Public Sentiment Toward Police Use of Force and the Potential Implications for Policing

(study in progress)

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Introduction

Americans' attitudes toward support for police use of force are declining. Coercive authority in a democratic society is predicated on the consent of the governed. The role of government, often on public display through police activity, may be losing some of its political appeal.

When citizens believe that government is overly aggressive, police policy often takes center stage since the police bring the State's power to use force to preserve peace unilaterally.

Public perception suggests that citizens do not support police striking someone even when someone strikes a police officer with fists or is escaping from custody.

Research Question

RQ1: How has public perception toward police use of force in the U.S. changed between 1972 to 2018?

Background

The Social Contract (Hobbes, 1651; Locke, 1800)
- Implicit agreement among the members of a society to cooperate and give up their right in favor of the government.

Egalitarinism (Balogh, 1966; Nye, J.S. et al., 1997)
- Leveling of hierarchical institutions and the belief that the police are not superior to the individual citizen.

Racial Threat Theory (Blalock, 1967)
- Racial majority influences state-sanctioned control practices and perceives an increasing threat to their likelihood with the increased size of the minority population.

Civil Liberties
- Basic rights and freedoms guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution to individuals as protection from any arbitrary actions or other interference of the government without due process of law.

Historical time points
- Rodney King beating, 1991.
- Michael Brown killing, 2014.
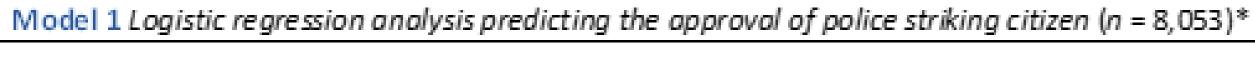
Materials & Methods

Materials

The General Social Survey, University of Chicago

Methods

- Longitudinal study (1972-2018)
- Searched terms used: (police; police use of force; police violence; racial bias; attack on police; public perception; civil liberties)
- Inclusion criteria:
  - Primary sources (original data)
  - Secondary sources (reviews, commentaries) - used for background, references
  - Published
- Exclusion criteria:
  - No full text available
- Manual review of reference lists in identified studies Variables
- Dependent
  - Approve or disapprove a police officer striking an adult male citizen
  - Approve or disapprove a police officer striking an adult male citizen when attacking the officer with fists
  - Approve or disapprove a police officer striking an adult male citizen who is attempting to escape from the officer's custody
- Independent
  - Race
- Control

(1) Age; (2) Sex; (3) Marital Status; (4) Afraid to walk at night in neighborhood; (5) Favor or oppose the death penalty; (6) Favor or oppose gun permits; (7) Have gun in the house;(8) Income; (9) Highest degree; (10) Political party affiliation; (11) Religious preference; (12) Regions of the U.S.

Preliminary Findings

Model 1 *Logistic regression analysis predicting the approval of police striking citizen (n = 8,053)**

Variables		B	SE	Wald	df	p	Exp(B)	95% CI for Exp (B) Lower	Upper
Predictor	Race	-.935	.078	144.147	1	.000	.393	.337	.457
Model	Constant	.585	.190	9.4451	1	.002	1.794		
	-2 log likelihood	8075.651							
	Model χ^2	(22) = 667.077; p = .000							
	Nagelkerke R^2	.120							
	Hosmer-Lemshow	p = .856							

"All statistical results are preliminary and subject to further analysis."

Limitations

Some of the limitations include: 1) no data provided on a city level; 2) data aggregated to the regional level.

Policy Implication

Trustworthiness and legitimacy in policing are important to ensure the bureaucracy can more effectively carry out its duties and responsibilities. If the bureaucracy is perceived as having legitimate authority by the citizenry they serve, then they are more likely to prevent and solve crime, reduce disorder conditions and improve quality of life. The perception of legitimacy also affects recruiting, budgeting, retention and corruption. If use of force is a corruption issue, then the public is less likely to tolerate force from individual officers, which will result in more officers being disciplined and prosecuted for their conduct.

Directions for Future Research

Future research should examine the correlation between the public's perception of police use of force and internal officer discipline and external criminal prosecutions, as well as the correlation between perception and recruiting and budgeting.

Acknowledgment

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