

# Racially Biased Policing: Determinants of Citizen Perceptions\*

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## *Abstract*

*The current controversy surrounding racial profiling in America has focused renewed attention on the larger issue of racial bias by the police. Yet little is known about the extent of police racial bias and even less about public perceptions of the problem. This article analyzes recent national survey data on citizens' views of, and reported personal experiences with, several forms of police bias—including differential treatment of individuals and neighborhoods, police prejudice, and racial profiling. We find that attitudes toward the prevalence and acceptability of these practices are largely shaped by citizens' race, personal experiences with police discrimination, and exposure to news media reporting on incidents of police misconduct. The findings lend support to the group-position theory of race relations.*

Racial bias by the police includes such things as racial profiling of motorists, racial prejudice among police officers, and discriminatory treatment of minority individuals and minority neighborhoods. Little research exists on public perceptions of racially biased policing, though such perceptions may have important consequences. The perception of police practices as unfair or as racially motivated may lead to more frequent and severe confrontations between police and citizens and to greater distrust of the police. This article examines citizens' views of and reported experiences with police bias and the major determinants of citizens' perceptions.

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## Explaining Public Perceptions of the Police

Race is one of the most consistent predictors of attitudes toward the police. African Americans are significantly more likely than whites to hold negative views of the police, but very little is known about Hispanics' views. Do Hispanics tend to take a "minority group" perspective similar to that of African Americans; do they take an intermediate position in a white-Hispanic-black "racial hierarchy" pattern; or are their views more closely aligned with those of whites? Since only a few studies systematically compare police relations with Hispanics, blacks, and whites, the literature is insufficient to address these questions.

A larger deficiency in the empirical literature concerns the question of why racial differences exist in citizens' relations with the police. We argue that part of the explanation can be found in the *group-position thesis*, a variant of conflict theory. The group-position thesis focuses on intergroup competition over material rewards, status, and power. Racial attitudes reflect not merely individual-level feelings and beliefs but also a collective "sense of group position" vis-à-vis other racial groups (Blumer 1958), including (1) *perceived threats*: dominant group members' fears that their group is at risk of losing privileges or resources to competing racial groups, and (2) *perceived advantages*: minority group members' beliefs that their group interests will be enhanced by challenging the prevailing racial order.

The group-position thesis has been used to explain intergroup racial attitudes (Blumer 1958; Bobo and Hutchings 1996; Kinder and Sanders 1996); we extend it to an analysis of *group relations with social institutions*. If the dominant group believes that it is entitled to valuable resources, it follows that the group will have an affinity with the institutions that serve their interests. One such institution is the criminal justice system.

Dominant racial groups typically see the police as allies. This is especially transparent in deeply divided societies, like Northern Ireland and South Africa, where the police are or were a key institutional pillar in a sectarian sociopolitical system, and where the dominant racial or ethnic group traditionally views the police as an instrument for suppressing subordinate groups (Weitzer 1995). This affinity between the police and dominant groups is less pronounced in more democratic societies, but we argue that even in these societies, the general group-position dynamic structures group relations with the police. In the U.S., white support for the police has traditionally been robust. At the same time, whites tend to see blacks as inclined to criminal or violent behavior (Hurwitz and Peffley 1997). In the 2000 General Social Survey, for example, half of whites viewed blacks as "violence-prone." For whites who subscribe to these views, there is a tendency to condone police suspicion and disparate treatment of blacks as "rational discrimination" (Weitzer 2000). These attitudes may be more strongly held by some whites (the most racially prejudiced) than by others (Cohn and Barkan 2004), but the group-position thesis predicts that these views are fairly common

throughout the white population. Thus, for many whites, it seems sensible for law enforcement to target minority individuals or minority neighborhoods.

If whites tend to align themselves with the police, it follows that, when the police are criticized, whites may perceive their group interests as indirectly threatened (Bayley and Mendelsohn 1969; Jackson 1989). Our extension of group-position theory predicts that whites will tend to be dubious or dismissive of allegations of police misconduct. To accept that minorities are frequently mistreated would lend credence to reforms—reforms that might dilute crime control, thereby threatening whites. African Americans and Hispanics, on the other hand, should be more inclined to view the police as engaged in frequent abuse of minority citizens and, thus, as a “visible sign of majority domination” (Bayley and Mendelsohn 1969:195). This view of police does not mean that minorities are monolithically critical of the police, but it does increase the chances that they will see police misconduct as both a general problem and one that particularly afflicts Hispanics and blacks (Weitzer and Tuch 2004a).

The group-position thesis stresses perceived (not necessarily real) threats to dominant group interests (Bobo and Hutchings 1996; Kinder and Sanders 1996). While most blacks and Hispanics want more law enforcement,<sup>1</sup> leaders within the minority community often criticize the police in public, which may reinforce whites’ impressions that minorities are trying to interfere with crime control. In a nutshell, white skepticism of charges of police wrongdoing may be partly rooted in their attachment to the law-and-order status quo; minority perceptions of misconduct, on the other hand, may reflect their desire to gain better treatment from the police.

Although we do not have direct measures of group interests and threats, our data do allow us to test the key predictions of group-position theory—namely, white defense of the police against charges of racial discrimination and minority belief that police racial bias is a serious problem. As noted above, it is unclear from the literature whether blacks and Hispanics hold roughly similar views or whether one group is more critical of the police. But just as African Americans have a deeper and more crystallized sense of relative group position vis-à-vis whites than is true for Hispanics (Bobo 1999), they also have a longer and more fractious history with the police in America. This is one reason that blacks’ opinions of the police might be expected to be significantly more negative than Hispanics’. Again, we lack a critical mass of studies on this issue.

