

# Police Officers & Racial Bias in the Decision to Shoot

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In collaboration with the  
Denver Police Department

## Introduction

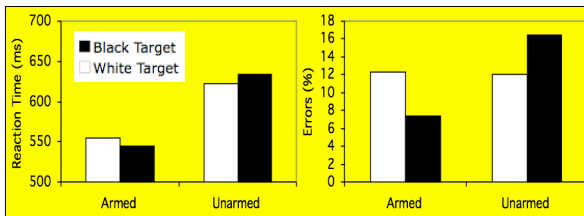
Late one night in February of 1999, a Black man named Amadou Diallo was standing outside his apartment building in the Bronx when 4 plain-clothes officers approached him. Diallo, perhaps misunderstanding their intentions, attempted to re-enter his building, and the officers pursued him into the vestibule. At that point, Diallo reached into his pocket. The officers later reported thinking that Diallo was drawing a gun, and they opened fire, killing him. To the officers' surprise, no weapon was found on the body. Apparently, Diallo had been reaching for a wallet. This tragedy, and others like it, sparked waves of protest and allegations of racism in the ranks of police. The question was repeatedly raised, would Diallo have been shot if he were White?

### Does race influence police shootings?

We developed a simulation in which participants adopt the role of an officer, quickly deciding whether or not to shoot a potentially threatening target. Targets are either White or Black, and either armed or unarmed. Using this simulation, we have investigated thousands of individuals of many races, including college students, community members and police officers around the country, in an effort to determine how a target's race affects the speed and accuracy of decisions to shoot.



## General Results



Across more than 25 studies, we have found a pattern of racial bias in decisions to shoot. This bias is evident in both reaction times and errors.

**Speed:** Participants are typically faster to shoot an armed target who is Black, rather than White, but they are faster to indicate "don't shoot" for unarmed targets who are White, rather than Black.

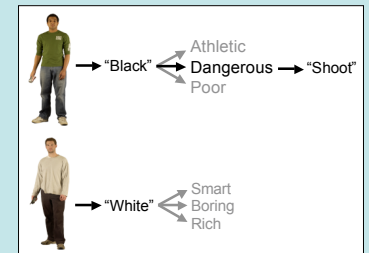
**Errors:** When a target is armed, participants are more likely to incorrectly indicate "don't shoot" if that target is White, rather than Black. But participants are more likely to incorrectly shoot an innocent, unarmed target who is Black, rather than White. This bias reflects a tendency to set a more lenient or "trigger-happy" threshold for the decision to shoot a Black target.

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## Understanding Cognitive Process

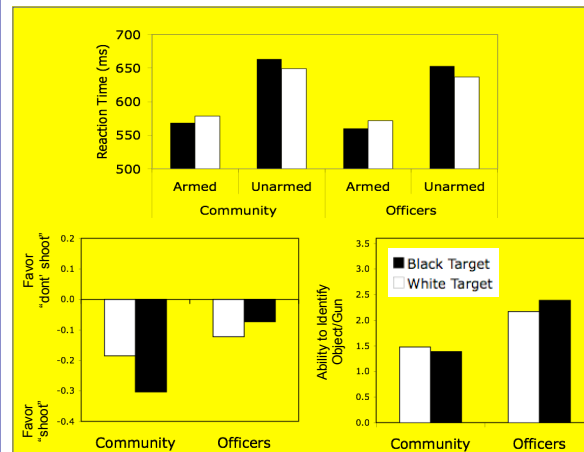
We propose that bias in the decision to shoot stems from cognitive associations between Black people (particularly young Black men) and the concepts of danger, violence and crime. If participants rapidly categorize targets according to race, stereotypic associations between race and danger may facilitate the decision to shoot when the target is Black. We have shown, for example, that participants with stronger stereotypic associations tend to show more pronounced bias. Critically, however, the effects of race should be particularly robust when participants are confused about the object itself.

This model suggests that participants may minimize the influence of racial cues by (a) increasing attention to the object in the target's hand, thereby decreasing confusion and obviating the need for secondary sources of information like race and/or (b) overriding response tendencies based on stereotypic associations. These two possibilities rely on attentional and motor control, which has important implications for police officers in the field. Investigation of these processes forms the core of our grant from the National Science Foundation.



## Testing Police Officers

To determine whether police officers show racial bias, and whether they differ from untrained college students and community members, we initially examined more than 150 officers from the Denver Police Department and more than 150 members of the Denver community. (We have now replicated these results several times with hundreds of officers from all over the United States.)

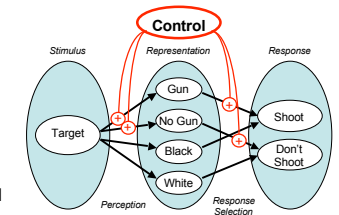


**Community Members:** We found that community members showed consistent evidence of bias. In their reaction times, they were faster to shoot armed Blacks and faster to indicate "don't shoot" for unarmed Whites. Community members also showed bias in terms of the decisions they ultimately made. They were simply more likely to shoot a Black target than a White target.

**Police Officers:** Like the community members, police officers showed evidence of bias in terms of their reaction times. But, unlike the community (and unlike thousands of undergraduates who have participated in this research) the police showed no bias in their ultimate decisions. In other words, the presence of an unarmed Black target may have delayed an officer's response, but it did not cause the officer to make a mistake. **Ultimately, the officers' decisions about whether or not to shoot were unaffected by the target's race.** The officers were also faster and more accurate overall.

## How do Police Override Racial Stereotypes?

We hypothesize that police officers override the influence of race through enhanced control of either visual attention or response selection. Our current research examines the extent to which increasing or decreasing one's capacity for control impacts performance on the simulation. In a recent study, we assessed students' capacity to attend to complex visual stimuli. Those with high **visual attention capacity (VAC)** should process the object quickly and easily, minimizing the influence of race. Participants with low VAC should be susceptible to stereotypes.



When responding to the simulation, participants with low VAC relied heavily on associations between Blacks and danger. But decisions for participants high in VAC were buffered from these associations.

## Potential Implications

Our research thus far suggests that **officers are not immune to stereotypes**, but that control-related processes allow them to override those associations when making the decision to shoot. By studying the cognitive processes involved in police performance, we also gain an **understanding of when that control is likely to fail**, and thus when bias is likely to re-emerge. Fatigue, extreme fear, and complex encounters with multiple suspects or bystanders may all compromise an officer's ability to implement the necessary control. This work may ultimately benefit law enforcement by informing policy about shift length and training with the goal of proactively addressing situations that pose such a risk.