

Examining Fear: A Comparison of Blacks' Fear of Police in the U.S. Compared to Fear of Police Abroad

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Abstract

In the United States, citizens of African Descent are more likely to have deadly force used against them by police than other ethnicities. As a result of the aforementioned, as well as perceived unfair policing practices towards Black citizens, previous research suggests that Blacks in the United States are not receptive to the police. The purpose of this research was to examine the comparison of the feeling of safety of people of African Descent when encountering police in the United States, compared to when encountering police in other countries. The research consisted of 414 participants. A closed ended survey was provided to answer the research question "Do you feel safer when coming in contact with law enforcement in the United States or law enforcement in other countries". A multinomial logistic regression was conducted to determine the extent to which fear was related to the outcome measured. For brevity purposes, the terms Black, people of African Descent, and people who are of the African Diaspora will be used to identify and refer to all Black people residing in the United States and other countries. The term African American will be used to identify blacks with citizenship in the United States.

Introduction

Most interactions between police and citizens often end without the use of force. It is even less probable that police/citizen contact will result in the deadly use of force by a police officer. However, while the is correct on a macro level, it is not the case for Black people in the United States of America. African American citizens make up 13.2% of the population, but are more likely to have force used against them when they come in contact with law enforcement than all other races. More specifically, African American males make up approximately 6.5% of the U.S. population, but are more likely to be shot by police than their Caucasian counterparts who make up approximately 31% of American citizens.

While the relationship in the United States between law enforcement and African Americans has a history of being strained, recent incidents that resulted in the use of deadly force by law enforcement against citizens such as Tamir Rice, Eric Gardner, Jordan Edwards, Philando Castile, and Alton Sterling has created a significant distrust, and divide between the police and the Black community. Many researchers have tried to examine factors that contribute to the disparity between the use of force and the use of deadly force between African Americans compared to other racial groups. Some studies suggest the only thing that was significant in predicting whether an unarmed person was shot and killed by police was whether or not they were Black...Crime variables did not matter in terms of predicting whether the person killed was unarmed (Lowery, 2016). Another study found evidence of a significant bias in the killing of unarmed African Americans relative to unarmed White Americans, in that the probability of being Black, unarmed, and shot by police is about 3.49 times the probability of being White, unarmed, and shot by police on average (Ross, 2015). The purpose of this study was to examine the comparison of the feeling of safety of people of African Descent when encountering police in the United States, compared to when encountering police in other countries. Previous studies suggest age, race, socioeconomic class, and education level are all predictors of how receptive one is to law enforcement officers.

The literature contends that as age, income, and education level increases, one's level of receptiveness of law enforcement increases. Previous research also argues that Caucasian Americans are more receptive to police than are African Americans. Researchers attribute this to the high rate of encounters African Americans have with police that ends negatively. While past research analyzed American citizens' level of receptiveness to police, there is an absence in the literature that does not study level of receptiveness or fear that all people of African Descent have toward United States law enforcement compared to law enforcement in other countries. This study measures how fearful people of the African Diaspora are when coming in contact with law enforcement in America, compared to when they come in contact with police outside of the United States. The results of this research provide insight on the significant impact overwhelmingly negative police interaction can have on an ethnic group that is subjected to different policing practices than their counterparts.

Literature Review

Tensions between African Americans and the police dates back far before the Civil Rights Movement. As a result, many studies on the relationship between the two groups concentrates on the attitude, perception, and level of receptiveness of Blacks towards law enforcement compared to other races (primarily whites). Much of the scope of the literature is limited because when examined, researchers often only study these attitudes toward police as it relates to a specific country, oppose to comparing how law enforcement in different countries impact these attitudes. Moreover, people of African Descent travel, and live in different areas of the world. This provides an opportunity to examine their feelings towards law enforcement in America compared to their feelings towards law enforcement in different countries.