Most of the literature is exclusively centered on the role of demographic characteristics in shaping views of the police (Brown and Benedict 2002; Gallagher et al. 2001; Weitzer and Tuch 1999). The role of nondemographic factors—both micro and macro—remains unclear. This is particularly true for “the public’s personal experiences with the police, what they learn second-hand from friends and acquaintances, and what they learn from the media” (Gallagher et al. 2001: v). A few studies suggest that these experiential and media factors may influence attitudes. Citizens’ personal contacts with the police—especially negative

experiences—appear to influence citizens' larger views of the police (Tyler and Huo 2002). One's personal contacts thus seem to affect how people view the police more generally. Moreover, it is also possible that the experiences of family members and friends may be internalized and “vicariously experienced” by the actor, affecting his or her larger views of the police. Similarly, exposure to media reports on incidents of police misconduct (e.g., Rodney King) may adversely affect citizens' confidence in the police, and this effect may be especially true for members of minority groups (Kaminski and Jefferis 1998; Sigelman et al. 1997; Tuch and Weitzer 1997; Weitzer 2002). But much more research is necessary to test these predictions. The present study examines whether citizens' views of racially biased policing are shaped by citizens' personal experiences, knowledge of others' experiences, and exposure to media reporting on the police—and whether the effects of these factors are more cogent among blacks and Hispanics than among whites.

We test the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1a:* Blacks and Hispanics are more likely than whites to believe that various forms of racially biased policing exist.

*Hypothesis 1b:* These racial differences persist net of the influences of experiential, media, and control variables.

*Hypothesis 2a:* Exposure to media reports of police misconduct increases perceptions of police bias among all groups.

*Hypothesis 2b:* The effect, however, is stronger for blacks and Hispanics than for whites.

*Hypothesis 3a:* Personal or vicarious experience with police bias increases perceptions of bias among all groups.

*Hypothesis 3b:* The effect, however, is stronger for blacks and Hispanics than for whites.

## **Data and Methods**

Data for this study come from the authors' 2002 national survey of 1,792 white, African American, and Hispanic adult residents of U.S. metropolitan areas with at least 100,000 population. The sample is representative of adults living in households with telephones in urban and suburban areas that meet this population-size criterion.

The data for this article were collected as part of a larger study by the authors of police–citizen relations in the U.S. The survey has the advantages of (1) oversampling African Americans and Hispanics, in contrast to the small number of minority respondents typically included in other surveys, and (2) tapping both attitudes toward police and personal and vicarious experiences with the police.

## SAMPLING

The survey was conducted for the authors by Knowledge Networks, a Web-based survey research firm that combines probability sampling with the reach and capabilities of the Internet to yield representative samples of respondents without sacrificing data quality. Research comparing the quality of data yielded by Knowledge Networks' Web-based survey methodology with that of random-digit dialing telephone surveys has found that Knowledge Networks yields representative samples that produce parameter estimates very similar to the estimates of random-digit dialing samples (Baker et al. 2003; Berrens 2003; Krosnick and Chang 2001).

Knowledge Networks uses list-assisted random-digit dialing sampling techniques on a sample frame consisting of the entire telephone population, so that any household with a telephone can be selected for the Knowledge Networks panel, including computer users and nonusers alike. In exchange for free Internet hardware (such as a television set-top box), connectivity (an Internet connection paid for by Knowledge Networks), and on-site installation, participants agree to complete a maximum of three to four surveys per month. Selected households remain on the panel for two to three years. Currently, Knowledge Networks has more than 25,000 households in its Web-enabled panel.

## PANEL REPRESENTATIVENESS

When using panels for survey research, potential sampling bias can occur at any of several stages. First, respondents consent to become panel members; this is referred to as the panel acceptance rate. At the time of the study, Knowledge Networks panel acceptance rate was 40%, calculated by standards established by the American Association for Public Opinion Research.<sup>2</sup> Second, the within-survey completion rate—or percentage of panel members who completed our questionnaire among those who received it—was 67%.

The Knowledge Networks panel is representative of and closely mirrors the U.S. population on key demographic, geographic, economic, and social characteristics. Four factors account for this representativeness. First, as mentioned above, the panel is selected using random-digit dialing telephone methodology, providing a probability-based starting sample of telephone households (according to the census, 98% of white households, 95% of Hispanic households, and 94% of African American households have telephone access). Second, the panel weights are adjusted to census demographic benchmarks to reduce error due to noncoverage of households without telephones and to reduce bias due to nonresponse and other nonsampling errors. Third, samples selected from the panel for individual studies are selected by probability methods, and sample design weights for each study are calculated to meet the design parameters. Fourth, nonresponse and poststratification weighting adjustments are applied

to the final survey data to reduce the effects of nonsampling error. The result is that the weighted demographic estimates from the census and the Knowledge Networks panel differ very little across gender, age, race/ethnicity, education, and region (see Table 1 for descriptive sample statistics). Moreover, analyses of panel attrition indicate that no significant differences separate those who remain on the panel from those who do not (Dennis and Li 2003).<sup>3</sup>

#### INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

##### *Race*

We use the term “race” broadly to include both racial and ethnic groups. Our sample consists of respondents who self-identify as African American, Hispanic, or non-Hispanic white on Knowledge Networks demographic profile of panel members.

##### *Experiences with Police Discrimination*

Perceived personal and vicarious experiences with discriminatory police behavior were measured with the following questions: “Have you ever felt that you were treated unfairly by the police specifically because of your race in [your city/your own neighborhood]?” “Have you ever felt that you were stopped by the police just because of your race or ethnic background?” Parallel questions tapped vicarious experience, with reference to whether this had happened to anyone else in the respondent’s household.<sup>4</sup> Responses to the personal experience questions were combined to form an index of reported personal experience with police bias; responses to the vicarious experience questions were combined to create an index of reported vicarious experience with police bias. The alpha reliability coefficient is .80 for the personal experience index and .84 for the vicarious index. In the analysis, both indices are dichotomized (1 = experience with bias, 0 = no experience).

