



#ACAB:

A Study of Student Perceptions of Police Behavior and Accountability

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INTRODUCTION

Police-community relations have been strained since the inception of policing in the United States. Incidents of police corruption and misconduct against minorities continue to evoke a negative perspective of police officers across college aged students and the public alike. (Lee et al., 2018). In recent years, with greater exposure to social media coverage and anti-police protests such as Black Lives Matter, the anti-policing sentiment has gained significant attention throughout the American society. Quite often, the majority of perceptions toward police are formed through exposure to stories displayed among various social media sites. However, the majority of social media lack factual data and illustrate exaggerated stories that draw upon the emotions of their viewers, specifically stories of excessive use force, police corruption, and officer misconduct (Mbuba, 2010). Along with the rapid escalation of police officer dissatisfaction displayed after the untimely death of George Floyd, many college students, specifically African American students, have voiced a magnification of distrust in the accountability and behavior of police officer's ability to protect all members of society. The purpose of this study is to gain insight into student perceptions of police officers' accountability and the increased dissatisfaction of the police by comparing surveys taken before and after the death of George Floyd.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Incidents of police using unjustified force on subjects in minority communities continues to draw a considerable amount of attention from college aged students as police misconduct cases continue to be streamed on popular social media sites (Girgenti-Malone et al, 2017). The death of George Floyd further disclosed the increased state of demand for policy reform and racial justice that America is currently in. Previous research exploring police-community ties has highlighted demographics such as race and gender, prior experiences, and ecological factors as the most determinant factors in predicting attitudes of police (Intravia, Wolf, & Piquero 2017). Research supports that race, followed by gender are the most prominent factors in students determining whether use of force by police officers is justified, with white men more than women believing use of force used by police officers is justifiable (Girgenti-Malone et. al, 2017). Patterns reveal that members of minority racial groups, specifically African Americans, are more likely to encounter police officers in interpersonal encounter and when surveyed are typically less favorable of police and more probable to perceive police officers as threats (Williams & Nofziger, 2012). Further, views of trust and safety differ significantly between men and women. Research has indicated patterns of men experiencing a higher level of trust in police officers but tend to feel less safe in their presence whereas women have less trust in police but express a heightened level of safety when around police officers (Girgenti-Malone et. al, 2017). The role of police officers should encompass equal and fair protection of all, but recent deaths of unarmed African American males in the past decade have advanced the anti-policing sentiment. With extensive research available examining predictable variables of perceived perceptions of police, measures to reform strained relationships between cops and members of minority communities as well as intentional efforts to better personal encounters should be a main priority of police agencies.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How are undergraduate college students perceiving the police in light of anti-police sentiments? Have undergraduate perceptions of police officer accountability and behavior changed after the death of George Floyd?

METHODOLOGY

- This quantitative study addresses student perceptions of the role of police and their relationships with the community through an anonymous survey focusing on their beliefs about the legitimacy of police officers today. An anonymous platform allows students to honestly review their thoughts and voice their true opinions without bias (Helfers et. al, 2020). The survey also explores their exposure to media coverage of police related misconduct and examines the relationship between their media consumption and subsequent views of law enforcement officers.
- Most of the questions asked in my survey use likert scales to enhance honest feedback, providing easy and accessible answer choices reflecting student's agreement or disagreement with specific questions (Bissonete, 2007).
- Surveys gathered from before the death of George Floyd were compared to those surveyed after the death of George Floyd to see if the death of George Floyd has had an impact on student's perceptions of police behavior and accountability.

Sample Questions:

- On average, how many times per week do you see a story about police misconduct on social media?
- Police have enough authority to do their jobs.
- Police have adequate training to perform their jobs.
- How safe do you feel when police are around?

RESULTS

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	SD	Range
Confidence	17.045	3.980	4-24
Cronbach's Alpha=(0.89)			
Authority	0.878	0.328	0-1
Safety	4.387	0.982	1-5
Protest	0.141	0.349	0-1
Social Media	3.743	1.414	0-5
Male	0.538	0.500	0-1
White	0.705	0.457	0-1
Hispanic	0.288	0.455	0-1
Friend	0.526	0.500	0-1
Before: George Floyd	0.417	0.495	0-1

Table 2. OLS Regression

Independent Variables	Model 1			Model 2		
	Coeff	SE	β	Coeff	SE	β
Authority	2.068	0.822	0.169**	2.118	0.777	0.173**
Safety	1.648	0.306	0.406***	1.375	0.308	0.339***
Protest	-3.157	0.930	-0.258**	-2.875	0.883	-0.235***
Social Media	-0.005	0.189	-0.002	0.275	0.188	0.099
Control Variables						
Male				-0.929	0.514	-0.104
White				0.725	0.624	0.0814
Hispanic				-0.178	0.556	-0.020
Friend				1.704	0.528	0.214**
Before: Floyd				1.522	0.536	0.190**
n	150			150		
R ²	0.351			0.451		

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

FINDINGS

OLS regression analysis was used to explore the association among police authority, safety, exposure to police stories on social media, and policing philosophy have on their perceptions of their confidence in the police (see Table 2 for the OLS regression models). The first model only contained the independent variables, without the control variables, and the model was statistically significant, $F(4, 145) = , p<0.001$, and explained 35.1% of the variance in student perceptions of their confidence in the police. The results indicated that authority, safety, and social activism had a statistically significant association with student perceptions of their confidence in the police, while exposure to social media stories of the police was not statistically significant. The full model included the control variables. This model was also statistically significant $F(9, 140) = p<0.001$, and explained 45.1% of the variance in student perceptions of their confidence in the police. The same variables that were statistically significant in the first model, remained statistically significant in this model. However, the demographic control variables (gender, race, and ethnicity) were not statistically significant. But, having a friend or relative employed as a police officer and perceptions before the George Floyd incident were statistically significant and in the expected direction (positive). Students that perceive police officers have the requisite authority to do their jobs have more confidence in the police than those that do not ($\beta = 0.173$), along with those that feel safe around the police ($\beta = 0.339$), holding all other variables constant. While those that engage in social activism, via demonstrations against the police, have less confidence in the police ($\beta = 0.235$), holding all other variables constant. And those that have a friend or family member employed as a police officer also have more confidence in the police ($\beta = 0.214$), holding all other variables constant. Lastly, student perceptions of confidence in the police were higher prior to the George Floyd incident ($\beta = 0.190$), holding all other variables constant.

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Variable	Mean
Gender	
Male	42.07%
Female	57.93%
Race/Ethnicity	
White	52.69%
Hispanic	23.70%
Black	9.72%
Asian	2.78%
Other	11.11%