

Study: Police more likely than others to say they are blind to racial differences

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An interdisciplinary team found pronounced differences between police and laypersons' attitudes towards race. The team included, from left, Ripan Malhi, Carla Hunter, Patrick Vargas, Cris Hughes and Michael Schlosser. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

A new study reveals that police recruits and experienced officers are more likely than others to subscribe to colorblind racial beliefs—the notion that they - and people in general—see no differences among people from different racial groups and treat everyone the same.

The findings appear in the journal *Race and Social Problems*.

The U.S. police force is roughly 75 percent white and male, said University of Illinois anthropology professor Cris Hughes, who led the research with colleagues in anthropology, psychology, advertising and the U. of I. Police Training Institute.

"People who hold colorblind racial attitudes tend to think that racism is no longer a meaningful factor in people's lives and that everyone has equal access to jobs and other resources across all walks of life," Hughes said. "Another component of that is

denying that blatant racism still exists."

"Many people, including police, perceive that they should be colorblind, that that is something they should aspire to," said U. of I. psychology professor Carla Hunter, a co-author of the study. "Police recruits want to help people; they want to treat people fairly. They want to maintain what they see as a just world. They believe, perhaps, that if they don't see color, that means everyone is on a level playing field. The problem is that when you deny color, you also deny systemic biases."

For the study, the researchers recruited 93 experienced [police officers](#), 33 police recruits and 1,401 laypersons, who filled out an anonymous online survey that collected demographic information and asked them a series of questions about their attitudes towards race. The police personnel were from precincts in Florida and Illinois.

An analysis of the responses found that experienced police officers and recruits (officers on the job two years or less) were equally likely to endorse colorblind racial beliefs. The analysis also revealed that all police were much more likely than laypersons to endorse a colorblind racial ideology, strongly agreeing with statements such as "Talking about racial issues causes unnecessary tension," or "Racial problems in the U.S. are rare, isolated situations."

Previous studies suggest that people with strong colorblind racial beliefs are more likely than those who acknowledge that racism and [racial differences](#) exist to have problematic interactions with members of [racial minorities](#), Hunter said. A 2004 [study](#), for example, found that therapists who reported colorblind racial attitudes also had less empathy and were more likely to think that black, but not white, clients were responsible for the solutions to their problems. A 2011 [study](#) found that black students performed worse on cognitive tests

after interacting with white students who expressed colorblind racial beliefs, but not after interactions with white students expressing multicultural values.

Other research has associated colorblind racial attitudes in whites with fear of racial minorities and greater levels of racial and gender intolerance, the researchers said.

"A high level of colorblind racial attitudes tells me that police don't understand the racism that exists in society today," said study co-author Michael Schlosser, the director of the U. of I. Police Training Institute. "It also tells me that they are less likely to be aware of their own assumptions, biases and stereotypes involving race, which could affect their behavior and decision-making."

There is reason to hope that training can overcome biased police responses to members of minority groups, he said.

Schlosser points to a 2007 [study](#) that compared police with community members who were asked to decide whether to shoot or not shoot black and white "targets" paired with guns or other objects. On average, police officers were faster at detecting weapons and more careful when determining whether to shoot. Police and community members all demonstrated bias, however, in the speed with which they made the decision to shoot black targets, the study reports.

"The cops did better than lay people at not shooting inappropriately," Schlosser said. "I think that this shows that training can make a big difference."

Schlosser oversees training for more than 300 police departments across Illinois, and is working to develop scenario-based training that will specifically address police interactions with racial minorities.

"First of all, we want the police basically to try to be aware of their own social identities and racial beliefs. Everybody has them," Schlosser said. The program also will familiarize police officers with research related to police misconduct and train them in techniques to de-escalate potentially volatile interactions, he said.

Hughes said she is hopeful that new training approaches will begin to address the disconnect between [police racial attitudes](#) and the day-to-day experiences of many racial minorities.

"If you're saying that racism doesn't exist and that certain inequalities are not a result of racism or institutional biases, you are basically alienating people who are experiencing those inequalities," she said. "That's going to handicap you in your dealings with those groups."

More information: Cris E. Hughes et al, Police Endorse Color-Blind Racial Beliefs More Than Laypersons, *Race and Social Problems* (2016). [DOI: 10.1007/s12552-016-9170-0](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12552-016-9170-0)

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