##### *Media Exposure*

We asked the following question in order to gauge respondents’ exposure to media accounts of police misconduct: “How often do you hear or read about (on the radio, television, or in the newspapers) incidents of police misconduct (such as police use of excessive force, verbal abuse, and corruption) that occur somewhere in the nation?” Response options were “never,” “rarely,” “sometimes,” and “often” on a four-point scale coded so that higher scores indicate more frequent exposure.<sup>5</sup>

*Controls*

We control on several demographic factors: age, in years; gender (1 = male, 0 = female); place of residence, measured with a dummy variable for city (coded 1) versus suburb (coded 0); region (1 = south, 0 = nonsouth); education, measured on a 9-point ladder ranging from less than high school (coded 1) to doctorate degree (coded 9); and household income, measured on a 17-step ladder ranging from less than \$5,000 per year (coded 1) to \$125,000 or more (coded 17). Three items measure respondents' assessment of neighborhood crime conditions: "Overall, how safe do you feel being alone outside in your neighborhood [during the day/at night]—very safe, somewhat safe, somewhat unsafe, or very unsafe?" "How serious a problem is crime in your neighborhood—very serious, somewhat serious, not serious, or not a problem at all?" Responses to these questions are coded so that higher scores reflect less safety and more perceived neighborhood crime.

## DEPENDENT VARIABLES

Perceptions of police racial bias<sup>6</sup> were measured by four sets of questions, with each set of items combined into a scale: (1) Racial bias against individuals: "Do you think the police in your [city/neighborhood] treat whites and blacks equally, do they treat whites worse than blacks, or blacks worse than whites?" A parallel question asked respondents to compare whites and Hispanics. Alpha for this index is .91. (2) Racial bias against neighborhoods: The police engage in positive and negative typifications of different locales (Smith 1986), which may lead to disparate treatment of neighborhoods. We asked, "In general in the U.S., do you think that police services in white neighborhoods are better, worse, or about the same as in black neighborhoods?" A parallel question asked for a comparison between white and Hispanic neighborhoods. Alpha for this index is .88. (3) Police prejudice: "How common do you think racial or ethnic prejudice is among police officers [throughout the U.S./in your city/in your neighborhood]?" Alpha for this index is .86. (4) Racial profiling: "Since many drivers engage in minor traffic violations like speeding, it is sometimes hard to tell why some drivers get stopped by the police while others do not. Do you think that black drivers are more likely to be stopped by the police than white drivers for the same types of violations?" A parallel question compared Hispanic and white drivers. Regarding approval of profiling, we replicated a 1999 Gallup poll question: "There have been reports that some police officers stop drivers from certain racial groups because they think members of these groups are more likely to commit crimes. This is known as 'racial profiling.' Do you approve or disapprove of the use of this practice?" Regarding the scope of profiling, we asked, "Do you think that racial profiling is widespread or not widespread [in the U.S./in your city/in your neighborhood]?" Alpha for the profiling index is .73.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics: Means (and Standard Deviations) on All Variables**

	Total Sample	Whites	Blacks	Hispanics
Education	4.06 (1.68)	4.18 (1.69) <sup>a,b</sup>	3.72 (1.52) <sup>a,c</sup>	3.33 (1.59) <sup>b,c</sup>
Income	9.94 (3.95)	10.34 (3.70) <sup>a,b</sup>	8.59 (4.12) <sup>a</sup>	8.86 (4.14) <sup>b</sup>
Gender (1 = male)	.49 (.50)	.50 (.50) <sup>a</sup>	.44 (.50) <sup>a</sup>	.49 (.50)
Age	45.40 (16.74)	47.43 (16.93) <sup>a,b</sup>	40.49 (15.52) <sup>a,c</sup>	37.43 (14.39) <sup>b,c</sup>
Residence (1 = city)	.70 (.46)	.65 (.48) <sup>a,b</sup>	.70 (.46) <sup>a,c</sup>	.79 (.41) <sup>b,c</sup>
Region (1 = south)	.35 (.48)	.32 (.47) <sup>a</sup>	.51 (.50) <sup>a,c</sup>	.28 (.45) <sup>c</sup>
Safety (day)	1.36 (.61)	1.26 (.55) <sup>a,b</sup>	1.56 (.68) <sup>a</sup>	1.63 (.77) <sup>b</sup>
Safety (night)	1.77 (.80)	1.66 (.75) <sup>a,b</sup>	2.00 (.85) <sup>a</sup>	2.06 (.92) <sup>b</sup>
Neighborhood crime	1.96 (.78)	1.84 (.72) <sup>a,b</sup>	2.27 (.86) <sup>a</sup>	2.19 (.88) <sup>b</sup>
Media exposure	2.97 (.73)	2.89 (.68) <sup>a,b</sup>	3.25 (.79) <sup>a,c</sup>	3.07 (.80) <sup>b,c</sup>
Personal experience (1 = yes)	.15 (.36)	.05 (.22) <sup>a,b</sup>	.50 (.50) <sup>a,c</sup>	.32 (.47) <sup>b,c</sup>
Vicarious experience (1 = yes)	.13 (.34)	.05 (.22) <sup>a,b</sup>	.38 (.49) <sup>a,c</sup>	.30 (.46) <sup>b,c</sup>
Bias against individuals	5.19 (1.75)	4.70 (1.42) <sup>a,b</sup>	6.59 (1.85) <sup>a,c</sup>	5.94 (2.02) <sup>b,c</sup>
Bias against neighborhoods	2.77 (1.12)	2.55 (1.09) <sup>a,b</sup>	3.44 (.94) <sup>a,c</sup>	3.16 (1.03) <sup>b,c</sup>
Police prejudice	7.68 (2.47)	7.03 (2.19) <sup>a,b</sup>	9.69 (2.17) <sup>a,c</sup>	8.78 (2.49) <sup>b,c</sup>
Racial profiling	3.16 (1.82)	2.67 (1.63) <sup>a,b</sup>	4.75 (1.46) <sup>a,c</sup>	3.99 (1.78) <sup>b,c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> The white and black means are significantly different,  $p < .05$ .

