

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Groomers and Trigger-Happy Thugs? Public Sector Stereotypes of Teachers and Police Officers

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Abstract

In an era where memes and social media cross national borders, stereotypes can jump from one country to another. We tested the level of support for two public sector stereotypes from the United States in one Canadian province. A representative sample of 3,510 Quebecers answered questions about their public sector stereotypes, for teachers ($n = 1,494$) and police officers ($n = 1,516$). Although the support for the teacher as a groomer and police officers as trigger-happy is lower and less polarized than in the original studies in the United States, the profiles of citizens who support these stereotypes are similar.

Sommaire

À l'époque où les mêmes et les réseaux sociaux font fi des frontières nationales, les stéréotypes se transmettent d'un pays à l'autre. Nous avons vérifié le niveau de soutien à deux stéréotypes du secteur public états-unien dans une province canadienne. Un échantillon représentatif de 3 510 Québécois a répondu à des questions au sujet des stéréotypes de leur secteur public, concernant les enseignants ($n = 1,494$) et les policiers ($n = 1,516$). Bien que l'adhésion au stéréotype que les enseignants sont des prédateurs et que les policiers ont la gâchette facile soit

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plus faible et moins polarisée que dans les études originales menées aux États-Unis, les profils des citoyens qui adhèrent à ces stéréotypes sont semblables.

INTRODUCTION

A decade ago, the Toronto-based *Financial Post* published an article titled “Civil servants are not born lazy—they learn it at work” (Watson, 2013). In 2018, *The Wall Street Journal* ran a piece called “My Lazy Summer as a Public Employee,” where the author described how public employees lounge throughout the day, meet minimal work requirements, and waste most of their time on the job (Riley, 2018). Indeed, numerous newspaper articles across countries perpetuate negative stereotypes about public sector workers. Public servants are negatively stereotyped in the popular media and political campaigns (Garrett et al., 2006; Van de Walle, 2004). Recent Canadian research recognizes this problem (Wranik et al., 2024, p.123).

The persistence of negative public sector worker stereotypes can have damaging consequences on three fronts. Firstly, direct effects are documented on the workers themselves, both in terms of their motivation and in their performance. Being subjected to negative stereotypes targeting one's occupation can decrease confidence and work morale (Chen & Bozeman, 2014). Negative job stereotyping is also associated with performance anxiety, decreased motivation for successful task performance, work disengagement, lower perceived task significance, and negative approaches towards clients (Wright & Pandey, 2008). Secondly, stereotyping can harm an employee's career development. Findings show that negative public sector stereotypes may decrease public sector workers' opportunities to transition from the public to the private sector (London Chamber of Commerce and Industry and Hays, 2011). Finally, they can also affect the government itself and its quality through retention and recruitment problems of high-skilled workers (Piereson & Riley, 2013). Thus, negative public sector stereotypes may harm public sector workers as well as the public sector, making it important to understand the mechanisms underlying their occurrence.

Yet, little is known about how and why these stereotypes exist. Therefore, this study asks the following question: *What factors affect public employee stereotyping?* More precisely, *does political affiliation, urban and college-educated compared to rural and non-college educated population subgroups, and trust towards community and occupations affect the stereotyping of public sector professions?*

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Stereotyping

Stereotypes are defined as beliefs about the characteristics, attributes, and behaviors of members of a specific group (Stallybrass, 1977). In recent years, there has been a surge in studying public sector worker stereotypes explicitly (Bertram et al., 2022; De Boer, 2020; Döring & Willems, 2021; Willems, 2020). These studies examine how the general population stereotypes public sector workers, without examining how do these differ based on various factors and between subgroups (notable exceptions, Bertram et al., 2022; Döring & Willems, 2021).

Research indicates that citizens hold diverse stereotypes of public employees, both positive and negative. Notably, in the U.S. and Canada, these stereotypes are predominantly positive, characterizing public employees as helpful, serving, responsible, and hardworking (Neo et al., 2024; Willems, 2020). Research reveals that negative stereotypes about public employees (e.g., lazy, overpaid, corrupt) persist, though less prevalent (Willems, 2020). Interestingly, citizens also hold contradictory views, seeing public employees as both overpaid and underpaid, hardworking and lazy, honest and corrupt, highlighting the diverse range of stereotypes that exist (Willems, 2020).

Yet, examining the media and political campaigns, negative stereotyping of public sector workers is an integrate norm of North American culture and media (Van de Walle, 2004). For instance, the perpetuated image of the “lazy bureaucrat” and general negative stereotyping of public employees has been a common characterization in TV entertainment for decades (Pautz & Warnement, 2013). It is also common to negatively bash public employees in political campaigns (Garrett et al., 2006), such as witnessed in the Ronald Reagan era or even more recently with Trump (Moynihan, 2021). It appears that negatively stereotyping or even having negative attitudes towards public employees is not “taboo” as for other social groups. For instance, in their qualitative study of 220 of Canadians front line public servants, Wake Carroll and Siegel (1999) devote a full chapter about how public servants cope with negative stereotypes, and how disparaging jokes on public servants are tolerated, writing

Not only is it acceptable to make jokes about public servants but people are allowed to discuss public servants in such sweeping terms and with such invective that if the same type of language were applied to another societal group, the speaker could be accused of fomenting hatred (p.181).

This discrepancy between the mostly positive stereotypes found in research and the cultural norm of negatively stereotyping public employees, alongside the contradictory stereotypes found in research, lead us to question what factors can help us explain positive and negative stereotyping of public employees.

Trust

Research shows that trust does impact perception (Lankton et al., 2014). However, limited research explores the association between trust and occupational stereotyping (notable exception, Hansen, 2021). Data, audits and testing have displaced trust in professionalism in professions, including policing and teaching. A teacher from an Australian suburb flesh out these concerns. Camila, a secondary teacher pleaded

(...) trust that the people you have employed are doing everything they can to do the very best for the students they've got. Stop assuming the worst and going to the lowest common denominator, therefore having an insistence on all this stuff that really takes away from what we are doing in the classroom and takes your really good people out of the system (...) (Daliri-Ngametua et al., 2022, 400).

