

Breeding Contempt: Reactions to Police Violence against Men and Dogs

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Abstract

Growing media coverage and conversation around police shootings has occurred in the United States in recent years, but little research in political science has explored individual reactions to the news of police shootings or the implications for feelings towards police organizations. Consequently, this project explores how Americans react to stories about police-involved shootings and their subsequent opinions towards police. Using a survey experiment, we expose white participants to a news story which describes police officers shooting and killing either a black man, a white man, or a dog, followed by measures of feelings towards police. We find evidence that the victim presented — when either a white man or a dog — influences the perceptions white people hold of police brutality, police racism, and their attitudes toward policing more broadly. Moreover, and perhaps of greatest concern, is the lack of reaction white respondents express after reading about the murder of a black victim. We contend that this finding has important implications for the politics of policing and police oversight.

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Of 987 individuals killed by police officers' use of fatal force in 2018, 209 were black, and, of those, 200 were black men.¹ The targeting and killing of unarmed black men has become a point of interest for news cycles and social movement organizations alike and is indicative of a fraught relationship between communities of color and police. For instance, Pew data from 2014 and 2016 reveals that black respondents are about half as likely as white respondents to believe that police are doing a good job.² With increasing press coverage over the past decade, academics have also begun to focus on the intertwining relationship between police use of force and race (Boudreau, MacKenzie and Simmons 2019; Desmond, Papachristos and Kirk 2016; Jefferson, Neuner and Pasek N.d.; McGowan and Wylie N.d.; Streeter 2019), complementing a long-standing literature which links blacks to perceptions of criminality, violence, and hostility. One area that is not well-developed, however, is how news coverage of police shootings influences attitudes towards police and policies related to policing.

In contrast, there is a long literature which connects black people with stereotypes of violence and criminality, as well as receiving harsher punishments. Indeed, prejudice towards black people (Dixon 2006; Peffley, Hurwitz and Sniderman 1997), interaction with black people (Quillian and Pager 2001; Gilliam Jr, Valentino and Beckmann 2002), and even the implicit dehumanization of black people (Goff et al. 2008; Jardina and Piston 2016) all have implications for the degree of punishment prescribed to black suspects accused of committing crimes.

We know very little, however, about how attitudes towards police are influenced following police shootings of black victims. Thus, we compare the reactions of white Americans to the police killing of an unarmed black victim to the police killing of a similar white victim and a family dog. Put differently, how does the depiction of police violence towards black lives – relative to other victims – influence whites' reactions? Is it the case that black lives are valued less than others in the context of a police shooting?³

Given the extensive literature exploring the ways in which the news media influences perceptions of events and groups (Entman 1997; Gilens 2009; Iyengar and Kinder 2010; Mendelberg 1997; White 2007), we should expect that the domain of policing will be no different. That is, by exposing white respondents to news of a police shooting, we can understand how that news coverage impacts opinions of police and policing, as well as how changing the victim influences those opinions. Thus, we ask in this study how exposure to news about a police shooting influences white attitudes toward police and policing. Using a survey experiment, we have white participants read a news article that describes an incident in which a black man, white man, or a dog is shot by police and then measure subsequent attitudes towards police and related policy preferences. Taken together, our results suggest that exposure to a news story about a police shooting draws strong reactions from white people, some of which are reflective of stereotypes about black people. Concerning,

¹Through December 27, 2018. Data is available from the [Washington Post's Fatal Force Police Shootings Database](#).

²Pew data is available [here](#) and [here](#).

³For example, [one editorial](#) referencing this concept that black lives are worth less than animals' lives.

also, is that exposure to the black victim condition does not result in a particularly meaningful reaction from white participants. Moreover, the news story does not serve as a call to action for white participants when the victim is a dog or a black man. We find that only the white victim motivates white participants to increase their support for measures of public oversight of police.

Literature Review

There are two primary areas from which we draw to position our project within the discipline. To begin, any discussion of race and policing must highlight the relationship between black Americans, crime, and the criminal justice system, of which police are an enforcement mechanism. We then move to a discussion of existing work in political science that examines perceptions of police and the influence of policing on politics.

Race, Crime, and the Criminal Justice System

The relationship between black Americans and the United States criminal justice system is long, complex, and fraught with tension. This comes not only from the ways in which police and the penal system have historically been used as oppressive and coercive forces in black communities but also due to the long-standing association presented to white Americans which connects black people and criminality. This legacy can be traced back hundreds of years – to slave patrols in the 19th century which policed black slave communities to prevent escape, as well as lynch mobs following Emancipation, which policed and handed down brutal, extra-legal punishment on blacks who breached social constraints (White 1927). The relationship is not limited to agents of repression and over-policing in black communities, though. It extends to how black Americans have come to be intricately connected with crime and violence. There is a well-established literature which has identified this distorted relationship, reinforced over time, between black people and crime, as well as their disproportionate interactions with the United States criminal justice system (Alexander 2012; Barkan and Cohn 2005; Chiricos, Welch and Gertz 2004; Entman 1997; Dixon and Linz 2000; Gilliam Jr and Iyengar 2000; Gilliam Jr, Valentino and Beckmann 2002; Oliver 2003; Peffley, Hurwitz and Sniderman 1997; Quillian and Pager 2001).

Among the mechanisms by which this relationship between black Americans and crime has been reinforced is the news media. It is a powerful force in shaping public perception of events at-hand and of society more broadly. Such influence is not limited to the tone or bias contained within an individual story, but it is perhaps especially influential in the larger narratives created over time. Many studies have found that the use of racially-coded language and racial cues in news, both words and images, have impacts on the political attitudes and policy preferences of white Americans (Gilens 2009; Hurwitz and Peffley 2005; Hutchings, Walton Jr and Benjamin 2010; Mendelberg 1997; Valentino, Hutchings and White 2002). On this note, black people are a

common subject matter in the news media when it comes to criminal activity and violent behavior, and crime is the most frequent topic in the news to feature them prominently (Entman 1997).

Moreover, black Americans are not just frequently described as violent or engaged in criminal activity, but the ways in which they are framed in news stories serves to reinforce the association. They are more often shown in police custody or with a mug shot in stories about crime than white people. These stories also tend to take on white perspectives, emphasizing white victimization and white opinions (Entman 1997). Similarly, Dixon and Linz (2000), in a content analysis of local news programs in Southern California, find that black people are overrepresented as “lawbreakers” in regards to their population and are more likely to be portrayed as criminals (along with Hispanics) than white people.

