Categorically complex: A latent class analysis of public perceptions of police militarization

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The events in Ferguson, MO in 2014 renewed national attention to the issue of militarization of law enforcement. Despite scrutiny from policymakers and community stakeholders, little is known regarding the public's opinion on police militarization (PM), or the factors shaping these views. This problem is magnified because individuals may support or oppose PM for a variety of reasons, but the characteristics of these supporters and opposers is currently unknown. This study aims to examine the distinct types of individuals who support or oppose PM, and the normative, instrumental, and demographic factors that distinguish within- and between-groups of supporters and opposers of PM.
Methods: Using a national sample of 702 American adults, a series of Latent Class Analyses were conducted using data on normative and instrumental characteristics of individuals who support and oppose PM.
Results: Results indicate three unique sub-types of PM supporters and two unique sub-types of opposers, and each contain a distinct combination of normative and instrumental concerns and beliefs. Normative orientations distinguish between overall PM supporters and opposers. Within-group variations appear to be a function of additional characteristics.
Conclusions: These findings demonstrate the complexity of the public sentiment toward this controversial topic in contemporary American policing.

On August 9, 2014, an unarmed 18-year old African American man, Michael Brown Jr., was shot and killed by Darren Wilson, a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. Within hours of the shooting, protests began and quickly became unruly. Law enforcement, including the Ferguson and St. Louis County Police Departments, and the Missouri State Highway Patrol, responded with a highly-militarized show of force. This included the deployment of surplus military weapons, vehicles, and equipment against protesters (Kesling & Shallwani, 2014). As images of protesting citizens being confronted by police officers in tactical gear and armed with military-style weapons were broadcast on the evening news and shared on social media, the events of Ferguson renewed national attention to the issue of police militarization.[1] In the wake of these events, policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders across the country were critical of the use of surplus military weapons and equipment by civilian law enforcement agencies (American Civil Liberties Union, 2014; Grovum, 2015; NBC News, 2014; Turner & Fox,

2017). The President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing (2015), based on stakeholder testimony, went so far as to emphasize the potentially negative consequences of militarization for police-community relations (see also Delehanty, Mewhirter, Welch, & Wilks, 2017).

The problem, however, is that relatively little is known regarding how the public feels with respect to police militarization. Public opinion surveys on the topic have been few and far between, providing limited insight into perceptions of these practices in the wake of Ferguson (Lockwood, Doyle, & Comiskey, 2018; Moule, Fox, & Parry, 2018; Page, 2014). Prior research has used three approaches to examine general perceptions of police, as well as perceptions of militarization (Brown & Reed Benedict, 2002; Decker, 1981; Leiber, Nalla, & Farnsworth, 1998; Tankebe, 2013; Tyler, 2006). These approaches emphasize demographic factors (e.g., age, race), normative (e.g., legitimacy, legal cynicism; Tapp, 1976, 1991; Trinkner & Cohn, 2014, Tyler, 2006), and instrumental (e.g., fear of crime; Bowers & Robinson,

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[1] Earlier incidents, such as the 1985 MOVE bombing in Philadelphia, were also indicative of some degree of militarization (see Assefa & Wahrhaftig, 1988). These earlier events did not occur in the same type of media environment as Ferguson (Balko, 2014; Parry et al., 2017), and did not spur the same degree of social unrest across cities as seen in the aftermath of Ferguson.

2012) factors as influential for perceptions of police and police practices. We extend these approaches to assess public support and opposition to militarization. Given the attention militarization has received from policymakers and stakeholders over the past few years, and suggestions from the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing (2015) that militarization could ultimately undermine public support for law enforcement, understanding how the public feels regarding militarization, and why the public feels the way it does, is an important topic for criminologists to address.

Given the dearth of research in the area, the current study examines public support for, and opposition to, police militarization. Using a national sample of 702 American adults and drawing from past research on perceptions of police, we ask three research questions: (1) Are there distinct groups of individuals who support or oppose police militarization? If so, (2) What factors distinguish between groups of individuals in the supporter versus opposer groups?, and (3) What factors distinguish individuals within groups of supporters and opposers? To answer these research questions, we use Latent Class Analysis (Hagenaars & McCutcheon, 2002; McCutcheon, 1987), a statistical classification technique which identifies distinct, homogenous groupings of individuals within a sample. Our overall goal is to highlight factors shaping individual perceptions of police militarization, and understanding how these factors may vary across people who agree and differ in their perceptions of police militarization. We begin by discussing police militarization in the United States.

1. Police militarization

As Kraska (2007, p. 1) observed a decade ago, "we have been witness to a little noticed but nonetheless momentous historical change-the traditional distinctions between military/police, war/law enforcement, and internal/external security are rapidly blurring." This blurring involves the concepts of militarism and militarization. Militarism refers to a constellation of beliefs, values, and assumptions which justify the threat or use of force as an appropriate and necessary means of problem solving (Kraska, 2007; see also Berghahn, 1982; Aide & Thee, 1980). Police militarization (PM) is the manifestation of these beliefs, as agencies "draw from, and pattern themselves around, the tenets of militarism and the military model" (Kraska, 2007, p. 503). Such patterning includes the adoption of military-style 1) weapons, 2) equipment, 3) vehicles, and 4) appearance by local law enforcement agencies, which are the hallmarks of police militarization in both practice and definition (Kraska, 2007; Lockwood et al., 2018).

