

The Effects of Label and Race on Public Perceptions of Violence

Kiela Crabtree and Corina Simonelli

Abstract

How do the labels used to describe political violence in the United States shape the public's reactions to violence and evaluations of the appropriate responses to it? We argue that labels such as "hate crime" and "terrorism" are embedded within racial contexts that influence their use and subsequent interpretations of the violence they are used to describe. Two survey experiments elucidate these contexts. In the first, we identify distinctions in how Americans label incidents of violence when given only information about the perpetrator and victim. In the second, we measure changes in perceived likelihood of victimization, emotional response, and punitiveness when altering descriptions of an act of violence. Our results demonstrate that these labels have powerful influence on Americans' interpretation of violence when placed within a racial context. Describing a shooting as a "hate crime" leads to greater expectations of violence, higher levels of anger, and greater support for punitive criminal justice measures among non-white respondents. These findings suggest that the labels used to describe violence are racialized, aside from their legal definitions, and that their use has implications for how the public responds to violence.

Working Paper – Please do not cite without permission

Introduction

Less than twenty-four hours after a white gunman entered the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, murdering nine Black parishioners in their worship, the *New York Times* used a headline to question how the American public should understand the shooting that shattered the Charleston, South Carolina community, asking if the attack was “Hate Crime? Or Terrorism?”¹ This line of questioning followed the story as it developed, as the perpetrator was caught, and even after he was charged, tried, and sentenced. It engaged not only the legal parameters of what a hate crime or act of terrorism is, but it scrutinized how those concepts are construed and also challenged their mutual exclusivity.

Do the labels used to describe acts of violence affect our perceptions of those acts? In this paper, we consider how the language used to describe and classify violence interacts with the characteristics of a violent event to shape public opinion. Scholarship that considers differing responses to state violence depending on a victim’s race (McGowen and Wylie 2020), as well as differing perceptions of violence across racial groups (Jefferson, Neuner and Pasek N.d.), suggests that the racial identification of victims or perpetrators could powerfully influence our interpretation of violence. Thus, we consider the confluence of the dynamics of violence, label, and race.

For Americans, the term “terrorism” is intrinsically linked to the September 11, 2001 terror attacks, which associated the term with specific racial and religious identities, as well as tactics (Huff and Kertzer 2017). The American narrative of terrorism centers on perpetrators that are Arab, Muslim, and members of transnational Islamic groups (D’Orazio and Salehyan 2018; Dolliver and Kearns 2019; Kearns, Betus and Lemieux 2017; Nacos and Torres-Reyna 2007; Powell 2011). Hate crimes are legally defined as crimes motivated by bias, and more commonly, Americans consider hate crimes to be targeted toward members of minority or historically-oppressed groups (Hall 2013). They are not just acts of violence or crimes, but actions which also reinforce existing social divides through the targeting of marginalized people (Green, Strolovitch and Wong 1998; Perry 2002b; Rothenberg 2004). While scholarship has considered these concepts – hate crime and terrorism – separately, there is a notable gap in research that considers how the malleability of these labels may influence responses to the acts of violence they describe. This paper begins to fill this gap, testing how the language used to describe an act of violence influences responses to it.

We field two survey experiments that test the impact of labels and their racial contexts. In the first experiment, we vary the racial identities of the perpetrator and victims in a mass shooting event and measure differences across the subjects’ use of the terms hate crime or terrorism. The second survey experiment manipulates the label – “hate crime,” “terrorism,” or “mass shooting” – and racial context of a multiple casualty shooting on a college campus. Our findings show that when the race of the perpetrator and victims in a shooting scenario reflect popular conceptions of a label, emotional reactions and perceptions of violence are altered. The results demonstrate

¹ “Hate Crime? Or Terrorism?” *New York Times*. June 18, 2015.

that attacks described as hate crimes increase concerns of safety, feelings of anger, and support for punitive criminal justice policies *only* when used in conjunction with a white perpetrator attacking a historically Black college. Alternatively, the terrorist narrative is not activated by the racial variation we explore and this condition more closely mirrors a generic mass shooting description.

This article makes several contributions to the study of race and ethnicity politics and political violence. First, our findings demonstrate that labels can act as heuristics that intensify the public's reactions to violence. For example, in reading about a white perpetrator attacking a historically Black college, respondents reported significantly higher levels of anger when the attack was labeled a hate crime. Second, our results highlight trends that persist across labels. Attitudes toward the appropriate punishment of perpetrators vary based on the race of the perpetrator, regardless of the label given to the attack. Finally, we identify important differences across respondents in their interpretations of violence. White and Black Americans have vastly different experiences with political violence in the United States and these differences are reflected in their reactions to violence. For example, we see that the label "hate crime" contextualized the incident in a history of violence against Black Americans, magnifying the impact of the attack.

This article proceeds with a discussion of narratives surrounding violence in the United States. We then present our theoretical expectations about labels and their interactions with the racial characteristics of perpetrators and victims. Next, we describe and discuss the results from our first study in which respondents classified violence based on its attributes. The next section presents the experimental design and findings for our second survey experiment. The article concludes with a discussion of the results and areas for further research.

Race, Violence, and What We Call It

American media outlets, like *The New York Times*, play a powerful role in establishing the perception and salience of events in the minds of the public. News media in the United States distorts the true nature of crime and violence by overwhelmingly emphasizing white victims and law enforcement (Dixon and Linz 2000; Dixon, Azocar and Casas 2003; Dixon 2007), Black and Hispanic criminals (Gilliam Jr and Iyengar 2000; Dixon and Linz 2000; Dixon and Maddox 2005; Dixon 2007), and Muslim terrorists (Nacos and Torres-Reyna 2007; Powell 2011; D'Orazio and Salehyan 2018). This framing process allows the media to increase or omit coverage, in turn shaping the perceptions and attitudes their viewers hold on the issues at hand (Iyengar and Kinder 2010; Chong and Druckman 2007; McLeod and Hertog 1999). Frames in the reporting of violence change over time (Chyi and McCombs 2004), and they have the ability shift blame and public opinion (Iyengar 1996; Haider-Markel 2004; Davis and Silver 2004; Huddy and Feldman 2011; Baele et al. 2019).

Thus, while legal definitions and jurisdictions set the parameters for the official designation of an attack, the labels used to describe these incidents exist outside of the legal system. In fact, they hold the power to reflect and reinforce systems of oppression. For example. the use of the

term “riot” to describe collective action, rather than “protest” or “rebellion,” implicitly reflects the illegitimate status of those involved (McLeod and Hertog 1999; Kilgo and Harlow 2019). The concept of “terrorism,” for instance, is intertwined with race, religion, and gender (D’Orazio and Salehyan 2018; Dolliver and Kearns 2019; Kearns, Betus and Lemieux 2017; Nacos and Torres-Reyna 2007; Powell 2011). The label used to describe violence is one way that the act is framed. The words used to provide further context to acts of violence also elevate perceived risk of a future terror attack (Powell 2011; Woods 2011).

Terrorist attacks have notable effects on emotional responses and public policy. Wayne (2019) finds that anger is the predominate emotional response to terrorism and this anger as opposed to fear drives American’s preferences for punitive policy responses. Huddy and Feldman (2011) finds that anger and perceived threat of terrorism influenced support for President George W. Bush and foreign policy in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Sadler et al (2005) uncovers similar association between fear and a more dovish stance on foreign military action, and anger and a more hawkish take.

Evidence suggests, as well, that characteristics of an act of violence, including its target, its perpetrator, its location, and its tactic influences how the violence is viewed by the public (Huff and Kertzer 2017; Dolliver and Kearns 2019). Associations with Islam (Dolliver and Kearns 2019) and bombing tactics (Huff and Kertzer 2017) increase the likelihood that an act of violence is considered an act of terrorism. For example, acts of violence committed by Arab-American perpetrators are more likely to be classified as terrorism than acts of violence committed by white Americans (D’Orazio and Salehyan 2018). Identity is a clear heuristic for the public to classify violence and evaluate its potential threat. The use of the label “terrorism,” or its absence, reflects power dynamics within society, designating legitimate actors while denigrating those who perpetrate it (Meier 2020). Just as “terrorism” has come to develop certain connotations in American politics, we contend that “hate crime” has as well.

