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What are people’s attitudes towards police brutality?

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ABSTRACT

The topic of this paper is police brutality, and the researchers explored people’s attitudes about police brutality. Police Brutality is when police officers use excessive force that results in the victim either being dead or severely injured. (Danilina, 2016) American society has long entrusted to its police the authority to use force in the pursuit of justice, law, and order. (Bryant, Greenspan, Hamilton, Weisburd, & Williams, 2001) People living here in America believes that police officers should not use excessive force against victims because it is unlawful. (Bryant et al., 2001) However, the potential abuse and actual abuse of such authority remain both a central problem for police agencies and a central public policy concern. (Bryant et al., 2001) Police Brutality is a huge social problem in the American Society because the police agencies and people are concerned about the use of excessive force against actual or potential victims. Police Brutality raises many concerns because people and police agencies see excessive force as unjust. Excessive force is unnecessary, and many people do not agree with the usefulness of excessive force against innocent victims or criminals. (Bryant, et al., 2001) Students in the social work research class conducted and participated in a survey that asked questions that are related to social welfare issues. One significant finding is that a lot of people think that police brutality is a problem in their community.

Keywords: police brutality, cops, victims, race

What are people attitudes towards Police Brutality?

Police Brutality is an important topic to discuss because so many people are blindsided by the social and economic factors that influence police brutality. The noble cause is a moral commitment to make the world a safer place to live. Police are trained and armed to protect the innocent and think about the goal in terms of “keeping the scum off the streets.” (Caldero & Crank, 2014) Not all police officers are bad people, and it is unfair to say that every cop is racist and some cops do their job accordingly to service their community. The researchers are exploring the attitudes and behaviors of police officers mainly; the researchers want to know what are the police officers most concerned about, what are their opinions and values on racism. As stated before, people and police officers believe that cops are trained to protect the innocent and keep the crime off of our streets, but not all cops have that mindset. Some cops chose not to be a police officer anymore because their racist values were interfering with them being able to do their job properly. Another officer suggested that officers who exhibit racist attitudes in the conduct of their duties eventually "weed themselves out of this job," because racism interferes with doing work their successfully. (Bryant et al., 2001)

The ideology of racism is important as it relates to police brutality because some people or police officers believe that cops who use excessive force are racist towards minorities. The article spoke about African-American police officers feelings about racist white police officers using excessive force on poor minorities. A majority of African-American police officers believe that police treat whites better than African-Americans and other minorities, and that police officer are more likely to use physical force against minorities or the poor. (Bryant et al., 2001) Many African-American police officers have this shared belief that white police officers are racist and they have a negative attitude towards white cops. Some cops have negative attitudes towards racism, and some of the cops acknowledge that other cops express racism towards minorities. Most importantly, some cops make ignorant remarks about racism and stereotyping. The race card will never go away. It's always there. Somebody is going to play it. (Bryant et al., 2001) Cops try to deny the fact that race plays a role in racial profiling. America's biggest problem is not racism, but it is ignorance. Some cops stereotype black people, and they do not even realize that they are stereotyping them because they try to discard or cover their ignorance. As one cop reported: I only look for black people, it is because that is all that was there... I can't arrest white people, Korean people, Italian people. (Bryant, et al., 2001)

The cop is stating that he is not racist or stereotypical, but he is stereotyping when he says “I only look for black people”. If a cop is patrolling through a highly black neighborhood then, of course, most of the people that the cops arrest are going to be Black. But, what happens if a Black person is walking through an Italian neighborhood or Korean community does that make it right for cops to stereotype black people just because the officer claimed that they look suspicious because they do not belong in that neighborhood. Cops should take into consideration that some Blacks have high-status jobs and that they live in residential areas. (Bryant et al., 2001)