This news coverage extends to impact the attitudes of those who consume news. Gilliam Jr and Iyengar (2000) find that white respondents are more likely to express punitive attitudes when presented with a news story about a black murder suspect than they are when presented with a story with a white murder suspect. Peffley, Hurwitz and Sniderman (1997) suggest that prior stereotypes and attitudes held about black people may be a mediating factor in perceptions of them as criminals as well as punitiveness against them. In an experiment in which they alter the race and behavior of two men subjected to a police search and found with drugs, Peffley, Hurwitz and Sniderman (1997) find that white participants who endorse negative stereotypes about black people – proclivity for violence and hostility – believe the search to be more reasonable than those who did not endorse the negative stereotypes.

Support for stronger punishment against black suspects is not limited to police force; it is also relevant for the criminal justice system more widely. Dixon (2006) finds that these negative stereotypes, in conjunction with new media consumption, are mediators for greater punitiveness. White participants who hold negative stereotypes about black people and watch high amounts of news are more likely to support the death penalty when exposed to a newscast which features a majority of black suspects accused of criminal activity (Dixon 2006). Studies also find that prejudiced white respondents who endorse stereotypes of black Americans as violent are more supportive of increased spending on the criminal justice system (Barkan and Cohn 2005), and that white people who associate black people with crime, but do not necessarily hold stereotypes of them as violent, are more supportive of punitive measures in the criminal justice system, regardless of their political ideology and their racial prejudice (Chiricos, Welch and Gertz 2004). Moreover, there is little evidence that white attitudes towards black people are improving over time, even following the election of the first black president (Hutchings, Walton Jr and Benjamin 2010; Yadon and Piston 2018).

Further, we draw on another literature which argues that white people regard black people, not only as criminal, but also as less than human. Goff et al. (2004; 2008) not only find evidence of the implicit dehumanization of black people, they also observe that priming dehumanization in white

respondents leads to greater support for the use of violent police force against a black suspect, regardless of anti-black prejudice. This relationship is not limited to their experiments, but can also be traced through news coverage of both black and white death row inmates, many of whom were described in news media with language that invoked ape-like characteristics.

Dehumanization is not only implicit. [Jardina and Piston \(2016\)](#) develop and test explicit measures of dehumanization in relation to punitive policies which affect black people disproportionately to white people. They conclude that white people who hold explicitly dehumanizing attitudes are more supportive of policies like three-strike laws, stop-and-frisk procedures, and the death penalty. Such dehumanization, then, is perhaps one mechanism for levying stiffer punishments and harsher force against black suspects ([Goff et al. 2008](#); [Eberhardt et al. 2004](#); [Hutchings 2015](#); [Jardina and Piston 2016](#); [Peffley and Hurwitz 2007](#)). The decision in our experimental design to place human victims in comparison to an animal victim is an effort to indirectly test for dehumanization of the human victims.

Thus far, our discussion has focused on how prejudice against black people can influence policy preferences and support for punitive action. How, though, does this relate to perceptions of police and police use of force? We turn now to observational studies considering police use of force that find strongly differentiated responses among black and white communities. Many studies have noted the significant behavioral impact of police shootings on American Politics. These events shift how and whether citizens engage in political activity ([Kang and Dawes N.d.](#); [Enos, Kaufman and Sands 2019](#)) and with the state itself ([Desmond, Papachristos and Kirk 2016](#)). Here, though, we concern ourselves with political attitudes in the wake of police shootings, and several studies have laid a groundwork as we develop our expectations.

Police Violence and Perceptions of Police

Among the observational studies which broach the topic of policing and police violence, several offer direct guidance for the design of our study. For example, [Rosenbaum et al. \(2005\)](#) find that indirect proximity to a police shooting – perhaps knowing or reading about someone who has been a victim of police brutality – has significant effects for attitudes toward police. So too, citizen initiated-contact with police may shift attitudes toward police ([Rosenbaum et al. 2005](#)). Thus, in our survey instrument we include questions which ask participants to note their own interactions with police.⁴ Moreover, [Graziano, Schuck and Martin \(2010\)](#) find decreased perceptions of the frequency of police racial profiling in the aftermath of a local, highly-publicized incident of racial profiling committed against a black elite. They also find that there is no impact of viewing a video which discusses racial profiling in police stops on the attitudes that respondents report about police stops. They conclude that a clear frame of reference in news coverage is essential ([Graziano,](#)

⁴While we do not include the results accounting for police and crime victimization in the current version of this paper, we do find that both forms of victimization are significant for several of our variables, including: perceptions of police and police brutality, as well as willingness to sign a petition in regards to police use of force.

Schuck and Martin 2010). Thus, in our study, we clearly state that the shooting victim was not doing anything to provoke a violent response from police, and in the male victim conditions, we specify that the victim is shown on video with his arms up in the air immediately before being shot by police. Finally, using their Police Force Index measure, which asked respondents under what conditions they might find police use of force to be justifiable, Carter and Corra (2016) find that white racial resentment was a determinant of justification of police force. We include questions of gender, political ideology, and racial resentment in our survey instrument.⁵

More broadly, citizen interactions with police, and particularly the interactions of non-white citizens, are a topic of interest for the many ways in which they have been found to affect those involved. Evidence from survey experiments demonstrate that white and black people perceive and process information related to police shootings differently (Jefferson, Neuner and Pasek N.d.). Such differences in perception are perhaps also apparent when considering emotional responses to police shootings. Whereas African-Americans are more likely to express anger in response to a police shooting, no matter the race of the victim, white respondents are more likely to report no emotional response when presented with a black victim. African-Americans so too are more likely to place blame for the shooting on the police officer compared to white respondents (McGowan and Wylie N.d.). The information context in which news of a shooting is also important. Situating a shooting into a broader narrative of police violence increases the blame attributed to police, while also decreasing trust in them (Boudreau, MacKenzie and Simmons 2019).

There are a handful of other studies examining perceptions of police from which we draw. Utilizing longitudinal data from the city of Cincinnati, Kaminski and Jefferis (1998) find that a televised instance of police force, including the violent arrest of a black man, plausibly impacted Cincinnati's non-white population's perceptions of police – specifically their perceptions of police use of force. The authors find that non-white perceptions of police use of force shifted toward police using too much force, while whites' perceptions remain unchanged. Perceptions of police courtesy, protection, and responsiveness remain unchanged in both groups (Kaminski and Jefferis 1998). Weitzer (2002) finds a subtle effect of police misconduct on public opinion, measured through newspaper polls in New York City and Los Angeles, but it is most pronounced in non-white people. In white people, the effect does not appear to be as lasting or impactful. Put differently, a participant's identification as non-white is an important factor in the magnitude and longevity of the decreased feelings of warmth toward police. Non-white respondents report lower baseline levels of approval for police, but their dissatisfaction in the wake of police violence decreases more and remains lower longer when compared to white people (Weitzer 2002).