In 2008, Schuck, Rosenbaum, and Hawkins conducted a study titled *The Influence of Race/Ethnicity, Social Class, and Neighborhood Context on Residents' Attitudes Toward the Police*. The purpose of the study was to examine how race/ethnicity, social class, and neighborhood context interacted to influence four different dimensions of attitudes: neighborhood, global, police services, and fear of the police (Schuck, Rosenbaum, & Hawkins, 2008). The population for the study was derived from the city of Chicago of which 461 participants made up the sample. The aforementioned consisted of 168 Caucasian participants, 131 African American participants, and 162 Hispanic participants. The results suggested:

Significant racial/ethnic variation in perceptions of the police, with African Americans reporting the most negative attitudes. The magnitude of the racial/ethnic gap, however varied across the different dimensions with the largest difference between African Americans and Whites in terms of fear of the police. The findings also suggested that African Americans' and Hispanics' perceptions of the police are moderated by the interaction of social class and neighborhood socioeconomic composition. Middle-class African Americans and Hispanics who resided in disadvantaged neighborhoods reported more negative attitudes towards the police than those who resided in more advantaged areas. Overall, the study findings highlighted the complex interplay between experiences, community context, social class, and type of attitudinal assessment in understanding within and across racial and ethnic variation in residents' perceptions to the police (Schuck, et. al., 2008).

Like many other studies that examine the relationship between African Americans and the police, this research provided great insight on factors that affect the lack of bond between the two groups that are specific to a geographical location. As a result, there is a gap in the current literature that does not examine the feelings of Blacks towards the police in America, compared to their feelings towards law enforcement in other countries. Similar to the research of Schuck et. al., Peck, in 2015 published an article titled *Minority Perceptions of the Police: A-State-of-the-Art-Review*. The purpose of the paper was to provide a comprehensive literature review of empirical studies that examined perceptions and attitudes of the police across various racial and ethnic groups. The specific focus aimed to highlight if minorities perceive the police differently compared to their white counterparts (Peck, 2015). The research reviewed 92 studies that met a specific criterion which examined race and perception of the police throughout the United States. The results suggested that race was a significant predictor on citizens' level of receptiveness of police. Overall, individuals who identified themselves as African American, non-white, or minority were more likely to hold negative perceptions and attitudes toward the police compared to Whites (Peck, 2015). The results of all of the studies were consistent despite the researchers attempts to control for different variables, and ways for operationalizing the attitudes of the participants.

Like many other analyses on the topic, the strengths of the research identified African Americans' attitudes towards the police, and could generalize the findings beyond one geographical location, and population. However, the research does not explore the attitudes of people of African Descent towards police in other countries compared to their attitudes towards law enforcement in America. Understanding if there is a parallel between the aforementioned is important because people who are of the African Diaspora are present in many countries throughout the world. In 2002, Ben Brown, and W.M. Reed Benedict also examined previously written articles on citizens' perception of the police in the United States. They reviewed 100 studies which focused on factors such as race, age, neighborhood, and contact with the police. The research reviewed spanned from 1965 to 2000. Their results indicated that African Americans viewed police less favorable than Whites (Brown, & Reed, 2002). The findings also suggested a precipitous decline in approval ratings occurred after each major incident of police brutality (Brown & Reed, 2002).

While Brown and Reed's 2002 study identified a reason for the unfavorable attitude African Americans had toward law enforcement, it only focused on the United States of America. It is important to be able to expand the research to include a comparison between attitudes towards police in other countries and the United States. By doing so, it helps to understand if Blacks' attitude and fear of police is towards all police, or if it is based on police in a specific country due to their interactions. Much of the research conducted on race and police are quantitative studies. Brunson, and Miller in 2006 conducted a qualitative examination on the perception of young African American men on police based on their experiences. The study was titled *Young Black Men and Urban Policing in the United States*. The researchers surveyed 40 young men from urban neighborhoods in St. Louis. They found that overall, young men's assessments of the police are consistently less positive than those found in general surveys of attitudes toward the police (Brunson & Miller, 2006). They also discovered, young men's negative views about the police stemmed largely from proactive policing strategies such as frequent pedestrian and vehicle stops (Brunson & Miller, 2006). While they acknowledged that these activities sometimes yielded arrests or seizures, they nonetheless felt that such police practices amounted to routine harassment (Brunson & Miller, 2006).

