

Data can help rebuild police-community relationships, expert says

July 19 2016, by Clifton B. Parker

Knowledge is the first step toward bringing police agencies and communities closer together, a Stanford scholar says.

With [police](#) shootings and [law enforcement officers](#) themselves under attack in recent weeks, Stanford psychologist Jennifer Eberhardt said society needs to fully consider the data on how to de-escalate potentially dangerous interactions between police and citizens, especially in African American communities.

Understanding the data will help to lessen police-community tensions and enhance police and citizen safety at the same time, said Eberhardt in an interview. Her research team recently issued an in-depth [analysis](#) of police and community issues in the city of Oakland, Calif.

Eberhardt said it is inaccurate to simply attribute recent police shootings to racism and bias. Racial disparities, however, indicate a different type of treatment, sometimes even unintentional or unknowing, but not necessarily one motivated by baser and intentional attitudes like bias or racism.

"When we're trying to understand what's going wrong, I feel like people are too quick to look at racial disparity and then try to make it into racial bias," she said.

Bias could play a role, Eberhardt explained, but solely attributing police-community troubles to this is a "myopic view" of the context in which

[law enforcement](#) operates. Other factors such as policies, departmental culture and environments can produce disparities in how police respond to people.

"We've been trying to look at these actions in the aggregate, in many thousands of interactions," Eberhardt said. "We want to take a broader approach and look at all the factors that contribute to this. Bias may be one of them, but there are others."

'Data for change'

On June 15, Eberhardt and her colleagues published a report, "Data for Change," that examined thousands of traffic and pedestrian stops involving Oakland police from 2013 to 2014.

That document also offered 50 recommendations for reforming police culture. Suggestions include the need for police agencies to use better data to understand their interactions with citizens, provide training and education to officers, and become better informed about community concerns.

Eberhardt's team was assisting Oakland in complying with the federal order to collect and analyze stop data by race. Co-investigators involved in the study were Stanford's Benoît Monin, a psychology professor at the Graduate School of Business; Rebecca C. Hetey, a postdoctoral psychology research associate; and Amrita Maitreyi, a psychology researcher.

Handcuffing disparities

In an interview, Monin said, "Looking only at individuals who were stopped, but did not receive an arrest or a citation, one in three African Americans was searched, compared to one in 10 whites. One in four

African Americans was handcuffed, versus one in 15 for whites."

In a further analysis of their original report, Monin noted that 8,096 African Americans were stopped without an ensuing citation or arrest, yet 2,190 of those still ended up in handcuffs (about 27 percent) and 2,874 were searched (35 percent). By contrast, of the 1,679 whites who were stopped without resulting citations or arrests, only 142 of them were handcuffed (about 8 percent) and 175 were searched (10 percent).

There were 15 times as many African Americans handcuffed without as much as a citation (2,190) as there were whites (142), the research showed.

Departmental policies – such as how to handle people on probation during searches – are a significant part of the problem, Monin said.

"This illustrates why officer bias cannot be inferred simply from observing racial disparities in the data. Well-meaning officers rigorously applying well-intentioned policies (for example, regarding who they can search and when to handcuff) can have hugely disparate impacts on different communities," he said.

Monin said that rather than just focusing on correcting bias or identifying problem officers – which require continuous vigilance and retraining – police departments should take advantage of data analysis to determine which policies can be changed in a way that helps avoid unintended [racial disparities](#).

'Real-world questions'

Monin is a faculty affiliate at Stanford SPARQ, which stands for "Social Psychological Answers to Real-world Questions." Eberhardt is the faculty director there. The Oakland police project is an example of how

SPARQ partners with government, businesses and nonprofits to craft solutions to pressing issues in communities.

The study analyzed traffic stop data from police body cameras that occurred between 2013 and 2014. The Stanford researchers also examined audio recordings and police reports or "narratives" on traffic stops. Police can legally stop people on the basis of traffic violations, probable cause, reasonable suspicion, or for being on probation or parole, among other reasons.

Oakland, located in the San Francisco Bay Area, has a population of 390,724; 34.5 percent is white, 28 percent is African American, and 25.4 percent is Latino, according to 2010 census data.

Oakland's police department has been under federal monitoring for more than a decade since the so-called Riders case involving police misconduct. Oakland officers started wearing body cameras in 2010 – one of the first departments in the United States to do so.

More information: The report is available online:
sparq.stanford.edu/opd-reports

Provided by Stanford University

Citation: Data can help rebuild police-community relationships, expert says (2016, July 19)
retrieved 26 April 2024 from
<https://phys.org/news/2016-07-rebuild-police-community-relationships-expert.html>

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