

# Depictions of race on TV news can influence perception of police

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Research shows that depictions of race on television news programs can strongly influence support for police among non-white viewers. The study was conducted by researchers at North Carolina State University, the University of Utah, Indiana University and the University of California, Los Angeles.

"Black men and women - particularly [black](#) men - are over-represented as criminals or criminal suspects on TV news, and under-represented as law enforcement or authority figures, and as victims of crime," says Dr. Ryan Hurley, an assistant professor of communication at NC State and lead author of a paper on the new research. "We wanted to see what affect these representations have on audiences of different races."

The researchers edited together three identical local newscasts that contained seven stories involving criminal suspects. In one version, images were photoshopped so that six of the suspects were white and one was black. In a second version, six of the suspects were black and one was white. In a third version, the race of the suspect was not specified. A fourth local newscast contained no crime stories.

The researchers enrolled 180 undergraduates into the study, dividing them into four equal groups. Each group viewed one of the four newscasts and was then asked a series of questions about issues related to crime and law enforcement.

The most prominent finding involved viewer support for [police](#). In the

study, [participants](#) were asked to rank their support for police on a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 being the most supportive.

White participants had approximately the same level of support for police regardless of which newscast they saw, reporting support levels of just under 3 on the 7-point scale.

However, non-white [study participants](#) showed significant variability. Non-white study participants who saw the newscast with six white criminal suspects had higher level of support for police than white participants - reporting a 4 on the 7-point scale. But non-white participants who saw the newscast with six black criminal suspects had a much lower opinion of police - reporting less than 2.5 on the 7-point scale.

"This is a small study, but it highlights an area of research that has not been well explored," Hurley says. "This tells us that viewer race is important. But it doesn't tell us what other variables may come into play, such as age. And while it tells us that representations on TV news can influence public perceptions of [law enforcement](#), it doesn't tell us about other issues related to race and public policy. We still have a lot to learn."

The paper, "Viewer Ethnicity Matters: Black Crime in TV News and Its Impact on Decisions Regarding Public Policy," is published online in the *Journal of Social Issues*.

**More information:** [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.../josi.12102/abstract](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/josi.12102/abstract)

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