Overall, what is notable, beyond the measured effect of police violence on public opinion and behavior, is the distinguishable impact of race (Enos, Kaufman and Sands 2019; Jefferson, Neuner and Pasek N.d.; McGowan and Wylie N.d.; Weitzer 2002). What we set out to do in the present

⁵In our analyses, we do not find that partisanship, political ideology, or racial resentment act as moderators.

study, and what has not been done in this literature, is understand how exposure to a news story about police violence affects not only attitudes about punishment, but also attitudes about police and policing. We contend that such connections are increasingly important to study as cities move toward tightening oversight of police forces and many such initiatives are presented to citizens at the ballot box. Thus, the attitudes citizens hold about police are not only their own. The public's opinion has potentially lasting effects for the future of policing in local communities.

Hypotheses

Drawing from existing work on race and policing in the United States, we develop two sets of hypotheses pertaining to attitudes about police and policy preferences about policing and crime. We outline these hypotheses below.

Attitudes about Police and Police Action

An extensive literature finds that white Americans are more punitive toward black Americans when presented with news stories which frame black people in regard to criminal activity – often as a function of stereotypes, prejudice, or racial resentment, (Dixon 2006; Peffley, Hurwitz and Sniderman 1997; Carter and Corra 2016). As a result, we believe that white people will also express more punitive attitudes toward a black victim than a white victim or a dog victim. Moreover, this is aligned with literature on dehumanization, which finds that black people are subject to perceptions of inferiority and decreased value which place them in a similar position to animals from the perspective of white people (Goff et al. 2008). This leads to our first hypothesis: (**H1**) – *white respondents are more likely to believe that the black victim was a greater threat to police than the dog or white victims.*

Speaking to white Americans' support for stronger punitive action against black people in the literature, we believe this likely signals an endorsement of police violence against black people as well. For example, we believe that fatal force taken against a dog or white person will elicit greater sympathy and greater disapproval from white participants. We hypothesize that (**H2**) – *white respondents will have greater respect (measured in perceptions of racism and police brutality) and greater confidence (measured in job approval, honesty, use of weapons, and abuse of power) in police and their actions when reading a news story about a black man killed by police compared to those who read a story about a dog or white man killed by police.*

Policy Preferences about Police

Perceptions of black people as violent, hostile, and prone to criminal activity influence the policy preferences that white people hold in regards to the criminal justice system. Despite our treatment stating that “the man was not involved in the crime, nor was there any reason to suspect that the

victim was dangerous” (see Table 1), we expect that associating the black victim with potential criminal activity will confirm stereotypes held by white people associating black people with criminal activity. We expect to see this association come through in our results regarding changes which could be made to prevent the improper use of fatal force. Thus, we hypothesize that (**H3**) *white people will express greater support for signing a petition to condone police violence and a local civilian review board in their community when reading a news story about a white victim as opposed to a black victim or dog victim.*

Methods

To test these hypotheses, we designed a survey experiment that relies on multiple (fictional) news stories regarding a fatal police shooting. While these news stories are fictional, the language used within the articles is drawn from actual events and represents an accurate portrayal of discussions of police violence. The first version depicted a black man being shot by police, the second version depicted a white man being shot by police, and in the third, the victim was a dog. Importantly, the key information regarding the shooting remained constant across the treatments with only small changes to the language used (see Table 1). This language was crafted in such a way to portray all victims as innocent and inculpable for the shooting. That is, the dog was depicted as not being aggressive but barking at the police officer as he walked by the yard where the dog was outside. The male victims are depicted as leaving home to walk to the nearby convenience store for a snack when they are approached by an officer. It is reported that the men raise their arms in the air to make clear they are not a threat as they walk away before being shot. This language was intentional because animals are frequently seen as more innocent than humans, so we intended to emphasize that the men were caught on video walking to the store with their arms up when shot. A control story, which had nothing to do with race or police shootings, was also included as a point of comparison. In the control, participants read a story about a search for crossing guards for a school district, which makes a passing mention of police participating in the training process. This mention of police was included so as not to make the post-treatment questions about police seem out-of-place to participants in the control condition.

The photo of the dog was selected after consideration of the coloration, breed, age, and other photo qualities (i.e., with or without eye contact, objects shown the background). We opted for a photo including a grassy background, with an adult appearance – i.e. not clearly old or puppy-like – and with a multi-colored coat given concerns that black-colored dogs are less likely to be adopted and are perceived as scarier given greater difficulty distinguishing their features.⁶ The photos depicting the male victims were drawn from the Chicago Face Database (Ma, Correll and Wittenbrink 2015). The photos of the black and white men were selected given their ratings on different attributes,

⁶Slate

specifically attractiveness, perceived threateningness, and racial proto-typicality. For example, with respect to the black male photo we selected, this man was rated as having one of the least threatening appearances (rated 12th least threatening out of 94 total black male photos), above average attractiveness, and above average prototypical characteristics. This should dispel concerns that the photo of this particular man is automatically seen as either especially threatening or racially ambiguous. Similarly, the white man’s photo had above average attractiveness, above average proto-typicality, and having one of the least threatening appearances (rated 17th least threatening out of 93 total white male photos). Further, the perceived threateningness of the white and black men’s photos were seen as essentially equal by the Chicago Face Database coders.

This experiment was conducted via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) platform. We recruited 802 white participants between January 26-28, 2019.⁷ Consistent with other studies involving MTurk data (Berinsky, Huber and Lenz 2012), our sample is distinct from a nationally representative sample in several ways (see the Appendix for detailed descriptives). Our participants are much younger, better educated, identify more with the Democratic Party, and identify more as liberal than nationally representative samples of whites.⁸ This is not surprising given the pool of participants from which our sample is drawn. For our purposes, these disparities could serve as a conservative test. That is, we might expect it to be more difficult to find any support for our hypotheses if our sample is skewed towards younger, better educated, and more liberal participants who might be more critical of police or generally more sympathetic to the plight of black victims across the board.

After reading the randomized news story, participants were then asked a series of questions related to their perceptions of the events referenced in the news article and about their attitudes towards police more broadly. These included questions regarding police using appropriate amounts of force, approval of how police are doing their job, whether the victim was a threat to the officers, support for increased crime spending, and a battery of items we developed to assess views towards police. These items include support for police training, abuse of power, honesty, and whether police officers face tough enough consequences when they kill unarmed citizens. We measured these items in an attempt to better understand the ways in which views of the police and broader criminal justice system are influenced by reading a story about potential police misconduct when the discharge of their firearm and the death of the victim are involved. In the broader social science literature, we

⁷We conducted a balance check across conditions with respect to gender, income, age, education, partisanship, and ideology. We find three instances in which there are slight imbalances: two are with respect to income and the third is ideology. Specifically, those in the dog condition have higher reported income than those in the white victim condition ($p < 0.02$), and those in the black victim condition have a higher income than those in the white victim condition ($p < 0.05$). In both cases, this is a difference from being in the \$40,000 to \$49,999 vs. \$50,000 to \$59,999 category. Finally, participants in the black victim condition are slightly more conservative than in the control ($p < 0.07$). Here, the mean difference ($b=3.47$ vs. $b=3.78$) places those in the black victim condition slightly closer to the moderate ideological identification than slightly liberal.

