



Article

“The Only Thing New is the Cameras”: A Study of U.S. College Students’ Perceptions of Police Violence on Social Media

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Abstract

The present study explored the impact of publicized incidents of police violence on racially underrepresented college students in the U.S. Approximately 134 college students at various colleges and universities in the U.S. completed a questionnaire that examined their engagement with police brutality videos, reactions about police killings of unarmed Black men (and boys), their encounters with police, and perceptions toward the issue of police violence. The majority of participants were students of color, from the middle to high socioeconomic backgrounds and attended private and public institutions of higher education. The main findings included: (1) social media as a medium to learn about incidents of police violence; (2) students displayed symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder (i.e., anger, sadness, and fear) after viewing the videos; and (3) student’s race affected how they viewed police violence in social media. These findings reflect that witnessing publicized police killings of unarmed Black men (and boys) is traumatic for college students and contributes to anxiety and fear for future police encounters.

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college students, police shootings, Black men, mental health, social media

Introduction

Black Americans (Black men in particular) are killed by police officers at rates disproportionate to their percentage of the U.S. population. Despite only being 13% of the population (United States Census Bureau, n.d.), Black Americans in 2017 were 25% of those killed by police and 35% of them have been known to be unarmed (Police Violence Report, 2017). Furthermore, Black people are three times more likely to be killed by police than white people, and five times more likely to be unarmed when killed (Police Violence Report, 2017). The reasons for these killings are many, including the notion that race is a factor in these encounters (Alexander, 2012; Chaney & Robertson, 2013; Police Violence Report, 2017). Civil rights attorney and law professor Michelle Alexander traces pervasive stereotypes of Black people, especially Black men, as predatory, dangerous, and inherently criminal in her 2010 study on mass incarceration, *The New Jim Crow* (Alexander, 2012). These stereotypes contribute to racial profiling, discriminatory practices, and other civil rights violations between law enforcement and Black citizens (Alexander, 2012).

Scholars across social science and public health disciplines have examined the role of racial bias in law enforcement officers during encounters with Black citizens. Kupers (2017) posits that the media subliminally directs the public to fear Black men by over-representing them as criminals and associating them with illicit behaviors. Oshiro and Valera (2018) suggest that these negative media portrayals of Black men cause automatic and subconscious implicit biases that can lead to police violence towards Black men, if left unchecked (Correll et al., 2007; Fryer, 2016; Spencer et al., 2016). Social psychologist Jack Glaser (2014) further explains how the negative stereotypes that society holds about Black men interact with the schema and cognitive shortcuts of many Americans and may serve as a catalyst for police officers to profile and target Black men. Therefore, the same implicit stereotypes that cause police officers to draw their guns faster after seeing a Black face than a white face or shoot an unarmed Black person more often than an unarmed white person contributes to the high rate of lethal force used on Black men in America (Glaser, 2014; Lacoë & Stein, 2008). Thus, law enforcement officers who have a considerable amount of discretion are—wittingly or not—often swayed by racial bias and misuse their discretion in keeping an encounter civil and routine or using excessive and lethal force (Kupers, 2017; Lacoë & Stein, 2008).

There has been highly publicized police killings of Black men (and boys) that has shaped public perception of the police (Garcia & Sharif, 2015; Oshiro & Valera, 2018). Public confidence in the police is already perceived to be low, especially among communities of color, who are particularly mistrustful and fearful of the police (Tyler, 2005). When incidents of police violence are shared, they are circulated in several platforms (e.g. newspaper outlets, local and national news, social media). Social media, which plays a vital role in shaping public confidence, has swayed public perception of police in recent years with the increased publicity of police brutality (Garcia & Sharif, 2015; Oshiro & Valera, 2018).

Police Brutality Against Black Men

Police brutality against Black men has gained massive national and global attention in recent years following the murder of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed 16-year-old Black teenager. He was shot and killed in a neighborhood watch in Sanford, FL, in 2012. Because of the subsequent Black Lives Matter movement, which campaigned against systemic racism and injustice, more publicized videos of deadly encounters between police and unarmed Black men were uploaded and shared on social media (Freelon et al., 2016a, 2016b; Kupers, 2017; Chaney, & Robertson, 2015).

