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Differences Between Races During Questioning by the Police

Amy Barron

This experiment was conducted with 100 volunteers from Lindenwood University (20 staff and 80 students). There were 56 male and 44 female participants. Each participant took a survey pertaining to their past encounters with the police. The researcher was trying to determine if there was: a) a difference between races in the amount of people who had been questioned by the police for looking suspicious, b) the reason why the people who had been questioned felt they had, c) if there was a difference between sexes and questioning for looking suspicious and d) if any sex and race combination was more likely to be questioned for looking suspicious (e.g., African American males). A Chi Square analysis was conducted and the results of the first two analyses revealed there were promising trends, they did not reach significance. The last two analyses showed strong significance between the groups.

When determining if a person looks suspicious, is skin color a factor that plays a role in fitting the mold of a criminal? Are certain races more likely to be questioned by the police for simply “looking suspicious”? If law abiding citizens of a certain race are questioned more by suspicious police, what other factors besides racism could play a role? These are all very serious questions that are current issues between minority U.S. citizens and the police.

The purpose of this study is to see if there is, in fact, a racial difference in the amount of people who are questioned either for looking suspicious, or for fitting the description of a perpetrator. One hundred participants were surveyed to determine what race and sex were more commonly approached by the police under these circumstances. Those who reported they had

been in either of these situations were called for a telephone interview to gather specific information about the incident and the feelings of the “suspect” on the situation.

This study was inspired by the researcher’s Criminal Justice professor. The professor asked his class who had been questioned by the police for looking suspicious or fitting the description of someone wanted for a crime. In response, four African American males raised their hands while no other students of any sex or race raised theirs. Racial profiling is not a new topic to the Criminal Justice field. Several studies have been done in the past to see if minorities are targeted by the police for crimes as minor as traffic stops. Ridgeway (2006) conducted a study utilizing only moving violations and mechanical/registration violations to see if there in fact was a difference between race and amount of times each was pulled over. The researcher used only these violations because, unlike felony and misdemeanor stops, the police were allowed to use discretion when pulling these people over. The study also noted, “these are the type of discretionary traffic stops that are commonly associated with the issue of racial profiling (p.13).. While Ridgeway’s results did not show any significant differences overall, he did note that different regions show much greater differences when pulling over “blacks” than “white” citizens. Another study by Lundman and Kaufman (2003) found that African Americans are more likely to be stopped and that both African Americans and Hispanics are less likely than Whites to be stopped for legitimate reasons. In these situations, the officers did not pull the African American drivers over for traffic violations, but instead because someone in the car was said to be participating in suspicious behavior.

Traffic stops are not the only instances where racial profiling is rumored to be prominent. Racial profiling in shopping centers had also been a common topic of interest when the effects of racism are studied. Lee (2000) conducted research on the experiences of seventy 75 residents in

five predominately black neighborhoods in New York and Philadelphia. His research showed that black men were treated with more suspicion than any other sex or race. Gabbidon and Higgins (2007) found in their study that “African American individuals compared to other races are more than ten times as likely to perceive themselves as having experienced CRP (consumer racial profiling)” (p.5).

Since several studies had been done to show racial profiling is a significant issue within the police force, two officers were interviewed to get their opinions as to why these events may be occurring. Both of the officers wished to remain anonymous but offered that one worked at Wentzville, Missouri Police Department and the other at the Hazelwood, Missouri Police Department. The Wentzville officer reported that when questioning a person because of fitting the description of a suspect they are looking for, the police are justified in their actions. “We are given a description of the person to look for and we do it. We are given less descriptive options when looking for a black person though. With a white person, you have hair color and eye color options. With a black guy, we only have hair style and that their eye color is brown” (anonymous, personal communication January 23, 2008). On the other hand, two African American participants in the study separately reported they had previously been questioned by the police because the suspect the officers were looking for was a “black man wearing a white shirt”. While both of the participants reported they were wearing white, they were offended by the fact that that was the only description given to the police. A police officer from Hazelwood reported that he always tried to avoid racism, but, “whether we like it or not, it still happens. Some of my coworkers are racist and they don’t even realize it. On the other hand though, some try so hard to not be racist they let minorities off on things they would cite a white guy for” (anonymous, personal communication, February 12, 2008). Neither of the officers were able to

offer reasons that would account for the differences between races concerning questioning for “looking suspicious”.

