

Correlates with Use of Force by Police Officers in America

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Police-community relations have long been an important issue affecting communities and policing as a profession. Attention to this issue has intensified recently with significant instances in the United States of police brutality and shootings of civilians as well as with civilian aggression against police. Discussions of this issue are often polarized by strong emotions on both sides of the argument. We attempt, in this paper, to present an unbiased review of some of the research that has been conducted regarding police use of force, particularly as it relates to minority groups. We hope this contributes to a more objective understanding of police use of force and to important efforts towards improving police-community relations. Nonetheless, this is a topic that deserves much more analysis than tackled here, and we plan to continue exploring this topic in future papers.

There are not many studies regarding the relationship between police use of force and race, minorities, and gender. Generally, the few studies that have been conducted have concluded that there is a relationship when it comes to police shootings and race, minorities, and gender. The studies concluded that inequality does play a role, but there are more factors that need to be taken into account.

Literature Review

Smith (2004) examined the relationship between police force and inequality and race. Four variables were tested: threat, community violence, police professionalism, and police bureaucratic control. Smith examined unequal distributions of police use of force among populations (defined as unequal “threat” of police force among different groups), and he examined the positive relationship between levels of violence in a community (defined as “community violence”) and use of force by police officers. Furthermore, Smith examined the education level and extensive training that could minimize use of police force (professionalism) and the need for more explicit rules for police officers (bureaucratic control) (2004).

Using SHRs (Supplement Homicide Reports), Smith collected data on the number of police killings of felons in various cities. (It is not stated why the study only used data on people with felonies who were killed by police.) In this study, he measured racial threat, economic inequality, community violence, and police organizational characteristics. The population of African Americans and Hispanics in the cities was used for the measurement of racial threat. Economic inequality was measured using the Gini Index, which measures total income by population. The number of violent crimes per capita such as murder, rape, robbery, and assault measured community violence. Organizational characteristics were determined from LEMAS (Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics) data, such as educational level and number of police officers employed (2004).

Cities with populations of 100,000 or more residents and cities with populations of 250,000 or more residents were separately analyzed. The results indicated that the cities with 100,000 or more and 250,000 or more residents were consistent with the racial threat hypothesis. The racial threat hypothesis states that the proportion of African American residents in these cities and the number of police killings of felons were positively related, meaning that in cities with higher proportions of black residents, the number of police killings was higher. Results were also consistent with the community violence hypothesis; violent crime rates and police killings of felons were positively related; cities that had more police killings of felons also had higher violent crime rates. As no causality can be inferred from the data, this could mean that if there is a change in violent crime rate, it will increase police killing or that if the number of police killings goes up, so will the violent crime rate. However, in disagreement with the economic threat hypothesis, there was no significant relationship between police killings of felons and levels of inequality in cities. In other words, the number of police killings does not change with the variability of inequality among cities.

The findings also concluded that the size of the population and the number of police killings of felons were positively related, indicating that larger cities tend to have more police killings. Cities in which officers had more field training hours also had more police killings, but this was only true in cities with populations between 100,000 and 250,000 people; this correlation was not significant for cities larger than 250,000 residents. Cities in the South and North had fewer police killings than any other regions in the country. Killing of white citizens by police officers was also significantly positively correlated with the violent crime rate, number of field training hours, and population size (Smith, 2004).

In trying to explain why the number of police killings of felons would be higher or not at all affected by police have more field training hours, Smith (2004) explains that “rather than training officers to avoid getting into potentially violent situations or learning to de-escalate violence, the training more often focuses on how to respond to a situation which is already out of control” (552). Also, the number of field training hours does not measure the nature of the training or whether it is focused on use of deadly force. It is probably also important that these same cities tended to be larger and have higher violent crime rates, which are reasons for there to be more field training hours.

Another weakness of this study is that it would be beneficial to also analyze the rate of police killings (per 100,000 city residents or out of the number of police officers in the city) as opposed to the raw number of killings to see if people in larger cities are killed by police at a higher rate than in smaller cities.

Similarly, Eitle, D’Alessio, and Stolzenberg (2014) analyzed the association between police organizational and environmental factors and police misconduct. Eitle et al. examined data reported in 2009 and 2010 in cities with populations of 40,000 or more residents and found 8,304 police misconduct incidents in this time frame. The researchers looked at organizational

structures of police departments, formalization (written rules, regulations, and policy directives), and professionalism. They measured organizational structure by organization size, spatial differentiation or geographic dispersion (the number of district police station), education level of officers, and levels of bureaucracy. Professionalism included education, salary, and training of officers. Percentages of blacks in the police department, number of in-service trainings, percentages of Hispanics, levels of structural disadvantage, percentage mobility, internal affairs, number of police misconducts, and civilianization (the proportion of a department's employees that are civilians) were also measured for police departments (2014).

It was concluded that police departments that have full-time internal affairs compared to police departments without full-time units are eighty-four percent more likely to have more incidents of police misconduct; the reasons are not yet determined, but it may be that departments without internal affairs units are less likely to document misconduct. In this study, there was a negative relationship between in-service training and police conduct, meaning that the more in-service training police had, the fewer cases there were of police misconduct. Crime rates and environmental variables did not have significant correlations with police misconduct in this study (Eitle et al, 2014).

MacDonald, Kaminski, Alpert, & Tennenbaum (2001) studied the relationship between public danger and police use of deadly force using two theories. The danger-perception theory states that police officers are more likely to use deadly force when they perceive their job as being hazardous or if they are around high levels of violence. The ratio-threat theory states that there is a positive relationship between the number of criminal incidents and the number of police officer killings of citizens. The researchers collected data from the FBI from 1976 through 1996 to test the relationship between homicide type and police killings. The homicide types

included homicides, homicides caused by love triangles, justifiable citizen homicide, robbery-related homicides, and police killings of citizens (2001).

MacDonald et al. concluded that the ratio-threat hypothesis is consistent with their findings, but further research needs to be conducted. They found that if the number of homicides was higher in a city, so is the number of police killings. The correlation with the number of police officer killings was strongest with justifiable citizen homicides and robbery-related homicides. There was a weaker relationship between police killings of citizens and the number of homicides related to love triangles (2001).

Finally, Terrill and Reisig (2003) examined police use of force and its relationships with neighborhood variables and encounter-level variables (whether suspect was male or a minority, his or her age, and wealth) (Terrill & Reisig, 2003). Higher levels of force were found to occur significantly more in high-crime neighborhoods. Those who are suspected of a crime and live in disadvantaged neighborhoods were more likely to have a higher level of force used on them. It was also found that suspects received higher levels of police force if they were males, minority, younger, and have lower income. Further research should be conducted that investigates at the individual city level the factors such as training programs and disaggregated violent crime patterns on civilians due to police killings. This research can be very beneficial because it can help policy makers develop methods to reduce police killings of citizens (Terrill & Reisig, 2003).

Conclusion

In order to understand the effect and the relationship of police use of deadly force with variables such as gender, race, and inequality, future studies need to be conducted, and data on police force needs to be better recorded. As indicated in the above studies, it is clear that there is a bigger reason why police officers use deadly force in some areas more than other areas. Some

of those reasons include the circumstances of the situation and the perception of the police officer during high-level stress. Understanding those reasons will help improve police departments and help reduce police killings of citizens. It is more than just inequality that plays a role in police use of deadly force; the place, the time, and the atmosphere also play roles. There are many factors that need to be accounted for other than gender and race, such as neighborhood setting, income, crime rates, nature and extent of officer trainings, and even social settings to help reduce police use of deadly force.

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