If I know <that> at 2 o'clock in the morning in a residential no 12-year and 13-year old should be walking back and forth, something is wrong with that and its not because they are two young Black kids. (Bryant et al., 2001) Cops would not openly say that they are stereotypical and ignorant, but they use words such as "residential" and that it is unusual for Black kids to be walking through a "residential neighborhood at 2 o'clock in the morning. The cop is not racist, but the cop made an ignorant remark and as a cop needs to acknowledge those comments because it leads to police brutality. There is no law stating that a child cannot walk the street at this time which brings us to question of morality and ethics. In which case this officer has no right to determine, examine, inspect or otherwise detain this child. That is the job of a parent, while on the other hand upholding the law is the job of the officer. The inconsiderate behavior of some police officers is shown through their absurd actions and statements that they say about minorities. (Bryant et al., 2001) Cops do not outwardly say that their racist it must be determined by their actions. In a nutshell, if a cop has this hidden belief or attitude towards minorities something needs to be changed because there are too many incidences of police brutality. The purpose of this study is to examine people's attitudes about police brutality. The social work students used a survey to examine people's attitudes about police brutality by asking their friends questions about the topic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

**Social Construction of Race**

Black males are criminalized because of the social construction of race theory. (Smiley & Fakunle et al., 2016) The media depicts Black people a certain way because it all starts from the social construction of race. The Social Construction of Race is formulated from the social construction of reality. The social construction of reality is that people attach a certain meaning to an object or thing based on their experience. That is how people form their own “reality” by having a collective experience associated with that object or thing. The reality is subjective because it is based on someone’s personal opinions or observations and it is based on how everyone associates this object or thing with this idea that means it must be true. The social construct of race is based on “shared assumptions” that people automatically assume that everyone in that racial/ethnic group to share those same characteristics and behaviors. That is where racism, bigotry and stereotyping begins. Social construction of race theory posits that race is not biological. People were not born Black, White or Hispanic, but society told these different racial/ethnic groups what the color of their skin is. Race is a social construct because race is subjective because it is based on people’s opinions and experience with a particular racial/ethnic group. (Smiley & Fakunle et al, 2016)

The media coverage of the deaths of six unarmed Black males is what the researcher focuses on because their deaths caused an uproar in this country. Newspaper articles that explored the deaths of six unarmed Black men (Eric Garner (43 years old), Michael Brown (18 years old), Akai Gurley (28 years old), Tamir Rice (12 years old), Tony Robinson (19 years old) and Freddie Gray (25 years old)) found that the coverage of the men’s deaths focused on four major recurring themes: "Behavior," "Appearance," "Location," and "Lifestyle." (Fakunle & Smiley, 2016) These four themes derived from the concepts of the "micro aggression theory." Micro-Aggression is a subtle but offensive comment or action directed at a minority or other non-dominant group that is often unintentional or unconsciously reinforces a stereotype. (Pierce, 1970) For instance, Eric Garner was described as tall and large individual those descriptions fall under "Appearance". (Fakunle & Smiley, 2016) The New York Time article described Eric Garner this way: The 350-pound man, about to be arrested on charges of illegally selling cigarettes, was arguing with the police. (Goldstein & Schweber, 2014) The study found that newspaper articles portray Black males in a bad way due to this "micro-aggression theory."

**Diverse Theoretical Perspectives**

Research has explored different theoretical perspectives to best explain why certain racial/ethnic minority groups are targeted more than whites. (Holmes & Smith et al., 2014). Three different theoretical perspectives on this phenomenon include: “minority threat theory”, “the place theory”, and “community accountability theory” . "Minority threat theory” suggests that the greater the proportion of minority residents in a city, the greater the use of excessive force by police (Holmes & Smith, 2014). For instance, in the minority threat theory blacks are associated with being threatening and whites associate blacks as threatening because that is one of the ideological, racial beliefs as whites view black people. The "place theory" suggests that segregated minority populations in cities are the primary targets of police brutality (Holmes & Smith, 2014) .

