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Police Contacts and Attitudes Toward Police: A Study of Race and Policing

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Abstract

In the past couple of years, different police departments in the United States have ignited intense criticism for allegedly operating in unethical and unconstitutional ways, namely facilitating the law under racist principles. Since the structure of policing often shifts based on changes within general society, it has become a common standard that policing must match the highest degree of ethics adopted by citizens of the United States. There is a compelling need for more research to be done on the police-citizen relationship. This research studies whether there is disproportionality, with a specific focus on race and ethnicity, in some of the police contacts that Bridgewater State University students (selected via random sample) have had – a goal that helps illustrate whether unethical policing is systematic in our society.

Introduction

Much of the scholarly and government-funded research on the relationship between police officers and citizens focuses on proactive policing strategies—oftentimes, strategies with a low or zero tolerance for crime—and whether those strategies encompass racist principles such as “racial profiling” (Department of Justice, 2015; Durose & Langton, 2013; Higgins, Gabbidon, & Vito, 2010). The Department of Justice (2015) deemed racial profiling to be an unconstitutional strategy of policing that can cause a loss of money, public embarrassment, and exposure to deleterious conditions. Therefore, many criminologists are concerned with how prevalent

racial profiling is in common policing strategies such as “street stops” and “traffic stops” (Department of Justice, 2015; Higgins et al., 2010; Ridgeway, 2006; Rojek, Rosenfeld, & Decker, 2012). A street stop refers to a police officer stopping a person who is not in a moving vehicle (e.g., who is walking down the street), and a traffic stop refers to stopping a person who is driving a motor vehicle.

The prevalence of racism in common policing strategies is supported by some research studies and countered by others, as many different studies have attempted to answer different questions regarding the issue (Department of Justice, 2015; Higgins et al., 2010; New York Police Department, 2014; Ridgeway, 2006; Rojek, Rosenfeld, & Decker, 2012). A report on New York City’s “stop, question, and frisk” program (Ridgeway, 2009) and the Department of Justice (2015) report on policing in Ferguson, Missouri found general police misconduct to be rare, but, where it does exist, located mainly in specific departments in the form of extreme misconduct (e.g., exacting racial profiling). Meanwhile, other research has indicated that racial profiling is not binary (i.e., either existing or not) but dependent on a variety of different factors and citizen perceptions (Durose & Langton, 2013; Higgins et al., 2010; Milner, George, & Allison, 2016; Ridgeway, 2006; Rojek et al., 2012; Tillyer & Engel, 2013). Durose & Langton (2013) found in a nationwide sample that, according to citizens who engaged with police in 2011, police misconduct could be systematic (as opposed to existing in a few departments). Higgins et al. (2010) found that police misconduct, including racial profiling, depends on dynamics in pre-existing relationships among officers and citizens of different races.

Extreme Police Misconduct

The U.S. Department of Justice (2015) report on policing in Ferguson, Missouri stated that the growing disconnect in recent years between particular groups of citizens and police can be attributed to race-driven actions by some police officers. According to Higgins et al. (2010) such misconduct is detrimental to collective police-citizen relations as poor race relations increase the perception of racial profiling. According to Kerner et al. (1968), negative

behavior by police catalyzes negative reactions; bad race relations can be exacerbated unless specifically mitigated (Higgins et al., 2010). Therefore, understanding the most prominent examples of police misconduct is an essential component of understanding police-citizen relationships more broadly.

The RAND Corporation's report on the New York Police Department (NYPD) after it faced accusations of proactive policing practices (especially "stop, question, and frisk") as unconstitutional, undue, and race-driven, found that a small number of officers within the NYPD were committing unconstitutional acts that could be deemed racist (Ridgeway, 2009). In 2013, however, a federal judge ruled that the NYPD's proactive policing actions—especially the "stop-and-frisk" policy, which emphasized high quantities of street and traffic stops—were unconstitutional and had resulted from years of "systematic ignorance" (Floyd, et al., 2013), as opposed to being limited to a few officers. According to 2013 stop-and-frisk data of the NYPD, about 104,000 of the 191,812 total number of people stopped by police were Black (people who identify as "African American" or "Black and not Hispanic") (New York Police Department, 2014). For ethical reasons, the fact that 54% of those stopped were Black is of great concern; Black people make up approximately 26% of the city's population. The concern is further warranted by reports that proactive tactics such as stop-and-frisk do not decrease the crime they intend to deter (Bump, 2014). Ridgeway (2006) found that such practices often do not end in arrests, calling into question the worth of such practices.