A rich debate exists in the disciplines of sociology and criminology which suggests that a more specific connotation has come to be associated with hate crime in conversational usage. That is, while legally any crime motivated by bias may be defined as a hate crime, more commonly, Americans consider hate crimes to be targeted toward members of minority or historically-oppressed groups (Hall 2005). They are not just acts of violence or crimes, but actions which also reinforce existing social divides through the targeting of marginalized people (Perry 2002a; Rothenberg 2004). By that understanding of the term, some would argue that hate crimes are defined by the identities of those whom they target and that those victims must be members of minority groups. Hate crimes, then, would victimize those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, but not heterosexuals. In the United States, they would target Muslims or Jews, but not Christians. They would target Black, Hispanic, or Asian people, but not white people. These identities of victim and perpetrator, on their own, may matter in how society comprehends the motivation and

classifications of these crimes.

Beyond these specific labels, the activation of implicit associations between race and violence impacts public policy preferences (Dixon 2006, Gilliam Jr and Iyengar 2000, Gilliam Jr, Valentino and Beckmann 2002, and Saleem et al. 2017). Saleem et. al. (2017) exposes respondents to typical media portrayals of Muslims as terrorists and finds increased respondent support for military operations in Muslim-majority countries and restrictions on the civil liberties of Muslim Americans. Similar effects have been documented for the racial groups in our study. White exposure to Black crimes stereotypes also increase preferences for punitive criminal justice policies (Dixon 2006, Gilliam Jr and Iyengar 2000, Gilliam Jr, Valentino and Beckmann 2002). Gilliam Jr and Iyengar (2000) finds that white respondents who read racialized news scripts express greater support for capital punishment and mandatory sentencing. Burge and Johnson (2018) measures the impact of perpetrator and victim identities on Black Americans' support for punitive policies and find support for increased prison to be highest when the attack featured a white perpetrator and Black victim.

Informed by these literatures that highlight how racial identities shape popular perceptions of violence, we set forth several expectations. First, we expect that the label of "terrorism" will increase perceptions of victimization, feelings of fear and anger, and also increase support for punitive measures against those who commit acts of violence. Second, while we suspect that the label of "terrorism" will amplify responses, we expect that the "hate crime" label will work to minimize perceptions of victimization, feelings of fear and anger, and punitiveness, especially among white subjects.

Self-ascribed social identities are powerful forces in the political decision-making process, including determination of threat (Huddy 2001). We expect subjects to view victims or perpetrators of their own racial group as members of their in-group and others as members of an out-group (Tajfel and Turner 1979). For example, when white people are described as the target of an act of violence, we expect that this treatment will have an impact on the ways in which white respondents perceive their own safety and their support for the use of violence. Self-identification as white indicates an affiliation with that racial group; when that group is perceived as threatened or under attack, we posit that subjects' own feelings of safety will change. Thus, we expect that non-white respondents will report higher levels of threat when reading about violence committed by a white perpetrator, and white respondents will report higher levels of threat when reading about a Black perpetrator. Similarly, we expect that white respondents will express more fear and anger, and be more supportive of punitive policies against Black perpetrators when white people are described as the victims of violence. We expect that non-white respondents will express more fear and anger, and be more supportive of punitive policies against white perpetrators when Black people are described as the victims of violence.

We also seek to measure and compare the power of the language that is selectively used to

describe mass violence in the United States. Research on crime and race has largely focused on the opinions and perceptions of white Americans, masking important differences in experiences with violence. Therefore, we also consider the interaction between label and racial identification. We expect the “hate crime” label to be far more salient with non-white Americans. We expect the white respondents in our sample to express similar preferences in conditions where they may infer or explicitly read about non-white perpetrators, regardless of the label.

These expectations are supported by several literatures. For instance, characteristics of terror attacks shift perceptions of threat, particularly when the victims are racially proximate to the subject ([Avdan and Webb 2018](#)). This extends to other forms of violence as well. For instance, reading about police violence directed at a white person generates greater fear in white subjects than reading about police violence directed at a Black person ([McGowen and Wylie 2020](#)), and Jefferson et al ([N.d.](#)) find distinct processes for interpreting information about police shootings. Similarly, hate crimes perpetrated by white people generate greater fault against the perpetrator and greater sympathy for the Black victim ([Lyons 2006](#)). As suggested by Green and Spry ([2014](#)), we use the present study as a means of exploring the dynamics of racial “power arrangements” in American society, doing so through the lenses of violence labels. In an electoral context, research contends that the presence of both a white and Black candidate on a ballot can prime white racial identity ([Petrow, Transue and Vercellotti 2018](#)). We expect that a similar priming of identity will happen when subjects see the juxtaposition of white and Black racial identities as victims or perpetrators in our experimental treatments. Their self-identification as a member of a racial group, as well as their reported racial attachment, indicates an affiliation with that racial group. When that group is perceived as threatened or under attack, we posit that their own feelings of safety will change. Thus, for example, when white subjects are described as the victims of violence, we expect that white subjects perceive their own level of risk is elevated. Further, we contend that this interaction will be influenced by the label given to the act of violence, and it will be strongest among those non-white subjects who see people like themselves victimized by “hate crimes.”

We evaluate our expectations through two survey experiments. Our first study explores Americans’ perceptions of the labels “hate crime” and “terrorism” and evaluates the attack characteristics that are most strongly associated with each term. This study allowed for subjects to consider both terms simultaneously, directly considering which was the most appropriate given the racial characteristics of a violent attack. In the second study, we analyze the effects of these labels on feelings of safety, emotion, and support for punitive policies. Together, these results show both the power and limitations of language we use to describe political violence.

Experiment One: Classifying Violence

The survey experiment was administered in July 2018 to 696 respondents recruited through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk).² The survey was designed to mimic a social media environment in which someone might initially receive notice of a violent attack. Our treatments took the form of tweets, representing the low-information environment that commonly characterizes evolving stories of political violence and an increasingly common form of news consumption. With our respondents given limited information on an incident of violence, our intent was to understand how the racial identities of suspects and victims – in the absence of a label – might alter how that violence is classified.

The survey was framed as an effort to optimize the presentation of news on a media website. Each subject read and was asked to classify three tweets on different recent news topics. For treated subjects, one of the tweets referenced a violent attack in which we manipulated the race (Black, white or none given) of the perpetrator and victim. This resulted in nine treatment conditions and one control group that read no tweet about violence. The text of all nine treatment conditions is included in Table 1 in the appendix. Subjects were given the option of classifying the violence described as “hate crime” or “act of terrorism.”³ The order in which the three tweets were presented to respondents was randomized, as was the order in which the two classification options were presented. In addition to selecting a classification, respondents were asked to give open-ended, written feedback explaining their selection decision.

Results

Among all 629 subjects receiving the violence treatment, we find that the addition of racial labels – Black or white racial identification of the victim and/or perpetrator – increases the percentage of people who identify the act of violence as an example of a hate crime. The smallest changes in classification from the “No Race” condition (28-72 percent hate crime-terrorism classification) occur in the conditions that identify either a white perpetrator or a white victim but give no racial label to the other group mentioned in the tweet. Racially-balanced conditions – white perpetrator-white victim and Black perpetrator-Black victim – receive slightly higher percentages of classification as hate crime, as does the condition which specified a Black perpetrator but no race for the victim.

Most distinctive are the increases in hate crime classification which occur when the conditions

²A comparison between our MTurk sample and the 2016 American National Election Study are provided in the appendix. MTurk is a cost-efficient platform that provides access to a population sample that is often more representative than respondents for in-person surveys (Berinsky, Huber and Lenz 2012), albeit does not perfectly reflect the demographics of the American public, particularly amongst older respondents (Huff and Tingley 2015). Respondents self-selected into the experiment based on a brief description of the task, expected length of survey, and payment amount.

³We intentionally forced respondents to choose a classification and excluded a third opt-out option such as “don’t know.” In doing so, we capture the views of less certain respondents. Forcing respondents to make a choice is no less reliable than including an undecided (Alwin and Krosnick, 1991; Presser and Schuman, 1980).

are racially-mixed. Far and away the white perpetrator-Black victim condition receives the highest percentage of classification as a hate crime at 73 percent, while 58 percent of subjects classified the Black perpetrator-white victim condition as a hate crime. The Black victim condition with an unidentified perpetrator saw 62 percent of respondents classify it as a hate crime. Thus, racially-mixed conditions, or those which describe the victimization of Black people, are classified more frequently as incidents of hate crime rather than terrorism. Figure 1 shows the patterns of classification across all conditions.