In 2014, Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old Black teenager, was fatally shot to death by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. His dead body was left on the street for hours. Furthermore, Tamir Rice was an unarmed 12-year-old Black teenager who was shot to death in Cleveland, OH in 2014, by two police officers who suspected he had a gun. Eric Garner was an unarmed 43-year old Black male who died in Staten Island, New York City, in 2014 after police officers put him on a chokehold during his arrest. Eric Garner repeated, "I can't breathe" 11 times before losing consciousness. This became a popular and powerful protest statement. Other publicized events include the shooting of Alton Sterling (an unarmed 37-year old Black man, who was shot dead by two police officers in Baton Rouge, LA in 2016). Philando Castile (an unarmed 32-year old Black man, was pulled over and killed by a police officer in Falcon Heights, MN in 2016). Walter Scott (a police officer killed an unarmed 50-year old Black man following a traffic stop for a non-functioning brake light in North Charleston, SC in 2015). Most recently, Ahmaud Arbery (fatally shot while he was jogging by armed white residents of a coastal South Georgia neighborhood in 2020). George Floyd, a 46 year old Black man, was killed by a white police officer who knelt in the back of his neck for 8 minutes in Minneapolis, MN. Tony McDade was a Black transman who was shot and killed by a police officer

in Tallahassee, FL. After the mass publicity of deadly police killings, the victims are often demonized and portrayed as thugs and criminals to seemingly justify their deaths and shift the blame away from law enforcement (Oshiro & Valera, 2018; Smiley & Fakunle, 2016). This restarts the cycle of negative stereotyping Black males as criminals, which maintains implicit biases and public fear, which leaves Black men vulnerable to police violence (Dukes & Gaither, 2017).

The psychological and social consequence of witnessed killings. Witnessed killings have primarily focused on school shootings (Chung, 2012; Daniels et al., 2007; Elklit & Kurdahl, 2013; Wike & Fraser, 2009) and workplace violence in health care settings (Creamer, 1989; Koritsas et al., 2010; Morken et al., 2015). All of these empirical studies to date point to the psychological consequences such as experiencing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after witnessing a killing, murder, or violence (Aymer, 2016; Elklit & Kurdahl, 2013; Jenifer, 2010). Furthermore, PTSD symptoms may be most common among Black people who identify with the victims and perceive these deadly encounters as racist and discriminatory (Aymer, 2016). This stems from a history of violence and destruction toward the Black body in the U.S. and the public display thereof (Aymer, 2016).

Brunson (2007) interviewed 40 Black men from disadvantaged urban communities about their experience with police officers. Their responses suggested that they did not trust the police and perceived them as racist. Participants not only drew from their own experiences but from public events that they were exposed to in their communities, especially in areas where aggressive policing was widely used. Brunson (2007) found that the participants perceived mistreatment from the police as racist and intentional, which resulted in an extreme sense of betrayal, fear, and distrust toward police.

In another study, Stagers-Hakim's (2016) pilot study explored how awareness of national police killings impacted the mental health of Black teenagers between 14 and 18 years old. There were 16 Black teenagers divided into three focus groups that encouraged conversation between them about police violence. Stagers-Hakim (2016) found that all participants were aware of recent police killings through family, friends, school, or television. They were also aware of the influence of social perceptions and stereotypes. These adolescences felt connected to the events and identified with the age and race of the victim. They expressed a great deal of fear, which was indicative of a traumatic reaction. The traumatic reactions and PTSD symptoms noted in these studies were related to some form of knowledge and exposure toward police violence. Because of racial profiling and the possibility of a police encounter in college campuses among students of color,

emerging adults of color may experience PTSD symptoms mirroring the experience of the larger population of Black people (Breslau & Anthony, 2007; Lynn-Whaley & Sugarman, 2017; Vrana & Lauterbach, 1994). However, to our knowledge, no study to date have been conducted on this phenomenon and its psychological and social consequences of witnessing killings through social media in emerging adults of color (Arnett, 1997).

