

Police Officers & Racial Bias in the Decision to Shoot

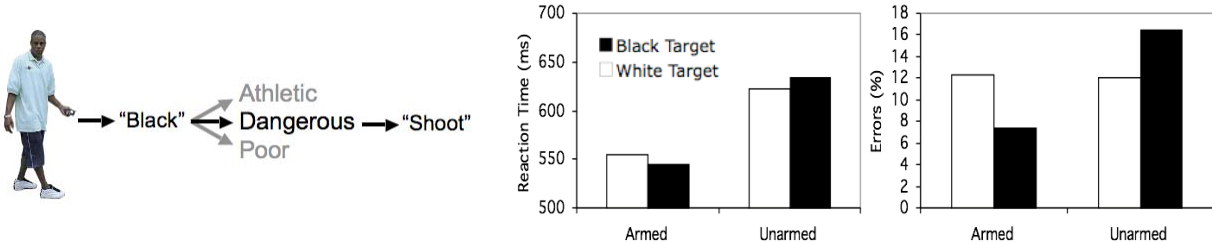
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Overview of Issue

In February of 1999, a Black man named Amadou Diallo was standing outside his apartment in the Bronx when 4 plain-clothes officers approached. Diallo, perhaps misunderstanding their intentions, re-entered his building, and the officers pursued him. At that point, Diallo reached into his pocket. The officers later reported thinking that Diallo was drawing a gun. They opened fire, killing him. To the officers' surprise, no weapon was found. Diallo had apparently been reaching for a wallet. Diallo's 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?

To investigate the impact of race on decisions to shoot, 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.



Studying 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 studies with hundreds of officers from all over the United States.) We found that community members showed consistent evidence of bias. In their reaction times, they were faster to shoot armed Blacks than armed Whites, and they were faster to indicate “don’t shoot” for unarmed Whites than for unarmed Blacks (see left panel of figure). Community members also showed bias in terms of the decisions they ultimately made. They were simply more likely to shoot a Black target, whether he was armed or unarmed, than a White target (right panel of figure).

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 not affected by the target’s race. The officers were also faster and more accurate overall. We are currently studying the cognitive mechanisms that allow police officers to inhibit bias, with particular emphasis on the role of cognitive control. We hypothesize that this control allows officers to more efficiently process the nature of the object (is it a gun or not?) and/or allows them engage in more effective response selection and response execution – making responses based on the object, rather than the target’s race.

Implications, Applications, & Relevance: Social and cognitive psychology have a long history of research using techniques that may initially seem esoteric, but that ultimately inform critical and important decisions. Police decisions to shoot involve many of the same processes psychologists have investigated in the lab for decades. These shootings often involve split-second reactions to confusing, high-stress situations in which technically irrelevant cues like race, clothing, and neighborhood, may impact performance, with potentially tragic consequences. These shootings affect not just the officers and suspects involved, but entire communities who often feel victimized by law enforcement. By studying the social and cognitive processes involved in these decisions, social psychological research can (a) begin to clarify the situations in which bias is most likely to emerge, and (b) potentially inform training protocols for law enforcement personnel. Studies of police decision making highlight the importance of this academic research and help us gain traction on an issue with tremendous real-world significance.

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Biographical Sketch for Joshua Correll

Dr. Joshua Correll is an assistant professor of social psychology at the University of Chicago. He received his doctorate from the University of Colorado at Boulder. His research focuses on racial stereotyping, particularly the association between race and danger, and the impact of those associations on police decision-making. He has received funding from the National Science Foundation and National Institute of Mental Health in the form of a grant, a Graduate Research Fellowship and a Predoctoral Fellowship. His work has been published in academic outlets such as the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, and *Personality and Social Psychological Review*. It has also been featured in the *New York Times*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, the *Today Show*, *20/20* and National Public Radio.

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