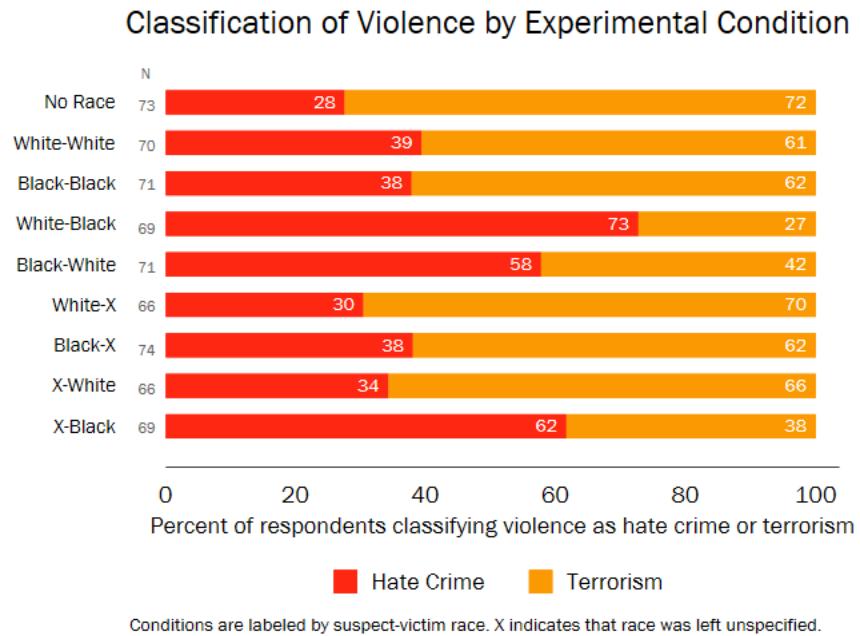


Figure 1: Frequencies and percentages of hate crime or terrorism classification by treatment conditions.

Another question arises, though, also relevant to the topic at hand: do our subjects actually have a good sense of what distinguishes a hate crime from an act of terrorism? In part, we contend that the public's understanding of these labels is of marginal relevance. Labels are often assigned by journalists as a part of reporting. Rarely will a member of the public be forced to confront the parameters of the legal designations among these categories. Of importance, though, is what our respondents consider as they make their choice. Descriptively, race comes across as a clear heuristic. Qualitative feedback from our subjects provides greater insight into why they made the choices they did. Their responses indicate that a clear victim group identification is important for classification.

Importance of Racial Group Identification

While we see distinct effects of our racial treatments on the classifications that respondents give, from these percentages alone we are not able to clearly understand what about race – or some other aspect of the treatment – led respondents to make the choices they did. A clear theme emerges in conditions that leave some portion of the suspect-victim racial labels ambiguous. For example, in the absence of a racially-labeled suspect, the importance of the victims' racial group emerges as respondents described why they classified the No Race perpetrator-Black victim condition as a hate crime. One subject wrote, “Because the college is a black college and racism is alive and well.” Another responded, even without the race of a shooter being identified, that “It is hate when it deals with another race.” Similarly, without a motivation discussed, another respondent wrote that “Because it targeted a group of people based on their race.”

Even with no idea who the perpetrator is or what his race may be, respondents used the targeting of a historically Black college to direct how they classified the violence. Fewer respondents gave justifications for their classification in the No Race perpetrator-White victim condition, but some still highlighted how the racial description of the college had guided their decision-making. Respondents in this condition also indicated greater uncertainty with the classification compared to those in the No Race perpetrator-Black victim condition. One subject wrote, for instance, that “This could be classified either way but since the college was mostly one race it could be a hate crime.”

When both racial labels are given, responses mirror the classification results we have presented – with some respondents indicating that news stories in which race is explicitly mentioned send a signal that race was the motivating factor, and thus the violence is a hate crime. One subject responded that “Hate crime is usually against a specific minority group and the tweet indicates a historically black college was targeted.” However, when violence targeted at a Black university was committed by a Black perpetrator, another respondent used a similar logic, while also conceptualizing their understanding of terrorism: “Mass shootings are terrorism. ‘Hate crime’ usually connotes violence against marginalized people by the privileged.”

In the Black perpetrator-White victim condition, some respondents also justified their classification of the attack as a hate crime, for instance, writing that “There’s no indication that terrorism is involved. The most indication provided is that it’s racial. I flipped it around the other direction – if a white man did this to a black institution, I would definitely call it a hate crime.” That is, an effort is made to emphasize that while hate crimes may be commonly considered as violence against minority groups, they can also be perpetrated against white people. These respondents make sure to highlight an aspect of equality in classification – just as these types of attacks can happen to Black people, they can also happen to white people. But again, as with the No Race perpetrator-White victim condition, respondents in the Black perpetrator-White victim condition also indicated some uncertainty about classification in a way that is not evident in the White

perpetrator-Black victim condition. The clear description of the targeted group cannot be assumed to indicate racial-malice, and one respondent writes: “I don’t like either classification; however, it doesn’t indicate it was racially driven and the act itself is a form of terrorism.

When given room to extrapolate on their own, with no racial labels given, respondents still indicated their need for further racial information to guide their decision-making process. Their responses also suggest that the addition of a racial victim group – removal of ambiguity – might even lessen the perceived severity and intensity of the attack. One such example, from the condition that made no mention of race reflects this: Well it is hateful but it’s not really a hate crime, one because there was no white on black violence, and two that’s terrifying therefore it is terrorism,” one subject wrote.

Ultimately, our respondents showed a degree of engagement with the treatment that supports our argument that race – even outside of an Islamic or Muslim identity – is crucial to how these events are classified. In the absence of a clear victim identity, a respondent in the White perpetrator-No Race victim condition wrote, “Neither tag fits, as terrorism implies a political or ideological motive, while a hate crime would imply that there were specific groups that the suspect is targeting. If I had to choose, I’d pick ‘terrorism’ because of the way the act induces a state of terror.”

Study Two: Responses to Violence

Now that we have a sense of the importance of race in classifying violence, we move to understand how subjects respond to these different labels when they are assigned: how does manipulating the label, as well as the racial descriptions of the perpetrator and victim, influence response to violence?

To answer this question, we fielded a second survey experiment through an online survey firm, Lucid Theorem, in January 2020. We collected a nationally-representative sample of 1,012 adults.⁴ Of the 1,002 respondents, 700 self-identified themselves as white and 312 as a member of another racial group. We classify and refer to these individuals as “non-white.” In our analyses, we distinguish between these white and non-white subjects. Full demographics of our sample are provided in Table 2.

In the survey introduction, subjects were informed that they would be taking part in a survey about Americans’ thoughts and opinions about recent news events. Respondents answered demographic questions before being asked to read an Associated Press tweet – our experimental treatment – and offer their opinions on several post-treatment questions. Figure 2 provides an example of the treatment tweet appearance.

⁴Coppock and McClellan (2019) confirm that Lucid’s samples reflect the demographic, political, and psychological characteristics of the broader American population. We provide a descriptive look at the sample in the appendix.



The Associated Press
@AP

BREAKING: Multiple casualties have been reported in shooting at a historically black college. The suspected gunman is described as a white male wearing a gray sweatshirt. Investigations are ongoing into this hate crime.

Figure 2: Example of the hate crime with white perpetrator and Black victims condition.

Subjects were randomly assigned to one of seven conditions, including six conditions that briefly described a multiple casualty mass shooting on a college campus, what we call violence conditions, and a seventh, control condition that made no mention of violence. The violence conditions further varied by the label given to the act of violence described and the racial descriptions of the victims and perpetrator. These conditions alternated between calling the incident a “hate crime,” a “terrorist attack,” or a “mass shooting.” Within these conditions, we alternate the race of the perpetrator and victims involved. The shooter is described as a white male in three conditions; in others he is described as a Black male. In three conditions, the location of the shooting is a “historically black college.”⁵ In the remaining three, the location is described as just a “college.”⁶ A full list of conditions and subjects within each condition is provided in Table 4 in the appendix, as are the tweets as they appear in the study.

We expect subjects’ perceptions of violence to be shaped by their own racial identities, related to whether they see themselves as a potential victim of the attack described in the treatment. In the pre-treatment questions, subjects were asked to select all of their racial and ethnic identities from a list that included: White, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino/a, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, American Indian or Alaska Native. Given the noted political influence of racial attachment, we also asked respondents to tell us how important their racial identities were to them (Jardina 2019). We measured racial attachment using a single item that asked, “How important is your race to your identity?” Political partisanship and ideology potentially shape responses to our dependent variables of interest, and so we asked respondents to provide us with their partisan affiliation and ideology. Additionally, subjects reported their household income, education-level, age, sources of news, as well as their aggression, and the amount of attention they paid to the media.