Researchers have found practices similar to New York's stop-and-frisk in other police departments (Milner et al., 2016; Rojek et al., 2012; Tillyer & Engel, 2013). National attention was particularly focused on the police department in Ferguson, Missouri (FPD) when a Department of Justice (2015) report found it to be operating on racist principles. The federal probe into the Ferguson police department and court system discovered that African Americans, who make up approximately 67% of the population of Ferguson, comprised 85% of the street and traffic stops by the FPD, 90% of FPD citations, and 93% of arrests, between 2012 and 2014

(Department of Justice, 2015). The investigation concluded that law enforcement practices in Ferguson were shaped by a focus on revenue and not by safety needs of the public (Department of Justice, 2015). Although racial profiling in New York City and Ferguson have been called isolated events, researchers have found that people of color in many parts of the country perceive some of their interactions with police as "racially-driven" (Higgins et al., 2010; Zhao, Lai, Ren, & Lawton, 2015).

Every three years, the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) conducts the Police-Public Contact Survey (PPCS), a supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey that seeks to gauge how and why people ages 16 and older engage with police (Durose & Langton, 2013). While it is important to keep in mind high-profile instances reported in the Floyd ruling about the NYPD and the Department of Justice's (2015) findings about the FPD when looking at police-citizen contacts, the PPCS provides a much broader picture because it is comprised of tens of millions of experiences—an estimated 62.9 million in 2011 (Durose & Langton, 2013). Nearly half (49%) of those interactions came in the form of street stops or traffic stops. Those who identified as Black or Hispanic were subject to more street stops (percentage-wise) than White people (Durose & Langton, 2013).

The PPCS reports quantitative data that can inform discussions about systematic racism, but it does not delve into the complexities of the data, nor the possible causes or implications of the numbers. Academic researchers, however, have examined various intricacies involved in undue, racist policing—from citizens' previous interactions with police to the intersections of a person's race, gender, age, and even size. Ridgeway (2006) found that Black drivers stopped via traffic stops were subject to similar citation and consent rates as White drivers, but were pat-searched more often than White drivers. Each of those interactions with police may affect the next interaction. Warner (2010) found that perceptions of police were informed by police experiences outside of an incumbent one, such as citizens' previous experiences with state police. Black, young men have been found to have the most contact with police;

while a person's race alone did not correlate with undue policing, race in conjunction with a certain age and gender, did (Tillyer & Engel, 2013). Rojek et al. (2012) found that unequal policing can be caused by citizens who "appear to look out of place" in certain "neighborhoods." Zhao et al. (2015) attributed undue policing to both the race and size (in particular, "large" size) of certain citizens. The various causes of undue policing are troubling especially because negativity has been shown to beget negativity, further exacerbating police-citizen interactions (Higgins, et al., 1968; Kerner, et al., 1968).

Pollock (2014) called for more research on the subject of police-citizen interactions, saying that it is essential to the wellbeing of society that even "minor" police misconduct is gauged and resolved. Rectifying police misconduct "requires consistent and timely research" in communities across the country; adding original, primary data to the police-citizen dynamic can help illustrate the contemporary state of relationships between police and citizens (Pollock, 2014). This study is a response to that call. It investigated whether undue policing has been experienced by a random sample of students at Bridgewater State University, whether there are differences between students of different races and ethnicities, and how interactions with police may have affected students' attitudes toward police. This campus-based research is intended to promote understanding of broader trends reported in the literature.