Early examples of militarization involved the formation of specialized police units. The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), for example, developed the first "special weapons and tactics" (SWAT) team in 1967 to respond to "critical incidents" requiring more advanced tactics and weaponry than were available to street-level officers (Kraska, 2005; see also Phillips, 2016). The use of SWAT and other police paramilitary units (PPUs) has grown substantially among law enforcement agencies (Kraska & Kappeler, 1997). Their use has extended beyond critical incidents–counter terrorism, hostage situations, and civil unrest–to now include counter-drug operations, proactive policing, measures, and the serving of high-risk warrants (Balko, 2014; Kraska, 2007). Indeed, the number of large police departments with PPUs rose from 59% in 1982 to almost 90% in 1995, and more than doubled from 31% to 69% among small police departments in that same time frame (see Kraska & Cubellis, 1997; Kraska & Kappeler, 1997). Furthermore, SWAT deployments increased from a few thousand total callouts per year in 1980 to more than 80,000 total deployments in 2014 (Balko, 2014; Kraska, 2001; Kraska, 2005).

The growing prevalence of these specialized units is due, in part, to initiatives such as the "War on Drugs" in the 1980s and "War on Terror" after September 11, 2001 (Kraska, 2005). These initiatives corresponded with federal legislation which enabled and financially supported the transfer of military equipment and weapons to local police

departments. In 1981, Congress passed the Military Cooperation with Civilian Law Enforcement Agencies Act, which authorized the U.S. military to assist law enforcement agencies in matters relating to drug investigations, counter-terrorism, and related operations, and provided access to military bases and equipment in support of these efforts (Balko, 2014). The 1208 Program, enacted as part of the 1990 National Defense Authorization Act (Wofford, 2014), allowed for the transferring of military equipment to federal and state agencies. The 1208 Program was succeeded by the 1033 Program, as part of the 1997 National Defense Authorization Act. This latter Act authorized the Department of Defense to transfer excess military weapons and equipment to local police (e.g., Balko, 2014; Kraska, 2005). In the decades since these programs began, it is estimated that the federal government has allocated more than $6 billion of surplus military weapons, equipment, and vehicles to over 8000 police departments in the U.S. (Hall & Coyne, 2013).[2]

Owing to controversy surrounding the acquisition and use of surplus military weapons and equipment seen in Ferguson, then-President Obama issued an executive order in 2015 to curtail access to some surplus military equipment and weapons available through the 1033 Program (Korte, 2015). In 2017, Attorney General Jefferson Sessions criticized the Obama executive order, claiming "Those restrictions went too far. We will not put superficial concerns above public safety" (Ebert, 2017, para 9). President Trump then rescinded this order, removing restrictions on access to military surplus weapons and equipment out of concern for officer and public safety, and to increase police effectiveness (Goldman, 2017). It is within this context that we seek to understand public perceptions of militarization. In the following section, we elaborate on the dominant approaches to understand perceptions of police generally, as well as an emerging body of literature on public perceptions of militarization.

1.1. Factors shaping perceptions of police

Prior research on public support for the police and police practices, as well as anecdotal evidence from recent movements such as "Black Lives Matter" and "Blues Lives Matter," suggest that there are strong and diverging views about contemporary police practices in the U.S. (Langford & Speight, 2015). Such contentions extend to police militarization. Kraska and Cubellis (1997, p. 627) noted the issue "involves heartfelt beliefs, values, and morals", and there are likely deep polarizations on how the public feels regarding the practice. For instance, some of the public may support PM as they see it as a necessary and appropriate response to crime or civil unrest, while other supporters may emphasize the trustworthiness of the police and that the police will use the surplus military equipment appropriately (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). Those opposed to militarization may not trust the government, or by extension the police who serve as enforcers of the law, and feel that the use of more advanced weaponry and equipment against citizens is indicative of an oppressive police state (Delehanty et al., 2017; Meeks, 2006).

These competing viewpoints on policing reflect a combination of normative beliefs and instrumental concerns. Normative beliefs involve the feelings, values, and ideals that people hold (Tyler, Schulhofer, & Huq, 2010). In turn, these characteristics shape support for social

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[2] More information on National Institute of Justice new and surplus equipment programs, including the 1033 Program, was previously available at: https://www.nij.gov/funding/Pages/equipment-funding.aspx. At some point during the review and publication process, this page was removed, but is archived at the following hyperlink: https://web.archive.org/web/20170712111145/https://www.nij.gov/funding/Pages/equipment-funding.aspx

Current information on the 1033 and related law enforcement equipment programs, is available at:

https://justnet.org/resources/Excess-Federal-Property.html