⁸Given our relatively small sample size and the skew of our sample, this makes it difficult to conduct any subgroup analyses. We might expect different responses to the treatments based on partisanship or racial resentment, for example, but we do not have sufficient power to detect these differences in the current MTurk sample.

found surprisingly few items that tapped into public perceptions of and attitudes towards police (but, see [Tuch and Weitzer, 1997](#) and [Tyler, 2005](#) as exceptions). As a result, we develop several measures to assess views towards police. We believe that gauging these perceptions after reading about a police shooting is one important contribution of our project to the literature on policing and public opinion.

Results

For the analyses presented below, all variables are coded from zero to one, and all statistical tests presented are two-tailed. First, we compare how threatening the victim was perceived to be in the black man condition ($n = 200$) versus the white man condition ($n = 207$) and dog condition ($n = 202$). As shown in Figure 1, the dog and both male victim conditions were viewed as equally threatening with approximately eight to nine percent of participants in each condition saying that they felt the victim was a threat to the police. This number was slightly higher in the white man condition – 9.2 percentage points vs. 8.2 percentage points in the dog condition and 7.8 percentage points in the black man condition – but these are neither statistically nor substantively significant differences.

Overall, this suggests that our treatments may serve as a tough test of our hypotheses because the vast majority of viewers believe the victims to not have been a threat to the police. Although we could not find survey data of reactions to specific police shootings broken down by race, Pew data following the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 reveals that nearly one-third of white people surveyed reported that police responses following the shooting were appropriate.⁹ This suggests that our singular news story treatment might provide participants with more certainty about the innocence of victims than real-life news coverage. In part, we purposefully designed the treatment to minimize ambiguity about the innocence of the victim to serve as a tough test of our hypotheses. Indeed, we find that we were successful in portraying the victims as innocent across all conditions. In future studies, we plan to manipulate the ambiguity surrounding the circumstances of a police shooting to see what role this plays in influencing whites’ responses.

Next, we examine our post-test items that were explicitly focused on police. We find two primary domains in which the treatments had a strong impact. The first domain concerns perceptions of police as a group. Here, reading a story about any victim of a police shooting significantly influenced participants’ perceptions of how honest police are, how likely police are to abuse their power, how appropriate the use of force is, and how approving they are of the job that police are doing generally. These results moved in a consistent direction regardless of which victim condition participants were assigned to, though the size of these effects varies by condition. Thus, there is some suggestive evidence of stark differences not just between the control and treatment conditions, but between

⁹Pew Research. [Stark Racial Divisions in Reactions to Ferguson Police Shooting](#).

Table 1: Police Shooting Treatments with Bolded Text to Denote Differences		
Title	Police Officer Will Not Be Punished for Shooting Dog in Owners' Backyard	Police Officer Will Not Be Punished for Shooting Unarmed Man with Hands Up
Body Text	<p>Sometimes something as simple as letting your dog outside can take a shocking turn. A recent lawsuit details how a Michigan couple let their dog out into their fenced-in backyard one evening. Minutes later, the dog was dead. How? A police officer searching for a suspect in a nearby home invasion shot the dog to death.</p> <p>On the search for another suspect, the police officer parked his car nearby. The dashcam video shows the officer approach the yard with the dog and the dog begins barking.</p> <p>The officer then radioed in to dispatch and said, "I'm going to drop this dog." The officer then fired multiple shots into the yard at the dog, leaving it bleeding on the ground.</p> <p>A second officer observed "blood coming out of numerous bullet holes in the dog" while the first officer attempted to summon the dog's owners from inside their home.</p> <p>By the time the dog's owners came outside, the dog was dead. The dog's owners were not involved in the crime, nor was there a reason to suspect the dog was dangerous or could get loose.</p> <p>This isn't a one-time accident, but one example that highlights a growing trend in recent years. Though there is no national database of how many dogs are killed by police each year, one user-started database – The Police Puppycide Database – compiles user data and media reports to track pet shootings at the hands of police.</p> <p>Since its inception in 2014, users have documented nearly 3,000 cases of pets being shot and killed by police officers. These data reveal a disproportionate number of dogs being shot by police.</p> <p>A recent set of court decisions in Michigan appear to support police officers' rights to shoot and kill any dog that doesn't sit still and be quiet, whether on the street or even in their own home.</p> <p>The issue of police shootings of pets in the line of duty is coming to a head. In addition to the tragic loss of life, these shootings cost taxpayers thousands of dollars in lawsuits by the dogs' owners. As a result, some taxpayers are calling for more police training. The officers involved in these shootings rarely face any repercussions.</p>	<p>Sometimes something as simple as going for walk outside can take a shocking turn. A recent lawsuit details how a Michigan man decided to walk to a nearby convenience store one evening. Minutes later, he was dead. How? A police officer searching for a suspect in a nearby home invasion shot him to death.</p> <p>On the search for another suspect, the police officer parked his car nearby. The dashcam video shows the officer approach the man as he is walking down the street. The encounter takes a sharp turn when the man begins walking away while putting his arms in the air.</p> <p>The officer then radioed in to dispatch and said, "I'm going to drop this guy." The officer then fired multiple shots at the man, leaving the man bleeding on the ground.</p> <p>A second officer observed "blood coming out of numerous bullet holes in the man" while the first officer searched for the man's weapon and identification.</p> <p>By the time an ambulance arrived, the man was dead. The man was not involved in the crime, nor was there a reason to suspect the victim was dangerous.</p> <p>This isn't a one-time accident, but one example that highlights a growing trend in recent years. Though there is no national database of how many people are killed by police each year, one user-started database – The Police Homicide Database – compiles user data and media reports to track shootings at the hands of police.</p> <p>Since its inception in 2014, users have documented nearly 3,000 cases of people being shot and killed by police officers. These data reveal a disproportionate number of [black people / men] being shot by police.</p> <p>A recent set of court decisions in Michigan appear to support police officers' rights to shoot any person that doesn't cooperate with police questioning, whether on the street or even in their own home.</p> <p>The issue of police shootings of black people in the line of duty is coming to a head. In addition to the tragic loss of life, these shootings cost taxpayers thousands of dollars in lawsuits by the victims' families. As a result, some taxpayers are calling for more police training. The officers involved in these shootings rarely face any repercussions.</p>

Table 1: Police shooting treatments with bolded text to denote differences. The text of all treatments, as they are presented in the survey experiment, can found in the appendix.

