to the reasons for their over-representation in the latter group.

¹⁵ This approach, highly developed in English-speaking countries, is based on the idea that the legitimacy of the police is grounded in people's judgments on the fairness and quality of treatment by police officers. Trust and legitimacy then lead to a propensity to cooperate with the police.