Brunson, and Miller's study provided researchers with an understanding of the lived experience of young African American males when coming in contact with police in the United States. Many other studies were quantitative, and focused only on attitudes towards police. However, this study provided an explanation why African American males are more likely to be less receptive to police than their Caucasian counterparts. While it provided great insight, like many of the other studies, it only focused on one geographical location in the United States, and did not offer a comparison between America, and other countries. There have been many studies conducted on the attitude, and level of receptiveness of African Americans toward police. In addition, other research has also compared the attitudes of African Americans, and Whites towards police. Despite the researcher, location of the study, or the sample size, all of results were identical. All the literature suggests that African Americans are less receptive of the police than their Caucasian counterparts. Much of the research indicates the reason for the aforementioned is due to unfair, aggressive, and hostile policing practices against minorities.

While the results of all the studies were consistent, the literature did not examine attitudes towards police in America compared to other countries. More specifically, none of the research focused on fear of people of African Descent/Blacks (Black citizens of the U.S. or Black citizens of other countries) when having contact with police in the United States. There is an absence in the literature that does not allow for scholars to understand the level of trepidation people who are of the African Diaspora have of the police in America. It is for this reason that it is important for further research to analyze the level of fear Blacks have when encountering police, and if the same level of fear is assigned when in contact with police in other countries.

Methodology

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine how fearful Blacks are when coming in contact with law enforcement in America, compared to when they are in contact with police outside of the United States. While previous studies examined the comparison between African Americans' and Whites' attitudes towards the police in the U.S., there is no literature on Blacks' fear of police in the America compared to other countries.

This study bridges the gap in the literature by providing an analysis of the level of fear experienced by Blacks when engaged with police in the United States. For brevity purposes, the terms Blacks, people of African Descent, and people who are of the African Diaspora will be used to identify and refer to all Black people residing in the United States and other countries. The term African American will be used to identify Blacks with citizenship in the United States.

Target Population and Participant Selection

The population for this study consisted of Blacks that reside in the United States as well in other countries. From this population 414 participants made up the sample size for this research. The age criterion to participate in the study were people over the age of eighteen. males, and females were eligible to participate.

Sampling Procedure

The sample consisted of 414 Black citizens of the United States, and other countries. Convenience Sampling/Availability Sampling was used to obtain the participants for the research. While traditionally, no inclusion criterion is identified prior to the selection of participants when using this method of sampling, due to the nature of the study and the need for a specific ethnicity for the research, a criterion was assigned.

Data Collection Procedures

Closed ended surveys were provided to the participants. Each survey was administered electronically and consisted of five closed ended questions. All the responses of the participants were confidential. Information received from the survey was the participant's age (coded as 1 for 18-24, 2 for 25-34, 3 for 35-44, 4 for 45-54, 5 for 55-64, 6 for 65-74 and 7 for 75 and over), gender (coded as 1 for female and 2 for male), country and area of residence (coded as 1 for New England and Atlantic, 2 for Central, 3 for Mountain and Pacific, and 4 for Living Abroad), number of times traveled outside of U.S. (coded as 1 for zero times per year, 2 for 1-3 times per year, 3 for 4-6 times per year, 4 for more than 6 times per year), travel to the United States from other countries (coded as 1 for yes, and 2 for no), and feeling of safety when in contact with law enforcement in the U.S. compared to feeling of safety when in contact with law enforcement in other countries (coded as 1 for feel safer when in contact with law enforcement in U.S., 2 for feel safer when in contact with law enforcement in other countries, 3 for do not feel safe at all with any law enforcement, and 4 for feel equally safe when in contact with law enforcement in U.S., and law enforcement in other countries).

