

# Racial Composition of Neighborhood and Perceptions of Police

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## ABSTRACT

Different people have varying interactions with the police depending on race, neighborhood, and socioeconomic status. While race and neighborhood have individually been researched, the relationship between race, neighborhood and perceptions of police based on these variables remains a gap in the literature. Our study draws on an original survey and focuses on Black and White American respondents and the racial composition (RC) of each individual's environment. We examine how neighborhood context can affect perceptions of an experience with police and law enforcement in general. We formulate two hypotheses to explain the relationship between diverse RC of neighborhood and perceptions of police. Hypothesis 1 predicts that African-Americans, regardless of neighborhood racial composition, will express mostly negative opinions of police. Hypothesis 2 predicts that as composition of a neighborhood becomes more black, a White American will be increasingly likely to have negative perceptions of police. We measure variation in RC of neighborhoods and variation in perceptions of police related to effectiveness, trustworthiness, and incidents of personal contact to find the relationship between variables. We ultimately find neighborhood context has different effects on perception of police for Black and White Americans. We find Black Americans' perception of police is not affected by neighborhood context, while White Americans experience increasingly negative perceptions of police as neighborhood diversity increases. Some implications of our findings include the differing impact of neighborhood on Black and White Americans, the effect of linked fate, and the unintended consequences of segregated neighborhoods. Our findings also leave room for more political psychology research to be done.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the defining characteristics of democratic life is a trust in public institutions and law enforcement. In the wake of mass incarceration however, expanding police powers have resulted in aggressive surveillance of African-American communities, and have accentuated Black Americans' already frayed trust in policing. Political science research on mass incarceration has focused mainly on differences between primary and proximal contact in determining attitudes towards the police (Walker 2014; Burch 2013). Our contribution to this conversation is by analyzing both White and Black Americans' perceptions of police with neighborhood diversity as the main independent variable.

## METHODS AND MATERIALS

### Data sources:

- *Race and the Carceral State Survey* fielded on *Survey Sampling International*.
- American Community Survey 5-Year Data (2012-2016)

### Analysis:

- **Dependent Variables:** General perception of police: Police Effectiveness (Figure 1)  
 Police Trustworthiness (Figure 2)  
 Police Perception of Personal Contact (Figure 3)
- **Independent Variables**

Neighborhood racial diversity (in terms of the percent of African-Americans in the total population, Figure 4)

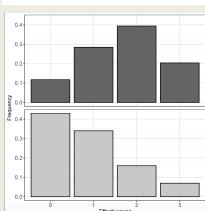


Figure 1: Distribution of Perceptions of Effectiveness

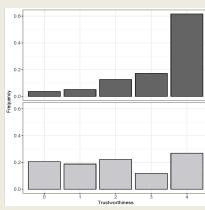


Figure 2: Distribution of Perceptions of Trustworthiness

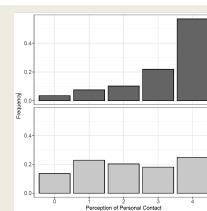


Figure 3: Distribution of Perceptions of Personal Contact

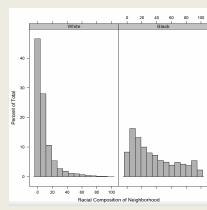


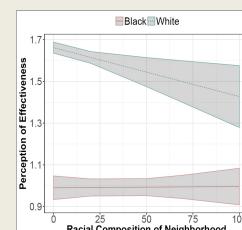
Figure 4: Distribution of Neighborhood Racial Composition

## ANALYSIS

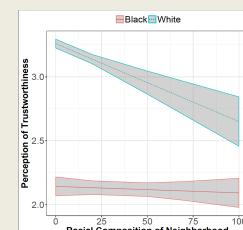
To compare the relationship between racial composition (RC) of neighborhood and each sub-variable measuring perception of police, we create regression models with an interaction on race. Model 1, 2, and 3 examine how Police Effectiveness, Trustworthiness, and Perception of Personal Contact are related to RC of neighborhood for Black and White respondents (controls: income, education, number of police stops, political ideology).

