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# Toward Data Justice: Analyzing Police Shooting Data Systems and Their Narratives

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## Abstract

*Reports of criminal activity tend to take up the majority of news time. Viewers may be more exposed to instances of police misbehavior if news outlets extensively cover crime tales. More people are looking at the police now that there are so many technology advancements, such as mobile phone cameras. There has been an uptick in allegations of unfair police procedures, which may have a chilling effect on public opinion. People may have a skewed understanding of the justifications and circumstances behind the use of force if they see too many depictions of police brutality. The media's portrayal of police brutality as a background has not been the subject of many studies. These evaluations may show certain tendencies or errors in the way the news reports things. The present research addresses this knowledge vacuum by reviewing videos of police abuse that have been uploaded on YouTube. According to the results, there are more recordings of victims from minority groups than victims from White backgrounds. Additionally, research shows that police often resort to unwarranted physical force when dealing with criminals in detention or when trying to mediate verbal conflicts between themselves and citizens. This investigation shows that public and police alike are more likely to have unfavorable views and prejudices about one other, which increases the risk that force will be employed during confrontations.*

## Introduction

The subject of police brutality has grown in recent years. The use of force by police in interactions with the public has been the subject of intense scrutiny after a number of high-profile instances came to light. For example, the public is deeply divided over when deadly force should be used, as seen in the tragic cases of Eric Garner (who died as a result of a chokehold by police), LaQuan McDonald (who was shot dead as he walked away from the cops), Walter Scott (who was shot dead as he escaped from the cops), and most recently George Floyd. The victims in the aforementioned, publicly publicized incidents are unfortunately typical: unarmed Black men (Embrick, 2015; Emesowum, 2017; Nix et al., 2017). There have been many occasions when the use of

force by police has been called into question and has been "shocking to the conscience." These occurrences have happened among these deaths. There has been a national uproar about these incidents, and many demonstrations have taken place, however police officers who use excessive force are almost never punished (Chaney & Robertson, 2015). Worse still, punishments handed down to convicted police are often less than those handed down to individuals found guilty of same offenses (Chaney & Robertson, 2015).

The use of less-than-lethal force by police in confrontations has been the subject of relatively few studies compared to those that have looked into police brutality. To address this gap, this study employs a thorough content analysis to look at how well police and citizens handle situations when force is used. Reviewing cases involving the use of force may provide light on trends unique to situations involving the use of excessive force by police. Policy decisions on line officer training and procedures may be better informed if such tendencies are highlighted. Official government reports usually include the most thorough information about use of force occurrences (Dixon et al., 2003). These assessments are common after high-profile incidents and a flood of public complaints against police. It is often said that the absence of impartial monitoring in the police force might result in prejudiced assessments of wrongdoing (Stinson, Sr. et al., 2010). To rephrase, insufficient sanctions (such as not charging offenders, nonindictments, and low sentences) may encourage further wrongdoing if police are not subject to enough scrutiny and openness. Consequently, it's possible that many assumptions about the reliability of police-citizen interactions are not grounded in the actual experiences of those involved.

The outcomes of government monitoring have often been less than desirable. The public does not always have access to the most heinous details of police

violence. Following a high-profile fatality at the hands of police, it is common practice for agencies to postpone the publication of reports and other video evidence. Explanations given for the withholding of information after instances involving the use of force often include continuing investigations, future lawsuits, privacy concerns, and sometimes legislative constraints (Freund, 2015; Todak et al., 2021; Tregel et al., 2020). Again, this hesitancy toward disclosure caused by postponements in disclosing information on use of force instances could work to the benefit of police officers, allowing them to keep a good reputation in the eyes of the public. A fair trial for accused officials, whether in state courts or the "court of public opinion" influenced by sensationalized media accounts, may need such measures, which may be partially rationalized. The fact that there is so little written on the nuances of crimes committed by police officers is another factor to think about. Although "police officers commit an alarming array of serious crimes..." (Stinson, Sr. et al., 2010), Surprisingly, very little is known about these crimes... and no official American body keeps track of information on police officers' criminal offenses (pp. 413-414).