Citizens' trust towards the government and its employees can be defined as the extent to which citizens believe public institutions and their employees are likely to act upon the best

interest of society and its members (Kim, 2010). The public employees with whom citizens have the most direct contact, street-level bureaucrats, are a target for citizen distrust and anger (Houston & Harding, 2013).

There are two core aspects on which people base their level of trust: perceived competence and perceived benevolence (Grimmelikhuijsen & Knies, 2015). Competence is the perception whether a public organization or institution has the skills and ability to fulfill its obligations to the public and includes traits such as capable, effective, skillful, and professional in decision-making (Grimmelikhuijsen & Knies, 2015). Benevolence is the perception whether a public organization has good intentions, meaning to keep citizens' best interest in mind (Grimmelikhuijsen & Knies, 2015).

Substantial evidence in social psychology advances that these same two dimensions underlie the judgement of groups and stereotyping (Cuddy et al., 2008). That is, we form stereotypes and perceptions based on ability (competence), including traits such as skill, efficiency, and capability, and based on intent or benevolence (warmth), including traits such as friendliness, helpfulness, and likeability. Examining recent findings about public employees stereotypes (Neo et al., 2024; Willems, 2020), we can observe that most fall into one of these categories. For instance, stereotypes such as knowledgeable, hardworking, responsible, and educated fall into the competence dimension, whereas stereotypes such as friendly, serving, helpful, and trustworthy fall into the warmth dimension.

A Community Context Model to Explain Public Trust

Trust towards public employees is strongly mediated by the neighborhood or community context. Decades of research have found that trust in the community plays a crucial role in shaping public trust in public institutions, such as the police (Bolger et al., 2021). Research shows community trust impacts perceptions of police officers and likely extends to other public sector employees. Higher social cohesion, quality of life, and collective efficacy correlate with increased trust in police. Conversely, social disorder, disadvantages, high crime rates, and fear of crime are associated with lower trust and support for law enforcement (Bolger et al., 2021; Weisburd et al., 2024; Yesberg et al., 2023). There is still no consensus on the direction of such relationship—is social cohesion antecedent or consequent to citizens' trust toward public employees such as police officers?—but it has been suggested that “collective efficacy may foster a culture of cooperation with the police” (Kwak & McNeeley, 2019, p. 601) and a shared willingness to consolidate public order and cohesion (Yesberg et al., 2023). Citizens' trust toward public institutions therefore strongly depends on where they live.

Previously neglected by many researchers, rurality (or geographic isolation) seems increasingly fundamental to the analysis of public opinion about public sector workers. In her longitudinal focus groups of 39 groups in 27 rural communities in Wisconsin diners and gas-station coffee spots, Cramer (2016) substantiates dim views of government from these residents. Public employees were discussed as “(1) lazy and undeserving, (2) inefficient bureaucrats, (3) recipients of exorbitant benefits and salaries paid with hard-earned taxpayer money, (4) guilty by association with the government, and (5) often represented by greedy unions” (Cramer, 2016, p.144). She adds that for rural Wisconsinites, public servants are seen as out of touch urbanites who are very much outsiders.

The rise of populism and ideological divides, especially in the United States, has placed tensions between rural and urban perceptions at the forefront of understanding social

fragmentation. Social fragmentation into conflicting “us” versus “them” identities severely hinders the democratic process (Fish & Abrams, 2020). However, the study’s general model may have overlooked important nuances. Strong correlations between trust and stereotypes might exist in some subgroups but not others, leading to mixed overall results. In contrast to the U.S. system—where the Senate and Electoral College structure largely favors rural areas (Mettler & Brown, 2022)—Canadian local institutions are designed with democratic criteria to address the urban nature and evolving needs of the population (Armstrong et al., 2022).

In addition to the marginalization and regional inequalities that have caused a social divide, the effects of globalisation are playing an important role in the reconsideration of rural areas (Wuthnow, 2019). Research has demonstrated an important educational gap between rural and urban areas (see Van Maarseveen, 2021). Yet, education was found to be related to levels of public confidence in public employees such as police officers (Kwak et al., 2012; McCarthy et al., 2023). In all, education levels have often been found associated with trust towards public institutions and civil servants (Charron & Rothstein, 2016; Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012; Houston et al., 2016). However, whether low/high education is associated with low/high trust depends on several factors, such as the quality of the government and corruption (Charron & Rothstein, 2016; Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012).

Rural populations are also often considered to be more conservative and less tolerant, in contrast to populations in large metropolises, which are considered to be progressive and liberal (Luca et al., 2023). Over time, Western democracies have shown this cleavage. Public sector workers should thus appeal differently to politically left-leaning and university-educated urban respondents and politically right-leaning and non-university-educated rural respondents.

CURRENT STUDY

Negative public sector worker stereotypes have been associated with damaging consequences on workers’ motivation, performance and career development, and ultimately, on the quality of government services. Still, little is known about the factors that may influence the existence and persistence of such stereotypes, particularly in a Canadian context. Using two major stereotypes about two public professions (i.e. teachers and police officers) from previous studies in the United States, this study asks the following question: *does political affiliation, urban and college educated compared to rural and non-college educated population subgroups, and trust towards community and occupations affect the stereotyping of public sector professions?* That choice to find stereotypes south of the border is motivated by Roberts’ (2024, p.22) observation that “Americans post messages on social media, and Canadians like, reply, and repost.”

Stereotype One: Teachers are Groomers

In the Spring of 2022, Data for Progress—a progressive American Think Tank—asked 1,155 likely voters about their support for transgender and LGBTQ individuals (Courier Newsroom/Data for Progress). One of the questions made the rounds in the media. The researchers asked respondents the following question.

Some groups have been describing teachers and parents who oppose banning discussion about sexual orientation or gender identity in schools as “groomers”—a

term used to describe someone who gets close to and builds trust with a child or young person with the intent of sexually abusing them. When thinking about this, which statement do you agree with?

The respondents could either answer “Teachers and parents that support discussions about sexual orientation and gender identity in schools are groomers” or “Teachers and parents that support discussions about sexual orientation and gender identity in schools are not groomers.” As a reporter stated (2022), even though 55% of total respondents in the survey rejected the “groomer” talk, using this term and other similar words has led to teachers and school board members being harassed (Vakil, 2022). We asked the same question to our representative sample of Quebecers. Telescoping from the American data and our literature review, we formulated three hypotheses on stereotype against teachers.