Data Analysis

The question constructed for this research was "Do you feel safer coming in contact with law enforcement in the United States or law enforcement in other countries". In the study, the independent variables were age, gender, region of residences, country of citizenship, and frequency of travel outside of country of citizenship (to U.S., or from U.S. to other countries). The dependent variable was feeling of safety. A multinomial logistic regression was conducted to determine the extent to which feelings of safety were related to the outcome measured.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Out of 447 total participants, 33 participants (7.4%) were excluded because they reported that they lived abroad and traveled outside the United States, suggesting that they either live both abroad and in the U.S. or that they provided inconsistent responses. The final sample was 414 participants. Table 1 displays the frequencies and percentages of all the variables in the sample. The majority of the sample was female (62.1%), from the New England and Atlantic region (52.9%), and reported traveling outside the U.S. 1-3 times per year (56.8%). Over one-fifth of the sample reported living abroad (21.8%) with the majority of those living abroad reporting that they travel to the U.S. (18.6%). The largest proportion of participants reported feeling safer coming in contact with law enforcement in other countries (43.7%) relative to feeling not safe with either (34.1%), feeling safe in the U.S. (12.3%), and feeling equally safe with both (9.9%). To examine the perception of safety by the other variables in the study, frequencies and percentages were calculated for perception of safety by age, gender, region, travel frequency outside the U.S. (U.S. sample), and travel to the U.S. (abroad sample; see Table 2). The proportions between safety categories were similar among age, gender, and travel to the U.S. categories. However, among New England and Atlantic participants, a larger proportion of participants reported feeling safer in the U.S. (68.6%) than feeling safer in other countries (43.1%).

Also, among those living abroad reported, a greater proportion of participants reported feeling safer with law enforcement in other countries (33.1%) than in the U.S. (5.9%) and feeling not safe with either (13.5%). For the U.S. sample, among those who do not travel outside the U.S., a larger proportion of participants reported feeling safer in the U.S. (14.6%) than feeling safer in other countries (3.3%).

Perception of Safety U.S. Sample

To examine the relationships between perception of safety with age, gender, region, and travel frequency outside the U.S., a multinomial logistic regression was conducted only on participants living in the U.S. (see Table 3). The outcome variable, perception of safety, was defined as whether participants feel safer in coming into contact with law enforcement in the U.S. or abroad. The four categories were feeling safer in the U.S., other countries, equally safe with both, or not safe with either (reference category). The predictors in the model were age, gender (reference category: female), region (reference category: Mountain and Pacific), and travel frequency outside the U.S. The results revealed that the full model was significant, $\chi^2(15) = 31.46, p = .008$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .100$. When examining individual predictors, travel frequency outside the U.S. significantly predicted perception of safety. Specifically, compared to not feeling safe with either U.S. or foreign law enforcement, frequent travel outside the U.S. was significantly more predictive of feeling safer with law enforcement in other countries, $OR = 2.12, p = .001$, and feeling equally safe with both, $OR = 1.84, p = .045$. Age, gender, and region were not significant predictors of perceptions of safety, $ps > .05$.

Recommendation for Future Studies

The results of the research suggested future studies should examine to which countries are the participants traveling, the income level of the participants, and the reason(s) participants feel less safe when in contact with law enforcement in the U.S., and safer when in contact with police abroad. While this study was quantitative, future research would benefit from a qualitative or mixed methods research design to assist in capturing the lived experience of Blacks when engaged with law enforcement officers. This would assist readers to understand the reasons for Blacks' level of fear of police in the United States.

Conclusion

While the relationship between Blacks and the police in the United States has a long unattractive history, Blacks' level of fear of American law enforcement officers was never examined. This research explored the comparison of the feeling of safety of people of African Descent when coming in contact with police in the United States, compared to when coming in contact with police in other countries. The results of the study found that overall people of African Descent are more fearful of encountering law enforcement in the United States of America, and felt safer coming in contact with police in other countries. As frequency of travel outside the U.S. increased, so did the feeling of safety with foreign law enforcement. Ultimately, the results of this research serve as not only a reminder of the changes needed in policing practices against Blacks in the United States, but also as an indicator of how those policing practices force people of African Descent to live in fear of the police in America.