This survey experiment addresses the impact of violence labels and racial features of an attack on the perceptions of the threat, emotional responses, and the appropriate policy solutions to

⁵Note that, at the time this experiment was conducted, the Associated Press style guide did not capitalize the word “black” when used in reference to Black people.

⁶In an earlier test of the experimental manipulation, we found that “predominantly white institution,” while parallel to “historically black college,” was an unfamiliar and awkward term for respondents, though that is the phrase used to describe such educational institutions. Here, we believe that describing a “college” evokes an institution serving white people.

violence. Because we contend that the interactions of labels and racial identification should alter how subjects perceive their own safety, we assessed perceptions of the threat posed by violence. Subjects were asked, “In the next 12 months, how likely do you think it is that someone like you will be the victim of a violent attack?” This wording specifically cues respondents to consider their identities as they relate to the violence posed in the attack.

We also considered threat as an emotional response and asked subjects to think about the “threat posed by this shooting” and evaluate how much anger and fear they felt after reading the article. For each emotion, respondents were offered a five-point scale indicating how they felt from “None at all” to “A great deal.” To evaluate support for punitive criminal justice policies, we asked respondents to consider possible punishments a judge could impose if the perpetrator is found guilty of committing the attack. Subjects are given a binary choice, either the judge should or should not consider each potential punishment. We provided subjects with several prompts, including no punishment, life in prison without parole, and the death penalty.

Results

The empirical design evaluates Americans’ perceptions of violence based on attributes of a fictional shooting at a college. Specifically, we measure the effects of violence labels and the perpetrator’s race on respondents’ evaluations of being the target of a similar attack and their self-described emotional reaction to the attack. This section also explores heterogeneity across respondents and uncovers significant differences in the public’s interpretation of violence and their perceived vulnerability to it based on a respondents’ race and political ideology. The second section evaluates the policy implications of Americans’ reactions to violence. Collectively, our results demonstrate the power of labels in shaping Americans’ perceptions of violence and their ability to activate or moderate the racial narratives that under-gird violence in the United States

Perceptions of Threat

On average, respondents rated their likelihood of being the victim of a violent attack as between slightly likely and moderately likely. Figure 3 shows the marginal effects of each treatment condition.⁷ Across all attack types, respondents evaluated their risk of violence as higher when they read about an attack involving a white perpetrator. Compared to the control condition, only respondents who viewed attacks with white perpetrators rated their likelihood of victimization as significantly higher than subjects in the control condition. The model results are available in Table 5 in the appendix.

⁷Likelihood values normalized to a 0-1 scale from a five response Likert scale ranging from “Not at all likely” to “Extremely likely.”

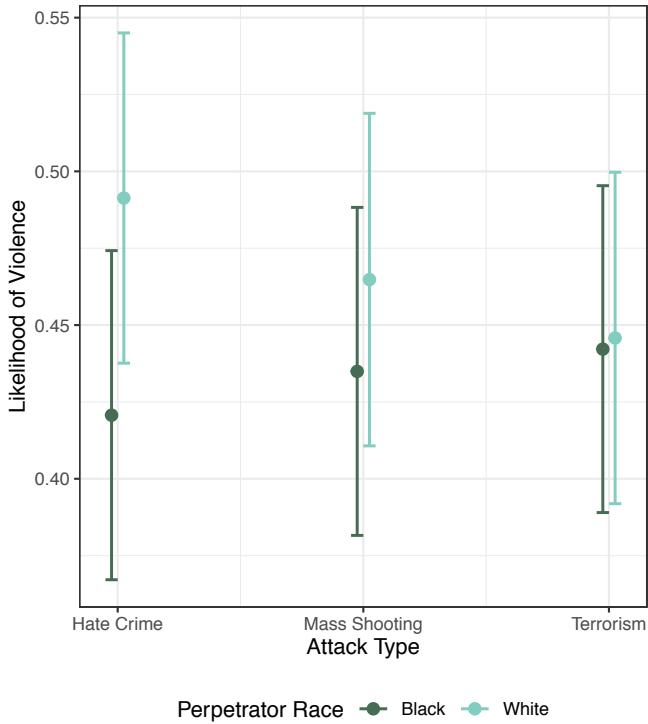


Figure 3: Marginal Effects of Label and Race Interactions on the Likelihood of Violence.

There was no significant effect of treatment on white respondents, even when reading about violence against presumably white victims. Non-white respondents, however were highly responsive to reading about violence. Although non-white respondents in the control condition on average evaluated their likelihood of being the victim of an attack an average of eight percentage points lower than white subjects, reading about an incident of violence increased non-white subjects' risk assessments by 17 percentage points. Including controls for other participant characteristics, the effect of treatment for non-white subjects is significant at the $p < 0.001$ level. The only condition not significantly different from the control for non-white subjects is the scenario of a Black perpetrator committing an act of terrorism. In contrast, non-white subjects reading about a *white* perpetrator committing an act of terrorism, gave risk assessments on average 23 percentage points higher than the control.

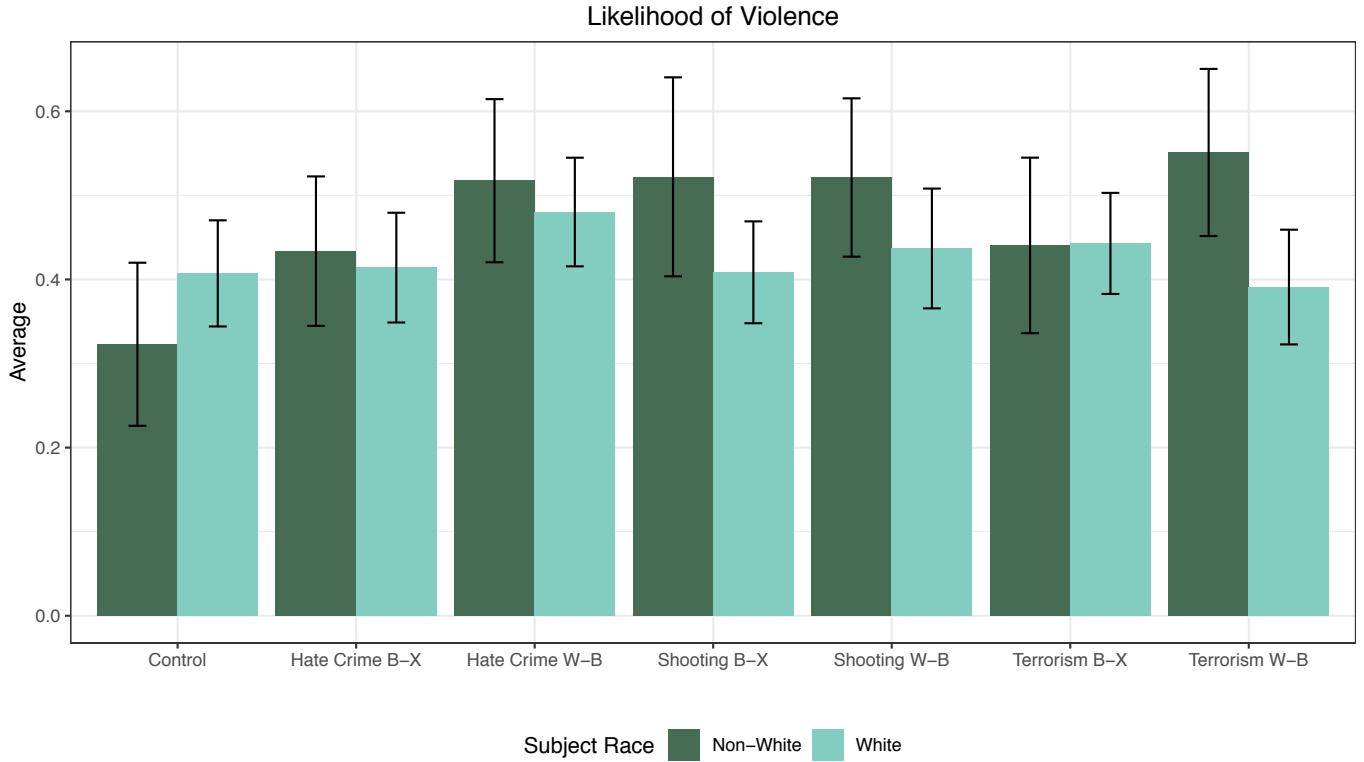


Figure 4: Average Evaluations of Violence Likelihood by Condition and Subject Race.

