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What Do Recent Studies Say About Crime and Policing? Part 2

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Crime plays a major role in the well-being of a community. It can influence where people live, where businesses locate and how local economies perform. Identifying causal effects, however, is difficult for a number of reasons. Still, considerable recent literature exists examining many aspects of crime. Part two of our *Economic Brief* series examines studies on racial disparities in policing, crime reporting and the effectiveness of training programs.

In [part one](#), we focused on the impacts of crime on communities and their well-being and discussed the literature examining the effectiveness of investing in more police.

However, several other factors could have significant impact as well. Among them is race. Recent and highly publicized episodes of police violence such as the deaths of Freddie Gray and George Floyd have again raised the issue of racial biases in policing behavior. Economic studies find suggestions of racial disparities in some categories of police activity.

In part two, we review some of these studies on race and policing, as well as how effective various policies have been in addressing some of these issues.

Racial Disparities in Policing

The evidence presented in the economic literature suggests that policing outcomes are affected by police officers' race. Earlier work establishes a connection between the racial makeup of a city's police force and the racial pattern of arrests. A [2001 paper by Steven Levitt and John Donohue](#) finds that adding more white police increases the number of arrests of nonwhites, but does not systematically affect the number of white arrests. Conversely, an increase in the number of minority police is associated with significant increases in arrests of whites, but with little impact on arrests of nonwhites.

Evidence also suggests that there is racial bias in the likelihood of being stopped by police, the likelihood of being searched once stopped, and police investigations. The 2020 paper "[A Large-Scale Analysis of Racial Disparities in Police Stops across the United States](#)" finds that Black drivers are less likely to be stopped after sunset. The reason is that the "veil of darkness" after the sun goes down makes race substantially harder to discern when deciding whether to stop the vehicle.

Concerning search behavior by police officers, the same paper as well as a [2020 working paper by Benjamin Feigenberg and Conrad Miller \(PDF\)](#) finds a lower bar for searching Black and Hispanic drivers than for white drivers.

Race also seems to play a role in police use of force and in police investigations. A [2020 working paper by Mark Hoekstra and Carly Will Sloan](#) indicates that white officers use force more often than Black officers on average and use gun force more than twice as often when responding to similar calls. The paper also found that when white officers are dispatched to minority neighborhoods, they tend to use any type of force more often than minority officers.

In the case of police investigations, a [2018 working paper by Jeremy West \(PDF\)](#) suggests that officers cite drivers of other races more frequently. To overcome the problem of nonrandom selection into police encounters, this study uses data from automobile crash investigations, which assumes that officer dispatch is independent of drivers' race. The study concludes that state police officers issue significantly more traffic citations to drivers whose race differs from their own.

Crime Reporting

The police's presence in communities and their relationships with residents complement each other. More cooperation between police and residents leads to a greater flow of information, which could in turn lead to more apprehensions and ultimately lower crime rates.

However, interactions which involve unfair police practices and those that end in tragedy highlight the fragility of this cooperation. These lessen resident/police cooperation, undermining communication flows required to contain criminal activity.

Earlier studies — such as [a 1998 paper by Levitt](#) — find that estimates of the impact of police on crime may be biased due to changes in crime reporting, but this effect is relatively small. However, high-profile cases of police violence may present a serious threat to public safety if they adversely affect the willingness of citizens to report crime.

We are currently looking at the impact of information sharing in Baltimore, Md., following the death of Freddie Gray. Our work examines data on Baltimore-area 911 calls leading up to and after the incident, in addition to police-reported crimes around the event.

Our goal is to determine if that form of crime reporting changed. Behavioral changes might be expected to differ across neighborhoods, as low-income and minority neighborhoods may react to the tragic incident differently than other neighborhoods. Preliminary evidence suggests there was a decline in certain types of 911 calls after the event in predominantly Black neighborhoods, especially in those close to where the event took place.

Learning From What Has (and Hasn't) Worked

A wide range of policies have been employed to address some of the issues we've been discussing in this series. Most policies implicitly recognize the value of cooperation between police and the communities they serve.

Police Diversity

Beginning in the 1970s, courts ordered police departments to implement affirmative action plans. Such policies had important effects on crime and crime reporting. A [2021 working paper by Anna Harvey and Taylor Mattia \(PDF\)](#) shows that court orders that increased the share of Black officers reduced racial disparities in crime victimization and reduced Black crime victimization without increasing white crime victimization.

A [2019 paper by Amalia Miller and Carmit Segal](#) examines the impact of integrating women in U.S. policing from the late 1970s through the early 1990s. It found that more female representation among officers led to higher reporting rates of violent crimes (especially domestic violence) and lower rates of intimate partner homicide and non-fatal domestic abuse.

It should be noted, however, that to the extent that minority representation has increased over time, most of the gains from these measures may have already been realized (on average).

Training Programs

Training programs can improve officer behavior, reduce use of force against civilians and reduce complaints against the police. A [2018 paper by Emily Owens, David Weisburd, Karen Amendola and Geoffrey Alpert](#) evaluates the effectiveness of a procedural justice program implemented in Seattle. The study finds that officers who participated in the program were less likely to resolve incidents with arrests and less likely to be involved in use-of-force incidents.

A [2020 paper by George Wood, Tom Tyler and Andrew Papachristos](#) evaluates a training program in Chicago. The program was intended to encourage officers to adopt policing strategies founded on respect, neutrality and transparency in the exercise of authority and also to provide opportunities for citizens to offer their viewpoint of the events. The study finds that the training reduced both complaints against the police and the use of force against civilians.

The main lesson from these studies is that relatively minor supervisory interventions had the ability to dramatically change how police and citizens interact with each other.

Police Oversight and Accountability

Evidence on the effectiveness of body cameras is inconclusive to date, as seen in papers from [2016](#) and [2019](#). Making it easier for citizens to file complaints increases civilian oversight, which may reduce police misconduct but also have unintended consequences (i.e., less engagement or "effort" by the police), according to a [2017 working paper by Bocar Ba](#) (PDF).

Also, law enforcement collective bargaining rights may enable police misconduct, as collective bargaining rights are associated with an increase in violent incidents of misconduct, according to a [2020 paper by Dhammika Dharmapala, Richard McAdams and John Rappaport](#). Finally, elected, rather than appointed, chief law enforcement officers can improve the treatment of minority groups by police, as noted in a [2020 working paper by Giovanni Facchini, Brian Knight and Cecelia Testa](#) (PDF).

Conclusion

Crime is an outcome of multiple factors. Education, employment opportunities, poverty, access to housing and health services, food deserts, and many other factors play important and complementary roles in determining crime levels. The focus of the present essay is on policing, especially the effect of policing policies. However, a holistic and comprehensive approach to address the problem of crime prevention seems to be the most reasonable course of action.

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