Table 1 Frequencies and Percentages of Variables Used in the Survey

Variable		N=414	%
Age			
18–24		9	2.2
25–34		83	20.0
35–44		190	45.9
45–54		89	21.5
55–64		35	8.5
65–74		8	1.9
Gender			
Female		257	62.1
Male		157	37.9
Region			
New England and Atlantic		219	52.9
Central		64	15.5
Mountain and Pacific		43	10.4
Abroad		88	21.3
Travel frequency outside the United States			
0 times per year		36	8.7
1–3 times per year		235	56.8
4–6 times per year		36	8.7
More than 6 times per year		19	4.6
Not applicable—Lives abroad		88	21.3
Travel to the United States for those living abroad			
No		11	2.7
Yes		77	18.6
Not applicable—Lives in the United States		326	78.7
Feel safer coming in contact with law enforcement in U.S. or abroad			
United States		51	12.3
Other countries		181	43.7
Not safe with either		141	34.1
Equally safe with both		41	9.9

Table 2 Frequencies and Percentages for Feeling Safer in Contact with U.S. or Abroad Law Enforcement by Variables

Variable	United States		Other countries		Not safe with either		Equally safe with both	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Age								
18–24	0	0.0	5	2.8	4	2.8	0	0.0
25–34	4	7.8	44	24.3	28	19.9	7	17.1
35–44	29	56.9	80	44.2	66	46.8	15	36.6
45–54	11	21.6	38	21.0	28	19.9	12	29.3
55–64	6	11.8	11	6.1	12	8.5	6	14.6
65–74	1	2.0	3	1.7	3	2.1	1	2.4
Gender								
Female	27	52.9	108	59.7	97	68.8	25	61.0
Male	24	47.1	73	40.3	44	31.2	16	39.0
Region								
New England and Atlantic	35	68.6	78	43.1	80	56.7	26	63.4
Central	8	15.7	30	16.6	22	15.6	4	9.8
Mountain and Pacific	5	9.8	13	7.2	20	14.2	5	12.2
Abroad	3	5.9	60	33.1	19	13.5	6	14.6
Travel frequency outside the United States								
0 times per year	7	14.6	4	3.3	23	18.9	2	5.7
1–3 times per year	33	68.8	90	74.4	85	69.7	27	77.1
4–6 times per year	5	10.4	18	14.9	10	8.2	3	8.6
More than 6 times per year	3	6.3	9	7.4	4	3.3	3	8.6
Travel to the United States for those living abroad								
No	0	0.0	6	10.0	3	15.8	2	33.3
Yes	3	100.0	54	90.0	16	84.2	4	66.7

Table 3 Summary of Multinomial Logistic Regression Predicting Feeling Safer of Contact with Law Enforcement in U.S. or Abroad

		<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	Wald	<i>OR</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI for <i>OR</i>	
Outcome and predictor							<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>
United States								
	Age	0.20	0.17	1.38	1.22	.240	0.87	1.71
	Gender—male	0.62	0.35	3.12	1.86	.077	0.93	3.72
	Region—New England and Atlantic	0.69	0.55	1.59	2.00	.208	0.68	5.88
	Region—Central	0.56	0.66	0.72	1.75	.397	0.48	6.43
	Travel frequency outside the U.S.	0.32	0.29	1.25	1.38	.264	0.79	2.42
Other countries								
	Age	-0.11	0.14	0.64	0.90	.426	0.69	1.17
	Gender—male	0.36	0.28	1.73	1.44	.188	0.84	2.48
	Region—New England and Atlantic	0.40	0.40	1.00	1.50	.317	0.68	3.28
	Region—Central	0.76	0.47	2.63	2.14	.105	0.85	5.39
	Travel frequency outside the U.S.	0.75	0.22	11.44	2.12	.001	1.37	3.27
Equally safe with both								
	Age	0.36	0.19	3.50	1.43	.061	0.98	2.09
	Gender—male	0.35	0.40	0.77	1.42	.381	0.65	3.12
	Region—New England and Atlantic	0.48	0.56	0.71	1.61	.399	0.53	4.86
	Region—Central	-0.03	0.76	0.00	0.97	.970	0.22	4.28
	Travel frequency outside the U.S.	0.61	0.31	4.02	1.84	.045	1.01	3.35

Note. Full Model: $\chi^2(15) = 31.46$, $p = .008$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .100$. Reference groups for Perceptions of Safety = Not Safe with Either, Gender = Female, Region = Mountain and Pacific.

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