H1.1: Respondents that last voted for right-of-center parties would be more prone to overestimate and support the stereotype that teachers and parents that support discussions about sexual orientation and gender identity in schools are groomers.

H1.2: The proportion of individuals holding stereotypes against a female-dominated profession necessitating a four-year university would be higher among non-college educated rural residents compared to college-educated urban residents.

H1.3: Respondents who demonstrate high level of trust in their community and teachers would be less prone to overestimate and support the stereotype that teachers and parents that support discussions about sexual orientation and gender identity in schools are groomers.

Stereotype Two: Police Officers Often Use their Firearms

In early 2021, two researchers from the Skeptic Research Center, better known from another venture of that nonprofit—Skeptic magazine—reported on the findings of a survey from the Civil Unrest and Presidential Election Study (CUPES) which questioned 980 Americans with declared political orientations (McCaffree & Saide, 2021). In their report covered by news agencies, the authors asked all respondents “How many unarmed Black men were killed by police in 2019?” Participants had five multiple choice options to chose from (around 10, 100, 1000, 10 000 and more than 10 000). Only 15.7% and 22.4% of respondent describing themselves as “very Liberal” and “Liberal” chose the estimation in the right order of magnitude. More than 20% and 12% of “very Liberal” and “Liberal” respondents overestimating the right numbers by a factor of 1,000 or more than 1,000, while much fewer “conservative” and “very conservative” respondents did the same. In Quebec, across all law enforcement agencies, the 15 000 or so police officers collectively discharged their firearms 84 times from 2016 to 2019 (an average of 21 per year). In 2019, the most recent year available, firearms were discharged 16 times in total across all police officers in the province (Ministère de la Sécurité publique, 2020). We asked a similar question with the data from Quebec, but the answering options followed the same orders of magnitude than the American question, without being as sensitive. As such, in the context of a Canadian province, we expected that:

H2.1: Respondents that last voted for left-of-center parties would be more prone to overestimate and support the stereotype that police officers often use their firearms.

H2.2: When it comes to college-educated urbanites and non-college educated rural dwellers, we expected that the share of the population harboring a stereotype against a blue-collar profession to be lower for non-college educated rural respondents than for college-educated urban respondents.

H2.3: Respondents who demonstrate high level of trust in their community and the police would be less prone to overestimate and support the stereotype that police officers often use their firearms.

METHODS

Design and Procedure

Respondents were reached out to by Léger, a research and analytics firm, with data collection occurring from March 21st to April 9th, 2023. To ensure the survey responses were from humans and not bots, a reCAPTCHA test was included.

Participants were first introduced to the study and asked for consent. Then they were presented with sociodemographic questions, randomized towards questions either on police officers or teachers, and presented with questions about stereotyping, interpersonal and community trust, experiences with the government and police or teachers, and some final socio-demographic questions. All questions had forced responses. Participants who did not provide consent to the study were redirected to terminate the survey.

Sample

We had 3510 participants (for the teachers' stereotype: $n = 1494$, for the police stereotype: $n = 1516$) from one Canadian province. Data collection was part of another project (pre-registration and full survey available at https://osf.io/9247w/?view_only=2944611066f44616a2348e6a72b95ebe), and therefore power calculations for the sample size of this survey were based on this project. All participants were above 18 years old. They all provided consent.

The sample is composed of 49.7% women; the mean age was between 45 and 54. It matches population quotas as presented in Table 1. That is, the sample is mostly representative in terms of age, gender, and region of population of Quebec. Nonetheless, we did not achieve a perfect quota match. Young people (18-24) are underrepresented by 5.5 percentage points and there is an over-representation of 55+ years old population by 5 percentage points. We did not control for it in our analyses. We do not deem this difference to be substantial enough to meaningfully impact our findings. Given that the sample remains largely aligned with the general population and there is no strong reason to expect systematic bias from these discrepancies, we deemed weighting unnecessary.

MEASURES

We assessed various sociodemographic factors of interest, including age, gender, region of residence (rural, suburban, urban), highest education level completed, personal experiences with government and teachers/police (positive or negative), trust in the government, interpersonal trust, political views (party voted for in the last provincial elections), employment sector, years of residency in Canada, ethnicity, and income.

TABLE 1 Sample Representativeness.

Category	Sample (%)	General population (%)
Sex		
Female	49.7	49.7
Male	50.3	50.3
Age		
18-24	9.1	14.6
25-34	14.8	16.6
35-44	15.1	15.8
45-54	14.4	15.5
55+	46.5	37.5
Region		
Abitibi	1.1	1.71
Bas Saint-Laurent	1.9	2.3
Capitale nationale	8.6	8.9
Centre du Quebec	2.7	3
Chaudiere-Appalaches	4.3	5.11
Cote Nord	0.6	1.1
Estrie	5.7	5.8
Gaspesie	0.8	1.1
Lanaudiere	5.8	6.3
Laurentide	5.9	7.6
Laval	4.3	5.2
Mauricie	2.9	3.3
Monteregie	14.9	17
Montreal	9.3	23.5
Nord du Quebec	0.2	0.54
Outaouais	4.1	4.7
Saguenay Lac Saint-Jean	2.6	3.3

Stereotyping

For both occupations, we used a one-item question to assess generalized beliefs.

Teacher stereotyping. We asked participants: “Some groups have described teachers and parents who oppose the ban on discussions of sexual orientation or gender identity as ‘groomers’—a term used to describe someone who approaches a child or young person and

establishes a trusting relationship with them for the purpose of sexual abuse. Thinking about it, which statement do you agree with?" Participants had two choices of answer: (1) teachers and parents who support discussions about sexual orientation and gender identity in school are "groomers," and (2) teachers and parents who support discussions about sexual orientation and gender identity in school are not "groomers."

Police stereotyping. We asked participants: "If you had to make an estimate, how many times in a normal year did the more than 14 000 police officers in the province of Quebec have to use their firearms?" Participants had the choice between these following answers: (a) around 15, (b) around 150, (c) around 1500, (d) around 15 000, (e) more than 15 000.