We do not find that racial attachment discernibly moderates likelihood of victimization among white respondents. However, with the control condition as a baseline, we do see that white respondents with high racial attachment tend to express less likelihood of victimization in all Black victim conditions, regardless of label. Similarly, these high identifiers express greater likelihood when the race of the victim is not specified, again, regardless of label. As racial attachment increases, we see that likelihood of victimization also increases for all non-white respondents, regardless of treatment condition.

Responding with Fear and Anger

Subjects were asked to evaluate the emotions they felt about the threat posed by the shooting described in the tweet. Figure 5 shows the interaction of attack features – label and perpetrator race – and subjects’ reported feelings of fear and anger and the results are reported in Table 6 and Table 7 in the appendix.⁸ Respondents rated their levels of fear marginally higher in conditions with Black perpetrators. However, this effect disappears in the hate crime condition. In contrast, when evaluating anger, the hate crime condition was the only attack type with a meaningful difference

⁸Likelihood values normalized to a 0-1 scale from a five response Likert scale ranging from “None at all” to “A great deal.”

between perpetrator races. Of all the conditions, respondents reported the highest levels of anger when reading about a white perpetrator committing a hate crime. These findings highlight the racial context of hate crimes in the United States. Respondents' were more angry after reading about an attack on a historically Black college that was labeled a hate crime than the similar attack committed by a Black perpetrator. We contend that this may be because, as we demonstrate in Study One, Black perpetrated-hate crimes are not as common a narrative as those committed by white people.

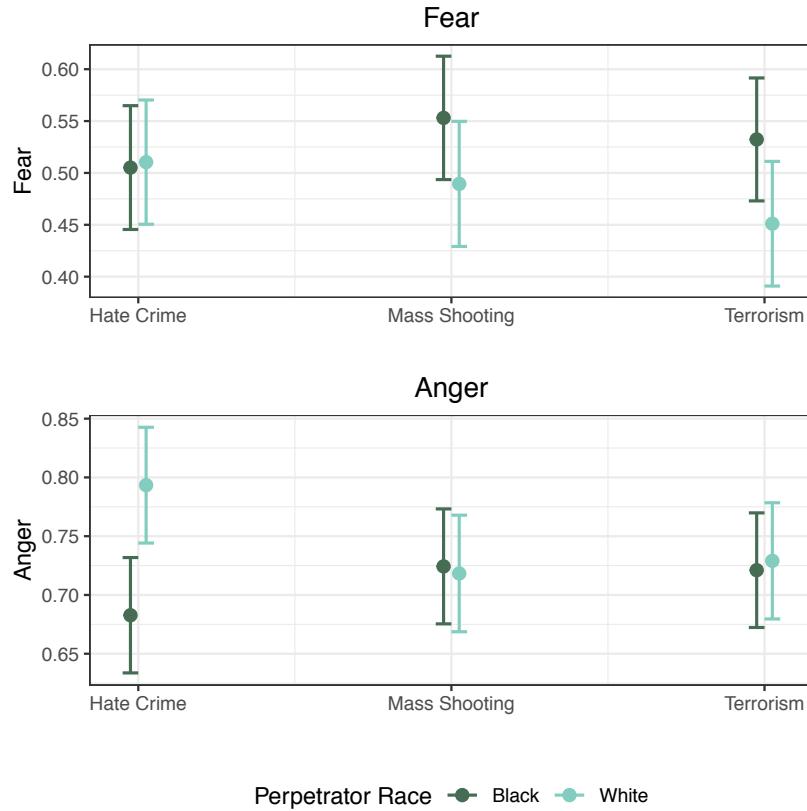


Figure 5: Marginal Effects of Label and Race Interactions on Reported Levels of Fear and Anger.

We expect a subject's race to shape their emotional reaction to violence, particularly as they may see their racial identity represented in either the victim or perpetrator. Figure 6 shows the results.⁹ White subjects, comprising 70 percent of our sample, showed relatively static emotional responses across attack types. The labels ascribed to violence do not alter white respondents' fear or anger in response to the treatment. White respondents report slightly higher levels of fear when considering a Black perpetrator, but this difference is not statistically significant. We suggest that

⁹Likelihood values normalized to a 0-1 scale from a five response Likert scale ranging from "None at all" to "A great deal."

is in line with media narratives that associate Black people, crime, and violence, and inaccurately emphasizes Black perpetrators victimizing white people (Dixon and Linz 2000; Gilliam Jr and Iyengar 2000). In contrast, white people are over-represented as the victims of crimes compared to Black and Latino people (Dixon and Linz 2000; Dixon, Azocar and Casas 2003). We see this reflected in the white perpetrator condition, where white subjects might not see themselves as likely victims in an attack on a historically Black college, and are therefore less fearful.

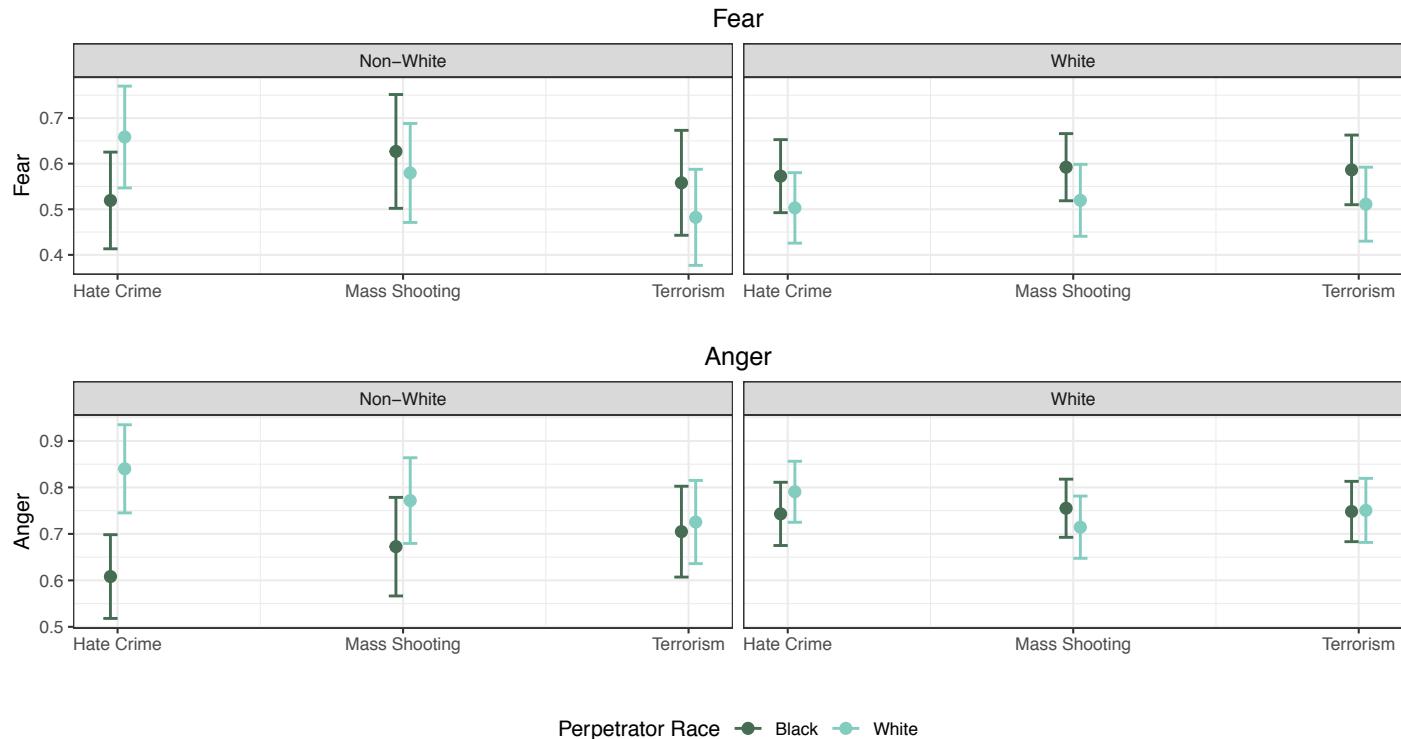


Figure 6: Marginal Effects of Label and Race Interactions by Subject Racial Groups on Reported Levels of Fear and Anger

Anger increases slightly among non-white subjects who saw a mass shooting targeting Black people. But, anger is significantly higher among non-white people who read about a hate crime targeting Black people, when compared to those who read about a hate crime targeting white people. White subjects also report the highest levels of anger when reading about a white-perpetrated hate crime, though this is not a significant difference. This finding is consistent with literature that finds shared racial identity is a factor in responses to violence (Burge and Johnson 2018; McGowen and Wylie 2020).