Media portrayals of police-citizen interactions may be skewed due to the mutually beneficial connection between law enforcement and mainstream news outlets, according to previous studies (Hirschfield & Simon, 2010). Given the heavy reliance on law enforcement organizations for noteworthy information, this notion suggests that major news programs could be hesitant to cover instances of police misbehavior. This claim is supported by prior research (Dixon et al., 2003), which indicates that news broadcasts are often dominated by criminal tales.

## Literature Review

There is a lot of writing on how police employ force. There have been two main schools of thought in the literature on police brutality: those that have examined the elements that increase the risk of brutality (Emesowum, 2016) and those who have examined how the media portrays police violence (Dixon et al., 2003; Miller & Davis, 2008; Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). Several studies have examined the topic from different angles, with a number of them concentrating on police shootings that result in fatalities (Chaney & Robertson, 2015; Nix et al., 2017; Shane et al., 2017). The significance of research focused on non-lethal forms of police brutality is diminished by the fact that police deaths are usually well publicized and sensationalized.

There is a void in the literature that the present study can fill.

### **Evidence-Based Research on Police Brutality**

There are many facets to the issue of police brutality, as is shown by a review of the relevant literature. The range of these dimensions include the following topics: policy choices and their influence on use of force decisions (Ferdik et al., 2014), the overrepresentation of minorities in police killings (Shane et al., 2017), news and mainstream media portrayals of police violence (Dixon et al., 2003; Erfani-Ghettani, 2015; Greer & McLaughlin, 2012; Hirschfield & Simon, 2010; Huspek, 2004; Lee et al., 2018), the effects of social media relative to perceptions of police brutality (Baker, 2014; Bejan et al., 2018; Brown et al., 2017; Freelon et al., 2018), and racial differences in support for reform (Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). Bejan et al. (2018), Legewie (2016), and Nix et al. (2017) are among the many quantitative studies that have attempted to identify the variables that put officers in a more vulnerable position to misbehavior. Given that the majority of studies use quantitative methods, this discovery should not come as a surprise. Alternatively, there is a small number of qualitative studies that aim to either examine the quality of news coverage and media reports (Chiricos & Eschholz, 2002; Lee et al., 2018) or test theoretical propositions regarding the reasons why police misconduct happens (Smith & Holmes, 2014; Reinka & Leach, 2018; Chaney & Robertson, 2015). According to many research (Brown et al., 2017; Hirschfeld & Simon, 2010; Lee et al., 2018), content analyses are the most common form of qualitative study that evaluate hidden material.

There have been a lot of different approaches taken to the problem of police brutality and the impact of the media on public opinion. Experiments, content analysis, logistic regression, and mixed-methods studies are all examples of such techniques. For example, although some have attempted to artificially study police misbehavior views using hypothetical scenarios (Hurwitz & Peffley, 2010), others have used secondary data directly from police records and comparable archives (Chaney & Robertson, 2013). Emesowum (2017) and others have used geographic analysis to analyze areas or jurisdictions in order to find and forecast hotspots for wrongdoing. Last but not least, previous studies have evaluated the impact of occupational variables on police crime rates, including those involving individuals in their latter years of employment (Stinson, Sr. et al., 2010).

### **Research on the Real-World Impact of Popular Media**

The media's portrayal of police brutality has been the subject of several studies (Greer & McLaughlin, 2012; Hirshfield & Simon, 2010; Lee et al., 2018; Miller & Davis, 2008). By doing so, these investigations address the question of how the public perceives police use of force—and particularly excessive force—from a very different angle. For instance, a number of studies have looked at how accurate news accounts are and how much they support police while painting victims of police brutality in an unfavorable light (Dixon et al., 2003). News coverage of police murders often depicts officers as acting properly, whereas victims are portrayed as dangerous, according to research by Hirshfield and Simon (2010). The research examined 105 news stories published between 1997 and 2000 using interpretative content analysis.

Also, Chiricos and Eschholz (2002) looked examined three weeks of news reports from three Orlando, Florida stations to see whether blacks "are disproportionately portrayed as criminals" and if crime is a "Black phenomenon" (p. 402). The results show that compared to Whites, Hispanics and Blacks are more often presented as aggressive aggressors and crime suspects in television news reports. Additionally, the report highlights the disproportionate portrayal of minorities as criminal suspects, rather as victims or good role models. Data shows that Hispanics are somewhat overrepresented as suspects, but in one of the three locations studied (Orlando, Florida), the authors could not discover evidence that Blacks were disproportionately represented as suspects on television news media.