Trust

General trust towards the profession. We used a one-item measure of trust for both occupations. Most large international surveys widely used in research (OECD, ISSP, Pew research center) and a large body of literature about trust towards civil servants use only a one-item question to measure trust towards civil servants (Van Ryzin, 2011). Therefore, we have incorporated a direct measure of trust towards police officers and teachers, asking respondents to rate on a five-point Likert-scale (1- strongly agree and 5- strongly disagree): "How much do you trust [police officers/high school teachers] to do the right thing?"

Community trust. We used the Neighborhood Social Capital Trust Scale (Duke et al., 2012). The scale has four questions with a four-point Likert scale (disagree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree, agree).

Trust towards teachers. Scale of Perception of Sexual Abuse in Youth Sports SPSAYS (Baker & Byon, 2014). We have adapted this scale to by changing the word "coach" to "teachers" and "youth sport" to "students." We have adapted three of the four dimensions. The scale measures perceptions of prevalence (intentions), influence, and likelihood (capabilities) of teachers in terms of sexual abuse. Participants rate on a five- point Likert-scale (1- strongly agree and 5- strongly disagree).

Although this scale is not a direct measure of trust, it is related to trust. Citizens' trust towards institutions and their employees can be defined as the extent to which citizens have confidence in public institutions and their employees to act upon the best interest of society and its members (Houston et al., 2016). Perceiving risk for children in terms of sexual abuse demonstrates a lack of trust. Trust has two core elements: competence (capabilities) and benevolence (intentions), which this scale measures (Grimmelikhuijsen & Knies, 2015).

Trust towards police. We used the 12 item Perceptions of Police Scale (PoPS) (Nadal & Davidoff, 2015). The scale was developed to assesses broad perceptions of trustworthiness and fairness of police officers by community members. The PoPS covers two dimensions: general attitudes toward the police (where a higher score indicates a favorable opinion) and perceptions of police bias (where a lower score indicates a belief in impartial treatment from officers). Participants rate the items on a five-point Likert-scale (1- strongly agree and 5- strongly disagree).

LIMITATIONS

Caution is needed when interpreting the upcoming findings due to the cross-sectional nature of our study and small effect sizes. We examine only a few isolated cues, while citizens use many to judge public sector workers. Stereotype development is complex, with non-linear causal

relationships (Bertram et al., 2022). Future experimental research will be needed. Our results may be specific to our national context, as stereotypes about public sector workers could vary across countries or regions within Canada (Neo et al., 2024).

Additionally, another limitation to be mindful of relates to self-selection bias, which can be a concern in survey experiments. Participants in online panels may not fully represent the general public—despite weighting efforts and recruiting a well-regarded polling firm—as not everyone is willing to participate in such panels. To mitigate this, we used quotas based on sex, age, and region to ensure that our sample approximated the population distribution for these factors.

FINDINGS

Stereotype One: Teachers are Groomers

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of the prevalence of perceiving teachers as groomers in our Canadian sample and in the American sample of Courier Newsroom/Data for Progress (2022), differentiated by partisan leaning. Similar to the results of Courier Newsroom/Data for Progress (2022), regardless of partisan leaning, most of our respondents believe that teachers and parents who support discussions about sexual orientation and gender identity in schools are not groomers. However, this proportion is much higher in our Canadian sample (84.2% in QC vs 55% in U.S.), depicting a weaker support for the stereotype. Table 2 also shows that there is an over-representation of the support for the “teachers as groomers” stereotype among politically right-leaning respondents in Quebec (31.5% for the PCQ vs. 15.8% for the total sample), just like in the U.S (45% for Republicans vs 29% for the total sample). This *supports our Hypothesis 1.1* that respondents that last voted for right-of-center parties would be more prone to overestimate and support the stereotype that teachers and parents that support discussions about sexual orientation and gender identity in schools are groomers.

However, here again, support for such stereotype appears much lower among Quebec politically right-leaning respondents than in the sample from Courier Newsroom/Data for Progress (2022). Data fragmentation along partisan leaning additionally reveals that opinions among left-of-center and right-of-center supporters or voters seem much less polarized in Quebec than they appear in the United States. For example, in the U.S., 30 percentage points separate the proportion of people who support the “teachers as groomers” stereotype among Democrats and Republicans, while only 15.2 percentage points separate the same prevalence for QS (left-wing party) and PCQ (right-wing party) supporters. A similar pattern can also be observed from the comparison of prevalence of perceiving that teachers and parents who support discussions about sexual orientation and gender identity in schools are not groomers along partisan leaning.

Figure 1 sets forth descriptive results of the support for the “teachers as groomers” stereotype, differentiated by four sociodemographic factors of interest, i.e. general trust, trust in neighbours, highest education level completed and region of residence, and political leaning. It shows that respondents with low or high general trust share some similar level of support for the stereotype ($\approx 15\%$). Similarly, urban and suburban college graduates, rural residents without university degree and respondents who fall into neither of these 2 categories (“others”) have comparable stereotype support rates ($\approx 16\%$), *refuting our initial hypothesis 1.2*. However,

TABLE 2 U.S. vs one Canadian province comparisons on the prevalence of perceiving teachers as groomers, along partisan leaning.