Theoretical Framework

The current study uses critical race theory as a lens to analyze how the publicity of police violence toward Black men impact college students of color. *Critical Race Theory* was developed by Dr. Derrick Bell in the 1980s who examined how systemic racism shapes our society (Bell, 1987). Critical race theory contends that the social construct of race still matters and examines how law and policies maintain the notion of white supremacy and white privilege, which in turn perpetuates oppression and marginalization of people of color (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Although the literature on mass shootings and witnessed killings are sparse, even less is known about the psychological and social consequences of viewing extremely charged publicity of killings of Black men on emerging adults, especially racially underrepresented students enrolled in college or a university. Little is known about the collective trauma that young adults experience after watching these videos and the psychological consequences that follow. Many perceive colleges to be physically and/or socially secluded and presume students live in a “bubble.” Therefore, it remains unknown whether students of color approve or disprove of the publicity of these videos, how they feel and respond to these videos, for how long after viewing them, and what their reactions are after viewing them. This is the first study to document the preliminary impact of police violence incidents shown using social media on college students in the U.S.

Methods

This study focused on emerging adults of color, ages 18 to 24 who were undergraduate students studying in various institutions in the U.S. The students completed an anonymous 32-item electronic survey developed by the first author using Google Forms. The survey consisted of both open and closed-ended questions where they self-reported their engagement with viewing police brutality videos that were uploaded and shared by other social media users; how they felt about its publicity, their attitudes and

encounters with police; and perceptions toward the issue of police violence in the U.S

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling approaches (Padgett, 2008) on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, where profiles focus on college students or had followers that were college students who were sent a message to the survey link. Participants were also encouraged to share the survey with other students on their respective campuses. The eligibility criteria for participating in the study were: (1) enrolled as a full-time college student in the U.S.; (2) between 18 and 24 years old; and (3) provide informed consent electronically. Participants did not receive compensation for completing the survey.

Materials and Procedures

The survey started with a description of the study and informed consent to participate. Participants then provided demographic information including: (1) gender (i.e., male, female, transgender), race, or ethnicity (i.e., Black/African-American, Latinx, White, Native-American/American Indian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Asian, Other), age (between 18 and 24), family's socioeconomic status (i.e., high, middle, low), class standing (i.e., freshman, sophomore, junior, senior), type of university enrolled (i.e., private, public, historically black college/university, church-affiliated), and an open-ended question for their hometown. We used pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants who responded to the open-ended questions.

Viewing police brutality. Four questions were asked about (1) *"How do you typically find out about incidents of police violence?"* (Response: social media; TV; newspaper; radio; family/friends; other __); (2) *"How often have you watched videos of police violence in the media?"* (Responses: All of the time; most of the time; sometimes; rarely; never); (3) *"Do you watch them from beginning to end?"* (Response: yes; no; sometimes); and (4) *"What is your initial reaction to these videos?"* (Response: Select all that apply. Anger/Frustration; fear; sadness/grief; no reaction; other __ in the space provided, please further explain how these videos make you feel).

Personal experiences and encounters with the police. Participants were asked to reflect on their own personal experiences and encounters with the police: (1) *"Have you ever been stopped by the police?"* (Response: yes, no); (2) *"Where did the encounter take place?"* (Response: on campus; off-campus; hometown; other); (3) *"Rank how calm or anxious did you feel during the encounter?"* (Response 0=calm to 5=anxious); (4) *"Have you ever received a talk from a parent/guardian on how to respond if the police were*

to stop you?" (Response: yes, no); and (5) "Has police misconduct or brutality been identified as a problem in your hometown?" (Response: yes; no).

Feelings toward police. Participants were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with four statements about how they personally feel about police and police violence: (1) "I trust law enforcement officers in general." (2) "I feel safe in encounters with law enforcement officers." (3) "I am afraid of law enforcement officers." (4) "I fear I may be a victim of police brutality." Participants were then asked to indicate how much they thought the race played a role in these incidents using two items: "Do you think race is a factor in police violence?" (Response: yes, no), and "in the United States, how would you define police violence?" (Responses: a race issue, focuses on a racist act or discrimination based on race; a civil rights issue defined as a human rights violation; both; neither). To conclude, open-ended space was provided for participants to give any additional thoughts about these questions.