Hypotheses

This study began with four hypotheses that emerged from the literature on police-citizen interactions. The first hypothesis of this research is that the number of street stops for non-Whites is greater than the number of street stops for Whites. Although several researchers have found that police behavior does not necessarily correlate directly with race, due to intersectionality (which refers to co-existing attributes—such as a person's age, race, and gender—that are always present in conjunction with each other), street stops have been shown to differ by race in conjunction with other traits (Ridgeway, 2006; Tillyer & Engel, 2013; Zhao et al., 2015). Logically, this same notion can be applied to traffic stops, and therefore, the

second hypothesis of this research is that the number of traffic stops for non-Whites is greater than the number of traffic stops for Whites. The first and second hypothesis in conjunction with the work of Kerner et al. (1968) and Higgins et al. (2010) led to the third hypothesis of this research: non-White students have a less favorable attitude toward police than White students. Finally, the fourth hypothesis of this research can be derived from the third (specifically due to Kerner et al.'s work in 1968): contact with police (in the form of street stops or traffic stops) negatively affects attitudes toward police.

Methods

Overview

This study gives a snapshot of the state of police-citizen dynamics, as reported from the perspectives of 250 college students enrolled at Bridgewater State University. The research sought to discover how a particular college-age population has interacted with police in the past, and how the population feels about the police. Through a quantitative design this study addresses two main research questions: Did police contact with the students differ by race and ethnicity? Did police contact impact the students' attitudes toward police?

Data were collected via respondent questionnaires. Out of 2,103 classes offered by Bridgewater State University in one semester, 50 were randomly selected to participate in this study by means of a random-number generator application. Over the course of six weeks, 250 students, in 13 classes, consented to participate in the research and were administered the questionnaire.

Instrument

The instrument used in this research was replicated and based on the Bureau of Justice Statistics' most recent Police-Public Contact Survey (PPCS). The PPCS is a supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey that seeks to gauge how and why people ages 16 and older engage with police (Durose & Langton, 2013). Like the PPCS, the questionnaire used for this research has

several different categories: general questions (e.g., respondent's age), general police-related questions (e.g., the number of times the respective respondents had contact with police), specific questions related to the respondents' most recent contact with police (street stops, traffic stops, or voluntary contacts), and a section dedicated to the respondents' perceptions of police (e.g., gauging how honest the respondents think police generally are).

Demographics

Three of the most pertinent characteristics of the 247 student responses (3 of the 250 questionnaires were left blank, leaving an "N" of 247) are age, race, and gender. 246 respondents answered the questionnaire with their age (in years). The lowest age was 17 and the highest age was 59 (range = 42). The mean (M) of ages (in years) is 21.1585 with a standard deviation (SD) of 4.16341. All 247 identified for their race(s). "White" was the most commonly identified race (198 respondents) and "Middle Eastern, Arabic" and "Native American, Alaskan, Pacific Islander" were the least common, with two respondents each. Among the other respondents, four identified as "Asian"; 24 identified as "Black or African American"; 14 identified as "Hispanic, Latino." For gender, 135 identified as "Male," 111 as "Female, and 1 as "Other."

In the general Bridgewater State University population in 2013, there were 9,615 undergraduate students (Bridgewater State University, 2014). Forty-two percent of those undergraduate students identified as male and 58% identified as female. About 82% of students identified as "White" and 18% identified with a race other than "White." Among the non-White students, 801 identified as "Black," 558 identified as "Hispanic," 265 identified as having "Two or More Races," 221 identified as "Asian," 22 identified as "Native American," and 10 identified as "Native Hawaiian" (Bridgewater State University, 2014).

Results

H1: The number of street stops for non-Whites is greater than the number of street stops for Whites.

In H1, the dependent variable was street stops and the independent variable was race. Street stops were measured by "yes" or "no" responses and race was recoded into two categories: "White" and "non-White." Dividing the assortment of races into two categories was a succinct way of measuring contact with police; furthermore, both the PPCS and the Bridgewater State University Fact Book have stratified races into such categories (Bridgewater State University, 2014; Durose & Langton, 2013). Out of 247 respondents, 30 (12%) said that they had a street stops within 12 months of taking the questionnaire. In order to test the association of street stops and race/ethnicity (to test whether the observed distribution was due chance), a Chi Square analysis was used. The test found no significant connection between the variables because the p-value produced was greater than .05 alpha ($p > 0.05$ alpha). In other words, according to the respondents' questionnaires in sum, no particular race/ethnicity was correlated with a street stop. However, this observation is limited based on the "superficial" questions within the questionnaire: this analysis is not able to penetrate into why the respondents were stopped. Furthermore, the analysis used can only gauge the observed distribution as a whole and not into several different categories that were not measured. More in-depth research methodologies that fall on the qualitative spectrum could better illuminate individual experiences and in-depth attributes of respondents (and thus, more conspicuous correlations). However, due to time constraints for this research, such methods were not used, as they can be costly and time-consuming.