It seems that most people today agree racism is a serious issue, but how much of these accusations can be statistically backed up? Is it possible that minorities mistakenly assume they are being victimized when in fact the person questioning their behavior is justified? This survey will not only tell what races, if any, are targeted more, but also give the people who feel they are victimized a chance to explain what reasons they feel caused them to be questioned by the police. The researcher hypothesized that on study 1), that African American participants would be questioned more than any other race group, on study 2), that African American participants who had been questioned for looking suspicious would be more likely to attribute the reason for the questioning to race, on study 3), that men would be questioned by the police more for looking suspicious and on study 4) that African American men would be more likely than any other race/sex group to be questioned for looking suspicious.

Method

Participants

Forty-four women and 56 men voluntarily participated in this experiment. Twenty participants were faculty or staff at Lindenwood University and 80 participants were Lindenwood Students. Ages of the participants ranged between 18 and 68. Of the participants, 51 were White (non Hispanic), 32 African American, 6 Asian, 8 Hispanic, and 3 were Multi-Racial (see Figure 1). Some of the participants were recruited through the Human Subject Pool at Lindenwood University. These participants were awarded extra credit points in either a psychology, sociology or anthropology class for participation in the study. All participants who did not receive extra credit were rewarded a piece of candy for their participation. The student

participants that were not part of the Human Subject Pool were recruited either from general education classes at Lindenwood University or from the Black Student Union at Lindenwood University. The faculty/ staff participants were randomly selected to participate and were visited during their office hours by the researcher.

Materials and Procedure

The researcher was assigned a room in the Psychology Lab at Lindenwood University to conduct the experiment with Human Subject Pool participants. The lab contained two desks and two chairs. One desk also contained a computer; this desk was used as the researcher's desk. Two classrooms were also used. Classrooms of Professor Witherspoon (Criminology) and Professor Mueller (Inter-Cultural Communication) used to obtain other Lindenwood participant's data. In these rooms there were several chairs, all facing the same direction with about two feet between participants. One of these rooms was in Roemer Hall and the other in Young Hall. The remainder of the Lindenwood participants were recruited through the Black Student Union (B.S.U.). These students took the survey in one of the classrooms in the Spellman Center. First all participants were asked to read and sign an informed consent form granting the researcher permission to conduct the study and ensuring that their rights were understood. Along with the consent form, all participants were verbally reminded they would need to put their telephone number on the survey in case they qualified for a follow up interview. Next, a survey was given to all participants questioning previous involvement with the police and demographic information (see Appendix A).

Upon completion of the survey, participants were given a feedback form explaining the reasoning behind the study. All participants were also verbally debriefed following the survey. After the surveys were completed, those who answered "yes" to having been questioned by the

police because they “looked suspicious” were called for a follow-up interview held over the phone. The follow-up interview was conducted one week after all surveys were completed. The follow up interview can be found in Appendix B. A pen or pencil was used to record all data and a computer was used to graph answers and keep all information on file. The program, SPSS, was used to analyze all data.

Results

A Chi-square analysis was performed on all of the participants’ responses to determine if there was a relationship between a person’s race and whether they were questioned or not. The results revealed that the two effects were not related, $X^2_4 = 8.206$, $p = .084$. While significance was not reached, the results were nearing significance. This did not support the researcher’s hypothesis that African Americans would be more likely to be questioned by the police for looking suspicious.

The respondents’ belief of the reason why they were questioned was compared to their race. The results of this study revealed that the two were not related, $X^2_4 = 10.754$, $p = .550$. While significance was not found, results were nearing significance when comparing races to the reason why they felt they had been questioned by the police. This also did not support the researcher’s hypothesis that African American participants would be more likely to attribute the reason for questioning to their race.

The next analysis was to see if men or women were questioned more by the police for looking suspicious. This result supported the researcher’s hypothesis, $X^2_4 = 22.955$, $p < .001$. This showed strong significance, revealing that men were questioned more than women for looking suspicious.

The final analysis compared a person's race combined with their sex to police interaction. The results of this study revealed that the two were related, $X^2_4 = 39.922$, $p=.002$. This supported the researcher's hypothesis that African American men would be questioned more by the police for "looking suspicious".

Discussion

In this study trends were found showing that African Americans were questioned more for looking suspicious but the results had not quite reached significance. Other results showed definite relation between sex and police interaction and African Males and police interaction. As with any study, more participants will always give a more accurate result. In order to receive a more accurate result, a greater sample size and a more diverse sample would be ideal. More participants of minority races would help the researcher receive more representative sample. In this study, only 6% of the participants were Asian, 51% White, Non-Hispanic, 32% African American, 8% Hispanic, and 3% multi racial. Out of all of the participants, 47% had been questioned by the police merely for looking suspicious. These percentages are very uneven. Perhaps with an equally divided sample, results would reach significance. Perhaps if the study were done at another campus a more diverse sample could be obtained. Lindenwood University's ethnicity chart can be seen in Table 1.