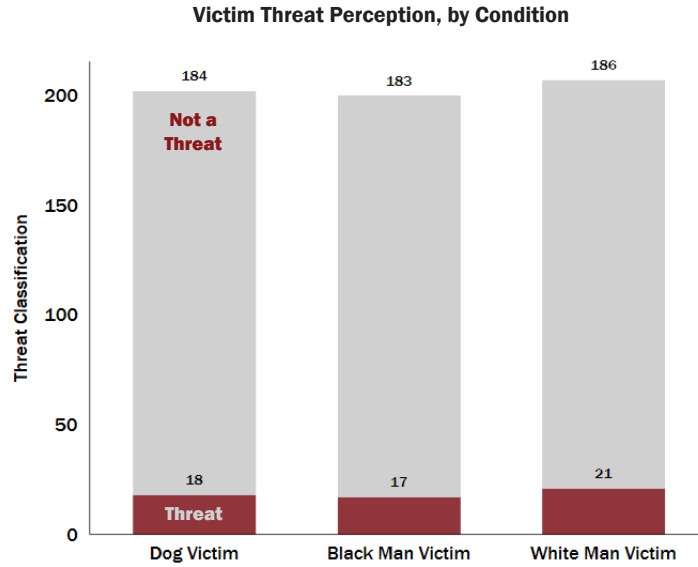


Figure 1: Frequency of victim threat perception by condition. The number of participants believing the victim was a not a threat are presented in grey and the number believing the victim was a threat are presented in maroon.

the treatments.

Attitudes toward Police

To begin, we examine how reading a story about a police shooting influenced attitudes towards police broadly relative to those who read a control story. We explore a few dimensions of attitudes towards police: job approval of police officers generally, trustworthiness and honesty of police officers, perceptions of the frequency of police brutality, as well as perceptions of racism among police officers.

First, we turn to the question about job approval. This question asked: *Do you approve or disapprove of the way the police in the United States are doing their job?* After viewing any of the treatments of police shootings, white participants are significantly less approving of the job police officers are doing relative to the control (see Figure 2). Indeed, there was a significant decrease in approval of police for those who viewed the treatments — a drop from a 65 percentage point police approval rating in the control group down to 53 percentage points ($p < 0.001$) in the black victim story, 51 percentage points ($p < 0.001$) in the dog story, or 49 percentage points ($p < 0.001$) in the white victim story. Substantively, this is equivalent to shifting from approve somewhat of the job police are doing in the control condition down to nearly neither approve nor disapprove in all three treatments. Although there are no statistically significant differences across the treatments,

the most negative substantive reaction is towards the white victim.

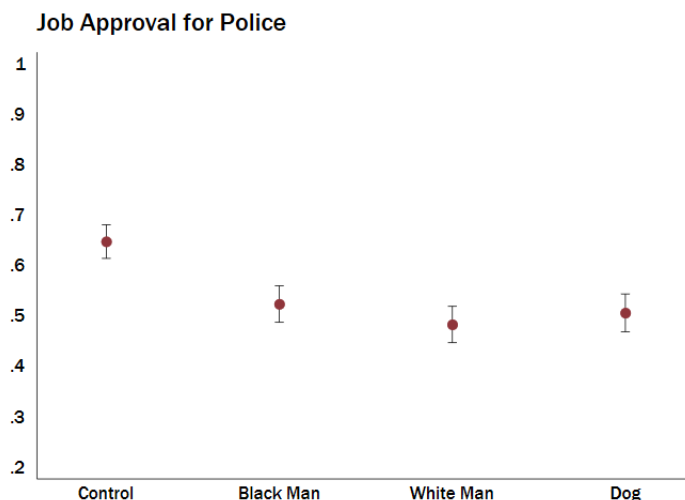


Figure 2: Participant job approval for police by condition.

Second, we turn to a series of questions related to perceptions of trustworthiness and honesty with respect to police. These three items were asked in the same battery of questions and were listed as follows. *Please tell us how much you agree or disagree with the following statements:*

Police officers only use their gun when it is necessary.

Police officers give honest explanations for their actions.

Police officers rarely abuse their power.

These questions were developed with the intention of assessing how white respondents' views of police could be influenced by reading a story about police shootings. Indeed, we find that exposure to the treatments significantly influences perceptions of police (see Figure 3).

For example, there is a large drop in belief that police only use their guns when necessary with exposure to either the white man or dog treatments, but not the black man treatment. In the control group, there is a sense that police only use their guns when necessary, but in the white victim treatment this drops by eight percentage points — from 55 percentage points to 47 percentage points ($p < 0.009$) — and by six percentage points in the dog treatment (to 49 percentage points; $p < 0.04$). Here we see a slightly larger substantive effect of reading about a white man being shot and killed by police relative to a dog; both of these conditions are significant in relation to the control group, whereas there is no significant difference in perception of police gun use between the black man and control conditions. Moreover, the difference between the black and white victim conditions approaches but does not reach standard levels of statistical significance ($p < 0.15$).

With respect to police honesty, a somewhat similar pattern emerges: There is moderate belief in the control group that police give honest explanations for their actions, but this decreases significantly after viewing any of the three treatments. The effect is strongest for those who read about a white man being shot by police; here, belief that police give honest explanations decreases by eight percentage points relative to the control — from 55 percentage points to 47 percentage points ($p < 0.01$). For those who read about the dog shooting, there is a seven percentage point drop in belief that police give honest explanations for their actions ($p < 0.03$). In contrast, those who read about the black victim shot by police had a five percentage point decrease in belief that police give honest explanations of their actions ($p < 0.10$). Thus, while this is statistically distinct from the control, it is the weakest substantive effect across the treatment conditions.

The final item in this trustworthiness battery speaks to how frequently police officers abuse their power. Again, participants who view either the dog or white victim treatments are significantly less likely to believe that police officers rarely abuse their power. In the control group, participants were largely neutral about whether or not police officers rarely abuse their power (being near the midpoint, at 0.49, on the 0 to 1 scale). There was an eight percentage point decrease in belief that police rarely abuse their power amongst those in the dog shooting condition — down to 41 percentage points ($p < 0.01$). Similarly, in the white victim treatment, there was a decrease of seven percentage points — down to 42 percentage points ($p < 0.04$). Substantively, this is the equivalent of moving from a baseline of feeling neutral towards the idea that police rarely abuse their power towards a slight disagreement that abuse of power is rare. The black victim condition is indistinguishable from the control condition on this item. Moreover, there is some evidence of a distinct effect between the black victim and dog victim conditions ($p < 0.11$), suggesting that white respondents react more strongly to a dog victim than a black victim.