<sup>b</sup> The white and Hispanic means are significantly different,  $p < .05$ .

<sup>c</sup> The black and Hispanic means are significantly different,  $p < .05$ .

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for all study variables. Compared to whites, African Americans and Hispanics in our sample report significantly less education and lower incomes; are younger; reside in cities rather than suburbs; report less neighborhood safety and more crime; report greater exposure to media coverage of police misconduct; and have more frequent experiences with, and greater perceptions of, police bias. Blacks and Hispanics also differ significantly on each of these variables (except income, neighborhood safety and crime). Blacks are more likely than Hispanics to report media exposure to police misconduct and personal/vicarious experience with racially biased policing, and they are also more likely to perceive the existence of our four types of police racial bias.

## Results

Hypothesis 1 predicted that blacks and Hispanics are more likely than whites to believe that racially biased policing exists. To test this hypothesis, we first cross-tabulated with race each of the items that compose the various racial bias indices; we briefly summarize those results here (not shown in a table). First, a majority of blacks (75%) and Hispanics (54%) believe that police in their city treat blacks worse than whites, and virtually the same proportions also believe that Hispanics are treated worse than whites (74% and 53%, respectively). Few whites agree: The overwhelming majority of whites (75%–77%) believe that police in their city treat whites and the two minority groups “equally.”<sup>7</sup>

A second set of questions pertains to perceived disparities in police services toward neighborhoods populated by the racial groups. A majority of blacks and Hispanics—but just one-third of whites—believes that police provide “worse” services to black and Hispanic neighborhoods (in comparison to white neighborhoods) throughout the U.S. It is interesting that blacks are more likely than Hispanics (77% vs. 61%, respectively) to believe that Hispanic neighborhoods are treated worse than white areas. The majority of whites believe that police treat neighborhoods similarly.

Third, blacks and Hispanics are also much more likely than whites to believe that police prejudice is a problem. Three times as many blacks as whites believe that police prejudice is “very common” throughout the U.S., and blacks are about six times as likely as whites to believe it is very common in their own city (Hispanics take an intermediate position). And fourth, while large majorities of all three groups disapprove of racial profiling (73% of whites, 77% of Hispanics, 90% of blacks) and believe that it is widespread in the U.S. (70% of whites, 83% of Hispanics, 92% of blacks), only a third of whites believe that profiling is pervasive in their own city (vs. 59% of Hispanics and 80% of blacks).

Finally, a large gulf separates minorities and whites when it comes to their own experiences with racial discrimination by the police. For instance, significant numbers of Hispanics (23%) and blacks (37%), but almost no whites (1%),

report being “treated unfairly” by police in their city specifically because of their race, and similar percentages of each group report being stopped by police solely because of their race. The same disparities are found for vicarious experience, that is, racially biased treatment of someone in the respondent’s household.

These race differences are consistent with hypothesis 1a, but do they persist net of the influences of demographic, neighborhood, media, and experiential variables? And what other factors besides race shape views of police bias? To answer these questions, we turn to the multivariate results in Table 2.

Table 2 displays results from regressing each of the police bias indices on race, the other demographics, and the neighborhood, media, and experience variables. Each model in the table presents coefficients both for the total sample and for each racial group separately. The total sample coefficients in Table 2 show that race differences in views of police bias persist net of the influence of the other predictors, supporting hypothesis 1b. In all four models—bias against individuals, bias against neighborhoods, police prejudice, and racial profiling—blacks and Hispanics are significantly more likely than whites to adopt a critical view of the police, and—consistent with the racial hierarchy thesis—Hispanics’ assessments of police bias are intermediate between the views of whites, who are less negative, and those of blacks, who are more negative.<sup>8</sup>

Several of the coefficients associated with the remaining predictors in the total sample columns of Table 2 are significant in at least three of the four models: younger people, persons exposed to media reports on police misconduct, and those who have personally experienced police bias are more likely to perceive all four types of bias. In addition, increasing education, city residence, and living in a neighborhood with a serious crime problem each significantly increases perceptions of bias in three of the four models.

The group-specific coefficients in Table 2 allow for an examination of racial differences in the effects of the predictors on attitudes toward racialized policing. Model 1 presents results for bias against minority individuals. The demographic variables have generally limited and inconsistent effects on citizen perceptions of this type of police bias, although social class does have some effect. Among whites, higher education increases perceptions of bias against individuals; among blacks, higher income increases these perceptions; but neither education nor income shapes Hispanics’ attitudes in this area. Similarly, the three dimensions of neighborhood crime have limited effects, though the feeling that crime is serious in one’s neighborhood increases blacks’ and Hispanics’ perceptions of police bias, and fears about safety (during the day) does so for blacks.

As predicted by hypothesis 2a, exposure to media accounts of police misconduct significantly increases perceptions of police bias against minority individuals among all three racial groups—though difference-in-slopes tests indicate that the effect of media exposure is not significantly stronger among blacks and Hispanics than among whites, as hypothesis 2b predicted. Hypothesis 3a predicted that personal and vicarious experience with police bias would

amplify the perception that police discriminate against minority individuals, and hypothesis 3b predicted that this effect would be strongest among blacks and Hispanics. We found that personal (but not vicarious) experience with police discrimination significantly shapes perceived bias among blacks and Hispanics (but not among whites), and, consistent with hypothesis 3b, these effects are significantly stronger among blacks and Hispanics than among whites. Moreover, as indicated by the magnitudes of the standardized coefficients associated with the media and personal experience variables, these effects are among the strongest in the model.