Analytical plan. Responses were analyzed using SPSS. We explored the study variables using descriptive statistics. Mean and standard deviations were examined.

Results

Participant Demographics

Table 1 describes the demographic characteristics of the study participants. The majority of participants were Black and Latina females attending private universities from the Northeast region of the U.S. A total of 134 undergraduate college students between 18 and 24 years old participated in the study (74% female, 26% male). Of these 134 participants, 61% self-identified as Black, 17% Latinx, 14% White, 5% other, 2% Asian, and 1% Native American/American Indian. The mean age was 21, SD=1.019. Participants did not specify majors of study.

Viewing Police Brutality

Participants noted that they observed several acts of police violence on various social media platforms. Approximately 85% of college students reported that they typically found out about incidents of police violence from social media and only 8% from television. A total of 91% of the respondents indicated that they watched these videos when they were shown on social media, 71% of the participants reported that they sometimes viewed the video from beginning to end, and 34.6% reported watching these videos most of the time.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants.

Variable	Number (n)	Percent (%)	M (SD)
Age (years)			21.12 (1.02)
18	3	2.3	
19	4	3.0	
20	19	14.4	
21	65	49.2	
22	31	23.5	
23	9	6.8	
24	1	0.8	
Gender			
Female	99	73.9	
Male	35	26.1	
Race/ethnicity			
Black/African-American	81	60.9	
Latino or Hispanic	22	16.5	
White	19	14.3	
Native-American/American Indian	1	0.8	
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0	0	
Asian	4	3.0	
Other	6	4.5	
Class standing			
Freshman	6	4.5	
Sophomore	9	6.7	
Junior	28	20.9	
Senior	91	67.9	
Institution attended			
Private	90	67.2	
Public	49	29.9	
Historically Black College/ University (HBCU)	3	2.2	
Church affiliated	1	0.7	
SES			
High	5	3.7	
Middle	86	64.2	
Low	43	32.1	

Feelings toward watching police violence in social media

Participants reported feelings of anger and frustration (77%), sadness/grief (68%), and fear (43%) after watching these videos, and 81% of participants

agreed that the videos were hard to watch. These trends suggest that the publicity of police violence may have a traumatic effect on college students. Furthermore, the majority (78%) of the participants believed the publicity was necessary, though some disagreed that the media does more harm than good by publicizing them.

Participants used open-ended spaces to explain their feelings of anger, frustration, sadness/grief, and fear. Kimberly, who is a rising junior in a large public university, responded, *"I just get so angry that I can't continue watching it. I skip a lot of these videos when I see them for this reason."* Shauna, who is a senior in a private university, says, *"They [police brutality videos] make me feel unprotected and paranoid about what's to come next. I fear that I might be next."* Keisha and Stacy shared physiological responses, *"My heart starts to race, and I can feel my face flush. I'm angry, I'm sad, and I want it all to stop. I'm tired of the violence."* Maria, who will be graduating from a public university, said, *"I almost can't believe that it's actually happening. I can't take my eyes off of the video, often in shock and disbelief. Once I process that it is really the emotions flood over me, sadness, anger, hopelessness."*

Michael, a senior at a private college, noted that *"I often notice that I put off watching the video until I see it everywhere and can't avoid it. I usually think 'another one?' and am in disbelief that it keeps happening."* Cynthia also a senior enrolled in a private university, admits, *"These videos are very scary. It makes me wonder if I'm living in a bubble because I haven't necessarily seen this up close and personally. So, to know that this happens in the world, targeted [towards] people like me makes me angry and scared."*

Reporting of Personal Encounters With Police

Interestingly, 75% ($n=101$) of the sample reported being stopped by the police, and while participants were not asked to provide details, the majority of them felt anxious during the encounter. Participants indicated that they were stopped by the police at their hometown (68%) or off-campus (24%). Of those who were stopped, 81% were Black or Latinx, and 64% of those stopped rated high levels of anxiety during the encounter. Participants were asked if they believed race or ethnicity was a factor in police brutality, and all participants agreed that race or ethnicity was a factor in police violence, and 79% believed police violence was both a race and civil rights issue. When asked how respondents felt about the mass publication of police violence, Tyesha who is a rising junior and enrolled in Historically Black College/University (HBCU) responded,

“This is nothing new of course, even before Black Lives Matter, Ferguson, the L.A. Riots, this has been an issue, the only new thing at play is the technology to not only capture what REALLY happened (instead of just believing the police report), and it can be shared and spread on a massive scale.”

