



The Effects of Suspect Characteristics on Arrest: A Meta-Analysis



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Synthesis research on the correlates of arrest has had a long history of analysis in police decision making research. Yet, much of this line of synthesis research has found mixed results and has been unable to definitively state whether relationships exist between suspect demographic characteristics, race, gender, age, and ethnicity, and arrest. This research attempts to clear this confusion created by previous synthesis attempts particularly.

Methods: Meta-analysis was used to generate weighted mean effect sizes of the effect of race, gender, age, and ethnicity on arrest. Effect sizes were weighted using the inverse variance method and random effects modeling was also used. Moderator analyses were also performed.

Results: Black individuals, males, and Hispanic individuals were significantly more likely to be arrested than white individuals, females, and non-Hispanic individuals. These effects persisted across the majority of moderator categories. Age was not a significant predictor of arrest.

Conclusions: The results here bring some degree of order to a large amount of arrest decision making literature. The findings confirm the results of a previous meta-analysis on race and arrest and also expand upon that research. These results expand “what we know” about the effect of race on arrest.

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Introduction

The examination of the criminal justice decision making process has a long history of study (see for example, Brown & Frank, 2006; Kramer & Steffensmeier, 1993; Kutateladze, Andiloro, Johnson, & Spohn, 2014; Lundman, 1994; Myers & Talarico, 1986; Novak & Engel, 2005; Piliavin & Briar, 1964; Riksheim & Chermak, 1993; Sherman, 1980; Spohn, 2000; Worden, 1989). Moreover, according to Walker (1992), the American Bar Foundation's field observations were the first attempts to garner some knowledge of the police process and the exercise of discretion in the 1950's. Further, Goldstein (1960) raises questions about the potential problems of the exercise of police discretion. Goldstein's concerns involved situations when police decided to not formally intervene or what he called low visibility decisions. The chief concern for both the American Bar Foundation generally, and Goldstein was the potential for the police to apply their power in discriminatory ways. Given recent events in the United States, particularly in Ferguson, MO, clearly the potential for abuse of police power is still a very real concern.

Growing concern and the desire to understand the arrest decision, led researchers to do systematic social observations of police (See for example Black & Reiss, 1970; Brown & Frank, 2006; Engel, 2000; Lundman, 1994; Smith, 1984; or Worden, 1989). Large scale systematic

social observations such as Black and Reiss' three city study, the Mid-west City Study, the Police Services Study (PSS), the Project on Policing Neighborhoods (POPON), or the Cincinnati Police Observation Study represent large amounts of information that provide snapshots of police behavior over time. In addition to these systematic social observations, other researchers have collected arrest data directly from the agencies themselves, generally in the form of traffic stop data, as another attempt to gain knowledge on the arrest decision (See for example Alpert et al., 2006; Engel, Calnon, Liu, & Johnson, 2004; or Smith, Makarios, & Alpert, 2006).

While these various studies individually have been valuable contributions to understanding police decision making, attempts to make sense of the findings collectively has not led to clear results. Most recently, the National Research Council attempted to examine the correlates of arrest decisions by reviewing the extant literature via the traditional literature review approach (Skogan & Frydl, 2004). Their findings, with regard to the effect of extra-legal factors, were that the research presents mixed results. More specifically, they state that “there is mixed evidence concerning whether and how citizen gender influences police behavior” (Skogan & Frydl, 2004, p. 121). They make similar statements regarding race; they state, “the evidence is mixed, ranging from findings that indicate bias against racial minorities, findings of bias in favor of racial minorities, and findings of no race effect” (Skogan & Frydl, 2004, p. 123). While the committee does not specifically discuss findings with regard to age or ethnicity, given the previous propositions from the National Research Council's assessment and the mixed findings, as a whole with extra-legal factors, it is plausible that

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the findings on the effect of age and ethnicity on arrest are equally mixed. Additionally, [Riksheim and Chermak \(1993\)](#) reported mixed findings in their review of the correlates of police decision making regarding the relationship between suspect race and arrest, suspect gender and arrest, and suspect age and arrest. In other words, across studies, the field of arrest decision making research cannot say with any degree of certainty whether suspect demographics matter based on these narrative literature reviews.

One possible way to reduce the confusion created by these traditional literature reviews is to use meta-analysis. Meta-analysis is a statistical tool that can discern differences in findings in precisely the situation previously discussed. Meta-analysis allows for the comparison of results from various studies in order to discern an overall effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable ([Lipsey & Wilson, 2001](#)). Using this technique to make sense of these numerous studies on police decision making will be a major leap forward for this line in inquiry by objectively assessing the effect of suspect demographic characteristics on arrest.

Thus, the purpose of this paper is to reduce the confusion that is a product of the traditional literature reviews previously mentioned and use meta-analysis to gain a better understanding of the effect of suspect demographic characteristics on arrest. While the use of meta-analysis has been very prevalent in fields outside of criminal justice, the use of meta-analysis in criminal justice research, and more specifically, criminal justice decision making, has been very limited ([Wells, 2009](#)). Meta-analysis will be used to more definitively examine the effects of suspect race, gender, age, and ethnicity on the arrest decision.