Teacher stereotype question	United States				Quebec						
	Total	(D)	(I)	(R)	Total	QS	PQ	PLQ	CAQ	PCQ	Did not vote
...are groomers	29%	15%	24%	45%	15.8% (221)	16.3% (27)	11.4% (21)	21.0% (41)	12.2% (56)	31.5% (35)	83.7% (41)
... are not groomers	55%	70%	60%	37%	84.2% (1232)	86.1% (186)	88.6% (169)	79.5% (159)	87.9% (424)	68.4% (76)	16.3% (218)
Don't Know/missing	16%	14%	15%	18%	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
	April 12th-17th 2022 of 1,155 likely U.S. voters				March 21st-April 9th 2023 of 1,494 Quebecers						

Note: (D) = Democratic party, (I) = Independent, (R) = Republican party, QS = Québec Solidaire (left-wing), PQ = Parti Québécois (center-left), PLQ = Parti Libéral du Québec (center-right), CAQ = Coalition Avenir Québec (center-right), PCQ = Parti Conservateur du Québec (right-wing)¹ (see Bélanger & Godbout, 2022 for more details about ideological cleavages the party system in Quebec), *Source:* Courier Newsroom/Data for Progress (2022) on the left, and our data on the right

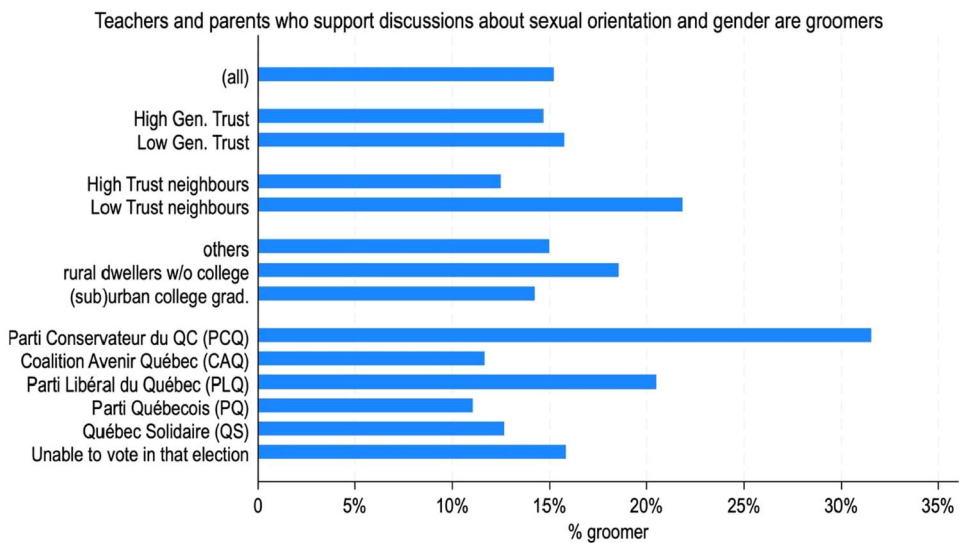


FIGURE 1 Descriptive statistics of support for a “teachers as groomers” stereotype, by general trust, trust in neighbors, education & place of residence, and political leaning.

Figure 1 shows a major difference in the support for the “teachers as groomers” stereotype between respondents with high trust ($\approx 12.5\%$) and low trust ($\approx 22\%$) in their neighbours. Such discrepancy is worth further investigation on the importance of different types of trust as predictors of believing that teachers and parents that support discussions about sexual orientation and gender identity in schools are groomers.

Figure 2 features the results of logit regression analyses for five independent variables related to types of trust (i.e. General trust, Trust in neighbours, and Prevalence, Influence and Likelihood measures which are factors of risk perception associated with the child/youth sexual abuse threats posed by teachers). Purple lines on each side of the purple dot indicate the confidence interval of the estimate (the purple dot) of the effect of this variable, once the four other ones are taken into consideration. A purple line that touches the black dotted line means that it is not different from zero (not statistically significant).

Overall, the model is statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 49.43$, $p < 0.00$). It shows that three out of five predictors are statistically significant. General trust and media influence of the perception of sexual abuse threat posed by teachers to child/youth (SPSAYS_Influence) were not significant predictors of support for the “teachers as groomers” stereotype. However, both perceptions about the prevalence of sexual abuse committed by teachers (SPSAYS_Prevalence) and the likelihood that a particular profile of teacher is a groomer (SPSAYS_Likelihood) are shown to be significant in the regression analysis ($p < 0.01$). Both variables are similarly positively associated with support for the stereotype (Prevalence odds ratio (OR) = $e^{0.2884086} = 1.3343$; Likelihood OR = $e^{0.2979315} = 1.3471$). Trust in neighbours is also the strongest statistically significant predictor of support for such stereotype ($p < 0.00$). People with a high level of trust in neighbours are about twice less likely to show some support for the “teachers as groomers” stereotype (OR = $e^{-0.7407325} = 0.4768$), which *partially support our hypothesis 1.3*.

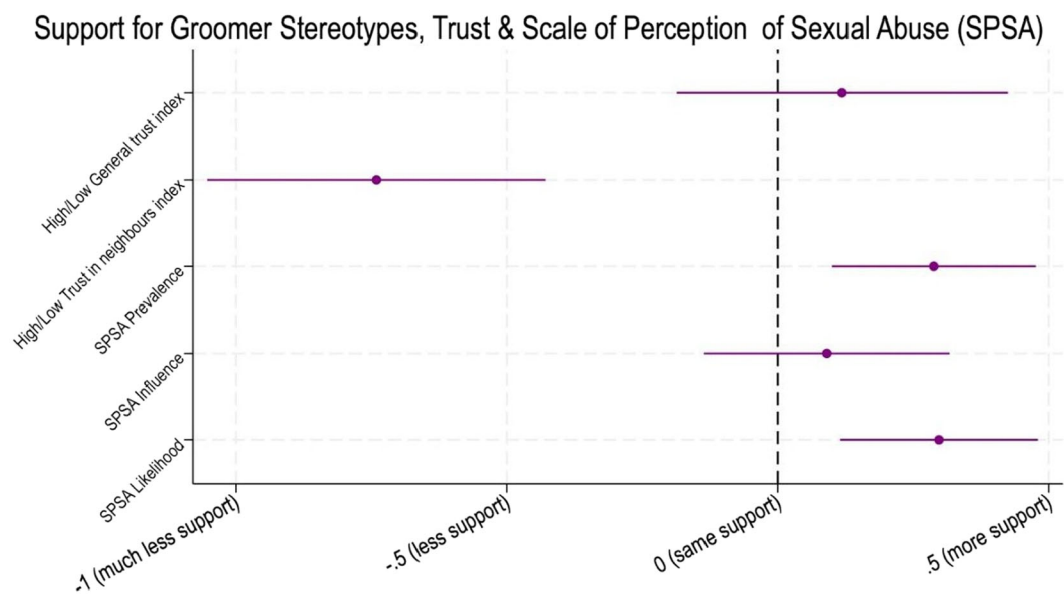


FIGURE 2 Average Coefficients after a Logit Regression of Support for the “teachers as groomers” Stereotype, Along Some Types of Trust.