But it's also worth mentioning that "TV news may contribute to the social construction of threat" that minorities often face, which is why this research is significant (Chiricos & Escholz, 2002, p. 400).

In 2018, Lee and colleagues analyzed the substance of newspaper coverage around high-profile police murders in three American cities: Ferguson, Missouri; Charleston, South Carolina; and Baltimore, Maryland. The purpose of the research was to learn how the media's bias against police or citizens has changed over time. Results show that after high-profile, racially heated incidents, media coverage does not support police as much as previous studies had shown. The writers point out that this bias in favor of citizens (rather than police personnel) is a change from how the media has covered crime for decades. What makes this research stand out is its focus on the ever-changing character of media coverage over time and how stakeholder criticism and public opinion may influence it.

Previous studies have looked at how news coverage affects public opinion of police and their support for

reform initiatives, in addition to the quality of such coverage. The public's backing for changes is what Weitzer and Tuch (2004) look at.

According to the results, the visibility of police misbehavior in the media and the regularity with which it occurs in one's community have a direct correlation with how residents see the police and their readiness to back reform initiatives. To rephrase, neighborhood impacts and media exposure, both in terms of frequency and substance, transfer people's encounters with police, whether those experiences are personal or vicarious. The findings once again demonstrate how powerful media can be.

#### The Impact of Global Media on Police Brutality

Police brutality in the United States has received a lot of attention from scholars (Baker, 2014; Erfani-Ghattani, 2015; Greer & McLaughlin, 2011; Pollack & Allern, 2014), but there is a wealth of literature documenting and analyzing similar issues in other nations. Furthermore, these findings usually support the idea that media rhetoric greatly influences how the public views both the victims and the offenders. Such studies highlight the reality that racial differences in the rates of victimization due to police brutality may indicate systemic issues with policing worldwide, not just in the United States.

The results may also show that media portrayals of police brutality and victim stereotypes are shaped by news stories (Chaney & Robertson, 2013; Chiricos & Escholz, 2002; Hirschfield & Simon, 2010; Huspek, 2004).

The author Erfani-Ghattani (2015) highlights the fact that in the aftermath of custodial violence, the portrayal of victims and police is different. Applying a case study methodology, this research analyzes how different British media covered the news when Joy Gardner died in police custody. When reporting on police brutality, the author points out that news organizations almost never provide an unbiased or balanced perspective.

The results show that police officers are portrayed in a very poor light in offensive journalism, in contrast to victims who are often slandered and held responsible for unpleasant experiences with the police. Victims of police brutality are often the targets of inflammatory propaganda that links their mistreatment to underlying issues, such as drug misuse, gang membership, or immigration infractions. Such "character assassinations" are prevalent when discussing police brutality, the author points out (Erfani-Ghattani, 2015). However, in order to bring attention to the dangerous situations in which police officers operate, police personnel are usually made to seem like victims after incidents of excessive force. Officers' credibility is shielded by using



anonymous quotes, in contrast to the frontal attacks on the character of those who receive force. It is common practice to utilize a variety of rhetorical strategies to cast accused officers as "a few bad apples" if they are named or explicitly condemned. This study demonstrates how biased news reports may be used to hide the truth about police brutality from the public.

## Methodology

This study examines footage of police abuse that has been uploaded on YouTube. Why is YouTube so special? YouTube is a platform where people can upload, share, and view videos online. Users from all around the world may contribute films to the website, which then archives them. The stuff that people may contribute is not heavily limited. It looks that video clips accessible via YouTube are the most often returned results when searching for video material (MP4 files) on the internet using almost any search engine (e.g., Google.com). (Balakrishnan & Griffiths, 2017; Hanson & Haridakis, 2008; Jung & Lee, 2015; Klobas et al., 2018) Many viewers find YouTube to be an incredibly popular and often utilized application for sharing video material on the internet. Indeed, YouTube is considered "the most visited video-sharing site and the second most popular website" (p. 227) according to Paek and colleagues (2013). The website YouTube.com is therefore likely to be the "first choice" for those who want to see visual information related to current events, particularly if they missed the original broadcast. In addition to entertaining videos, YouTube also has a wide range of instructional videos, including "how to" guides and more serious instructional films (Klobas et al., 2018). Actually, the vast majority of major news organizations even have their own YouTube "channel" where viewers can access all of the news organization's previous broadcasts and information.

