

Perceived threats from police officers, black men predict support for policing reforms

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At a time of intense national attention on law enforcement and race, a new University of Washington study suggests that racially based fear plays a role in public support for policing reforms.

The research, conducted by UW postdoctoral researcher Allison Skinner and published online July 12 in the open-access journal *Frontiers in Psychology*, used a series of experiments to gauge participants' level of [support](#) for policing reforms in relation to whether they felt threatened by [police officers](#) or black men.

The study found that the degree to which participants viewed police as threatening was linked to their tendency to support reformed policing practices, such as limiting the use of lethal force and requiring police force demographics to match those of the community. By contrast, when they perceived black men as threatening, participants were less likely to support policing reforms.

"This speaks to the potential influence of [racial biases](#) in attitudes about policing policy reform," said Skinner, a researcher in the UW's Institute for Learning & Brain Sciences. "Racial attitudes are tied up into people's policy positions and how they feel about these seemingly unrelated topics."

The findings come a week after the nation was roiled by the killings of two black men by police in Baton Rouge and Minnesota and the murders of five police officers in Dallas. Skinner and co-author Ingrid Haas, an

assistant professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, launched the study about eight weeks after unarmed black teenager Michael Brown was fatally shot in August 2014 by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri.

Brown's killing prompted widespread calls for policing reform, and the two researchers sought to investigate the role that perceived threat might play in support for such reforms. For the first experiment, they asked 216 mostly white university students to rate the extent to which they felt threatened by police officers and black men as a result of Brown's shooting. They also asked participants about their support for specific policing reform measures and whether they thought lethal force was justified under particular circumstances.

The same experiment was then repeated with a more demographically representative—though still largely white—sample, with similar results. Respondents in both experiments were "significantly" more threatened by police officers than by black men. In both groups, those who saw police officers as threatening were more likely to support policing reforms, while a higher threat association with black men predicted less support for reforms.

Their responses about lethal force were also similar, though the second group deemed lethal force less acceptable in some circumstances—for example, while almost 25 percent of respondents in the student sample thought it was appropriate for police to use deadly force when someone is committing a crime, just 11 percent in the community sample did.

The researchers then took the experiment a step further. Since the findings from the first two studies could not prove a causal relationship, they sought to determine if showing participants threatening images of police officers and black men would actually influence their support for policing reforms. They showed a new set of participants threatening

images of police officers or of black men, then asked participants the same reform questions asked in the previous experiments. Control groups were shown images of the officers or black men with neutral facial expressions.

The researchers tried to account for racial bias by asking participants a series of questions about their racial attitudes and factoring that information into the model. Overall, they found that respondents with low levels of racial bias were most supportive of policing policy reforms, but that exposure to threatening images of black men reduced support for reform. By contrast, participants with high bias levels were equally supportive of policing reforms regardless of whether they saw black men as threatening.

"That suggests that people with high racial bias have a tendency to oppose policing reform and support less restrictive policing policies," Skinner said.

A final experiment involving alternating images of threatening items—ferocious dogs, snakes—with neutral images of police officers and black men to determine whether participants could be conditioned to associate threat with either group. Participants were also asked about their fear of crime and whether they would be willing to sign a petition supporting policing reform.

Although the images did not impact attitudes toward policing reforms, Skinner said, the experiment showed that respondents who saw black men as threatening were more fearful about crime.

"As you might expect, the more threatened participants felt by police, the more willing they were to sign a petition in support of police reform, and the more threatened participants felt by black men, the less willing they were to sign the petition," she said.

But the researchers also found evidence that the images influenced willingness to sign the petition. Participants in a control group agreed to sign the petition (58 percent) at rates higher than chance (50 percent), while among participants who were conditioned to associate [black men](#) with threat, willingness to sign the petition was at chance (49 percent).

The studies have limitations, the researchers acknowledged. Intensive media coverage and debate about race and policing policy reform could influence public opinion, they note, and the study [participants](#) were primarily white—making it unclear whether the findings can be generalized across minority groups.

But overall, Skinner said, the research provides strong evidence that the notion of threat is related to [public support](#) of policing reforms.

"It speaks to the relationship between racial attitudes and attitudes about [policing](#)," she said. "By knowing that relationship exists, we can then start thinking about how to address it."

More information: Allison L. Skinner et al. Perceived Threat Associated with Police Officers and Black Men Predicts Support for Policing Policy Reform, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2016). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01057](#)

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