

Use of police force still breaking down across racial and ethnic lines, says study

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UTSA criminology and criminal justice professors Michael R. Smith and Rob Tillyer working in collaboration with University of Cincinnati

Professor Robin Engel examined racial and ethnic disparities in the use of force by the Fairfax County Police Department (FCPD). One of the nation's largest county police departments, the FCPD serves Fairfax County, Va., a major metropolitan county near Washington, D.C.

The team presented the results of its 18-month study today to the Public Safety Committee of the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors. The team analyzed three years of data, including 1,360 cases of force used by FCPD officers against at least one civilian between January 1, 2016 and December 31, 2018.

In addition to investigating the influence of civilian race, ethnicity and other factors on force used by FCPD officers, the team also was charged with providing recommendations for reducing potential bias in officer decision-making and improving future use of force data collection.

"Last year highlighted the racial and social disparities that are a fact of life for many in the U.S. The protests following the killing of George Floyd, public health disparities highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and rising violent crime in many cities are examples of the larger social and economic challenges we face," said Smith. "As an urban serving university, UTSA is committed to research that can address the nation's pressing challenges."

Using benchmarks to compare the rate of force used against racial and ethnic subgroups to the expected risk of force across those groups, the researchers also used a series of multivariate regression models to assess factors associated with the totality and severity of force used against civilians in Fairfax County.

The researchers benchmarked force used against the major racial and ethnic groups in Fairfax County to the racial and ethnic composition of criminal suspects and arrestees in the county. Key findings of the study

included:

- Average force levels were slightly higher for Blacks (2.4 on a 4.0 scale) than for other [racial groups](#) while resistance levels were essentially equal across the racial and [ethnic groups](#).
- The rates of force used against white and Black civilians consistently exceeded the benchmarks while Hispanic civilians were underrepresented in force cases compared to the benchmarks. The benchmarking findings for Asian civilians were mixed with some showing overrepresentation and some not.
- Comparing rates of force used against minorities relative to whites utilizing these same benchmarks showed that in all but one case, the rate of force used against minorities was lower than the rate used against whites.
- At the same time, Black—and to a lesser degree, Hispanic—civilians experienced more severe force than whites, and those findings varied by district station.

The researchers concluded that force was used county-wide more often than expected against white and Black civilians based on the benchmark comparisons and generally less often than expected against Hispanic civilians. They also found that Black civilians were more likely to have force used against them in arrest situations compared to whites.

The researchers offered the FCPD many constructive suggestions on how to enhance its data collection practices, improve its use of force policies and provide evidence-based training to officers to help reduce future disparities in the use of [force](#).

"The Fairfax County Police Department is one of the leading law enforcement agencies in the country. We hope our findings provide the agency and the residents of Fairfax County with a roadmap for improvement," said Smith.

Provided by University of Texas at San Antonio

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