Research Synthesis of Correlates of Arrest

While there have been a large number of studies examining the various influences of arrest, there have been considerably fewer attempts to synthesize what we know on arrest. Until recently, all of the major attempts to determine the current status of research on the effect of suspect demographic characteristics on arrest had used the narrative review style of research synthesis (see [Riksheim & Chermak, 1993](#); [Sherman, 1980](#); [Skogan & Frydl, 2004](#)). These three analyses have found that some correlates of arrest have shown consistent findings over time while other relationships have revealed mixed findings. Race remains one of the most studied variables within the realm of police decision making research ([Riksheim & Chermak, 1993](#)). However, analyses of suspect race on arrest have led to mixed results both across time and place ([Riksheim & Chermak, 1993](#); [Sherman, 1980](#); [Skogan & Frydl, 2004](#)). The National Research Council's examination of the effect of race on arrest concludes that "results appear to be highly contingent on the measure of police practice, other influences that are taken into account, and the time and location of the study" ([Skogan & Frydl, 2004, p. 123](#)). Further, [Sherman \(1980\)](#) states that results from the Black-Reiss study may indicate that the relationship between suspect race and arrest is spurious. Given these mixed results, meta-analysis may be able to clear up these nebulous results.

More recently, [Kochel, Wilson, and Mastrofski \(2011\)](#) conducted a meta-analysis looking at the effect of suspect race on arrest and found a significant relationship between suspect race and arrest. Kochel and her colleagues found that black individuals were significantly more likely to be arrested. Moreover, this effect persisted even when accounting for seriousness of the offense and demeanor of the suspect.

What we know about the relationship of other suspect demographic factors and arrest has also varied over time, and has yet to be studied meta-analytically. [Sherman \(1980\)](#) states very assertively that women were significantly less likely to be arrested. However, as time has progressed the body of knowledge has become less certain. Narrative reviews since Sherman's review state that studies have found that the influence of suspect gender on arrest is mixed ([Riksheim & Chermak, 1993](#); [Skogan & Frydl, 2004](#)). Additionally, [Riksheim and Chermak \(1993\)](#) argued that there was a considerable amount of research since

Sherman's analysis that found no relationship between gender and arrest.

The effect of suspect age on arrest has experienced a similar shift in findings. Initially, [Sherman \(1980\)](#) found that there was a definitive bias against juveniles, but [Riksheim and Chermak \(1993\)](#) contend that the evidence on the impact of age is mixed. [Riksheim and Chermak \(1993\)](#) found that the influence of age is contingent on gender, severity of the offense, or department style.

Finally, none of the above reviews have examined the issue of suspect ethnicity, specifically Hispanic ethnicity, on arrest. This issue has been examined in reviews of judicial decision making, but is still relatively new in the police decision making literature and the criminal justice decision making literature generally. However, within the realm of judicial decision making, [Spohn \(2000\)](#) found that Hispanic individuals were at a significant disadvantage and were much more likely to be sentenced to prison than non-Hispanics.

Systematic reviews have been conducted in sentencing research on the relationship between gender and incarceration and age and incarceration. Two meta-analyses indicate that males were significantly more likely than women to be incarcerated ([Bontrager, Barrick, & Stupi, 2013](#); [Daly & Bordt, 1995](#)). Additionally, [Wu and Spohn \(2009\)](#) found that age was not significantly related to incarceration decisions. While gender and age have been examined during the sentencing phase of the criminal justice process, they have not been examined in the arrest phase of the criminal justice process. Gender, age, and ethnicity warrant further study at the arrest decision because of the loosely coupled nature of the criminal justice system. According to [Hagan \(1989\)](#), the criminal justice system is a loosely coupled group of organizations. Loose coupling is the idea that each component of a system is working towards a main goal, but at the same time each component is also working independently toward their own particular goals ([Hagan, 1989](#)). This means that the effects of some suspect characteristics may not function the same way at different stages across the system.

Narrative Reviews Problems

Traditionally, the review of research in criminal justice and more specifically police decision making has used narrative literature reviews. This approach, while a valuable first step, has flaws. The first issue with this approach is the subjective nature of narrative reviews ([Pratt, 2002](#); [Wolf, 1986](#)). Any determinations as to the presence or lack of a relationship between two variables are entirely up to the reviewer. There is no objective method to determine whether a relationship exists. This creates the potential for confusion where two equally qualified reviewers could look at the same set of studies and come to completely different conclusions.

Second, on certain topics the volume of research may be too large for the reviewer to manage ([Hunter & Schmidt, 1990](#)). With the increase in the number of studies, the volume of material may become too cumbersome and could potentially decrease the accuracy of the findings. Additionally, when the volume of studies becomes too large, the reviewer may omit studies, either consciously or unconsciously, which could introduce a bias into the review. This bias could lead to inaccuracy in the conclusions of the review.

One attempt to correct these problems is the vote counting approach. This approach attempts to quantify the review process by creating a tally for the results of the individual studies ([Hunt, 1997](#); [Hunter & Schmidt, 1990](#)). While this attempt to quantify the review process is an improvement over traditional literature reviews, the major flaw with this approach is that all studies are treated equally. While [Eck \(2006\)](#) suggests that a small-n quasi experiment is better than no study at all, [Sherman et al. \(1997\)](#) argue that not all studies are created equal. The scale developed by Sherman and his colleagues illustrates the need to separate studies based on methodological quality when comparing and reviewing literature. The same idea applies to this vote

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