Model 2 in Table 2 reports the effects of the predictors on perceived bias against minority neighborhoods. In this model, higher education among whites, and higher education and income among blacks, increase perceptions of police bias; age is significant for whites and blacks, with older members of both groups reporting less perceived bias; and the remaining demographic predictors are largely unimportant. The view that neighborhood crime is high increases whites' perceptions of police bias against minority neighborhoods; and fears about safety (at night) increase blacks' perceptions of bias; safety fears (during the day), on the other hand, decrease blacks' and Hispanics' perceptions of bias. For each racial group, exposure to media reports of police misconduct significantly influences perceptions of differential police treatment of neighborhoods, strongly supporting hypothesis 2a. Contrary to the prediction of hypothesis 2b, however, we found no white–black or white–Hispanic differences in the effects of media exposure, though we did find that the effect of the media variable is significantly stronger for blacks than for Hispanics. Similarly, personal (but not vicarious) experience with police discrimination increases blacks' and Hispanics' perceptions of bias, lending partial support to hypothesis 3a. The differences with whites are not significant, despite hypothesis 2b's predictions.

The third model in Table 2 summarizes findings for perceptions of police prejudice. Consistent with earlier results, the demographic and neighborhood crime factors have only sporadic effects on perceptions of prejudice, though black and Hispanic city dwellers have higher levels than their suburban counterparts; and neighborhood crime increases perceptions of prejudice among blacks and Hispanics. Media exposure and both personal and vicarious experience with police misconduct, on the other hand, increase perceptions among all three racial groups that police officers are racially prejudiced, again providing strong support for hypotheses 2a and 3a. As before, however, the largely uniform effects of these variables across racial groups are not consistent with hypotheses 2b and 3b.

Model 4 in Table 2 reports results for the racial profiling index. Again, demographic<sup>9</sup> and other control factors play only a small role in accounting for citizens' perceptions and evaluations of racial profiling. As predicted, however, media exposure strongly shapes perceptions; and either personal or vicarious experience with police bias significantly increases perceptions that racial profiling is widespread and unacceptable. Again, evidence of significant minority–white

Table 2. OLS Estimates for the Regression of Perceived Police Bias on Predictors<sup>a</sup>

	Model 1. Bias against Individuals							
	Total Sample		Whites		Blacks		Hispanics	
	<i>b</i>	beta	<i>b</i>	beta	<i>b</i>	Beta	<i>b</i>	beta
Demographics								
Black	1.170*** (.127)	.233	—	—	—	—	—	—
Hispanic	.704*** (.114)	.145	—	—	—	—	—	—
Education	.120*** (.024)	.116	.139*** (.037)	.167	.050 (.055)	.041	.028 (.053)	.022
Income	-.005 (.010)	-.011	-.022 (.017)	-.056	.048** (.019)	.109	.038 (.022)	.077
Gender (1 = male)	.097 (.075)	.028	.191 (.118)	.067	-.279 (.164)	-.076	.289 (.166)	.073
Age	-.006** (.002)	-.058	-.008* (.004)	-.096	-.007 (.005)	-.061	-.007 (.006)	-.051
Residence (1 = city)	.231** (.081)	.061	.281* (.119)	.095	.316 (.178)	.079	.130 (.197)	.027
Region (1 = south)	.029 (.079)	.008	.104 (.123)	.034	.112 (.160)	.031	.037 (.181)	.008
Neighborhood								
Safety (day)	.145 (.089)	.049	.164 (.153)	.057	.452** (.167)	.163	.167 (.164)	.064
Safety (night)	.018 (.068)	.008	.084 (.109)	.042	-.077 (.136)	-.035	-.047 (.141)	-.022
Neighborhood crime	.142** (.056)	.062	.008 (.090)	.004	.261** (.101)	.121	.262* (.110)	.112
Policing								
Media exposure	.451*** (.053)	.186	.478*** (.087)	.225	.266** (.101)	.114	.517*** (.105)	.205
Personal experience (1 = yes)	.823*** (.133)	.168	.012 <sup>b,c</sup> (.319)	.002	1.091*** <sup>b</sup> (.179)	.297	1.396*** <sup>c</sup> (.198)	.326
Vicarious experience (1 = yes)	.207 (.136)	.040	.157 (.339)	.022	.161 (.176)	.043	.170 (.197)	.038
Constant	2.529		2.669		3.568		2.706	
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.273		.078		.184		.223	
N of cases (unweighted)	1,521		552		454		515	