The "Community Accountability" hypothesis is that organizational characteristics of police departments promote the use of excessive force against minorities. (Holmes & Smith, 2014) The findings are that the predictions of the minority hypothesis are true. The “minority threat hypothesis” maintains that the greater the proportion of minority residents in a city, the greater the use of coercive crime control mechanisms. (Smith & Holmes, 2014) The research findings for “minority threat hypothesis” shows that if more Blacks and Hispanics that reside in a city then more sustained excessive force complaints are filed (Smith & Holmes, 2014) and that there is a positive relationship between percent Black and percent Hispanic that complain about police brutality in their cities. (Holmes & Smith, 2014) But, the percent Hispanic is slightly lower due to the diversity of the Hispanic population. The researchers found that those of Mexican origin are stereotyped just as much as Blacks, but that does not include Puerto Ricans or Dominicans. (Holmes & Smith, 2014)

The “place hypothesis” had partial support. The researchers found that highly segregated cities with large Black populations see more excessive force complaints as compared to highly segregated cities with large Hispanic populations (Holmes & Smith, 2014) Blacks report more excessive force complaints in cities due to "Black Disadvantage". (Holmes & Smith, 2014) The researchers found that Hispanic segregation is unrelated to sustained complaints. The researchers found for the place theory hypothesis that for the "Black Dissimilarity Index" that more Blacks filed sustained complaints as compared to Hispanics. For the fifth quintile, it was 13 times larger than the first quintile and four times greater than the fourth quintile. The sustained excessive force complaints were measured by measuring the "Black Dissimilarity Index" quintiles on a bar graph. The findings were that it was a nonlinear relationship because the more segregated a city was that means, the more sustained complaints were filed which landed in a greater quintile. The researchers found that for "Community Accountability theory" this hypothesis was not supported. (Holmes & Smith, 2014)

**Social Order**

Whites are granted with “White Privilege” because they make the rules for the present society. Whites are able to acquire employment, purchase homes and automobiles, earn wealth, provide safe and high-quality education to their children and not be subjected to the harmful effects of the criminal justice system. (Feinstein et al., 2015) White privilege is based on “White Privilege Frame” which explains why Whites think they are better than Blacks and see themselves on top of the social hierarchy. (Feinstein et al., 2015)

Social Order refers to the way in which an organized society makes up certain rules and standard to maintain that organized society. For instance, whites’ interests are more likely to be served because they are the majority, and therefore at the top of social hierarchy. Whites and Police officers want to preserve social order because it benefits them . So, in this society, there are rules and standards that are made up to hinder minority group progress. Racism is built on standards, rules, and expectations because Blacks lack social power. Whites have social control because they do not have to comply with the given rules of society. But, minorities have to follow the rules made for them because they lack social and political power. Minorities do not want to be socially controlled that is why so many of them complain about police brutality. (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016)

**The Conflict Theory of Law**

The Conflict Theory of Law is when society uses crime control strategies to regulate the the interests of the dominant groups. (Holmes et al., 2000) The “Conflict theory of law” is about how social inequalities impact and differentiate between racial/ethnic groups in a society. The theory explains that a society made certain laws to favor the interest of one racial/ethnic group over other racial/ethnic groups. The “Conflict Theory of Law” can explain why police brutality exists. The researcher gathered their data from three sources, the DOJ (Department of Justice) Police Brutality Study, Uniform Crime Reports and U.S. Census Reports. The two sub-populations are municipal police departments with two or more civil rights criminal complaints annually and cities with 150,000 more people to measure the "threat hypothesis." The “threat hypothesis” is the minority threat theory. (Holmes, 2000).

The findings show that Hispanic and Black minority/majority income inequality were positively associated with civil rights complaints. But, city population had little effect on "Percent Hispanic, " but it had a significant impact on "Percent Black" , it was positively associated. The positive relationship between percent black and complaints appears here because 2+ complaints cities of 150,000+ had proportionately larger black populations (27.4%), on average, than did other cities of 150,000+ (15.9%). (Holmes, 2000)

**What have you learned?**

The "micro aggression.", "minority threat" and "conflict theory of law" are some of the theories that have been used to explain the incidence of police brutality. People see police brutality on T.V., but police brutality has many concepts behind why it exists. Therefore, police brutality is something that cannot be ignored because these social and economic factors that influence the incidence of police brutality can be measured and some of these factors were proven to be true. This research study builds on this research by exploring people’s attitudes towards police brutality.