Finally, with respect to general attitudes towards police, we were interested in examining how exposure to the treatments influenced white respondents' perceptions of police officers' propensity to hold racist beliefs and use excessive force (see Figure 4). To do so, we draw two items from [Tuch and Weitzer's](#) (1997) work. The first item asks participants: *How common do you think racist feelings are among police officers?* In this case, we see statistically significant and substantive effects in the white and dog shooting victim conditions relative to the control and black man conditions. There is an increase of five percentage points — from 52 percentage points in the control to 57 percentage points in the dog condition — in belief that racism is common among police officers ($p < 0.07$). There is an increase of six percentage points in belief that racist feelings are common among police for those who saw the white man treatment relative to the control ($p < 0.06$). Indeed, both the dog and white victim conditions are statistically significant relative to the black victim conditions as well ($p < 0.10$ and $p < 0.07$, respectively).

On the question about police brutality, we ask participants the following: *Do you think incidents of police brutality are very common, fairly common, fairly uncommon, or very uncommon?* Here,

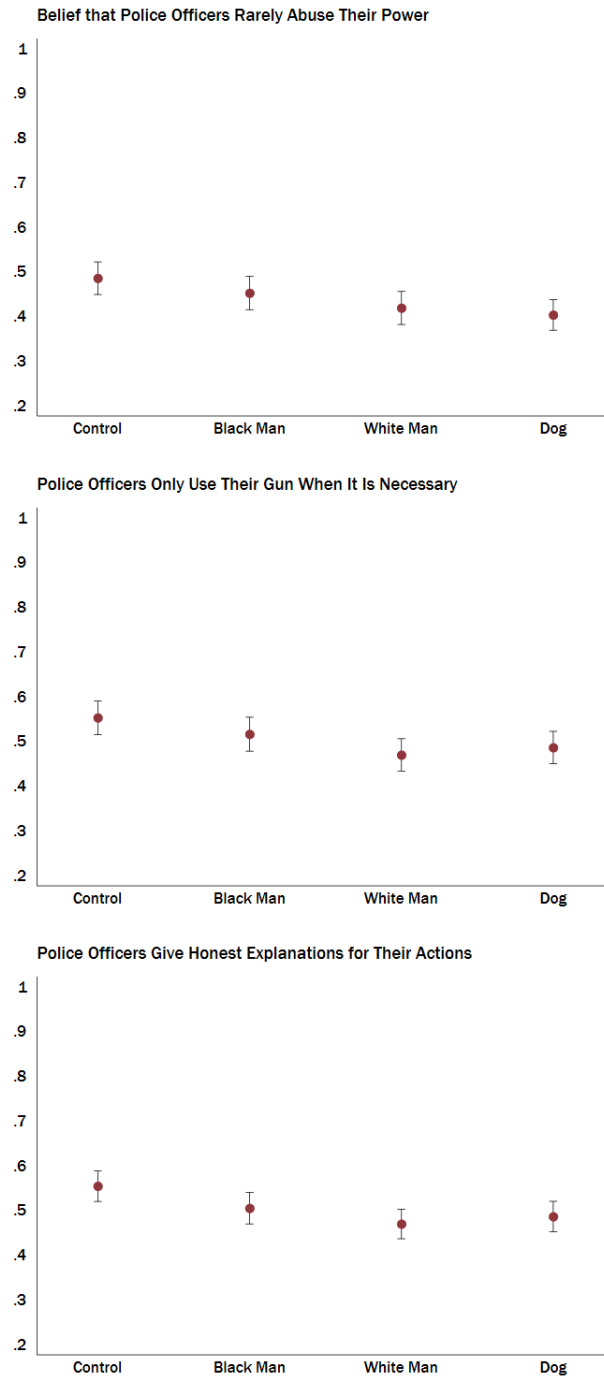


Figure 3: Participant perceptions of police trustworthiness and honesty by condition, regarding abuse of power, gun use, and honest explanations for actions.

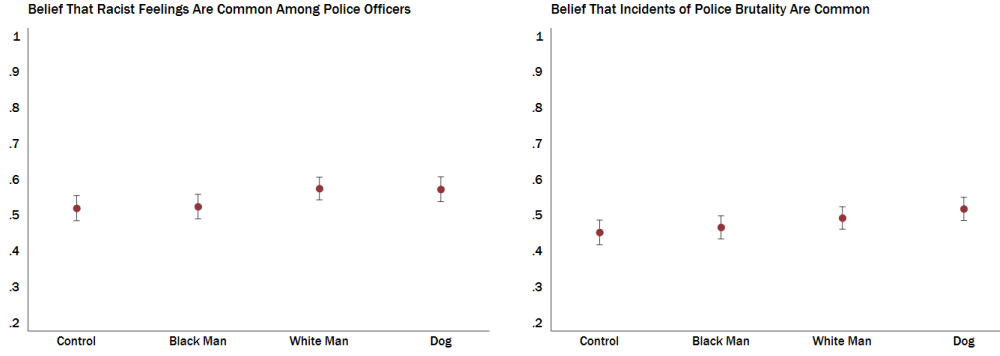


Figure 4: Participant perceptions of racist feelings held by police and police brutality by condition.

we find that only participants who viewed the dog victim condition are significantly more likely to say that police shootings are common relative to the control – an increase of seven percentage points ($p < 0.02$). Indeed, the impact of viewing the dog victim is significantly distinct from the black victim ($p < 0.06$), such that those who saw the dog as the victim were six percentage points more likely to report police brutality is common relative to those who saw a black victim. Taken together, this means that seeing the dog shooting victim leads white people to believe that racist feelings are more common among police officers and police brutality is more common.

Thus far, we have demonstrated that viewing a story about a police shooting significantly influences attitudes towards police officers across several areas: propensity to hold racist beliefs and use excessive force, abuse their power, give honest explanations, and with respect to job approval. After exposure to a news story about a police shooting, white participants in our sample are significantly more likely to take a negative view of police officers. Further, a pattern emerges such that these effects appear to be strongest in those conditions which do not feature a black victim. In several cases, the effects were stronger in one treatment relative to another, though the differences between treatments frequently did not reach statistical significance. Overall, this suggests that white people are responsive to news stories about police shootings and, at least for a short time, hold more negative views of police.