Model 2. Bias against Neighborhoods

	Total Sample		Whites		Blacks		Hispanics	
	<i>b</i>	beta	<i>b</i>	beta	<i>b</i>	Beta	<i>b</i>	beta
<b>Demographics</b>								
Black	.618*** (.085)	.193	—	—	—	—	—	—
Hispanic	.397*** (.077)	.128	—	—	—	—	—	—
Education	.084*** (.016)	.127	.112*** (.028)	.177	.054* (.027)	.088	-.036 (.028)	-.056
Income	-.007 (.007)	-.023	-.022 (.013)	-.073	.036*** (.010)	.159	.018 (.012)	.070
Gender (1 = male)	-.034 (.050)	-.051	.057 (.089)	.026	-.081 (.080)	-.044	-.078* (.089)	-.087
Age	-.005*** (.002)	-.080	-.006* (.003)	-.092	-.007** (.002)	-.111	-.005 (.003)	-.073
Residence (1 = city)	.097 (.054)	.041	.095 (.090)	.042	.098 (.085)	.049	-.003 (.106)	-.001
Region (1 = south)	-.061 (.052)	-.026	-.041 (.092)	-.018	-.046 (.078)	-.025	.093 (.098)	.041
<b>Neighborhood</b>								
Safety (day)	-.053 (.060)	-.028	.069 (.115)	.032	-.220** (.081)	-.157	-.277** (.088)	-.206
Safety (night)	.096* (.045)	.068	.087 (.081)	.058	.174** (.066)	.156	.140 (.076)	.125
Neighborhood crime	.062 (.037)	.043	.151* (.067)	.100	.051 (.049)	.048	.076 (.059)	.063
<b>Policing</b>								
Media exposure	.322*** (.036)	.208	.332*** (.065)	.207	.414***d (.048)	.356	.261***d (.057)	.202
Personal experience (1 = yes)	.280** (.090)	.089	.078 (.247)	.015	.273** (.086)	.148	.429*** (.107)	.196
Vicarious experience (1 = yes)	.108 (.091)	.032	.344 (.259)	.063	-.040 (.085)	-.021	.092 (.104)	.041
Constant		1.593		.160		1.629		2.441
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>		.176		.065		.228		.123
N of cases (unweighted)		1,550		564		463		523

Model 3. Police Prejudice								
	Total Sample		Whites		Blacks		Hispanics	
	<i>b</i>	beta	<i>b</i>	beta	<i>b</i>	beta	<i>b</i>	beta
<b>Demographics</b>								
Black	.891*** (.163)	.126	—	—	—	—	—	—
Hispanic	.528*** (.148)	.077	—	—	—	—	—	—
Education	.009 (.031)	.006	.018 (.051)	.014	.009 (.059)	.006	.006 (.061)	.004
Income	-.012 (.013)	-.091	-.016 (.024)	-.027	-.005 (.021)	-.010	.017 (.025)	.027
Gender (1 = male)	-.157 (.097)	-.032	-.149 (.164)	-.034	.074 (.174)	.017	-.320 (.190)	-.065
Age	-.020*** (.003)	-.137	-.026*** (.005)	-.201	.001 (.005)	.002	-.008 (.007)	-.046
Residence (1 = city)	.244* (.104)	.046	.199 (.165)	.044	.531** (.187)	.113	.501* (.224)	.083
Region (1 = south)	.194 (.101)	.038	.224 (.170)	.048	.528** (.170)	.122	-.029 (.208)	-.005
<b>Neighborhood</b>								
Safety (day)	-.085 (.116)	-.014	.005 (.213)	.001	-.229 (.177)	-.070	-.120 (.188)	-.037
Safety (night)	.129 (.087)	.041	.168 (.150)	.054	.247 (.144)	.095	-.094 (.161)	-.035
Neighborhood crime	.311*** (.072)	.096	.160 (.124)	.052	.349*** (.106)	.139	.566*** (.129)	.193
<b>Policing</b>								
Media exposure	.885*** (.068)	.259	.940*** (.120)	.291	.721*** (.106)	.266	.742*** (.121)	.235
Personal experience (1 = yes)	1.685*** (.171)	.246	2.089*** (.436)***	.205	1.496*** (.189)	.346	1.672*** (.229)	.313
Vicarious experience (1 = yes)	.793*** (.177)	.107	.998* (.478)	.090	.381* <sup>d</sup> (.186)	.086	.999*** <sup>d</sup> (.225)	.181
Constant	4.534		4.789		4.851		4.682	
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.383		.232		.325		.344	
<i>N</i> of cases (unweighted)	1,534		555		463		516	

continued

Model 4. Racial Profiling

	Total Sample		Whites		Blacks		Hispanics	
	<i>b</i>	beta	<i>b</i>	beta	<i>b</i>	beta	<i>b</i>	beta
Demographics								
Black	1.210*** (.128)	.230	—	—	—	—	—	—
Hispanic	.632*** (.115)	.124	—	—	—	—	—	—
Education	.083*** (.024)	.077	.122** (.041)	.127	.052 (.043)	.053	.005 (.046)	.004
Income	-.025* (.010)	-.054	-.046* (.019)	-.103	.016 (.015)	.045	.007 (.019)	.015
Gender (1 = male)	-.029 (.076)	-.008	.019 (.131)	.116	-.169 (.128)	-.058	.001 (.144)	.001
Age	-.014*** (.002)	-.125	-.018*** (.004)	-.184	-.004 (.004)	-.046	-.009 (.005)	-.069
Residence (1 = city)	.177* (.081)	.042	.118 (.132)	.035	.172 (.137)	.055	.485** (.170)	.112
Region (1 = south)	-.151 (.079)	-.039	-.190 (.135)	-.055	.068 (.125)	.023	.226 (.158)	.056
Neighborhood								
Safety (day)	.083 (.090)	.013	.149 (.168)	.046	-.013 (.130)	-.006	-.200 (.143)	-.085
Safety (night)	-.054 (.068)	-.023	-.080 (.119)	-.036	.144 (.106)	.083	-.076 (.121)	-.039
Neighborhood crime	.266*** (.056)	.112	.192* (.099)	.084	.120 (.079)	.071	.477*** (.095)	.227
Policing								
Media exposure	.467*** (.053)	.184	.504*** (.095)	.209	.311*** (.078)	.172	.392*** (.090)	.175
Personal experience (1 = yes)	.780*** (.133)	.153	.414 <sup>c</sup> (.345)	.054	.749*** <sup>d</sup> (.139)	.258	1.200*** <sup>c,d</sup> (.171)	.314
Vicarious experience (1 = yes)	.490*** (.138)	.089	.914* (.374)	.112	.395** (.138)	.134	.503** (.170)	.126
Constant		1.329		1.551		2.510		1.497
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>		.320		.124		.191		.284
N of cases (unweighted)		1,526		554		458		514

<sup>a</sup> Standard errors are in parentheses.

