

Academic research on police shootings and race

By Heather Mac

Donald

July 19

I am blogging about findings from my new book, “[The War on Cops](#),” this week, following a series of assassinations and attempted assassinations of police officers. [Yesterday](#), I argued that police shootings and other police activity do not evidence officer bias, when crime rates are taken into account. Today, I will discuss the latest academic research on the issue of police shootings and race.

The most sophisticated lab study of police shoot/don’t-shoot decisions to date, published this year in [Criminology and Public Policy](#), undercuts the Black Lives Matter narrative about trigger-happy, racist cops. Washington State University researcher Lois James put 80 officers from the Spokane, Wash., police department in highly realistic video simulators of street scenarios. Officers were confronted with potentially armed suspects identical in all aspects, including body language and weapon, except for their race. The test subjects were not told the purpose of the research, which was conducted between August 2012 and November 2013, before the issue of race in policing reached the fever pitch of prominence that it possesses today.

The officers were three times less likely to shoot unarmed black suspects than unarmed white suspects and took significantly longer to decide to shoot armed black suspects than armed white suspects. James hypothesized that officers were second-guessing themselves when confronting black suspects, due to their awareness of the potential negative repercussions of shooting a black suspect. James’s finding that participants, in her words, “displayed significant bias favoring Black suspects” in their shooting decisions replicated the results of two previous studies she has run on shoot/don’t-shoot decisions.

James’s work anticipated a much-discussed [working paper](#) by Harvard economist Roland Fryer. Fryer found that police officers in Houston were nearly 24 percent less likely to shoot blacks than whites (p. 50; he concluded that there was no evidence of racial discrimination in shootings there. In a data set comprising officer shootings from Dallas, Austin, Houston, Los Angeles and six Florida counties, he found that officers were 47 percent less likely to discharge their weapon without first being attacked if the suspect was black than if the suspect was white (p. 25), and that black and white victims of police shootings were equally likely to have been armed.

(Fryer also found that blacks in New York City were more likely than whites to have non-lethal force used against them during pedestrian stops. But the cursory forms filled out by officers after a stop do not convey the intensity or exact details of suspect resistance. Blacks were more likely to have non-lethal force used against them when “officers report perfect compliance” by

the stop subject (p. 6, p. 31), writes Fryer. The stop forms have no field for reporting “perfect compliance,” however, but only contain fields for notating suspect resistance. An officer’s oversight in not checking the boxes regarding suspect behavior is not necessarily tantamount to affirmatively “reporting perfect compliance.”)

Several other recent studies complicate the favored media meme of white cops oppressing black subjects. A March 2015 study of the Philadelphia Police Department by the Justice Department found that black and Hispanic officers were more likely than white officers to shoot unarmed black individuals under the mistaken belief that those individuals were armed.

A study by the former acting director of the National Institute of Justice found that black officers in the New York Police Department were 3.3 times more likely than white officers to use their gun at shooting scenes. (Fryer also looked at differences in behavior between white and black officers and found that although white officers were not more likely to shoot unarmed blacks than unarmed whites, black officers were more likely to shoot unarmed whites than unarmed blacks, and more likely than white officers to shoot unarmed whites.)

As for the widely held assumption that a predominantly white law enforcement agency is more likely to engage in systemic civil rights violations than a racially diverse law enforcement agency, it bears noting that in August 2014, the U.S. attorney for the Southern District of New York issued a report denouncing the “deep-seated culture of violence” toward adolescent inmates among corrections officers at New York’s Rikers Island jail complex. Over three-quarters of Rikers corrections officers are black in a city that is 23 percent black.

The Detroit Police Department emerged in 2014 from 11 years of federal oversight for alleged abuse of civilians, including a pattern of unjustified shootings. The Detroit force is about two-thirds black. In 2012, the Justice Department imposed on the New Orleans Police Department the most expansive consent decree in the nation to rein in the alleged unconstitutional behavior of its officers, the majority of whom are black.

Now perhaps these civil rights allegations against these majority-black forces were trumped up. But if so, perhaps similar allegations against majority-white forces are, too. Or maybe the race of officers has little to do with whether they can police fairly.

Two final pieces of data challenge the narrative that there is an epidemic of racially biased police shootings in the country. The percentage of homicide victims who die from police shootings is greater for whites and Hispanics than for blacks. Twelve percent of all white and Hispanic homicide victims in 2015 died from police shootings, based on The Washington Post’s shootings database, compared with four percent of black homicide victims.

And police officers are at greater risk from blacks than unarmed blacks are from police officers. If we accept at face value The Post’s typology of “unarmed” victims, which I discussed yesterday, the per capita rate of officers being feloniously killed is 45 times higher than the rate at which unarmed black males are killed by cops. And an officer’s chance of getting killed by a *black* assailant is 18.5 times higher than the chance of an unarmed black getting killed by a cop.

(The 36 unarmed black male victims of police shootings in 2015 measured against the total black male population [nearly 19 million in mid-2014, per the Census Bureau] amounts to a per capita rate of 0.0000018 unarmed fatalities by police. By comparison, 52 law enforcement officers were feloniously killed in 2015 while engaged in such duties as traffic stops and warrant service, according to the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund. The FBI counted nearly 628,000 full-time law enforcement officers in the United States in 2014. Assuming that the number of officers did not markedly increase in 2015, the per capita rate of officers being feloniously killed is 0.000082, or 45 times the rate at which unarmed black males are killed by cops. The Memorial Fund does not have data on the race of cop-killers in 2015, but applying the historical average over the last decade in which 40 percent of all cop-killers were black would yield 21 cops killed by blacks in 2015. An officer's chance of getting killed by a black person is 0.000033, which is 18.5 times the chance of an unarmed black person getting killed by a cop. After this year's 72 percent increase in felonious killings of police officers, these ratios will be even more lopsided.)

These findings, taken together, fail to support the claim that police are biased in their use of deadly force against blacks.

[Heather Mac Donald is the Thomas W. Smith fellow at the Manhattan Institute and contributing editor to City Journal.]