Because the researcher needed more African American participants in the study, the study was also conducted at a Black Student Union meeting held on the Lindenwood campus. This may have skewed the results since the rest of the participants were either from the Human Subject Pool, faculty/staff, or General Education classes.

Participants were also questioned in the original survey to determine whether the general population believed certain races were targeted by the police or not. The results showed that 39%

believes African American's are targeted, 26% believes a combination of African Americans and Hispanics are targeted, and only 20% reported they felt that no race was targeted by the police. Participants who reported they had been questioned for looking suspicious were also asked why they felt they had been questioned. Only one person reported they were actually participating in suspicious (but legal) behavior. Only 6% reported that they felt their race was the reason they were questioned. Two of the participants who had reported they chose "Other" for their belief as to why they were questioned because they felt they had only been questioned because they were in a group of African Americans. The woman who reported "other" reported that she was with two African American men and the police man pulled up to her and asked "Mam, are you alright?", when nothing out of the ordinary was going on. The man who had chosen "other" reported that he was the only white person in a car with all African Americans and felt he had only been questioned because the others were. After conducting the experiment, the researcher noted that it seemed males were more likely than females to be questioned by the police for looking suspicious. This may be an interesting topic to look into at a later time.

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Figure 1

Race Percentages of Participants

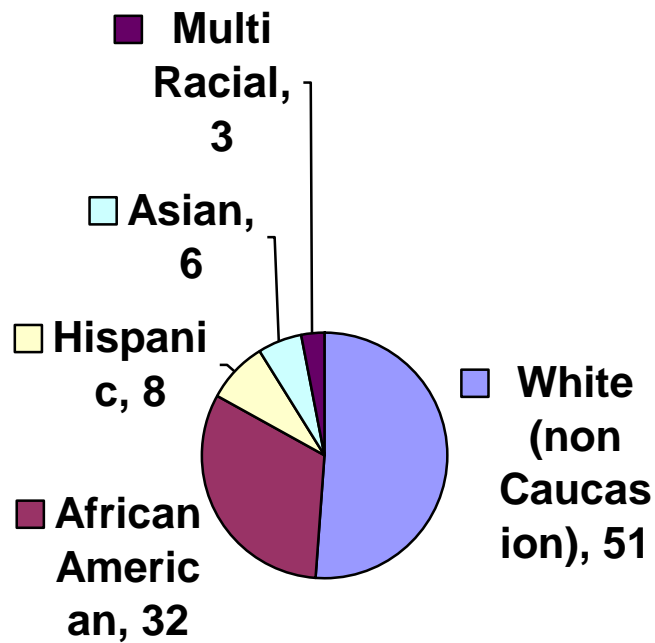


Table 1

Total Male Students = 3,618		Full time	Part time
Total Female Students = 6,015	Student Total	Instructional Staff	Instructional Staff
Men & Women			
Non resident alien	711	0	0
Black, non-Hispanic	1530	4	10
American Indian / Alaska Native	7	1	2
Asian / Pacific Islander	73	10	3
Hispanic	99	1	15
White, non-Hispanic	6454	172	358
Race / ethnicity unknown	740	0	0
Total	9633	188	391

Appendix A

Criminal Justice Survey Part I

What is your...

Phone Number

- 1) Age*
- 2) Sex*
- 3) Race: Please check all that Apply.*
Black, Non Hispanic _____
Pacific Islander _____
Asian _____
White, Non Hispanic _____
Hispanic _____
Multiracial _____ & _____
Other: (please specify) _____
- 4) G.P.A (last year of schooling)
- 5) City and/or Country you have lived in a majority of your life
- 6) Number of years of schooling you have received?
- 7) Have you ever been arrested or taken into custody? (with or without prosecution)
- 8) Have you ever been convicted of a crime? (this includes crimes such as speeding)
- 9) Have you ever been questioned by the police simply because you "looked suspicious"? *
- 10) Have you ever been questioned by the police because you "fit the description" of a person they suspected of committing a crime"

THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION

*** Only questions 1, 2, 3, and 9 were used in this study. The rest were filler questions.**

Appendix B

Criminal Justice Phone Interview

1) How many times have you been questioned by the police because you simply “look suspicious”?

2) THE MOST RECENT: Do you believe the police questioned you because of:

a) You really looked suspicious

b) the amount of people you were with

c) your race

d) the time of night or location

e) other

3) What was (were) the race(s) of the officer who questioned you? (please list each instance separately) (most recent incident).

THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION

Author Note

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