Moreover, when we consider how racial attachment moderates these emotional responses, we see two distinct patterns when comparing white and non-white subjects. In white subjects, we see that conditions are not distinctly moderated by racial attachment, when comparing across labels,

nor when comparing across all conditions.

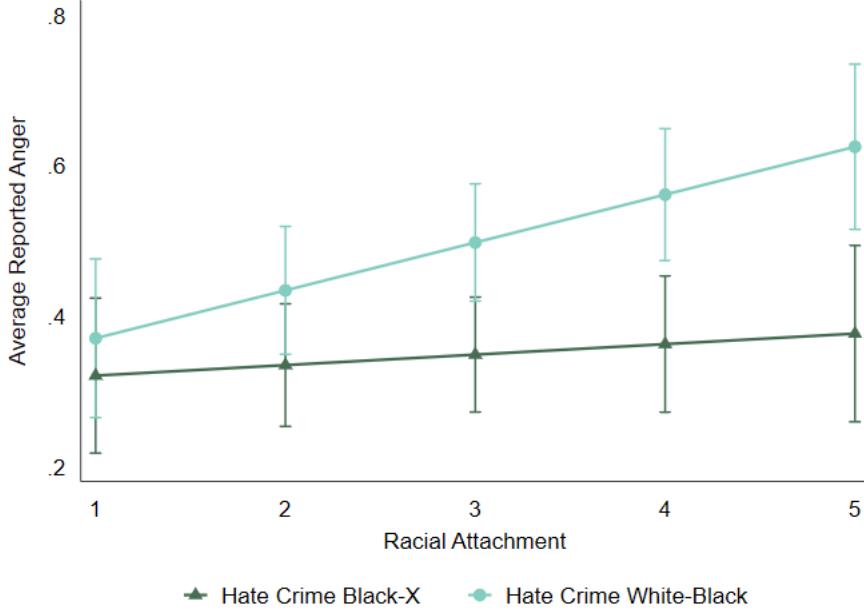


Figure 7: Racial attachment moderates the effect of reading about a hate crime in non-white respondents. Moving from the lowest to the higher ends of the measure, non-white respondents with high racial attachment express anger 20 percentage points higher than those at the lowest end of the scale.

Among non-white subjects, however, there is a clear moderation effect of racial attachment when considering the interaction of labels and the racial identities of victims and perpetrators, as shown in Figure 7. Just as we find that anger is higher in non-white subjects who read about a hate crime targeting Black people, we find that anger is greatest in those non-white subjects with high racial attachment and read about a hate crime targeting Black people. We see that non-white subjects in the Black-targeted condition reported anger that was almost 20 percentage points higher, when moving from the lowest to highest end of the racial attachment measure in this condition. In the hate crime condition with no victim specified, we find there is no statistical difference in anger across the racial attachment measure.

Individuals' emotional reactions influence their political behavior (Albertson and Gadarian 2015; Marcus, Neuman and MacKuen 2000; Valentino, Gregorowicz and Groenendyk 2009; Valentino et al. 2011). Specifically, we know that though anger mobilizes individuals to political action (Valentino et al. 2011). While this paper does not directly test for changes in political action that might be plausibly linked to emotional mediators, we do find here that emotional responses may fluctuate depending on the label given to the act of violence.

Punishment

How do these different conditions impact preferences over the appropriate responses to violence? If labels are used strategically by political operatives and policymakers, what policy objectives could they further? This analysis considers the impact of label and racial context on a subjects' support for different levels of punitiveness in sentencing a the fictional perpetrator. Figure 11 in the appendix shows subjects' levels of support for each incarceration punishment accounting for the perpetrator's race. Generally subjects were more willing to consider lenient sentences, such as no punishment, institutionalization in a mental health facility, and a term less than life in prison and less supportive of stronger sentences when reading about Black perpetrators. The results for support for death penalty are presented in Table 8 and support for a punishment term less than life in prison are presented in Table 9 in the appendix.

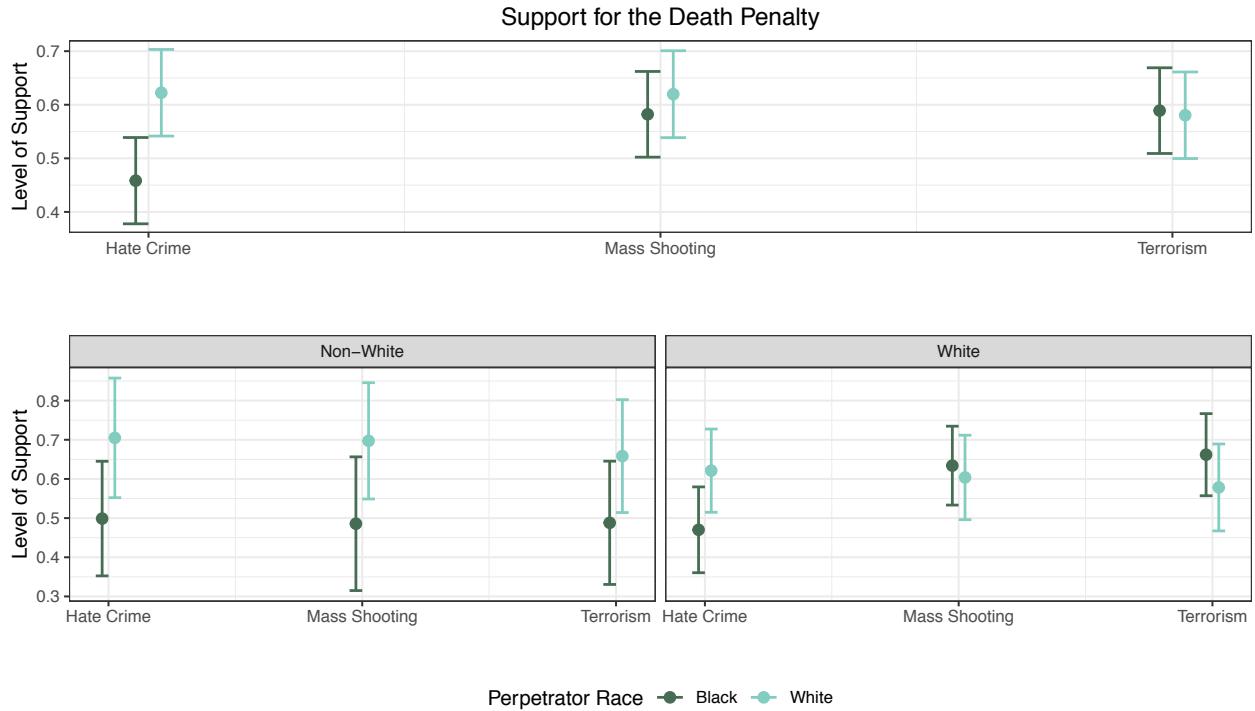


Figure 8: Marginal Effects of Label and Race Interactions on Punishments.

Figure 8 shows the marginal effects of attack attributes on support for the death penalty and Figure 9 shows support for an imprisonment term less than life in prison. Support for the death penalty was higher in cases of a white perpetrator. This is driven by the hate crime condition. For white subjects, this is an anomaly, their support for the death penalty is lower in the case of a Black perpetrator only in the hate crime condition. Non-white respondents on average are 20 percentage points less supportive of the death penalty when reading about a Black perpetrator.

This effect is consistent across political ideologies; both conservatives and liberals are more likely to consider the death penalty an appropriate response when considering a hate crime committed by a white perpetrator (Figure 12 in the appendix). Imprisonment term less than a life sentence was the minimum incarceration term that respondents could select. Counter to the existing literature, our subjects reported higher willingness to consider lenient prison terms when reading about Black perpetrators. This may reflect the political nature of mass violence in the United States compared to crime or subject's recognition of structural biases against Black Americans in the criminal justice system. Further research should explore how perceptions of injustice or inequality impact evaluations of violence and the appropriate punishment for it.