Similar convictions came up across responses, where participants expressed similar sentiments—fear, concern, anger, and distrust of police. Sean who is a freshman attending a public university responded,

“It’s honestly traumatizing, and I oftentimes can’t get the images out of my head. Till this day I still remember how Eric Garner lay lifeless on the ground and the stillness of Philando Castile’s body haunts me. But, at the same time I’ve also become desensitized where I’ll see a video and just go “oh it’s another Black guy shot by an officer.”

Carmen, who is a senior at a private college, commented, *“I think to myself this could have been me. I fear for my father and my brothers back home.”* Despite being in college, this student was fearful they could fall victim to police violence as well as their loved ones back in their hometown. Kristin another senior at a private university said,

“These videos are almost always police actions against people of color, and I am sickened and embarrassed to be an American with this persisting injustice going on. On some level I do feel like the constant media coverage of police violence against minorities is making the public numb to it, and making it seem like a normal thing, but I also strongly believe that it needs the public’s attention so ultimately it is important that they are shown. It also adds to my already high level of distrust for the police and our criminal justice system. I am mostly angry not only that it’s happening but that I feel powerless to change it.”

Discussion

The results reflect on how social media has normalized police killings of Black men and follows a critical race theory that suggests that the role of race in the U.S. must be considered when examining the potentially harmful interactions between Black men and the police (Bell, 1987). Previous studies have explored the impact of homicides at the workplace (Koritsas et al., 2010; Morken et al., 2015) and school shootings (Chung, 2012; Daniels et al., 2007; Elklit & Kurdahl, 2013; Wike & Fraser, 2009). This particular study uniquely focuses on how college students are affected by watching Black men (and boys) being killed at the hands of police officers on social media.

College students are also presumed to have access to the advantages and privileges that others may not. Some of the advantages and privileges include access to social capital such as employment opportunities, resources, a sense of physical safety that may not have existed before, networking opportunities, financial, and education advancement, among others (González et al., 2003). However, this study shows that college students of color are not immune from fearing the police, and their reactions mirror the general population of Black people.

The majority of the sample were Black/African American (61%) and Latinx sample (16.5%). Within the sample, the majority of them reported being stopped by the police and experiencing a high level of anxiety during these encounters. Approximately 65% of the participants reported that police violence is an issue in their hometown and that family members have coached them on how to handle police encounters (63%). This shows a clear relationship between race and being stopped by the police (Alexander, 2012), and these trends are consistent even among college students. Even students who did not have direct encounters with the police were still fearful for their safety because they identified with the victims. None of the female participants mentioned Sandra Bland, a Black female who was mistreated by a police officer during a random traffic stop. She was arrested and allegedly committed suicide in jail. Her experience received national attention, and videos of the traffic stopped were circulated in social media. However, despite the focus on Black men and boys being killed by police officers, it is important to note that Black women have also been killed by police officers. These women are: Pamela Turner, Breonna Taylor, Korryn Gaines, Atatiana Jefferson and Shantel Davis, among others.

Implications for Higher Education

Institutions of higher education can no longer ignore these extreme events that affect many racial and ethnic minorities, especially students of color and their well-being (Carter, 2007; Green, 2016). Colleges and universities need to create proactive solutions by investing in diversity and inclusion practices that build the capacity for equity and fairness. Furthermore, higher education should work toward promoting student and faculty diversity. This requires universities and colleges to have regular open discussions for Black students to discuss their collective trauma and incidents of police violence. Given the complexity of these issues, Black scholars and university counselors should lead these conversations rather than college administrators.