Stereotype Two: Police Officers Often Use their Firearms

Figure 3 shows the proportion of (over)estimation of Quebecers about police officers using their firearms, differentiated by partisan leaning along with the results of the U.S. study from McCaffree and Saide (2021). Our findings shows that the distribution of respondents across the five proposed estimations of police officers using their firearms is relatively consistent regardless of partisan leaning, except for respondents who voted for “Québec Solidaire.” For all the other political orientations, the most popular estimation is around 150 occurrences yearly of police officers using their firearms (between 41.38% and 45.04%). The number of respondents who estimated this number to be around 15 occurrences (between 21.15% and 29.60%) or around 1,500 (between 18.83% and 29.81%) is also relatively similar among all political orientations if we exclude voters for “Québec Solidaire.” “Québec Solidaire” supporters, who are furthest to the left of the political spectrum, are thus a little distant from other respondents when it comes to their estimation of occurrence of police officers using their firearms. It is the only partisan leaning where the most popular estimation is 1,500 times a year (37.44%), *supporting our hypothesis 2.1* that respondents that last voted for left-of-center parties would be more prone to overestimate and support the stereotype that police officers often use their firearms.

Our results may be consistent with findings from the U.S. study from McCaffree and Saide (2021) since highly exaggerated estimations (around 15 000 or more) are rare, but they still depict major differences regarding the prevalence of a “police officers as trigger-happy” stereotype. In our sample, we do not observe as many differences in (over)estimation based on political orientation of respondents. Polarization of opinions seems less pronounced in Quebec than in the U.S., even when comparing left-of-center and right-of-center partisan leaning. No political orientation showed a majority of supporters believing the lowest occurrence of police

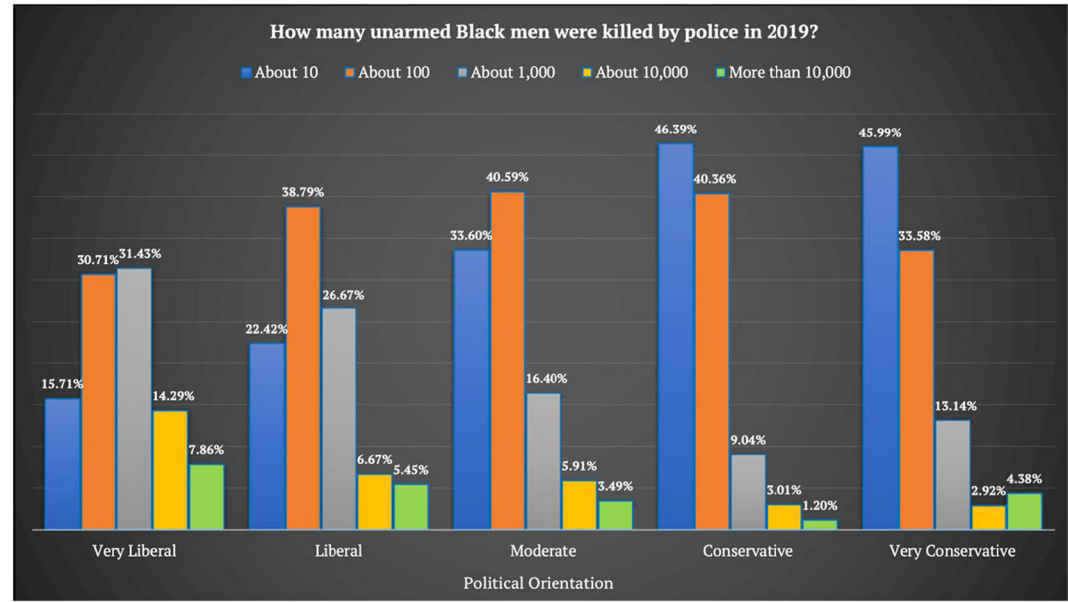
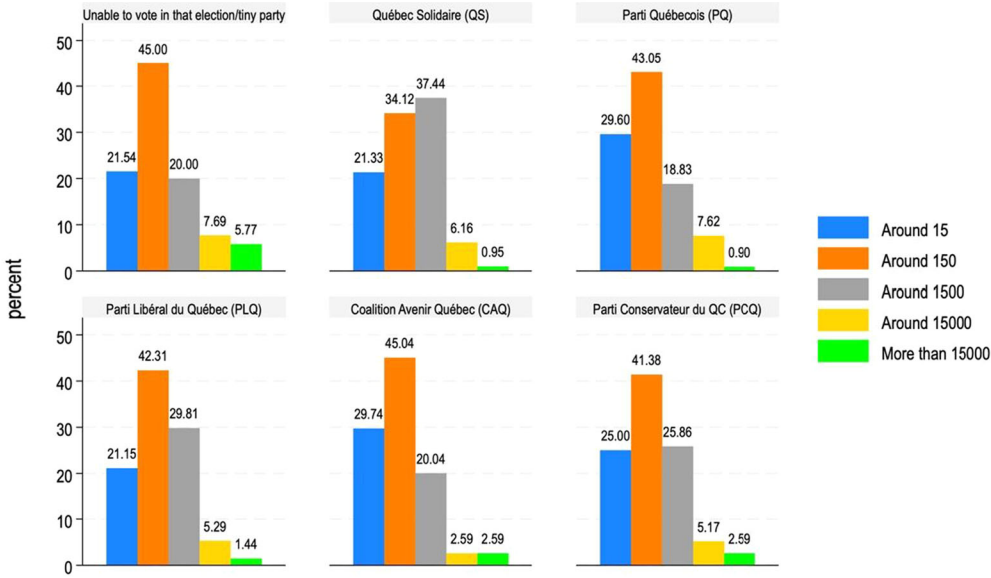


FIGURE 3 Proportion of (over)estimation of Quebecers about Police officers using their firearms, vs (over) estimation Americans of Unarmed Black Men killed by Police. *Source:* Our data on top; McCaffree and Saide (2021) at the bottom.

officers using their firearms (around 15) to be truthful, despite it being the correct estimation. In the study from McCaffree and Saide (2021), most conservative voters did correctly estimate the occurrence of police officers using their firearms. Finally, it is also surprising to note that among respondents who were unable to vote, and who voted for a tiny party, the “Coalition Avenir Québec” or the “Parti Conservateur du Québec,” there is a substantial overrepresentation of people believing that police officers use their firearms more than 15 000 in

a year (i.e. respectively 5.77%, 2.59% and 2.59%). While still being less than what McCaffree and Saide (2021) found in the U.S., it is between 2.9 and 6.4 times more that the proportion among other partisan leaning.