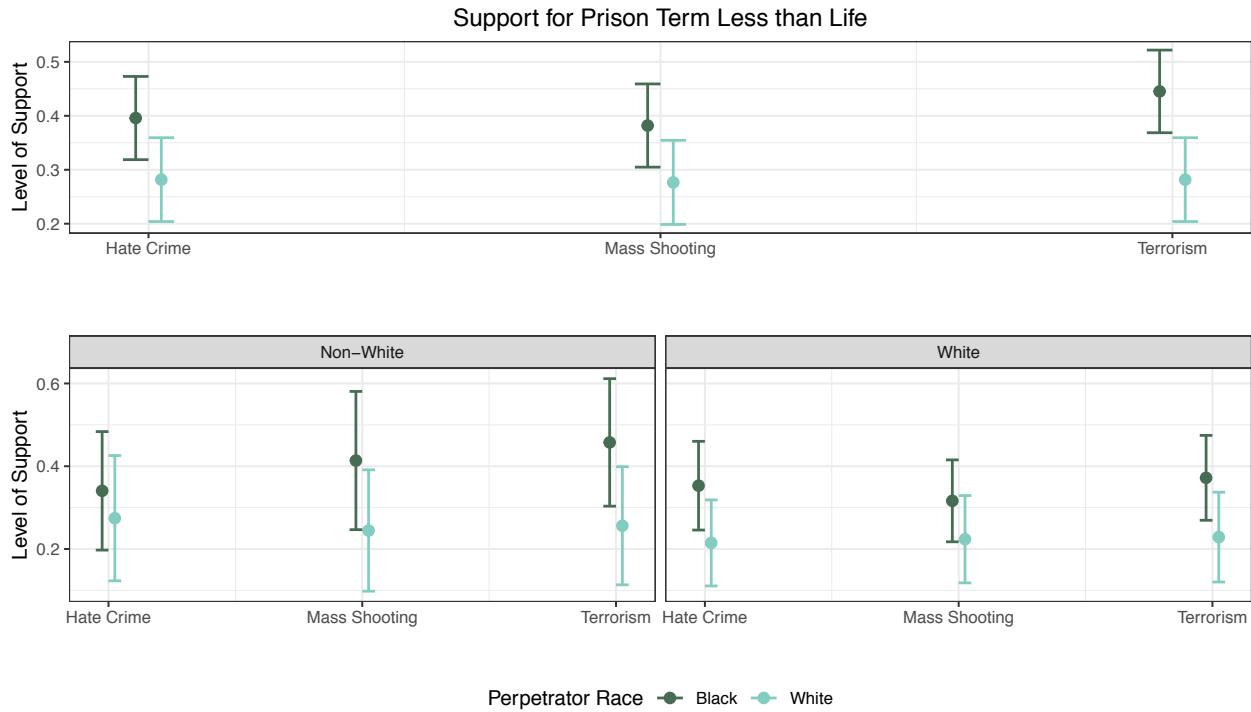


Figure 9: Marginal Effects of Label and Race Interactions on Punishments.

Again, we find that racial attachment moderates these outcomes in distinct ways when comparing white and non-white respondents. As racial attachment increases in white subjects, we see that support for the death penalty to punish the violence increases only in those conditions that did not specify the race of the victim; in the Black victim condition, there is no change in support for the death penalty moving from the lowest to the highest points of the measure. Among non-white subjects, we see that support is lowest among those high in racial attachment and in the hate crime condition that does not specify the race of the victims. When considering support for a prison term less than a life sentence, the support of non-white respondents remains constant across the racial attachment measure. Among white subjects, we see, similar to support for the death penalty, that

support for prison time increases in those conditions that describe violence against presumably white victims and decreases or remains constant in conditions describing violence against Black people.

Overall, these results demonstrate how the labels and terminology used to discuss instances of violence are embedded within media narratives of race, crime, and violence. The results also point to the salience of race enduring across descriptions of violence, and our consideration of racial attachment suggests that these labels do mean different things to members of different racial groups. Labels such as “hate crime” are born from and embedded with a history of white supremacist violence against people of color in the United States ([Jenness and Grattet 2001](#)). The enduring historic context and frequency of these crimes intensifies Americans’ perceptions of threat and anger when confronted with this familiar pattern of violence. However, contrary to our expectations, the term “terrorism” does not inherently intensify subjects’ reactions to violence. Although rhetoric invoking terrorism has been successfully leveraged to justify a range of policy objectives, including extensive military operations and civil liberty intrusions, our results show that this label alone, void of its racial, religious, or attack-specific context, does not induce significantly more fear, anger, or punitiveness in our subjects. This finding expands on existing literature by altering the label used to describe the violence, rather than the contextual factors that characterize an act of violence or the media narrative around it ([Wayne 2019](#)). Future research should explore the conditions which may activate this label. We have identified such a condition for the label “hate crime” which augments reactions to white violence against Black victims, particularly for non-white respondents. We suggest that our findings reflect the importance of historic context, as well as how labels, in conjunction with racial identity, can shape different perceptions of violence.

Conclusion

We contend that these labels are not simply words, but they have powerful implications for how violence is perceived, particularly when considered alongside race. Our study tackles a subject that has become increasingly prevalent as politicians and activists grapple with the language used to describe violence, and often use that language to mobilize the public and bring attention to these events. This is a process of seeking not only the legal recognition and state punishment of violence, but also a search for the power to name violence and mobilize in opposition to it.

By asking our respondents to classify a description of a violent attack as an example of hate crime or terrorism in our first study, we concern ourselves with how the manipulation of race in this instance changes perceptions of violence. We find descriptive evidence to suggest that these racial manipulations do matter for how our respondents classify violence. In our second study, we find that not only do these racial identities matter for classifications, but they also interact with given labels to influence emotional reactions and public opinion. These labels can be used to magnify systemic patterns of violence or shield an incident from its larger racial or bias-motivated context

by avoiding terms such as hate crime.

This article shows how language that connects to deep narratives of race and violence can be used to elicit anger, fear, and influence support for policies punishing the perpetrators of violence. We have shown, too, that a fairly limited and brief exposure to these labels, such as in a tweet, can alter a person's understanding of violence and the larger pattern it may reflect. While journalists, politicians, and commentators are given leeway in describing mass violent events as they unfold, their choice of language may have lasting effects on Americans' understanding of a violent attack even if more information later emerges that contradicts earlier theories and classifications (Nyhan and Reifler, 2010; Lewandowsky et al., 2012). Future work should explore the lasting effects of the speculative language that fills the information void in the wake of mass violence without a clear motive. Do the effects we have identified here endure and are they receptive or resistant to updating when contradictory motives emerge? There is ample room to further investigate both the descriptive usage of these labels in the media and by politicians, as well as their consequences.

Recent studies have begun to move beyond the typical racialized crime script into less explored aspects of historic and contemporary political violence in America (Francis 2014; Kilgo and Harlow 2019; Perry 2014; Streeter 2019). Building on these results, further research should explore the how other victim and perpetrator characteristics, such as religion, sexual orientation, homelessness, and gender identity intersect with the narratives of these labels and influence American's perceptions of bias motivated violence.

References

- Albertson, Bethany and Shana Kushner Gadarian. 2015. *Anxious politics: Democratic citizenship in a threatening world*. Cambridge University Press.
- Alwin, Duane F and Jon A Krosnick. 1991. "The reliability of survey attitude measurement: The influence of question and respondent attributes." *Sociological Methods & Research* 20(1):139–181.
- Avdan, Nazli and Clayton Webb. 2018. "Not in My Back Yard: Public Perceptions and Terrorism." *Political Research Quarterly*.
- Baele, Stephane J, Olivier C Sterck, Thibaut Slingeneyer and Gregoire P Lits. 2019. "What Does the "Terrorist" Label Really Do? Measuring and Explaining the Effects of the "Terrorist" and "Islamist" Categories." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42(5):520–540.
- Berinsky, Adam J, Gregory A Huber and Gabriel S Lenz. 2012. "Evaluating Online Labor Markets for Experimental Research: Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk." *Political analysis* 20(3):351–368.
- Burge, Camille D and Gbemende Johnson. 2018. "Race, crime, and emotions." *Research & Politics* 5(3):2053168018795334.
- Chong, Dennis and James N Druckman. 2007. "Framing theory." *Annu. Rev. Polit. Sci.* 10:103–126.
- Chyi, Hsiang Iris and Maxwell McCombs. 2004. "Media Salience and the Process of Framing: Coverage of the Columbine School Shootings." *JMC Quarterly* 81(1):22–35.
- Davis, Darren W and Brian D Silver. 2004. "Civil liberties vs. security: Public opinion in the context of the terrorist attacks on America." *American Journal of Political Science* 48(1):28–46.
- Dixon, Travis L. 2006. "Psychological Reactions to Crime News Portrayals of Black Criminals: Understanding the Moderating Roles of Prior News Viewing and Stereotype Endorsement." *Communication Monographs* 73(2):162–187.
- Dixon, Travis L. 2007. "Black Criminals and White Officers: The Effects of Racially Misrepresenting Law Breakers and Law Defenders on Television News." *Media Psychology* 10(2):270–291.
- Dixon, Travis L, Cristina L Azocar and Michael Casas. 2003. "The Portrayal of Race and Crime on Television Network News." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 47(4):498–523.
- Dixon, Travis L and Daniel Linz. 2000. "Overrepresentation and Underrepresentation of African Americans and Latinos as Lawbreakers on Television News." *Journal of communication* 50(2):131–154.