Political Behavior and Public Opinion

Next, we turn to examining how exposure to the treatments influences white participants' proclivity for political participation. To do so, we asked two items that are more behavioral in nature. First, we asked participants whether or not they would be interested in signing a petition urging their representative in Congress to reduce excessive use of force by police, one assessment of their willingness to engage in political activity given the article they read. We find no significant differences in effect among any of the conditions. That is, there is no distinguishable change in willingness to communicate with their Congressional representative whether they read of a black man, white

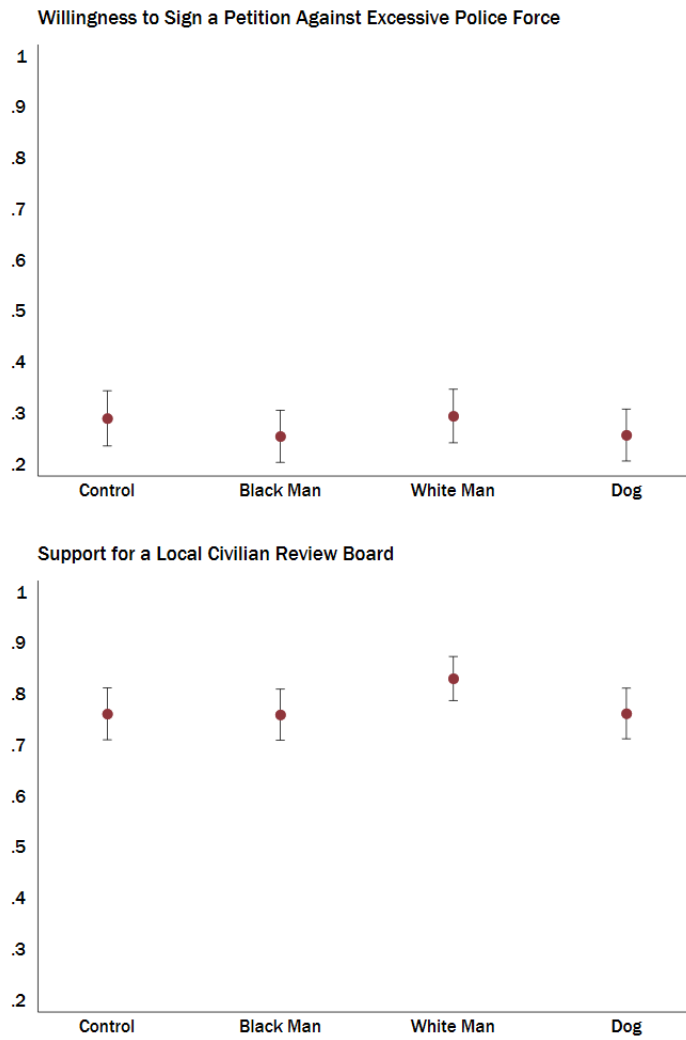


Figure 5: Participant willingness to sign a petition regarding police use of force (top) and support for a local civilian review board (bottom).

man, or a dog shot and killed by police relative to the control. Across the board, all participants are relatively uninterested in signing a petition, despite this being a low-cost action.

Second, we assessed participants' willingness to support measures to monitor their local police force, asking them if they would be in favor of a civilian review board to oversee the police department in their community. For this item, we find there are no significant effects of viewing the black man or dog victim condition. For those in the white victim condition, though, support for installing a civilian review board in their community is approximately seven percentage points higher than for participants in other conditions. This suggests that viewing a white victim of a police shooting more strongly compels white people to support a local civilian review board relative to a black victim ($p < 0.08$) or a dog victim ($p < 0.09$). In short, we have demonstrated that reading a story about a police shooting has a significant impact on white respondents' opinions on police oversight, but not necessarily on their behavior. This has significant implications for our understanding of the impacts of police shootings on whites' attitudes as well as future additions to this literature on policing.

Conclusion

This study is one of the first of its kind to gauge attitudes toward police and policing given exposure to news of a police shooting through a survey experiment which compares a black, white, and dog victim. Taken together, our results suggest that exposure to a news story about a police shooting draws strong reactions from white people. Of concern, however, is that such reactions are largely limited to viewing either a white man or a dog victim. Indeed, across most of the items which measure attitudes towards police, we find there are no statistically significant differences when comparing our control condition with our black victim treatment, meaning that viewing a black victim of a police shooting does not evoke the equivalent response that a white man or dog victim does. In these cases, both the white victim and dog treatments elicit significant changes in our white participants, often with the white victim garnering the strongest response. Moreover, the white victim and dog victim conditions are frequently significant relative to the black victim condition itself. At best, this suggests that white respondents may be more sympathetic towards those like themselves, as well as animals, being killed by police. At worst, it conveys a sentiment consistent with the views of many African Americans: that white people view the lives of black people as equal to or less than the life of an animal.

In addition to the novelty of this exploration of white sympathy towards animal and human out-groups alike, we believe our study expands the sphere of understanding of whites' political attitudes. Specifically, their attitudes towards police and police officers. We develop multiple measures of attitudes towards police and find that exposure to a story about a police shooting significantly influences reactions towards police officers. These measures can be easily adopted by researchers for use in other surveys and can expand our understanding of citizens' attitudes towards

police across a variety of contexts.

Overall, we have presented multiple thought-provoking results in this paper. White participants in our sample are significantly more likely to take a negative view of police officers after reading about a police shooting that targets a white man or a dog victim. This was true across several topics: propensity of police officers to hold racist beliefs and use excessive force, police abuse of power, likelihood of police giving honest explanations, and support for civilian review boards. It is noteworthy that negative reactions to police officers were not especially pronounced based on the identity of the victim, as a white man or a dog, however.








As we continue to pursue this project, there are several limitations and places for expansion. First, given a body of work which suggests that contact with black people is a mediator of perceptions of them as criminal or violent, gathering data on racial composition of the environments from which our participants come could provide important insight to why we find the effects we do. Second, we could include more contextually specific questions — i.e. asking not just about police generally, but about the type of punishment participants believe would be appropriate for the officer in question or the degree of blame (or sympathy) they ascribe to the victim and their family. Third, we intend to move forward with an additional study that brings into consideration the interaction that a victim’s race and gender may have on perceptions of policing. Theories of intersectionality point us toward the unique marginalization of black women (Crenshaw 1990), and the literature in political science demonstrates that racial stereotypes are also gendered (White and McConnaughy N.d.). As a result, the next iteration of our survey experiment will also vary the victim’s gender to dive deeper into the ways in which race and gender uniquely combine to inform whites’ reactions to deadly police interactions. Particularly, we will explore the ways in which, given our initial findings, the intersection of victims’ racial and gender identities may further contribute to marginalization. Moreover, the addition of gender to our study will add important nuance and external validity given instances of police violence towards both black and white women with very different outcomes, e.g., the death of Sandra Bland, fatal shooting of Justine Damond, and activism surrounding the #SayHerName campaign. Finally, given police use of force is particularly pertinent to communities of color and there are clear divides in opinion based on race, we intend to expand our future samples to include non-white participants.