Comparing opinions according to respondents' education and place of residence, Figure 4 shows that there is not much difference between the (over)estimations of police officers using their firearms from urban and suburban college graduates' estimations, and rural residents without university degree and other respondents who do not fit into either of these two groups. All three groups show similar distributions among the five estimations proposed and tend to overestimate by a factor of 10 the number of times police officers use their firearms in a year. Such findings thus *refute our initial hypothesis 2.2* that college-educated urbanites would harbor stronger support for the stereotype against a blue-collar profession.

Finally, Figure 5 sets forth the results of logit regression analyses for four independent variables related to types of trust (i.e. General trust, Trust in neighbours, General attitude toward police and Perceptions of police bias). Blue lines on the side of the blue dot indicate the confidence interval of the estimate (the blue dot) of the effect of that variable, once the three other ones are taken into account. A blue line overlapping the black dotted line means that it is not different from zero (not statistically significant).

Among those, only the level of trust in neighbours has shown to be a statistically significant predictor of support for the “police officers as trigger-happy” stereotype ($\rho < 0.05$). People with a high level of trust in neighbours are about 26.5% less likely to show some support for such a stereotype ($OR = e^{-0.23557255} = 0.7901$). Such findings *partially support our hypothesis 2.3*.

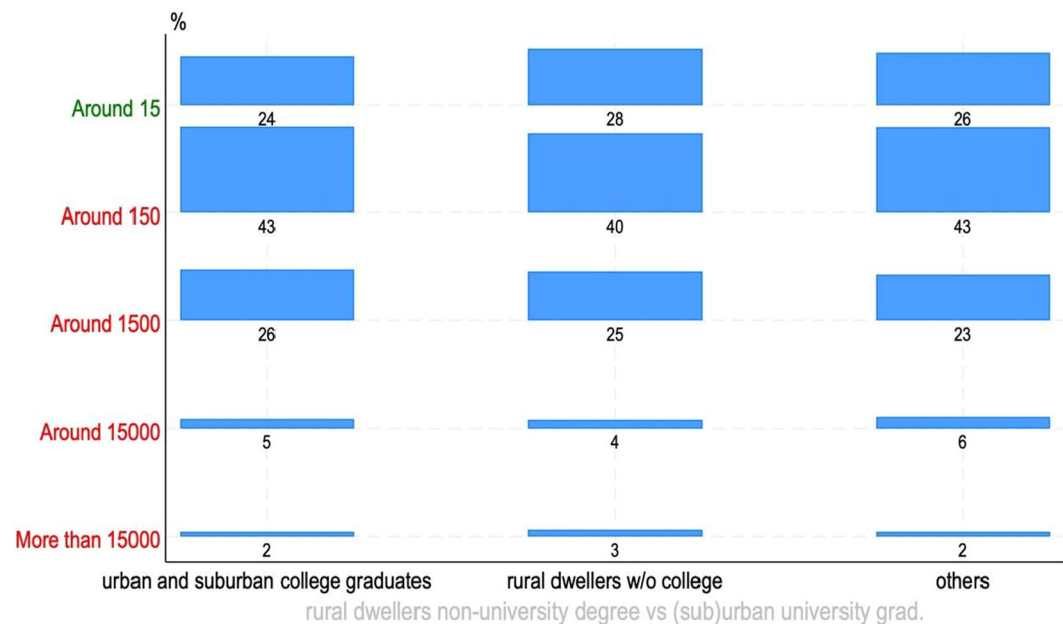


FIGURE 4 Descriptive statistics of (over)estimation of Quebecers about Police officers using their firearms, along education and place of residence.

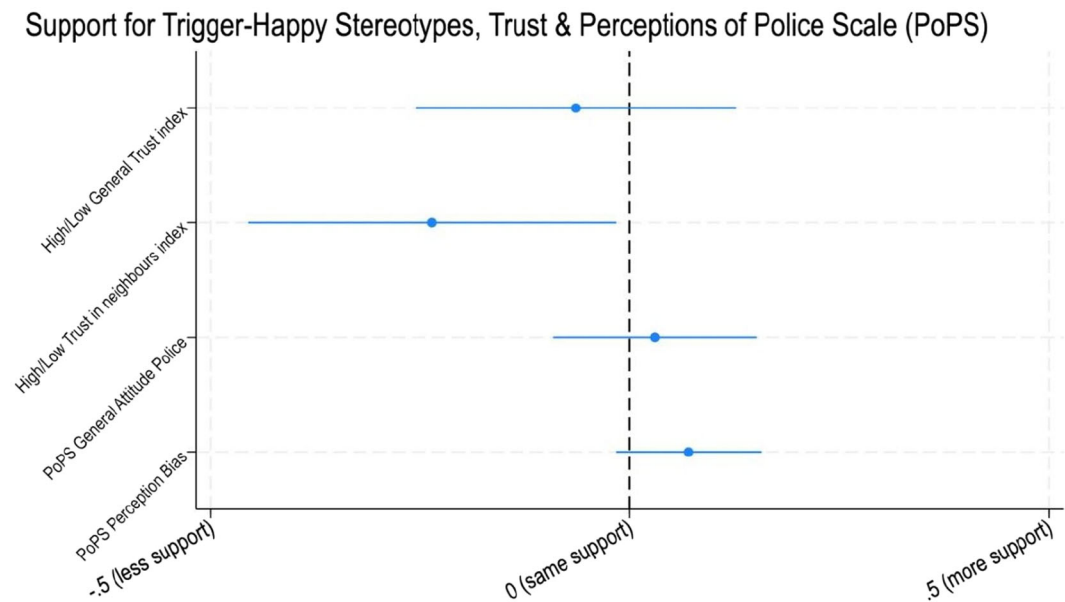


FIGURE 5 Average Coefficients after an Ordered Logit Regression of Support for the Trigger-Happy Stereotype, Along Some Types of Trust.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Our study aimed to test the level of support for two public sector stereotypes, namely the “teachers as groomers” stereotype and the “police officers as trigger-happy” stereotype, in one Canadian province. More specifically, we investigated how political orientation, education and place of residence, and trust in community and general trust would shape level of support for both stereotypes.

