

AMERICANS OF ITALIAN DESCENT

A Study of Public Images, Beliefs, and
Misperceptions

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

National Public Opinion Research for
Commission for Social Justice
Order Sons of Italy in America

Response Analysis Corporation
Princeton, New Jersey

January 1991

©Commission for Social Justice, Order Sons of Italy in America

This publication, Americans of Italian Descent, A Study of Public Images, Beliefs, and Misperceptions, National Public Opinion Research prepared for and at the direction of the Commission for Social Justice, Order Sons of Italy in America, (hereinafter "CSJ) by Response Analysis Corporation, Princeton New Jersey together with all of the Detailed Tabulations, is the sole and exclusive property of the CSJ and said Publication, together with the Detailed Tabulations as above set forth, is protected under the Copyright Laws of the United States and other countries.

This Publication and the Detailed Tabulations may only be used for such purposes as are designated from time to time by the CSJ and other than such designated purposes all other rights are reserved by the copyright owner of the Publication and the Detailed Tabulations.

Any copying by any means of all or any part of such Publication and/or the Detailed Tabulations or the unauthorized use in any way whatsoever of said Publication and/or the Detailed Tabulations is strictly prohibited and may subject the offender to civil liability and severe criminal penalties pursuant to the provisions of Title 17 U.S. Code § § 501 and 506.

INTRODUCTION

1. Principal Objectives

- To assess the attitudes of adults nationwide toward Americans of Italian descent and other selected subgroups of the population.
- To determine the degree to which both favorable and unfavorable images of Italian-Americans are prevalent in the population.
- To evaluate the impact of negative stereotyping and its likely effect on the self-image, well-being, opportunities, and position of Italian-Americans.
- To provide objective information to assist the CSJ in its communications with the general public, the media, and Italian-Americans.
- To indicate -- by inference -- the basis for media stereotypes of Italian-Americans and the ways that the media reinforce existing perceptions and misperceptions.

2. Procedure and Acknowledgements

This study is based on interviews with a projectable national cross section of 1,000 adults, who were interviewed from the Response Analysis Telephone Center during July - September 1990.

Response Analysis designed the study, constructed and pretested the interviews, trained and supervised interviewers, carried out data preparation, and prepared a report of the findings.

The design utilized techniques and interviewer training to ensure the validity of responses to potentially sensitive issues, issues to which respondents could indicate negative as well as positive attitudes toward ethnic groups.

A steering committee of the CSJ reviewed the research design, the questionnaires, and the findings and provided many useful suggestions: Gabriel L.I. Bevilacqua, Esq., President, CSJ; Judge Frank J. Montemuro, Jr.; Albert J. Riccelli, Sr., President, OSIA; and Dr. Philip R. Piccigallo, Executive Director, CSJ.

FINDINGS

Ethnic Characteristics

A key section of the interview consisted of ten image items (five favorable, five unfavorable), which were administered in rotated order. For each of the ten items, the respondents were asked whether the item fits one or more of these ethnic groups: English-American, Irish-American, Italian-American, Jewish-American, or Black-American.* Respondents could also indicate that the item did not fit any of the five ethnic groups.

Here are the ten items:

1. *They are known as ambitious and hard-working*
2. *They know how to enjoy life*
3. *Family ties mean a lot to them*
4. *They make very considerate neighbors*
5. *They are proud of their ancestry and where they came from*

6. *They don't like to mix outside of their own national group*
7. *They tend to cheat in business*
8. *They look down at other people*
9. *They are into a lot of the organized crime in this country*
10. *People are afraid of them*

1. Of the images of the five ethnic groups, that of Italian-Americans is most pronounced and includes many characteristics, both positive and negative. Italian-Americans have the highest average score for favorable items (49%) and are tied with blacks for the highest average score for unfavorable items (31%).

2. Regarding specific positive image items, three are strongly associated with Italian-Americans:

Family ties mean a lot to them (67% Italian-Americans)

They know how to enjoy life (56% Italian-Americans)

They are proud of their ancestry and where they came from (54% Italian-Americans)

* The comparison ethnic groups were selected both as foils to better understand attitudes toward Italian-Americans and to mask the purpose of the study. A number of questions made use of the five ethnic groups as answer categories.

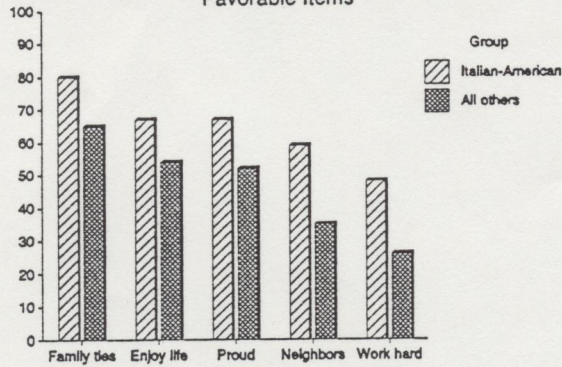
3. Among the negative items, Italian-Americans are closely associated with one idea, their perceived involvement with organized crime:

Italians	74%
Blacks	26%
Jews	10%
Irish	10%
English	8%

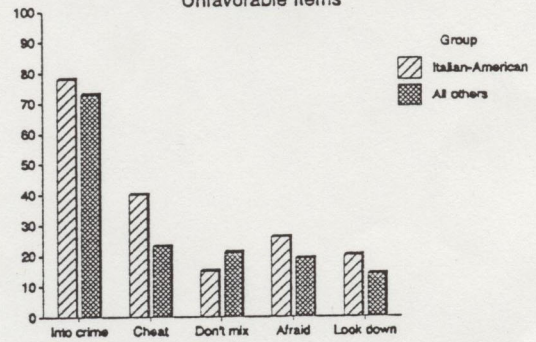
Notice that about three out of every four adults make the connection between Italian-Americans and organized crime. None of the other groups are associated with this item by more than about one out of four adults.

4. A comparison of the responses of Italian-Americans to the ten image items shows that Italian-Americans tend to be slightly more favorable than the general public on the positive ideas (below left) and slightly more unfavorable on the negative ideas (below right).

Public Image of Italian-Americans
Favorable Items



Public Image of Italian-Americans
Unfavorable Items



The above figures show that Italian-Americans and other Americans share about the same image of Italian-Americans. Note particularly the high proportion who perceive Italian-Americans as being into organized crime. Thus, the generally negative depiction of Italian-Americans in films and on television is probably as influential among persons of Italian descent as it is among the public at large.