

The Relationship Between Structural Racism and Black-White Disparities in Fatal Police Shootings at the State Level

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No external funding was received for this project. Supplemental figures were developed using Tableau (www.tableau.com), a Seattle-based, data visualization software company. The authors have no financial conflicts of interest to disclose.

Abstract: Objective: The objective of this study was to discern the relationship between state-level structural racism and Black-White disparities in police shootings of victims not known to be armed.

Methods: Using a Poisson regression, we evaluated the effect of structural racism on differences between states in Black-White disparities in fatal police shootings involving victims not known to be armed during the period from January 1, 2013 through June 30, 2017. We created a state racism index, which was comprised of five dimensions: (1) residential segregation; and gaps in (2) incarceration rates; (3) educational attainment; (4) economic indicators; and (5) employment status.

Results: After controlling for numerous state-level factors and for the underlying rate of fatal shootings of black victims in each state, the state racism index was a significant predictor of the Black-White disparity in police shooting rates of victims not known to be armed (incidence rate ratio: 1.24; 95% confidence interval, 1.02-1.50). For every 10-point increase in the state racism index, the Black-White disparity ratio of police shooting rates of people not known to be armed increased by 24%.

Conclusion: These findings suggest that structural racism is an important predictor of the Black-White disparity in rates of police shootings of unarmed victims across states.

Keywords: Firearm violence ■ Homicide ■ Police shootings ■ Racial disparities ■ Structural racism

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jnma.2017.12.002>

INTRODUCTION

Of all firearm homicides in the world, 82% occur in the United States.¹ Of these firearm homicides, 59% of the victims are Black, even though Black people comprise just 14% of the population.² Nationally, Black people are eight times more likely to be killed by a

firearm than White people.² This Black-White disparity in firearm homicide in the U.S. has been widely recognized,³ and has recently gained public attention in the context of fatal police shootings.⁴⁻⁶ Although the striking disparity in firearm death between Blacks and Whites has been documented for decades⁷⁻²² and a similarly striking racial disparity in the shooting by police of unarmed people has been reported,⁶ the underlying cause of these disparities is still unknown.

There are two competing theories in the social science field regarding the use of lethal force by police: the threat hypothesis and the community violence hypothesis. The threat hypothesis, derived from the conflict theory of law, suggests that racial disparities in police shootings can be explained by racism and its influences on the interaction between law enforcement officials and black suspects.²³⁻²⁵ In contrast, the community violence hypothesis maintains that disparities in the occurrence of lethal force by police is a direct response to the higher number of interactions that law enforcement officials have with black individuals due to higher rates of violent crime in the black community.^{23,24}

In the public health literature, there has been little empirical research to understand why Black people are so much more likely to be killed by police. In particular, there is a lack of research into the potential role of structural racism as a fundamental contributor to the disproportionate rates of black victimization by lethal police force. A search of Pub Med for articles with the keywords “racism” and “firearm” yielded only seven articles, just one of which examines racism as a potential explanation for firearm violence.²⁶ To the best of our knowledge, only one article in the public health literature has explored the relationship between racism and the Black-White disparity in fatal police shootings.⁶ Ross reported a positive relationship between a measure of county-level racism and county-specific disparities in police shooting deaths between Blacks and Whites; however, these results were not statistically significant.⁶ Ross noted: “The analyses presented here are only a very rough first pass through the data” [6, p. 16]; this

study used a crude measure of racism: the number of Google searches for a derogatory racial term.

Despite the large gap in the public health literature with regards to the underlying causes of racial disparities in fatal police shootings, there are accessible and validated measures of structural racism in the public health and social science literature. Notably, nearly all of these measures assess racial structural discrimination at the neighborhood level.^{27–35} However, extending the scope of previous research beyond the neighborhood level to the state level is crucial, because numerous policies that have been used to discriminate against Black people—such as mandatory minimum sentences for non-violent drug offenses³⁶—have been instituted at the state level. Moreover, due to the relatively small number of fatal police shootings, rates at the local level may be unstable; therefore, studying this phenomenon at the state level is advantageous. As Lukachko et al. argued in a 2014 paper, “Focusing on variation in structural racism at the state level is one potentially profitable approach to examining structural discrimination given that states vary substantially in their past and present policies, laws, and institutional practices that systematically disadvantage Blacks, thereby creating unique cultures of racism [27, p. 44]. This perception of unique cultures of structural racism at the state level was recently demonstrated by a travel advisory issued by the NAACP for African-Americans for the state of Missouri.³⁷

We are aware of two previous efforts to develop measures of structural racism at the state level.^{27,38} Both of these approaches used the gap between White and Black populations in measures of structural advantage/disadvantage as an indicator of structural racism. Racial inequalities in these measures are a direct result of structural racism, which is “the systematic exclusion of non-White racial groups from resources and mobility in society as a means to secure or maintain power.” [27, p. 44] Thus, greater racial gaps in these measures of structural advantage or disadvantage are likely to reflect higher levels of past and present structural racism. Lukachko et al. examined 11 measures of structural racism by comparing levels of factors among the Black and White population in a state across four domains: political participation (e.g., registered to vote), employment (e.g., labor force participation), educational attainment (college degree or higher), and judicial treatment (e.g., incarceration rate).²⁷ WalletHub developed a racial integration ranking for each state, on a scale of 0–100, based on the sum of individual state scores measuring the Black-White gap in factors such as median household income, labor force participation, unemployment rate, home ownership rate, and educational attainment.³⁸

In addition to racial gaps in structural advantage, racial residential segregation has been shown to be a strong

measure of structural racism.^{28–35,39} Jacoby et al. recently demonstrated that the degree of racial residential segregation of neighborhoods in Philadelphia in the 1940s is significantly predictive of current rates of firearm violence.²⁶ Massey et al. have argued that residential segregation is the hallmark of structural racism and that segregation in turn promotes racial inequalities in structural advantage.⁴⁰ While racial segregation has typically been used to study the effects of racism at the neighborhood level, we consider racial segregation within a state as a measure of “policies, laws, and institutional practices that systematically disadvantage Blacks thereby creating unique cultures of racism.” [27, p. 44].

In order to examine the potential influence of structural racism on racial disparities in police shootings, we combine these two previously validated indicators of structural racism — racial gaps in advantage/disadvantage and racial residential segregation — to create an overall state-level structural racism index.

While a number of articles in the criminology^{7–14} and social sciences^{15–21} literature have explored the potential role of racial inequalities in explaining overall homicide rates among the Black population, we are aware of only one article that has analyzed the association between racial inequality and the rate of police shootings of Black victims.²³ However, this article used only one measure (the racial gap in mean family income) as an indicator of racial inequality.

In this paper, we adapt previously developed measures of structural racism at the state level to evaluate the relationship at the state level between structural racism and the Black-White disparity in fatal police shootings of victims not known to be armed. This study advances the existing public health literature by explicitly modeling the Black-White disparity in police shooting rates as the outcome variable and by relying upon concrete measures of structural racism developed in the social sciences literature, rather than a non-specific measure based on individual Google searches. We developed an index to measure structural racism at the state level that includes five dimensions: (1) residential segregation; and gaps in (2) incarceration rates; (3) educational attainment; (4) economic indicators; and (5) employment status. We took advantage of a new, comprehensive database of fatal police shootings that addresses the problem of significant undercounts in previously existing data sources⁹ and is recognized as the most reliable and complete source of data.^{6,41,42}

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Design overview

Using a cross-sectional design, we evaluated the effect of state-level, structural racism on differences between states

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