<sup>b</sup> The white and black slope coefficients are significantly different,  $p < .05$

<sup>c</sup> The white and Hispanic slope coefficients are significantly different,  $p < .05$

<sup>d</sup> The black and Hispanic slope coefficients are significantly different,  $p < .05$

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$  \*\*\* $p < .001$

differences of the kind predicted by hypotheses 2b and 3b is weak.

In sum, the demographic factors (other than race) tend to have only sporadic effects in each model; this finding is consistent with the literature on public perceptions of racial discrimination in other institutional arenas (housing, jobs, education) documenting limited or weak demographic effects (Kluegel and Bobo 2001; Sigelman and Welch 1991). Supporting hypothesis 2a, we found that exposure to media accounts of police misconduct is significant in all models for each group. Hypothesis 2b's prediction of stronger media effects among minority than among white citizens was not supported, however. Hypothesis 3a predicted that personal or vicarious experience with police bias would increase citizens' overall perceptions of racialized policing among all groups. The personal experience variant of hypothesis 3a receives strong support; evidence for the vicarious experience version of the hypothesis is somewhat weaker, with significant effects present in the prejudice and profiling, but not in the individual- or neighborhood-bias, models. Hypothesis 3b also received partial support. Compared to whites, personal experience with police bias significantly increases perceptions of biased policing for blacks and Hispanics in model 1, and for Hispanics in model 4. Vicarious experience with police bias, though not as consistent a predictor as personal experience, is nevertheless significant in two of the four models for each racial group, lending partial support to hypothesis 3a—though the racial differences predicted by hypothesis 3b are not present. The fact that there are few racial differences with regard to the effect of personal and vicarious experience on perceptions of police bias is consistent with some other studies that have found that the effect of certain kinds of personal experience—such as racial profiling—is so powerful that it colors attitudes toward the police irrespective of race (Weitzer and Tuch 2002).

## Conclusion

Race structures citizen views of police racial bias, as it does other aspects of policing. In all four models, blacks and Hispanics are more likely than whites to believe that police bias is a problem. Blacks, however, are more likely to perceive such bias than Hispanics, net of other factors. This finding helps address one unanswered question in the literature on police–minority relations—whether blacks and Hispanics share a minority-group perspective or whether perceptions take the form of a white–Hispanic–black racial hierarchy. On the issue of racialized policing, we find that, consistent with the racial-hierarchy pattern, blacks and Hispanics do differ significantly. Indeed, on some questions, Hispanics are much less likely to perceive bias than are blacks. For instance, blacks are more likely to perceive police discrimination against Hispanics than Hispanics themselves are to hold this belief, and blacks are more likely than Hispanics to say that Hispanic neighborhoods are discriminated against (vs. white neighborhoods) and to believe

that Hispanic drivers are racially profiled (compared to white drivers). Blacks are thus more inclined to perceive racial bias against both minority groups. These findings indicate that “minority” perceptions are not monolithic: in terms of racially biased policing, Hispanics differ in some important ways from African Americans. One reason that the two groups differ, at least with regard to their personal experiences, may have to do with their visibility. For instance, blacks may be more vulnerable than Hispanics to traffic stops by police because their skin color heightens their visibility. But further research is needed to account more fully for black–Hispanic differences in relations with police. It may be that black and Hispanic views are issue-specific: on some issues most Hispanics and blacks may agree, while on other issues there may be less consensus (see Weitzer and Tuch 2004a, 2004b).

Americans are overwhelmingly opposed in principle to racially biased law enforcement. When asked in one poll whether it is the responsibility of the federal government to ensure that minorities and whites receive equal treatment from the police and the courts, large majorities of whites, Hispanics, and African Americans answered affirmatively (*Washington Post* 1995). But support for the principle of equal justice does not necessarily mean that one believes the system dispenses unequal justice. Our data indicate that many whites believe that the system operates impartially. Over three-quarters of whites think that police treat individual blacks and Hispanics the same as whites; a substantial majority of whites take the same view of minority and white neighborhoods; among whites who believe that police officers are prejudiced, most take the position that prejudice is mild, “somewhat common” instead of “very common”; and only one-third of whites believe that police engage in racial profiling of minority drivers—stopping them more frequently than whites for the same kinds of traffic violations.<sup>10</sup> That many whites are skeptical with regard to police discrimination, or see it as isolated and episodic rather than widespread, is consistent with their views of racial discrimination elsewhere in American society (Hochschild 1995; Schuman et al. 1997). In one poll, for instance, only 17% of whites—compared to 44% of blacks—thought that blacks are discriminated against “a lot” in America (*Washington Post*, 12 June 1997). For most whites, racial discrimination in general, and police discrimination in particular, is not a serious problem in America. Minorities, by contrast, tend to perceive racial discrimination in a wide range of institutional arenas, including housing, employment, and education (Hochschild 1995; Schuman et al. 1997).

Blacks and Hispanics are also significantly more likely than whites to report that they have personally been discriminated against by the police and that this has happened to another member of their household. While Hispanics are less likely than blacks to report these kinds of experiences, the percentage of Hispanics who do so is closer to that of blacks than it is to that of whites—departing somewhat from the racial hierarchy pattern.

Of course, perceived experience with police bias is not necessarily equivalent

to actual discrimination—since the sheer exercise of police authority (typically in a brusque and authoritarian manner) may be construed as racial bias by citizens (Sykes and Clark 1975; Wilson 1972). But, as is true for racial discrimination in other spheres, there is at least a rough aggregate correspondence between actual practice and blacks' and Hispanics' reported experiences of police treatment. Our respondents' self-reports are consistent with evidence from street observations of police–citizen interactions and records of police stops, which indicate that police indeed tend to view minorities with a high degree of suspicion and as having criminal propensities. Minorities tend to be stopped more often than whites (Fagan and Davies 2000; Harris 2002) and to be treated more harshly in encounters (Hepburn 1978; Smith 1986; Terrill and Reisig 2003). Similarly, the high percentage of blacks and Hispanics who believe that police prejudice is widespread in the nation is consistent with data on police officers themselves. As Jefferson concludes, “All the major British and North American studies, from the early post-war period on, agree that negative, stereotypical, prejudiced, and hostile attitudes to blacks are rife amongst police officers (1988:522).”