The results show that 19.2% of non-White respondents (10) had had police contact in the form of a street stop within the past 12 months; 80.8% of non-White respondents (42) had not. For White respondents, 10.3% (20) had had police contact in the form of a street stop within the past 12 months; 89.7% of White respondents (175) had not. To note, the small number of non-White respondents raises a question of validity for that segment of the sample. Further research would benefit from having a larger number of respondents and a similar number of White and non-White respondents.

H2: The number of traffic stops for non-Whites is greater than the number of traffic stops for Whites.

In H2, the dependent variable was traffic stops and the independent variable was race. Traffic stops were measured by “yes” or “no” responses, and race was measured by respondents either being “White” or “non-White.” Out of 247 respondents, 72 (28.8%) said they had had a traffic stop within the past 12 months of them taking the questionnaire. In order to test the association of traffic stops and race/ethnicity, a Chi Square analysis was used to measure

that race might not have played a role in traffic stops based on the experiences of the respondents. As stated previously, the small number of non-White respondents raises a question of validity for this part of the research.

H3: Non-White college students have a less favorable attitude toward police than White students.

In H3, the dependent variable was attitude (toward police) and the independent variable was race. Race was measured

Table 1
Chi-Square Tests on Race (non-White & White) and Street Stops

Street Stop	non-White (N= 52)		White (N=195)		$\chi^2 (1)$	p
	n	%	n	%		
No street stop contact	42	80.8%	175	89.7%	3.099	.078
Street stop contact contact*	10	19.2%	20	10.3%	3.099	.078

* = within the last 12 months of when the survey was taken

the nominal variables in H2. The test found no significant connection between traffic stops and whether the respondent identified as White or non-White because the p-value was greater than .05 alpha ($p > .05$ alpha). While this test illustrates the lack of association between race and traffic stops, it is superficial, in a sense. The basis for these respective stops is reported at the discretion of the respondent, and is limited by the quantitative focus of the research. A more qualitative approach could provide further insight into the events of the stop.

The results of this analysis show that 28.8% of non-White respondents (15) had had police contact in the form of a traffic stop within the past 12 months; 71.2% of non-White respondents (37) had not. In regard to White respondents, 29.2% (57) reported police contact in the form of a street stop within the past 12 months; 70.8% of White respondents (138) did not. The percentages of non-Whites and Whites who had a traffic stop within the previous 12 months are relatively similar (28.8% and 29.2%, respectively), which implies

by respondents either being “White” or “non-White.” Attitude (toward police) was measured by combing three related questions. By combining such like-variables, a more precise estimation of the impending test analyses can be made, as the more closely related questions are to one another in a test analysis, a relationship can be better illustrated. The correlation of these questions was tested by Cronbach’s Alpha, a measure used to determine the relation of items (in this case, questions) and whether their internal consistency can create a reliable scale.

The Cronbach’s Alpha for this scale was .813, suggesting that the three items have a high consistency with one another (the closer to 1.0, the higher the consistency). The three items added up to create a new variable called “attitude.” Attitude was gauged between a scale of 3-17 (3 being the lowest possible score out of the three questions and 17 being the highest). Lower scores represented more negative attitudes toward police and higher scores represented

more positive attitudes toward police (M=12.3439, SD=2.94149).