There are other social networking sites where users may share videos with one another, but YouTube is among the first and most popular. In addition, earlier studies have shown that YouTube viewers are distinct, often choose to post news-related material as a way to express themselves to others (Hanson & Haridakis, 2008). According to Hanson and Haridakis (2008), YouTube users who are more likely to share videos do so as a means of self-expression, while those who are less likely to contribute material are likely only looking for information or pleasure.

Whatever the case may be, the data we have so far points to YouTube as a potential improvement over

Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter for the purposes of this study. The reasons behind YouTubers' actions are perhaps less murky, and the platform is more readily available.

When seen in this light, YouTube has the potential to be a useful resource for illuminating the background of police violence. New information access methods have emerged as a result of the widespread use of media-sharing programs like YouTube. Although television and print media (such as newspapers) used to dominate the news industry, viewers' tastes have steadily moved toward internet sources in the last few years. Therefore, this research samples media information that shows instances of police violence using an exploratory technique.

### Methodology of Sampling

Over the course of five years (January 1, 2014 – January 1, 2019), video clips were obtained via Youtube.com as part of the sample employing convenience sampling. Words and phrases often linked to police brutality are used in a keyword search to generate cases. Searching YouTube's video archives requires three distinct keywords. Every time, different names of networks (Nbc, Fox, Police Brutality, etc.) are associated with a certain term or phrase. By selecting this option, you can be certain that your search will mostly return videos verified by credible organizations, rather than those that are biased toward negative representations of police brutality. Also, at first, we thought that different news organizations may highlight different uses of force in their broadcasts. Search terms include: police brutality, excessive force, and police violence. It is presumed that individuals seeking information regarding police brutality usually use these phrases, thus the search is restricted to them. This means that these phrases will likely form the basis of any investigation starting with YouTube's archive. Additionally, instances involving lawful uses of force are less likely to be uncovered by these terms. It should be noted that the present investigation is not concerned with the use of force in general but rather with excessive force, sometimes known as police brutality. Finally, reducing the range of keywords makes it less likely that duplicate videos will be identified. After that, the names of prominent news networks are combined with each of these phrases to run the search. In this study, we used the following network names: ABC, NBC, CBS, FOX, and MSNBC.

Two filters are added to tighten the results even further so that the range of possible scenarios may be better managed and/or reduced. Here are the filters: (1) video length (<4 minutes) and (2) YouTube upload date. Mainstream news sources aren't going to

show you video segments that are very lengthy, so this is a good strategy. The second filter also had the additional consequence of sorting the films from most recent to oldest by upload date. Since this method may be effective for looking at patterns over long periods of time, it might potentially be better for future studies. Only videos from the US that show police officers using physical force are included in the sample.

#### Matters Not Covered

We did not include any footage in our selection that did not show police using visible force. Additionally, videos that just depict what happened after the force was applied will not be considered. The sample does not include low-quality video footage. The sample mostly does not include compilations that depict a large amount of police violence. Whenever this method is used, it is documented as a singular incident pertinent to the story's focus. Lastly, this methodology does not apply to large-scale scenarios like riots or other planned demonstrations since they do not align with ordinary contacts between police and the public.

The present investigation aims to

- Find out whether there is a bias in the media regarding the portrayal of minorities as victims of police brutality.
- Find out how well police interactions with force work.
- Find out what the demographics are of those who use excessive force and those who do it.
- Find out how often police use force on suspects who are already in custody.
- For each group, rank the level of force used (1–4). One shot compared to sixteen shots is one example.

## Conclusion

Both demographic and environmental aspects are included in this study's analysis of police brutality. For the sake of this demographic study, we will be analyzing police and citizens according to their ethnicity and gender. As a demographic feature, age is taken into account wherever feasible. Considerations such as the nature of the confrontations between officers and suspects, the amount of force used, the presence or absence of weapons, the degree to which suspects fight arrest, and the likelihood that suspects make irrational, sudden moves like reaching for a weapon are used to put police brutality into perspective.

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