- Dixon, Travis L. and Keith B. Maddox. 2005. "Skin Tone, Crime News, and Social Reality Judgments: Priming the Stereotype of the Dark and Dangerous Black Criminal." *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 35(8):1555–1570.
- Dolliver, Matthew J. and Erin M. Kearns. 2019. "Is It Terrorism?: Public Perceptions, Media, and Labeling the Las Vegas Shooting." *Working Paper*.
- D'Orazio, Vito and Idean Salehyan. 2018. "Who is a Terrorist? Ethnicity, Group Affiliation, and Understandings of Political Violence." *International Interactions* 44(6):1017–1039.
- Francis, Megan Ming. 2014. *Civil rights and the making of the modern American state*. Cambridge University Press.
- Gilliam Jr, Franklin D, Nicholas A Valentino and Matthew N Beckmann. 2002. "Where You Live and What You Watch: The Impact of Racial Proximity and Local Television News on Attitudes about Race and Crime." *Political Research Quarterly* 55(4):755–780.
- Gilliam Jr, Franklin D and Shanto Iyengar. 2000. "Prime Suspects: The Influence of Local Television News on the Viewing Public." *American Journal of Political Science* pp. 560–573.
- Green, Donald P and Amber D Spry. 2014. "Hate crime research: Design and measurement strategies for improving causal inference." *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 30(3):228–246.
- Green, Donald P, Dara Z Strolovitch and Janelle S Wong. 1998. "Defended neighborhoods, integration, and racially motivated crime." *American Journal of Sociology* 104(2):372–403.
- Haider-Markel, D P. 2004. "Perception and Misperception in Urban Criminal Justice Policy - The Case of Hate Crime." *Urban Affairs Review* 39(4):491–512.
- Hall, Jacquelyn Dowd. 2005. "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past." *The Journal of American History* 91(4):1233–1263.
- Hall, Nathan. 2013. *Hate Crime*. Routledge.
- Huddy, Leonie. 2001. "From Social to Political Identity: A Critical Examination of Social Identity Theory." *Political psychology* 22(1):127–156.
- Huddy, Leonie and Stanley Feldman. 2011. "Americans respond politically to 9/11: understanding the impact of the terrorist attacks and their aftermath." *American Psychologist* 66(6):455.
- Huff, Connor and Dustin Tingley. 2015. "“Who are These People?” Evaluating the Demographic Characteristics and political preferences of MTurk survey respondents." *Research & Politics* 2(3):2053168015604648.

Huff, Connor and Joshua D. Kertzer. 2017. "How the Public Defines Terrorism." *American Journal of Political Science* 00(00):1–17.

URL: <http://doi.wiley.com/10.1111/ajps.12329>

Iyengar, Shanto. 1996. "Framing Responsibility for Political Issues." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 546(1):59–70.

Iyengar, Shanto and Donald R Kinder. 2010. *News that Matters: Television and American Opinion*. University of Chicago Press.

Jardina, Ashley. 2019. *White identity politics*. Cambridge University Press.

Jefferson, Hakeem J, Fabian G Neuner and Josh Pasek. N.d. "Seeing Blue in Black and White: Race and Perceptions of Officer-Involved Shootings." . Forthcoming.

Jenness, Valerie and Ryken Grattet. 2001. *Making hate a crime: From social movement to law enforcement*. Russell Sage Foundation.

Kearns, Erin, Allison Betus and Anthony Lemieux. 2017. "Why Do Some Terrorist Attacks Receive More Media Attention Than Others?" *Ssrn* pp. 1–53.

Kilgo, Danielle K and Summer Harlow. 2019. "Protests, Media Coverage, and a Hierarchy of Social Struggle." *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 24(4):508–530.

Lewandowsky, Stephan, Ullrich KH Ecker, Colleen M Seifert, Norbert Schwarz and John Cook. 2012. "Misinformation and its correction: Continued influence and successful debiasing." *Psychological science in the public interest* 13(3):106–131.

Lyons, Christopher J. 2006. "Stigma or sympathy? Attributions of fault to hate crime victims and offenders." *Social psychology quarterly* 69(1):39–59.

Marcus, George E, W Russell Neuman and Michael MacKuen. 2000. *Affective intelligence and political judgment*. University of Chicago Press.

McGowen, Ernest B and Kristin N Wylie. 2020. "Racialized differences in perceptions of and emotional responses to police killings of unarmed African Americans." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* pp. 1–11.

McLeod, Douglas M and James K Hertog. 1999. "Social control, social change and the mass media's role in the regulation of protest groups." *Mass media, social control, and social change: A macrosocial perspective* pp. 305–330.

Meier, Anna A. 2020. "The Idea of Terror: Institutional Reproduction in Government Responses to Political Violence." *International Studies Quarterly* .

- Nacos, Brigitte Lebans and Oscar Torres-Reyna. 2007. *Fueling Our Fears: Stereotyping, Media Coverage, and Public Opinion of Muslim Americans*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Nyhan, Brendan and Jason Reifler. 2010. "When corrections fail: The persistence of political misperceptions." *Political Behavior* 32(2):303–330.
- Perry, Barbara. 2002a. "Hate crime and identity politics." *Theoretical Criminology* 6(4):485–491.
- Perry, Barbara. 2002b. *In the Name of Hate: Understanding Hate Crimes*. Routledge.
- Perry, Barbara. 2014. "Gendered Islamophobia: hate crime against Muslim women." *Social Identities* 20(1):74–89.
- Petrow, Gregory A, John E Transue and Timothy Vercellotti. 2018. "Do White In-Group Processes Matter, too? White Racial Identity and Support for Black Political Candidates." *Political Behavior* 40(1):197–222.
- Powell, Kimberly A. 2011. "Framing islam: An Analysis of U.S. Media Coverage of Terrorism since 9/11." *Communication Studies* 62(1):90–112.
- Presser, Stanley and Howard Schuman. 1980. "The measurement of a middle position in attitude surveys." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 44(1):70–85.
- Rothenberg, Paula S. 2004. *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States: An Integrated Study*. Macmillan.
- Sadler, Melody S, Megan Lineberger, Joshua Correll and Bernadette Park. 2005. "Emotions, attributions, and policy endorsement in response to the September 11th terrorist attacks." *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 27(3):249–258.
- Saleem, Muniba, Sara Prot, Craig A. Anderson and Anthony F. Lemieux. 2017. "Exposure to Muslims in Media and Support for Public Policies Harming Muslims." *Communication Research* 44(6):841–869.
- Schaeffer, Katherine. 2019. "Share of Americans who favor stricter gun laws has increased since 2017." *Pew Research Center*.
- Streeter, Shea. 2019. "Lethal force in black and white: Assessing racial disparities in the circumstances of police killings." *The Journal of Politics* 81(3):1124–1132.
- Tajfel, Henri and John C Turner. 1979. "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict." *The social psychology of intergroup relations* 33(47):74.

Valentino, Nicholas A, Ted Brader, Eric W Groenendyk, Krysha Gregorowicz and Vincent L Hutchings. 2011. "Election night's alright for fighting: The role of emotions in political participation." *The Journal of Politics* 73(1):156–170.

Valentino, Nicholas, Krysha Gregorowicz and Eric W. Groenendyk. 2009. "Efficacy, Emotions, and the Habit of Participation." *Political Behavior* 31:307–330.

Wayne, Carly. 2019. "Risk or Retribution: How Citizens Respond to Terrorism." *Working Paper*.

Woods, Joshua. 2011. "Framing terror: An experimental framing effects study of the perceived threat of terrorism." *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 4(2):199–217.