

Study: Police murder of George Floyd associated with short-term spike in firearm assaults on US police officers

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The police murder of George Floyd sparked nationwide protests in the summer of 2020 and revived claims that public outcry over such high-

profile police killings perpetuates a violent "war on cops." In a new study, researchers assessed if and how patterns of firearm assault on police officers in the United States were influenced by the police murder of Floyd.

The study found that Floyd's [murder](#) was associated with a three-week spike in [firearm](#) assaults on police, after which the trend in such assaults dropped to levels slightly above those predicted by pre-Floyd data. The researchers strongly caution, however, that this spike is not evidence of a "war" and argue that this rhetoric exacerbates current police-public tensions.

The study was conducted by researchers at the University of Texas (UT) at Austin, the University of Nebraska Omaha (UNO), and the University of Utah. It appears in *Criminology*.

"The police murder of George Floyd in May 2020 sparked what experts have described as the largest social movement in history," write the authors. "Floyd's murder also coincided with a once-in-a-century pandemic that sharply shifted the behavior of individuals and social institutions." This combination of changes, the authors suggest, presented significant challenges to assessing whether Floyd's murder by police had a significant effect on violence against police.

In their study, Sierra-Arévalo and his colleagues used data from the Gun Violence Archive (GVA), which captures fatal and non-fatal firearm assaults on police across the United States, from January 2014 through December 2020. They analyzed firearm [assault](#) data in the months prior to Floyd's murder (before and after the onset of COVID-19) to isolate the effect of the murder on firearm assaults of police. They asked: Did the police murder of Floyd lead to a change in the frequency of firearm assaults on police across the United States?

Floyd's murder was associated with an approximately three-week spike in firearm assaults on U.S. [police officers](#) that revealed a significant increase in retaliatory violence, the study found. That spike quickly subsided to levels only slightly above what would be expected in the absence of Floyd's murder. Overall, Floyd's murder led to approximately 37 additional firearm assaults on police between May 25, 2020, and December 31, 2020, the study found. Approximately 26 additional firearm assaults were estimated to have occurred in the three weeks immediately after Floyd's murder.

Among the study's limitations, the authors note that GVA data are limited in that they exclude less injurious but far more common simple assaults against police, which prevents generalizing these findings to all violence against police. In addition, the study could not discount the possibility that some of the spike in firearm assaults related to Floyd's murder were driven by changes in police behavior and their perceptions of the public. For example, indiscriminate and excessively violent police tactics were documented at Floyd protests nationwide, which could have increased the likelihood that officers were assaulted.

However, the authors stress that this increase must be interpreted in the proper context. "While our results show a significant, short-term increase in firearm assaults on police following George Floyd's murder, the shooting of a police officer remains a statistically rare event." In light of this, the authors argue that popular rhetoric about a "war on cops" is unsupported by available data.

In addition to being used to discredit police critics, impede police reform, and solidify police power, "war on cops" rhetoric may also be implicated in current recruitment and retention difficulties reported by departments across the United States. "By reducing departmental staffing levels, 'war on cops' rhetoric may be reducing police effectiveness and response time in ways that, ironically, decrease officer

safety," the authors note.

Instead of continuing to use this kind of language, the authors suggest a focus on strategies that can simultaneously improve community and officer safety.

"In light of our findings, rather than continue to amplify unsupported notions of a 'war on cops,' police executives and policymakers who want to reduce violence should implement strategies to reduce firearm violence through a mixture of enforcement and non-enforcement intervention," write the authors. "To do otherwise is to double down on [political rhetoric](#) instead of investing in evidence-based solutions that can enhance public and [police](#) safety."

More information: Michael Sierra-Arévalo et al, The "war on cops," retaliatory violence, and the murder of George Floyd*, *Criminology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/1745-9125.12334](https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9125.12334)

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