To investigate this hypothesis, an independent t-test was run (Table 3). A t-test was used because the independent variable is binary (non-White students or White students) and because the hypothesis is concerned with the differing attitudes between the binary racial groups (non-White students and White students). An independent version of the t-test was used because the two means have only been measured once and because the dependent variable is deemed to be continuous. The t-test produced 34 non-White responses (M=11.3235, SD=2.76033) and 154 White responses (M=12.5714,

(streets stops and traffic stops). The result is a variable that is dichotomous: “non-contact” (the newly created definition consisting of the two combined variables) means that there has been no police contact (no street stops or traffic stops) in the last 12 months and “contact” means that an individual experienced a street stop or a traffic stop within the last 12 months of when the survey was taken. Approximately 61% (150 respondents) said they had no contact with police in the last 12 months, and 38.8% (97 respondents) said they had experienced a street stop or traffic stop within the last 12 months.

Table 2
Chi-Square Tests on Race (non-White & White) and Traffic Stops

Traffic Stop	non-White (N= 52)		White (N=195)		$\chi^2 (1)$	p
	n	%	n	%		
No traffic stop contact	37	71.2%	15	28.8%	.003	.957
Traffic stop contact contact*	138	70.8%	20	29.2%	.003	.957

* = within the last 12 months of when the survey was taken

SD=2.95026). The p-value (done in the t-test of equality of means) with equal variances assumed is .025 (t-observed=-2.257, df=186), which is less than the .05 alpha level used to gauge the hypothesis ($p < .05$, alpha = .05). Therefore, the null hypothesis (no statistically significant relationship between race and attitude toward police) is rejected. Further, difference in attitudes (toward police) between non-Whites and Whites is statistically significant, as non-White respondents, had (on average) an attitude (toward police) that is more negative than White students.

H4: Contact in the form of street stops or traffic stops negatively affects attitudes toward police.

In H4, the dependent variable was attitude and the independent variable was contact. Attitude was measured by using three related questions and was validated by the Cronbach’s Alpha measure. “Contact” was created by adding two variables together

To investigate the hypothesis, an independent t-test was run (Table 4). A t-test was used because the independent variable is binary (respondents either had contact with police within the past 12 months or they had not) and because the hypothesis is concerned with the respondents’ differing attitudes (like in H3, “attitude” in H4 is one variable). An independent version of the t-test was used because the two means have only been measured once and because the dependent variable is deemed to be continuous. The t-test produced 117 respondents who had “no contact” with police within the past 12 months (M=12.7778, SD=2.66882) and 72 respondents who had “contact” (M=11.6389, SD=3.23409). The p-value (done in the t-test of equality of means) with equal variances assumed is .009 (t-observed=2.625, df=187), which is less than the .05 alpha level used to gauge the hypothesis ($p < .05$, alpha = .05). Therefore, the null hypothesis (there is no statistically significant relationship between contact and attitudes toward police) is rejected. Further,

difference in attitudes between those who had “contact” within the past 12 months and those with “no contact” is statistically significant, as people who had contact reported a more negative attitude toward police.

Discussion

The statistical analysis of the first hypothesis did not find a relationship between race and street stops (as evidenced by Chi

stops. The second hypothesis of this research was unsupported. The reasons for the unsupported hypothesis finding is beyond the scope of this particular research; future research could seek to answer this question by garnering a larger non-White sample size.

The third hypothesis anticipated that non-White college students would have a less favorable attitude toward police than White students, and this hypothesis was correct: on average, non-White students had a more negative attitude toward police. According

Table 3
Group Statistics and Independent Samples Test of Attitude and Race (non-White & White)

	non-White (N= 34)		White (N=154)		df	t	p
	M	SD	M	SD			
Attitude	11.3245	2.76033	12.5714	2.95026	186	-2.257	.025*

*= p > .05

Square analysis), so the first hypothesis of this study was incorrect. To note, though, about 20% of non-White students had endured a street stop, while only 10% of White students had endured a street stop. According to Durose & Langton’s (2013) data, White Americans and non-White Americans were found to have nearly identical percentages for street stops. In this study, the percentage of non-White students who were subject to a street stop was nearly twice as much as their White classmates. Due to the differing implications between the statistical analysis and the casual observation, it is difficult to make an assertion about the non-White students in this study due to their sample size and their relationship with police without looking at other variables and other statistical analyses (Tillyer & Engel, 2013).

