

Police shootings reflect structural racism

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The deaths of Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, Michael Brown, and other unarmed black victims at the hands of police sparked a national conversation about racism and policing, from the Black Lives Matter movement to kneeling NFL players. Critics of these protests have attributed police shootings to "bad apples" within police departments, or argued more black victims die at the hands of police because higher rates of violent crime in black communities lead to more interactions with police.

But a new study led by Boston University School of Public Health (BUSPH) researchers finds states with a greater degree of structural racism, particularly [residential segregation](#), have higher racial disparities in fatal [police](#) shootings of unarmed victims.

Published in the *Journal of the National Medical Association*, this is the first study to examine the relationship between structural racism and racial disparities in fatal police shootings at the state level. Even controlling for rates of arrest, the researchers found a strong association between the racial disparity in unarmed fatal police shootings and a range of structural racism indicators, with residential segregation showing the most pronounced association.

"The problem of police killings of unarmed black victims should not be viewed merely as a problem of flawed action on the part of individual police officers, but more as a consequence of the broader problem of structural racism," said senior author Michael Siegel, professor of community health sciences at BUSPH. "Unjustified homicide by police

should be added to the long list of the public health consequences of societal racism."

The study used combined data on fatal police shootings of victims not known to be armed from January 1, 2013, through June 30, 2017, obtained from the Mapping Police Violence Project database, the most reliable source of data on police shootings.

The investigators then created an index of structural racism at the state level, believed to be the first of its kind. The index includes measures of black-white residential segregation and disparities in economic status, employment status, educational attainment, and incarceration rates. The index was on a scale of 0 to 100, with higher numbers representing higher levels of residential segregation and greater gaps in the other indicators.

For every 10-point increase in the state racism index, the researchers saw a 24 percent increase in the ratio of police shootings of unarmed victims. Looking at segregation alone, the researchers found the most dramatic association: For every 10-point increase in the state racial segregation index, there was a 67 percent increase in the state's ratio of police shootings of unarmed black victims to unarmed white victims.

The association between levels of structural racism and the racial disparity in the [shooting](#) of unarmed victims by police held even after controlling for the rate of arrests of black individuals in a state, and for the overall rate of fatal police shootings of black victims. "This suggests that the higher rates of fatal police shootings of unarmed black victims are not merely a result of more interactions between police officers and black suspects," said co-author Anita Knopov, a pre-doctoral fellow at BUSPH. "Instead, our results indicate that in some states there is a systematically different response based on the race of the suspect."

The authors wrote that there has been scant public health empirical research to understand why black people are more likely to be killed by police than white people. However, they wrote, there are accessible and validated measures of structural racism in the [public health](#) and social science literature, such as redlining, sundown towns, and mass incarceration.

The authors wrote they were aware of only two previous efforts to develop measures of structural racism at the state level rather than the neighborhood or city level. However, they wrote that the recent NAACP travel advisory for the state of Missouri, where Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson, reflects the perception that laws, policies, and institutional practices can create cultures of structural racism at the state level.

"This research should change the conversation about the problem of police shootings," said Siegel. "Part of the resistance to openly discussing this issue is that many people feel offended by criticism of people who are risking their lives to protect all of us. Our study suggests that this problem is not simply about the actions of individuals, but about the actions of all of society. Hopefully, reframing this from an individual to a societal problem will pave the way for a meaningful discussion about institutional [racism](#)."

More information: Aldina Mesic et al. The Relationship Between Structural Racism and Black-White Disparities in Fatal Police Shootings at the State Level, *Journal of the National Medical Association* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jnma.2017.12.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jnma.2017.12.002)

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