Teachers and the “Groomer” Stereotype

Our study found that political affiliation significantly influenced support for the “teachers as groomers” stereotype. Respondents who voted for right-of-center parties were more likely to endorse the stereotype that teachers who support discussions on sexual orientation and gender identity in schools as groomers, while those who voted for left-of-center parties were slightly less likely to support this stereotype. Additionally, trust in community was also a key factor in shaping attitudes towards teachers. Respondents who had higher trust in their neighbors were significantly less likely to endorse the stereotype of teachers as groomers. However, in terms of rural/urban differences, we did not find evidence to support rural-urban polarization for the “teachers as groomers” stereotype.

Lastly, perceptions of the frequency of sexual abuse by teachers and the likelihood that certain types of teachers could be considered groomers—based on the “Scale of Perception of Sexual Abuse in Youth Sports” (SPSAYS) (Baker & Byon, 2014)—were also important factors influencing support for the “teachers as groomers” stereotype. People who had more trust in

teachers were less likely to believe in this stereotype. For practical purposes, our findings suggest that leaders in education and public policy can improve public trust in teachers by focusing not just on their skills and qualifications, but also on creating positive and warm interactions with students, parents, and the community. By promoting an approach that emphasizes both competence and kindness, they could help build stronger, more trusting relationships with the public.

Police Officers and the Trigger-Happy Stereotype

Our findings suggest that support for the “police officers as trigger-happy” stereotype is very similar to the support for the “teachers as groomers” stereotype. Political affiliation also influenced support for the “police officers as trigger-happy” stereotype. Respondents who voted for right-of-center parties were more likely to endorse the stereotype that police officers often use their firearms, while those who voted for left-of-center parties showed a slightly lower tendency to support this stereotype. Moreover, trust in the community played a significant role in shaping views on police officers. Respondents who had higher trust in their neighbors were less likely to support the “trigger-happy” stereotype. Lastly, when considering rural/urban differences, we found no significant variation in the level of support for the stereotype between urban and suburban college graduates and rural dwellers without a university degree.

Discussion of Results Across Factors

Political affiliation emerged as a key factor that plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of public sector workers and influencing how citizens view professions like teaching and policing. Political orientation has become a key feature of the socio-demographic climate and, given its omnipresence in socio-political discourse today (Jung et al., 2019), it is not surprising to observe such trends. These findings align with previous studies (e.g., Courier Newsroom/Data for Progress, 2022; McCaffree & Saide, 2021), although we observed less polarization between political ideologies in Canada compared to the U.S. This indicates that while political affiliation remains a driving force, there is less social fragmentation between opposing political ideologies in Canada (Fish & Abrams, 2020).

Despite expectations based on previous research (Mettler & Brown, 2022), we did not find significant rural-urban polarization in either stereotype. The levels of support for both occupational stereotypes were largely consistent across urban, suburban, and rural areas, irrespective of education level. This finding suggests that rural-urban divides may not be as pronounced as anticipated in Canada, and that other factors, such as political orientation and trust, might play a more central role in shaping these perceptions. Further research is needed to explore how education, place of residence, and other socio-demographic factors interact in influencing public sector stereotypes (e.g. were urban and suburban college graduates in our sample much more progressive and rural dwellers without university degree more conservative, as suggested by Luca et al., 2023).

Finally, trust in the community was a common factor in shaping attitudes towards both occupations. This indicates that a stronger sense of community trust and belonging is associated with more positive perceptions of public sector workers. Our results highlight the importance of community cohesion in shaping public attitudes toward public sector workers.

The relationship between community trust and stereotype endorsement is crucial, as it suggests that fostering trust and a sense of connection within communities could help mitigate negative stereotypes about public sector workers. Further research should explore whether this effect holds when considering other variables, such as age or socioeconomic status (Statistics Canada, 2023). Additionally, the perception of safety in a community, as shaped by factors like crime rates and neighborhood characteristics (Lai & Zhao, 2010), may also influence public sector perceptions.

CONCLUSION

In 2009, Paul Thomas (2009) repeatedly acknowledged the corrosive effects of stereotypes but stated that “it would be melodramatic and an exaggeration to argue that Canada's public sector is facing a crisis of trust” (236). Less than two decades later, unfounded rumors that originated in the United States about overly aggressive police officers and predatory teachers have gained traction in the Canadian province we surveyed.

The stereotype about schoolteachers almost a hundred years ago was that they were harsh and forbidding (McGill, 1931:650). Teamed up with overestimating police use of force by a factor of 100 or 1000, that is quite an escalation. Our study explored the level of support for two public sector stereotypes, namely the “teachers as groomers” stereotype and the “police officers as trigger-happy” stereotype, in one Canadian province.

Although the support for both stereotypes is lower and less polarized in our sample than in the original studies in the United States (Courier Newsroom/Data for Progress, 2022; McCaffree & Saide, 2021), our findings demonstrate that political profiles of citizens who support these stereotypes are similar. This exposes Canadian public servants to negative views that can be detrimental to their motivations and performances and their career development (Chen & Bozeman, 2014). However, our results showed that trust in neighbours or in the profession (for teachers), could help reduce the degree of support for these stereotypes. There is thus an interesting opportunity for public leaders to build trust and try to reduce the prevalence of these public sector stereotypes.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data is available on OSF.

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ENDNOTE

- ¹ See Bélanger and Godbout (2022) for more details about ideological cleavages the party system in Quebec.

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