The difference between non-Whites and Whites stopped via traffic stops in this study was minimal; non-Whites were stopped via a traffic stop 28.8% of the time and Whites at 29.2%. In a sense, this study’s findings on traffic stops is antithetical to previous research (notably Ridgeway, 2006 and Durose & Langton, 2013) because a higher percentage of Whites in this study were subject to traffic

to Kerner et al. (1968) and Higgins et al. (2010), negative perceptions and bad experiences with police can be derived from previous bad relations between police and certain races; therefore, the unmeasured assortment of vicarious experiences could have resulted in this finding, since, statistically speaking, White students and non-White students in this study reported similar empirical experiences with traffic stops.

The fourth hypothesis of this study was confirmed by a statistically significant t-test: contact (in the form of street stops or traffic stops) negatively affects attitudes toward police. According to the ruling in Floyd, et al. v. City of New York, et al. (2013), many stop-and-frisks in proactive policing communities are deemed to be “fruitless” and “inefficient time wasters,” which can upset people after such stops. Additionally, the notions used to describe the previous finding can be used to explain this one as well: vicarious experiences can influence people to have more negative attitudes toward police (Higgins et al. 2010; Kerner et al., 1968).

Limitations

This research, although useful because it provides a quantitative snapshot of police-citizen interactions in southeastern Massachusetts for college-age students, only had about 250 respondents. The quantity of respondents in conjunction with the centralized ages of respondents being in the low 20's indicate that the population is not representative of the region. The small sample size of non-White students is not ideal, even though there was a larger percentage of non-Whites in this study than at Bridgewater State

second research question, about attitudes toward police, the findings were statistically significant. On average, non-White students had a more negative attitude toward police than White students. Street stops and traffic stops by police were correlated with less favorable attitudes toward police. About 50% of non-Whites reporting having police contact, and only 40% of Whites had such contact; non-White respondents may have reported a less favorable view of police because they had a greater percentage of exposure to such stops.

Further research is warranted, especially in order to study

Table 4
Group Statistics and Independent Samples Test of Attitude and Contact (street stops & traffic stops)

	no contact (N= 117)		contact (N=72)		df	t	p
	M	SD	M	SD			
Attitude	12.7778	2.66882	11.6389	3.23409	187	2.625	.009*

*= p > .05

University in 2013. The questionnaire did not enable respondents to elaborate on their experiences, nor can the statistical analyses expound on such experiences, so the study's findings are limited strictly to the questions asked. This can be particularly limiting (although still useful in the general literature, as Pollock stated in 2014) because Higgins et al. (2010), Tillyer & Engel (2013), and Warren (2010) have found in their respective research that there is much more to a person's experience with police than the types of questions asked for this research (e.g., external factors that influence a police contact). Future research should seek to look into these external factors.

Conclusion

This study serves to improve understanding of undue police misconduct involving race and ethnicity. This study found that street stops and traffic stops, based on statistical analysis, did not occur only because of a person's race/ethnicity. With regard to the

a congruent sample of non-White and White respondents and to ask how respondents feel about race relations more generally, as Higgins et al. (2010) found race relations to be important in police-citizen interactions. There are two main reasons to build on the type of approach used in this study to measure police-citizen relations: research could possibly identify the next "Ferguson" before it happens, and constant research of this sort is needed in order to understand the ever-changing police-citizen dynamic (Pollock, 2014). Future research could alternatively pursue methods more synonymous with studies by Zhao et al. (2015) and Tillyer & Engel (2013), which looked into various personal attributes (beyond citizens' race/ethnicity) that may cause undue police contact. Likewise, intricacies in police protocol could be studied, to build on Ridgeway's (2006) finding that undue police behaviors can occur within particular points of complex policies and protocols.

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About the Author



Gary Portway graduated summa cum laude from Bridgewater State University in December 2015 with a bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice. His research project, conducted as his honors thesis, was completed in the Fall 2015 semester under the mentorship of Dr. Jennifer Hartsfield (Criminal Justice). This project was made possible with a semester grant from the Office of Undergraduate Research. Gary presented this research at the 2015 American Society of Criminology conference in Washington, D.C. He plans to continue his education by pursuing a master's degree in the fall of 2016.