By investing in diversity and inclusion goals, we can begin to develop safe spaces and guidance for discussing emotionally charged issues that are shared

on social media and ought to be discussed in the classroom, especially since students are being affected by them directly. It is crucial to understand and acknowledge these world events so that students can begin to collectively communicate their fears, emotions, and traumas that may ultimately impact their academic experience (Bloom, 1995). Including these discussions on police violence and integrating social media in an educational context is important to not only to enhancing student learning, but also promoting the overall well-being of Black students who are affected and for instructors to respond or prevent crisis that may arise beyond the classroom.

Directions for Future Research

Future studies should examine the reliability and validity of the measures used in this study with a larger sample size of college students of color. As we work toward a better understanding of the role of social media, future research should assess the validity of these social media posts and determine the magnitude of change in public perception among college students. This work can also be extended to graduate students, medical and health science students, as well as those who are in law school, and non-traditional students.

While policing of Black people is concentrated mainly in urban communities where Black men are the presumed targets of suspicious activity (Brunson, 2007; Weitzer & Tuch, 2004), female participants and the majority of the respondents noted that the police had stopped them as well. It is critically important to explore this growing phenomenon and understand police encounters with Black women in addition to Black men, and the implications of these encounters.

Limitations of the Current Study

The limitations include a small sample size ($n = 134$) and the focus on emerging adults of color age 18 to 24. Additional limitations included participants being mostly Black and Latina females, primarily from middle-class backgrounds and seniors. As such, this is not enough to generalize to the larger population of undergraduate college students in the U.S.

Another limitation was that certain demographic questions such as parental income, student's average income, or marital status were not asked, which could have provided a more in-depth description of their characteristics. Further, the cross-sectional survey was self-composed, and although questions were carefully tailored, the researchers did not determine the reliability and validity of the items. Despite these limitations, to our knowledge, this is the first study to explore college students' perceived attitudes and feelings

regarding police violence toward unarmed Black men (and boys). College students in this sample noted feelings of trauma from witnessing publicized police violence in social media.

Conclusion

Preventive interventions and reform to stop the killing of Black men, women and children at the hands of law enforcement and white men is much needed. The present study is an example of the urgent need to understand the perpetuation of violence on unarmed Black men and how it affects the larger community. It also exemplifies social media as a tool for eliciting a community response to act such as what we have seen in Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd. If the video footage of these murders were not posted and shared on social media, public pressure calling for the arrest of the shooters would not have happened. Nonetheless, the killings of unarmed Black people shared on social media are physically and psychologically traumatic for emerging adults. Ultimately, these killings must stop (Johnson et al., 2014).

Authors' Note

Felicia Campbell is now affiliated with Yale School of Medicine, New Haven, Connecticut, USA.

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Author Biographies

Felicia Campbell, LMSW, is a licensed social worker and lecturer at the Yale Child Study Center at the Yale University School of Medicine. Ms. Campbell received her Masters in Social Work with a certificate in Mental Health from the University of Pittsburgh in April 2019 and her Bachelors in Forensic Science and Psychology from Syracuse University in 2017. Ms. Campbell has a diverse background doing trauma work with vulnerable children, adolescents and families to support their positive growth/development and empowerment in a variety of different settings and locations including Syracuse, Pittsburgh, New York City, London and Connecticut. She has worked with children and youth with complex PTSD, behavioral and mental health challenges, developmental disabilities, and concerns for child abuse in legal settings, schools, and mental health clinics. Ms. Campbell has also conducted clinical research on racial trauma in criminal justice, health care and education.

Pamela Valera is a first-generation college graduate who is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Urban-Global Public Health and serves as the Director of Doctoral Studies at the School of Public Health, Rutgers University, the State University of New Jersey. She received a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Psychology from the University of San Francisco, an MSW from the University of Michigan, and a PhD., in Social Work from the University of South Carolina. In addition to her academic background, Dr. Valera has completed a three-year NIMH T32 postdoctoral research fellowship in HIV Prevention and Human Sexuality at the Columbia University/New York Psychiatric Institute, as well as clinical training in cancer health from the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, and also an NHLBI R25 Program to Increase Diversity

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