In sum, we believe this study is valuable in expanding our understanding of Americans’ reactions to news stories and, specifically, news coverage of police shootings. It sheds light on the effect (or lack of effect) that exposure to news of a police shooting has on white participants, varying by the victim involved in the shooting. Moreover, it suggests that police use of force is related to the broader relationships connecting race, crime, violence, dehumanization, and public opinion in the United States.

Appendix

	MTurk White Sample (January 2019)	ANES 2016 White Sample (FTF only)
Observations	802	1,181
% Female	49%	54%
Age (average)	35 years old	52 years old
% College Degree	68%	39%
Income (average)	\$50,000 - \$59,999	\$50,000 - \$54,999
Partisanship	41% Democrat; 30% Independent; 29% Republican	38% Democrat; 9% Independent; 53% Republican
Ideology	48% liberal; 19% moderate; 33% conservative	35% liberal; 6% moderate; 59% conservative

Table A-1: Comparison of Authors White MTurk Sample with Nationally Representative Sample (2016 ANES)

Police Officer Will Not Be Punished for Shooting Dog in Owners' Backyard

MICHIGAN – Sometimes something as simple as letting your dog outside can take a shocking turn. A recent lawsuit details how a Michigan couple let their dog out into their fenced-in backyard one evening. Minutes later, the dog was dead. How? A police officer searching for a suspect in a nearby home invasion shot the dog to death.

On the search for another suspect, the police officer parked his car nearby. The dashcam video shows the officer approach the yard with the dog and the dog begins barking.

The officer then radioed in to dispatch and said, "I'm going to drop this dog." The officer then fired multiple shots into the yard at the dog, leaving it bleeding on the ground.

A second officer observed "blood coming out of numerous bullet holes in the dog" while the first officer attempted to summon the dog's owners from inside their home.

By the time the dog's owners came outside, the dog was dead. The dog's owners were not involved in the crime, nor was there a reason to suspect the dog was dangerous or could get loose.


This isn't a one-time accident, but one example that highlights a growing trend in recent years. Though there is no national database of how many dogs are killed by police each year, one user-started database – The Police Puppycide Database – compiles user data and media reports to track pet shootings at the hands of police.

Since its inception in 2014, users have documented nearly 3,000 cases of pets being shot and killed by police officers. These data reveal a disproportionate number of dogs being shot by police.

A recent set of court decisions in Michigan appear to support police officers' rights to shoot and kill any dog that doesn't sit still and be quiet, whether on the street or even in their own home.

The issue of police shootings of pets in the line of duty is coming to a head.

In addition to the tragic loss of life, these shootings cost taxpayers thousands of dollars in lawsuits by the dogs' owners. As a result, some taxpayers are calling for more police training. The officers involved in these shootings rarely face any repercussions.



Dog killed by police in Michigan. The barking dog was shot while in its owner's yard. (Photo: Facebook)

Figure 6: Dog victim treatment condition.

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Michigan victim of a police shooting. The unarmed victim was killed while walking in his neighborhood. (Photo: Facebook)

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Police Officer Will Not Be Punished for Shooting Unarmed Man with Hands Up

MICHIGAN – Sometimes something as simple as going for walk outside can take a shocking turn. A recent lawsuit details how a Michigan man decided to walk to a nearby convenience store one evening. Minutes later, he was dead. How? A police officer searching for a suspect in a nearby home invasion shot him to death.

On the search for another suspect, the police officer parked his car nearby. The dashcam video shows the officer approach the man as he is walking down the street. The encounter takes a sharp turn when the man begins walking away while putting his arms in the air.

The officer then radioed in to dispatch and said, "I'm going to drop this guy." The officer then fired multiple shots at the man, leaving the man bleeding on the ground.

A second officer observed "blood coming out of numerous bullet holes in the man" while the first officer searched for the man's weapon and identification.


By the time an ambulance arrived, the man was dead. The man was not involved in the crime, nor was there a reason to suspect the victim was dangerous.

This isn't a one-time accident, but one example that highlights a growing trend in recent years. Though there is no national database of how many people are killed by police each year, one user-started database – The Police Homicide Database – compiles user data and media reports to track shootings at the hands of police.

Since its inception in 2014, users have documented nearly 3,000 cases of people being shot and killed by police officers. These data reveal a disproportionate number of men being shot by police.

A recent set of court decisions in Michigan appear to support police officers' rights to shoot any person that doesn't cooperate with police questioning, whether on the street or even in their own home.

The issue of police shootings of people in the line of duty is coming to a head. In addition to the tragic loss of life, these shootings cost taxpayers thousands of dollars in lawsuits by the victims' families. As a result, some taxpayers are calling for more police training. The officers involved in these shootings rarely face any repercussions.



Michigan victim of a police shooting. The unarmed victim was killed while walking in his neighborhood. (Photo: Facebook)

Figure 8: White man victim treatment condition.

School District Hiring School Crossing Guards

MICHIGAN – The Lansing Public School District has announced a job search for crossing guards for the 2018-2019 school year. Training for successful applicants will be facilitated by the Lansing Police Department to ensure a standard protocol for all crossing guards.

Applicants who would like to apply for the job may attend a job fair hosted by the school district on Tuesday, from 10 a.m. until noon at the District's main office building. The manager of the District's School Crossing Guard Division, William Roberts, has said that he anticipates beginning to interview some applicants as soon as the end of the week.



The Lansing Public School District has announced a search for school crossing guards. Successful applicants will be trained through the Lansing Police Department. Photo: Lansing Public School District.

Crossing guards primarily direct traffic and the movements of students at street intersections and school entrances to ensure safe crossings. They also monitor and enforce school zone speed limits, when those speed limits are in effect. The crossing guard division, which currently has 100 members, can hire up to 15 more individuals for crossing guard positions, Roberts said.

The crossing guard division has strict requirements for its crossing guards to meet and uphold, which means positions are continually turning over. Successful applicants will be able to pass a criminal background check, drug test, as well as complete a basic physical fitness test.

Those who are offered positions are required to attend three days of training facilitated by the Lansing Police Department to learn to properly use hand signals, stop signs, and other tools required for directing traffic. Successful candidates will also receive additional on-the-job training and supervision in their first few weeks.

Roberts noted that the work of a school crossing guard is more difficult and physically taxing than it may look at first glance.

"It is a really tough job. In one moment, you are monitoring the movements of multiple motorists and small children, both of which can be unpredictable. You can never be sure how the elements may make the job even more complicated – you are out there in extreme cold and extreme heat. The job isn't for everyone."

The job is rewarding, though, Roberts emphasized. He said that crossing guards find that the relationships they build with their communities and the students they assist valuable.

Pay for Lansing Public School District crossing guards starts at \$9.00 an hour, for up to 20 hours a week. In addition to the job fair, applications can be picked up from the District's main office building during business hours, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday through Friday.

Figure 9: Control condition.

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