Racial Bias in the Policing Context

Racial bias is a deep societal problem covered frequently in the news in the context of law enforcement. Such bias might be as overt as racial profiling by police, or might be as subtle as police unknowingly treating citizens differently based on their race or ethnicity. Although some biases can positive, here we focus exclusively on negative aspects racial bias, which shortchange, restrict, devalue, and/or harm civilians.

I-O psychologists, along with social psychologists and sociologists, play a meaningful role in social science research investigating and documenting the nature of racial biases in policing contexts. Here are some examples of such research:

- In a study conducted in New York, NY, Blacks and Hispanics were found to be more likely than Whites to be detained, convicted, and incarcerated for the same crime of misdemeanor marijuana possession.²
- More physical force tends to be used against Blacks than against Whites, and in general, Blacks are four times as likely to be killed by police officers as are Whites.³
- In Cincinnati in 2004, Blacks who were stopped for traffic violations were more likely to have their vehicle searched (5%, vs. 1% for Whites across 304 stops), to be asked if they had weapons (10% vs. 2%), and to be asked to leave the vehicle (10% vs. 2%). Note the study did not examine differences that likely exist between Blacks and Whites in these conditions, such as the neighborhood in which they were identified, and the reasons for probable cause leading to a search.⁴
- Of all races, Black motorists have been found to be most often stopped for “equipment violations and investigative purposes,” which can reflect two phenomena: irrelevant discretionary police activity that reflects bias (i.e., an excuse to stop a Black motorist), and relevant situational factors that are unbiased but happen to correlate with race (e.g., authors note how national data indicate that Black motorists more often drive cars that are older and in less repair).⁵

Historically, psychological and sociological research has lent support to the idea that people hold a bias where minorities are more likely to be mentally associated with criminality. For example:

---

¹ This work is adapted from Ruggs, E., Hebl, M., Rabelo, V. C., Kemp, A. S., Kovacs, J., & Weaver, K. B. (under review). The fire is burning in Ferguson: Are I/O psychologists responding? Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice.
³ (DOJ, 2001)
In an early classic study, people viewed a line drawing where a White man was holding a razor threateningly. Afterward, many individuals reported that that a Black man in the scene was holding the razor instead.\(^6\)

White participants watched one of two versions of a heated argument involving pushing; they were more likely to report violent behavior by the actor if he was Black versus White.\(^7\)

Studies based on representative samples in large cities (Chicago, Seattle, Baltimore) have shown that, even after controlling for actual neighborhood crime levels, having a higher percentage of young Black men in a community was associated with greater perceptions of crime.\(^8\)

Seeing Black (versus White) faces led White study participants to detect pictures of crime-related objects (that had been blurred by the researchers) more accurately. This also worked in the reverse direction: showing crime-related objects made participants attend to Black faces more than to White faces, a finding that was replicated in a more realistic sample involving 61 police officers (76% White) who were rapidly presented with pictures of criminal events.\(^9\)

Using what is called the police officer’s dilemma, or the shooter-bias paradigm, approximately two dozen studies have been conducted.\(^10\) In these studies, researchers typically use a videogame simulation to have participants “shoot” armed targets and “not shoot” unarmed ones. The race of these targets (Black or White) is manipulated, and the race associated with errors in shooting is recorded.

- Both police officer and community member samples demonstrate racial bias in the speed it takes to shoot Black versus White targets (Black being faster to shoot than White).
- Fortunately, officers generally outperformed community members and were able to make more accurate responses, were better able to detect weapons, and they set a higher criterion in deciding to shoot. Police officers also did better than community members in their use of race as a factor in deciding whether to shoot; that is, they were not as “trigger happy” if the target were Black versus White.\(^11\) However, this conclusion does not mean that police do not make shooting errors in these studies—they do.
- Evidence of racial bias emerged in safe contexts, where there was a greater tendency to shoot Black targets. Interestingly, in threatening contexts, bias was reduced, mostly due to an increase in shooting White targets.\(^12\) This suggests that the nature of bias is more likely to be exercised in more ambiguous police circumstances.
- The shooter bias research also has been extended to examining not only Blacks but to other minority groups including Latinos, Asians, and those wearing Muslim headgear.\(^13\)

---


\(^7\) Duncan 1976


\(^13\) Sadler, M. S., Correll, J., Park, B., Judd, C.M. (2012). The world is not black and white: Racial bias in the decision to shoot in a multiethnic context. *Journal of Social Issues, 68*, 286-313. doi:
When police experience fatigue, or are hyper-aroused, or are fearful, then shooting biases are more likely to emerge due to their impulse control being compromised.14 Regarding shooter errors, research participants (both White and Black) were more likely to shoot Black unarmed targets who had more stereotypical physical features (e.g., darker skin tone, broader noses, tightly curled hair); conversely, they were more likely not to shoot White armed targets (thus exhibiting a bias in both directions, of between 2-5% in error rates).15

Other psychological, sociological, and criminal justice research notes that links between race and criminality are reinforced by media depictions, video game depictions, and differential treatment during trials and sentencing.16 I-O psychologists play an active role in the legal arena, when examining causes of racial bias in the employment setting.

**Research Solutions for Reducing Racial Bias**

I-O psychologists seek to address the reduction of prejudice and bias in organizational settings. In the larger psychological literature, some well-established techniques for reducing bias include:

1. **Meaningful Intergroup Contact**
   To reduce racial bias, members of different racial groups have to engage in meaningful contact (e.g., extended and engaged interactions) with one another in settings where they are equal in status, are not in competition, have common goals, and are supported by a larger institution.17

2. **Decategorization**
   To reduce racial bias, create group conditions where police draw on individuating information about community members so that ethnic minorities are thought of in terms of unique traits, rather than simply as members of a stereotyped group. In other words, work to separate individuals from the stereotypes associated with their racial group.18

---


3. **Mutual Differentiation**
   To reduce racial bias, activate multiple subgroup identities during contact between police and the community. This means that people acknowledge different subgroups coexist while in pursuit of a common goal.19

4. **Recategorization**
   To reduce racial bias, create a superordinate category from smaller group identities or by systematically altering the perception of intergroup boundaries to create a shared group.20

5. **Integration**
   To reduce racial bias, activate both separate identities (i.e., police and community) and common or superordinate identity simultaneously.21

6. **Diversity Training**
   Research has found that diversity training provides medium to large effects when the goal is to improve knowledge and skills. Weaker effects for diversity training are found when the goal is to change attitudes. There are also stronger effects for longer training, training with distributed rather than massed practice (e.g., multiple training sessions; not all in one sitting), and training with more active forms of instruction (exercises v. computer based).22

7. **Active Shooter Training**
   Research has found that training participants in an active shooter simulation can reduce racial bias, so long as race is not correlated with the presence of a weapon in the simulation.23

I-O psychologists can continue their research to understand the conceptual underpinnings of these biases. Future research involving I-O psychologists also might:

- Examine ways to improve existing measures of racial bias.24
- Develop new and accurate strategies of racial bias measurement in research settings.25
- Continue to investigate interventions that serve to reduce and prevent racial bias in policing, such as appropriate training, role-modeling, and/or self-management interventions.26

---


Cornell et al., 2007

24 Oswald, Mitchell, Blanton, Jaccard, & Tetlock, 2013