METHODS

Sampling

The participants were selected by snowball sampling. Snowball sampling occurs when the original recipients of a survey are prompted to share the opportunity to participate with others they know. In this case, the original recipients of the survey were chosen by the researchers. The original recipients, then recruited other participants including family, friends, or acquaintances. The researchers intended to gather a diverse set of participants, representing different racial and ethnic groups, as well as religious affiliations and geographic areas.

Measures

The research was conducted using a survey tool, including thirty-two closed ended questions. Questions included a series of multiple choice items designed to capture demographic characteristics of participants. Twenty-three (23) items were built using a 5 point Likert scale, from strongly disagree to strong agree. The Likert scale items captured participant agreement with statements related to four different identified social issues: Police Brutality, Reproductive Rights, Obesity, and Impact of Romantic Relationships on College Students. These social issues were identified by students in an undergraduate social work Research course at an urban, private university.

Design

This research design is quantitative, and aims at soliciting descriptive and exploratory level data. This research utilizes a cross-sectional design that sought participant input at only one phase. A limitation of this research design is that it cannot suggest causative relationships, but may be used to make correlational findings between variables.

Process

The tool was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the university. The survey designed by the social work class was provided to potential participants through either a paper based, or online survey. Results were gathered over a one week period in the Fall semester of 2016.

RESULTS

Sample

The overwhelming majority of survey respondents identified as female (more than 70%). The participants to this study were mostly under 30 years old (57%). Another 20% of the sample were over 50 years old. Most of the survey respondents identified as primarily Black or African-American. Approximately 17% of the sample identified themselves as Hispanic or Latino. Another 17% identified themselves as white. Over half of the sample reported their religion as a form of Christianity (ex: Protestant, Roman Catholic, etc.). The sample also included participants who identified as Muslim, Jewish, and Hindu. The majority of survey participants agreed that Religion was an important part of their lives.

Most participants currently reside in urban areas (almost 60%). Most of the remaining participants were made up of suburban residents (almost 35%). The majority of survey respondents came from households making less than $50,000 per year (60%). More than half of participants lived in households with three or more people (52%).

Most survey respondents had at least some college experience (80%). The majority of participants report currently being enrolled in an educational program, or college (52%). The majority of participants reported being employed full-time (50%). Twenty percent (20%) of the sample reported not being currently employed, with the remainder reporting part-time employment.

Police Brutality

Forty-nine percent (49%) of respondents disagreed that they have witnessed someone being harassed by the police, 36.1% agreed, while 14.3% of participants neither agreed nor disagreed. When asked whether they trust police officers, 33.3% of respondents reported that they neither agreed nor disagreed, 39.3% disagreed, and 27.4% agreed that they trust police. Almost twenty-nine percent (28.9%) of respondents reported that they neither agreed nor disagreed that police officers are viewed negatively within their community, while 28.1% disagreed and 43% agreed. 29.1% selected that they neither agreed nor disagreed that police brutality is an important issue within their community, 26.8% disagreed, 44.1% agreed. When asked whether they felt that the media portrays victims of police brutality in a negative way, 29.1% neither agreed nor disagreed, 13.5% disagreed, and 57.5% agreed.

Factors that Impact Attitudes about and Experiences with Police Brutality

Different factors, including social and economic disparities, impact respondents’ attitudes about, and experience with, police brutality. Employment status seems to impact attitudes about police brutality. Respondents who were employed, were more than likely than those who were not employed to agree with the statement “I have witnessed someone being harassed by the police”. 49.6% disagreed, 36.1% agreed, and 14.3% of participants neither agreed nor disagreed.

