

Cities with high racial economic inequality and widespread poverty increase police force size

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Commentary on the trial of George Zimmerman for the killing of Trayvon Martin highlighted some Americans' perception of the influence of race and class on law enforcement in the United States. University of Missouri sociologists recently documented the influence of racial division and economic inequality on the size of a city's police force. Understanding the dynamic relationship among race, economic inequality and the criminal justice system can help America's leaders design policies that increase individuals' security while ensuring justice for all. Crime reporters can use this study's results to give nuance to their reporting, according to the MU researchers.

"Municipal governments can use our research to inform policies that reduce inequalities in cities, which may subsequently reduce the expense of increasing the size of their police forces," said co-lead author Guðmundur Oddsson, PhD candidate in sociology in MU's College of Arts and Science. "Journalists can learn from our study that crime reporting needs to include the social and economic context of [criminal behavior](#) and social control and thereby tell more complex stories, as opposed to episodic tales of brutality and greed."

Oddsson and his colleagues examined data from 64 American cities with populations of more than 250,000. They found evidence that cities tend to increase the size of their police force when high levels of poverty exist along with greater economic inequality between racial groups.

When levels of racial and [economic inequality](#) are low or when levels of poverty are low, cities do not increase their [police forces](#) as much as metropolitan areas where citizens perceive greater threats resulting from a combination of large inequalities and severe poverty.

"People tend to blame either race or poverty for crime and the subsequent growth of the police force, but our study suggests that race and class inequality intertwine to influence police force size," said study co-lead author Andrew Fisher, sociology doctoral student in MU's College of Arts and Science. "Importantly, our study grants support to the theory that the police mainly protect the interests of dominant groups, that is, whites and the affluent. Because it brews discontent, a combination of economic disparities between [racial groups](#) and widespread poverty is likely to be understood as a serious threat to dominant groups and that enhances the pressure on city governments to increase police force strength."

More information: *The International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* published Fisher and Oddsson's study, "Policing class and race in urban America."

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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