Racial Composition of Neighborhood and Perceptions of Police

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ABSTRACT

Different people have varying interactions with the police depending on race, neighborhood, and socioeconomic status. White race and neighborhood have individually been researched, the relationship between race, neighborhood and perceptions of police based on these variables remains a gap in the literature. Our study draws on an original survey and focuses on Black and White American respondents and the racial composition (RC) of each individual’s environment. We examine how neighborhood context can affect perceptions of an experience with police and law enforcement in general. We formulate two hypotheses to explain the relationship between diverse RCs of neighborhood and perceptions of police.

Hypothesis 1 predicts that African-Americans, regardless of neighborhood racial composition, will express mostly negative opinions of police. Hypothesis 2 predicts that as composition of a neighborhood becomes more black, a White American will be increasingly likely to have negative perceptions of police. We measure variation in RC of neighborhoods and variation in perceptions of police related to effectiveness, trustworthiness, and incidents of personal contact to find the relationship between variables. We ultimately find neighborhood context has different effects on perception of police for Black and White Americans. We find Black Americans’ perception of police is not affected by neighborhood context, while White Americans experience increasingly negative perceptions of police as neighborhood diversity increases. Some implications of our findings include the differing impact of neighborhood on Black and White Americans, the effect of linked fate, and the unintended consequences of segregated neighborhoods. Our findings also leave room for more political psychology research to be done.

INTRODUCTION

One of the defining characteristics of democratic life is a trust in public institutions and law enforcement. In the wake of mass incarceration however, expanding police powers have resulted in aggressive surveillance of African-American communities, and have accentuated Black Americans’ already frayed trust in policing. Political science research on mass incarceration has focused mainly on differences between primary and proximal contact in determining attitudes towards the police (Walker 2014; Burch 2013). Our contribution to this conversation is by analyzing both White and Black Americans’ perceptions of police with neighborhood diversity as the main independent variable.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Data sources:
- Race and the Carceral State Survey fielded on Survey Sampling International.
- American Community Survey 5-Year Data (2012-2016)

Analysis:
- Dependent Variables: General perception of police: Police Effectiveness (Figure 1)
Policing Trustworthiness (Figure 2)
Police Perception of Personal Contact (Figure 3)
- Independent Variables
Neighborhood racial diversity (in terms of the percent of African-Americans in the total population, Figure 4)

CONCLUSIONS

Our findings hold practical implications for policy-makers; they imply that the neighborhoods we create impact the way in which the American political system is perceived. We also acknowledge some caveats to our findings:
- The sample is limited to African-Americans and White Americans.
- Police interactions are treated as a constant variable; we assume police operating in each neighborhood operate in the same way.
- Changing demographics will influence our results in the future. Most African Americans, regardless of class, are one generation away from poor Black neighborhoods resulting in different social networks. Our results might change as more Black Americans move to upper/ middle-class areas

REFERENCES