Religion impacts… When asked what level of agreement they had with the statement “I trust the police” , respondents who identified as Protestant, or Roman Catholic, were less likely than those who identified as Muslim, or Jewish, to agree with statement “I trust the police”.

Where respondents live seems to impact Urban respondents were less likely, than their suburban and rural counterparts, to agree with the statement “Police Brutality is an important issue in my community”.

Age of the respondent impacted The older the individual the more likely they were to agree with the “I trust the police”. Race impacted When it came to race, White respondents were more likely than Black and Hispanic respondents to agree with the statement “I trust the police” 33.3% of responders reported that they neither agreed nor disagreed, 39.3% disagreed, and 27.4% agreed. Black respondents were most likely to agree with the statement: “In my community, police officers are viewed negatively”.

Where respondents live seemed to impact their experiences with police brutality. For instance, respondents living in urban areas were more likely, than their suburban and rural counterparts, to agree with the statement “In my community police officers are viewed in a negative way. Religion impacted respondents who identified as Jewish or Hindu were less likely than those who identified as Christian, to agree 28.9% reported that they neither agreed nor disagreed, while 28.1% disagreed and 43% agreed.

From 134 responses, 29.1% selected that they neither agreed nor disagreed that police brutality is an important issue within their community, 26.8% disagreed, 44.1% agreed. When asked whether they felt that the media portrays victims of police brutality in a negative way, out of 134 responders, 29.1% neither agreed nor disagreed, 13.5% disagreed, and 57.5% agreed.

Gender impacted the results because women were more likely to agree than men with the statement that “The media portrays the victims of police brutality in a negative way. For education status, income, and household size there were no significant relationship between those and police brutality.

Limitations-

The limitations of the study are the majority of respondents were African-American females. There was not that much diversity in gender. The questions were limited. The survey was short. The survey was distributed to people that we know. The limitation is sampling bias. Most of the people in our class are of African-American descent, so that is why most of the respondents were African-American females.

CONCLUSION

For future researchers to gain a complete understanding of the social and economic factors that influence police brutality, it is necessary to conduct more studies around the "Community Accountability" theoretical perspective and the disparities between the different Hispanic Ethnic Groups. There are disparities among the Hispanic groups. Mexicans report more complaints than other Hispanics, so the question raised, are the Hispanic Ethnic Groups heavily impacted by police brutality as well? The survey stated that those who are employed witness more police brutality that makes sense because those that work go outside when they travel to their job, so that means they witness more police brutality than those who do not go outside. That can be another explanation for why older people trust the police because most seniors are retired.

The "Community Accountability Threat" does not explain that even though there is the fair representation of minority police officers in their community then why do people still file complaints. That brings up a lot of issues that police brutality is on an institutional level. There is something wrong with how the community responds to the police and the police department because if there are Black and Hispanic cops serving in their community then why are people filing more complaints. The survey showed that 44.1% people feel like police brutality is a problem in their community. That is alarming because there needs to be more research on how police departments work and how do they collaborate with their communities. Police Brutality is a complex social issue because on an institutional level there are many levels to dissect the criminality of what police officers do to their community members.

The survey says a lot about people's attitudes towards police brutality. For instance, an older person trusts the police more than a younger person. The researcher needs to explore on why younger people do not trust the police as compared to older people. That raises many questions on why older people feel like they trust the cops. There are some speculations on why a younger person has more distrust in the cops it could be that younger people are more exposed to police corruption due to social media. The younger generation knows more about police brutality because people have iPhones, and there is the internet. The younger people may have family members who run ins with the law. The ignorance behind the cops is that some of them do not realize that their actions have a mental and physical impact on people’s lives because the same man or woman that police arrest have family members. The arrest impacts the family members emotionally it also causes physical problems and hardships that still needs to be overcome. For future research, the circumstances that bring about police brutality need to be examined, researched in further detail.

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