

Study: Diplomats whose countries dislike U.S. less likely to pay fines

NEW YORK (AP) -- Researchers who examined tens of thousands of parking tickets issued to United Nations diplomats found those least likely to pay up were from countries where people hold a dim view of the United States.

The study was conducted by economists from Columbia University and the University of California, Berkeley, who were hoping to uncover why officials from some countries frequently abused their diplomatic immunity by parking illegally, while others played by the rules.

Their main finding was that diplomats were more likely to run up unpaid parking fines if they hailed from countries with a history of unchecked corruption, such as Nigeria.

But a second factor -- poor U.S. image -- emerged when the researchers matched the list of offenders against a 2002 world public opinion survey performed by the Pew Research Center.

"It's much easier to flout the law if you tell yourself that the government that is making these laws or enforcing these laws lacks legitimacy," said Raymond Fisman of Columbia University's Graduate School of Business.

Between November 1997 and the end of 2002, diplomats accumulated more than 150,000 unpaid parking tickets in New York, racking up \$18 million in unpaid fines.

Based on statistics supplied by the city, the report said the worst offenders during that period were Kuwait, which averaged 246.2 unpaid tickets per diplomat per year, followed by Egypt, with 139.6; Chad, with 124.3; and Sudan, with 119.1.

Twenty-two countries averaged zero unpaid tickets per year, according to the study, including Japan, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United Arab Emirates.

Mansoor Suhail, a spokesman for Pakistan's mission to the United Nations, said he did not agree that people in his country were displeased with America. Pakistan ranked 10th in unpaid tickets in the study, and near the top in unfavorable views of the United States.

A great many, he said, consider the U.S. to be "an ally and a friend."

As for the parking tickets, he said things have changed since the late 1990s. Pakistan's diplomats, he said, are now more vigilant about parking legally.

"In the pre-9/11 era, there was a different understanding of diplomatic privileges," he said.

Diplomatic immunity meant that, until recently, there was little or no enforcement of diplomatic parking violations in New York -- a factor the professors said allowed them to examine the role of "cultural norms alone" in determining who felt free to flout parking rules.

The parking problems around the United Nations got dramatically better in 2002 when U.S. officials threatened to revoke the plates of scofflaws and impound their cars. According to New York's finance department, diplomats have received 90 percent fewer tickets since then, with more than 85 percent paid on time.

The researchers said they also linked their list of tickets to an index intended to measure the prevalence of corruption in each country. Diplomats hailing from countries with low levels of corruption, such as Norway, "behave remarkably well even in situations where they can get away with violations," the researchers said.

"This finding suggests that cultural or social norms related to corruption are quite persistent," the professors wrote. "Even when stationed thousands of miles away, diplomats behave in a manner highly reminiscent of officials in the home country."

The professors looked at per-capita income in each nation and the average salaries of government bureaucrats. While they couldn't conclusively rule out income as a factor in paying the tickets, they said the weight of the evidence was against it.

Fisman and Edward Miguel, of Berkeley's economics department, released their findings in a paper published by the National Bureau of Economic Research in June.

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