- Model 1 shows that White respondents have a significantly more positive view of police effectiveness, with a higher intercept value. As racial diversity increases, the slope of White respondents' attitudes takes on a negative value, while the slope of Black respondents' attitudes holds relatively steady at 0.
- Model 2 shows that White respondents have a more positive view of police trustworthiness in all white neighborhoods (y-intercept). As racial diversity increases, the slope of White respondents' attitudes takes on a negative value, while the slope of Black respondents' attitudes holds relatively steady with only a very small negative value.
- Model 3 shows that White respondents have more positive perceptions of their experiences with police, with a higher intercept. As racial diversity increases, the slope of White respondents' attitudes takes on a negative value, while the slope of Black respondents' attitudes holds relatively steady at a value of 0.

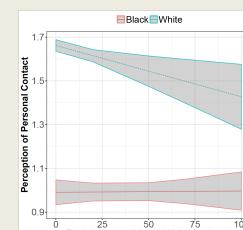
Perceptions of effectiveness, trustworthiness, and personal contact with the police become increasingly negative as White respondents move into more diverse neighborhoods, but remain negative across Black respondents.



Model 1: Interaction of Race and Neighborhood Diversity to Predict Perceptions of Effectiveness



Model 2: Interaction of Race and Neighborhood Diversity to Predict Perceptions of Trustworthiness



Model 3: Interaction of Race and Neighborhood Diversity to Predict Perceptions of Personal Contact

	1: Effectiveness	2: Trustworthiness	3: Perception of Contact
(Intercept)	1.26 (0.03)*	3.15 (0.04)*	3.72 (0.07)*
RC of Zip	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.01 (0.00)	-0.01 (0.00)
Race:Black	-0.67 (0.03)*	-1.12 (0.04)*	-0.87 (0.06)*
Education	0.00 (0.01)	-0.04 (0.01)*	-0.05 (0.01)*
Income	0.05 (0.01)*	0.05 (0.01)*	0.07 (0.01)*
# Police Stops	-0.19 (0.01)*	-0.34 (0.02)*	-0.72 (0.03)*
Political Ideology	0.18 (0.01)*	0.13 (0.01)*	0.15 (0.02)*
RC*Black	0.00 (0.00)*	0.01 (0.00)*	0.01 (0.00)*
R <sup>2</sup>	0.19	0.23	0.26
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.19	0.23	0.26
Num. obs.	9513	9621	3862
RMSE	0.89	1.17	1.11

\*p < .05

## DISCUSSION

Neighborhood context matters in determining White Americans' attitudes toward the police; White Americans demonstrate a willingness to be swayed by the diversity of their neighborhood. Racial diversity of neighborhood alone is insufficient in explaining perceptions of police across our African-American sample. Little variation in police attitudes among Black Americans might be explained by the presence of an in-group political attitude towards police conduct; Black Americans in homogenous White communities could still draw upon their larger African-American identity to reject.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our findings hold practical implications for policy-makers; they imply that the neighborhoods we create impact the way in which the American political system is perceived. We also acknowledge some caveats to our findings:

- The sample is limited to African-Americans and White Americans.
- Police interactions are treated as a constant variable; we assume police operating in each neighborhood operate in the same way.
- Changing demographics will influence our results in the future. Most African Americans, regardless of class, are one generation away from poor Black neighborhoods resulting in different social networks. Our results might change as more Black Americans move to upper/ middle-class areas

## REFERENCES

Burch, Traci R. 2013. "Effects Of Imprisonment and Community Supervision on Neighborhood Political Participation in North Carolina." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 651, no. 1, pp. 184–201.

Walker, Hannah L. 2014. "Extending the Effects of the Carceral State." *Political Research Quarterly* 67(4): 809–22.