

Racial, political identities influence how people view cause of deadly police encounters

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People's racial and political identities strongly shaped how they viewed the causes of several recent widely publicized police encounters that resulted in the deaths of African American men, according to a new study by two University of Kansas researchers.

The KU political science professors found that racial and political identities shape our understanding of these events; African Americans, liberals, and Democrats generally attribute the cause of fatal encounters between officers and black citizens to broader problems in policing. Others generally would view the encounters as a phenomena limited to the actions of a few actors.

"We often ignore the fact that if we don't have consensus about the cause of problems we can't possibly agree on what to do to solve observed problems," said Don Haider-Markel, professor and chair of the KU Department of Political Science.

Haider-Markel and Mark Joslyn, professor of [political science](#), co-authored the study published recently by the journal *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*. They examined data from two recent national surveys that asked respondents about use of [police](#) force, including widely covered deaths of unarmed black men in encounters, including Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri; Eric Garner in New York; Walter Scott in South Carolina; and, Freddie Gray in Baltimore.

All cases led to widespread national media coverage and some protests surrounding police treatment of African American men.

Regarding race, the researchers also found evidence that Hispanic respondents were more likely to view deaths in police encounters as a sign of a widespread problem, though it was less

consistent than among black respondents.

Based on the level of polarization observed in the findings, the researchers recommend that police departments focus more on community policing initiatives, especially in predominately Black and Hispanic communities.

"We know that for police to operate effectively in maintaining civil order they must have the confidence and trust of citizens," Joslyn said. "Without trust, citizens will not contact police or share information relevant to police investigators."

Community policing involves an approach that encourages officers to have regular, everyday contact with the communities they serve, especially outside of interactions solely surrounding crimes or police calls. This could involve meetings with neighborhood residents and community leaders or just daily proactive interactions.

Research on community policing is mixed, but it could help alleviate problems in two ways, the researchers said. First, it gets cops interacting with members of the community on a daily basis, in situations where no one is in trouble.

"This makes is less likely that citizens or police will overreact when a situation is more tense, such as when criminal behavior is alleged," Haider-Markel said. "Secondly, these interactions can build community trust so that citizens believe they can turn to the police when they need help and are more willing to provide information to the police when a criminal investigation occurs."

Among other details in the study, the researchers looked at how people's identities might cross-cut each other as well as how other factors could influence one's response to a question, especially

the perceived race of the interviewer.

Racial [identity](#) appeared to most powerful predictor of perceiving police force as a widespread problem, the researchers found, even trumping ideological identity. Among African Americans who described themselves as politically conservative, they were more likely to view fatal police encounters as a widespread problem instead of an isolated incident, relative to other conservatives.

"Many of us have multiple social identities and some situations bring those into conflict with one another. In the case of conservatives, the group identity narrative points to an isolated incidents attribution, while for black respondents the group identity narrative suggests the broader problems attribution. So when political and racial identities conflict, which will dominate for most people?" Haider-Markel said. "Our evidence suggests that racial identities will have the greatest influence."

They did find that if a respondent, based on the interviewer's voice, perceived the questioner to be African American, he or she was more likely to attribute broader societal problems as a cause of the death of the black men in the police encounter.

"Our argument is that recent events involving police use of violence have become racialized, in large part because the interactions involve white officers and Black citizens," Haider-Markel said. "This context provides cues to observers that activate race as an important element. Our analysis confirms this pattern and previous research has found very similar race-based interviewer effects."

More information: Donald P. Haider-Markel et al, Bad Apples? Attributions for Police Treatment of African Americans, *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* (2017). [DOI: 10.1111/asap.12146](https://doi.org/10.1111/asap.12146)

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