To explore further these racial differences, we examined several possible predictors of perceptions. Most studies of police–citizen relations focus on demographic variables, which, we find, do not fully exhaust the range of determinants of public opinion. Citizen views are also strongly influenced by certain nondemographic factors.

First, personal and vicarious experience of racially biased policing shapes perceptions of police bias, net of other factors. For blacks and Hispanics, such personal experience significantly increases perceptions of racialized policing in all four models. This perception is not the case for whites (with one exception). Vicarious experience significantly affects perceived police bias in two of the four models for each racial group. A similar pattern is found with respect to discrimination in other arenas, such as jobs and housing. One study, for instance, found that blacks, Hispanics, and Asians who felt that they had personally experienced job discrimination were more likely to perceive job discrimination against their minority group generally (Kluegel and Bobo 2001).

A second key finding is the mass media's role in shaping perceptions of racialized policing. Repeated exposure to media reports on police abuse (i.e., excessive force, verbal abuse, corruption) is a strong predictor of the belief that police bias exists, is widespread, and is unacceptable. Media effects are extremely robust—operating for all three racial groups in all four models, net of other factors. People who frequently hear or read about incidents of police misconduct, as transmitted by the media, are inclined to conclude that the police engage in racial profiling, are prejudiced, and discriminate against minority individuals and neighborhoods. Though it is usually overlooked by researchers who study public perceptions of the police, the mass media appears to be an important determinant of those perceptions.

As indicated earlier, much of the literature documents race differences but does not adequately explain them. Our extension of the group-position thesis holds that views of social institutions will be influenced by group interests and perceived threats. Dominant groups should perceive the police as an institution allied with their interests, whereas minorities should be more inclined to view the police as contributing to their subordination. These predictions are generally supported by our findings. Whites tend to minimize or discount the existence of racialized policing and perhaps view charges of police racism as a threat to a revered institution. Blacks are inclined to believe that police bias is common, and many Hispanics share this view. Both groups are interested in curbing abuses of citizens, particularly minority citizens, who are disproportionately the recipients of mistreatment. Greater controls on the police may have the effect of advancing the group interests of blacks and Hispanics (Weitzer and Tuch 2004b).

Our findings highlight the role of both micro- and macro-level factors in fostering racial differences in evaluations of the police: The greater tendency for blacks and Hispanics to perceive bias is largely a function of their disproportionate adverse experiences with officers and exposure to media reports of police abuse. Views of the police are thus related to racial differences not only in general group-position relationships but also in real or perceived group vulnerability to abusive practices, which is reinforced by both personal experience and exposure to media reports of abuse.

## Notes

1. In the present survey, Hispanics and blacks overwhelmingly supported an increase, in their city, in the number of officers patrolling the streets in police cars (80% for both groups) and on foot patrol (69% and 80%, respectively) as well as “more police surveillance of areas where street crimes occur frequently” (85% and 88%, respectively). White support for these changes was similarly high.
2. The American Association for Public Opinion Research response rate definitions can be viewed at [www.aapor.org](http://www.aapor.org).
3. A detailed demographic panel analysis is available at [www.knowledgenetworks.com](http://www.knowledgenetworks.com).
4. We recognize that only one type of vicarious experience is measured by our question. It does not include other associates, such as friends, coworkers, and neighbors.
5. Because our media-exposure measure is based on respondents’ self-reports, some caution is in order in interpreting media effects. Some self-selection may be involved in exposure to media coverage of the police, with acutely interested persons being more attentive than others. Our media variable is also fairly broad, asking about exposure to reports of police abuse anywhere in the country, which may or may not include the respondent’s city of residence. An alternative measure would ask specifically about media coverage of incidents in the respondent’s city.
6. We use the term “racial bias” as a construct referring to the four types of outcomes described in this paragraph, while recognizing that two of the questions refer to disparate

treatment of individuals and neighborhoods, which may or may not reflect outright racial discrimination.

7. All the cross-tabulated relationships discussed in this section are statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ).

8. Hispanics were asked to identify their ancestry as Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, Caribbean, or other Hispanic. No significant subgroup differences on perceived police bias were found. Because of the small sample sizes for some of these subgroups, this finding should be considered tentative. It is also for this reason that our primary analyses compare the three major racial groups rather than the Hispanic nationality groups.

9. A previous study (Weitzer and Tuch 2002) reported class effects on attitudes toward racial profiling among African Americans, with more educated blacks expressing more disapproval of the practice and greater awareness of its existence than less educated blacks. We suspected that the absence of class effects among blacks (in model 4, Table 2) was attributable to differences in the measures of profiling used in the two studies. To test this, we selected from our four-item index of profiling attitudes the two questions that we replicated from our earlier study—approval of profiling and assessments of whether the practice is widespread—and fit logistic regression models to the data for blacks. We found class effects consistent with our earlier findings: Higher-income blacks are more likely than lower-income blacks to disapprove of profiling, and more educated blacks are more likely than their less educated counterparts to believe that profiling is widespread.

10. The only exception to this pattern is that a majority of whites believe that racial profiling is widespread in the U.S. (but not in their city or neighborhood). Curiously, in an apparent contradiction, whites are twice as likely to believe that profiling is widespread than to believe that blacks or Hispanics are stopped more frequently than whites.

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