



Talking about it and being about it

Differences by race in the perception of policing and protests

Corey D. Fields, Rahsaan Mahadeo, Lisa Hummel, Sara Moore

The American Voices Project (AVP) relies on immersive interviews to deliver a comprehensive portrait of life across the country. The interview protocol blends qualitative, survey, administrative, and experimental approaches to collecting data on such topics as family, living situations, community, health, emotional well-being, living costs, and income. The AVP is a nationally representative sample of hundreds of communities in the United States. Within each of these sites, a representative sample of addresses is selected. In March 2020, recruitment and interviewing began to be carried out remotely (instead of face-to-face), and questions were added on the pandemic, health and health care, race and systemic racism, employment and earnings, schooling and childcare, and safety net usage (including new stimulus programs).

The “Monitoring the Crisis” series uses AVP interviews to provide timely reports on what’s happening throughout the country as the pandemic and recession play out. This report is sponsored by the Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality. To protect respondents’ anonymity, quotations have been altered slightly by changing inconsequential details. To learn more about the American Voices Project and its methodology, please visit inequality.stanford.edu/avp/methodology.

The American Voices Project gratefully acknowledges support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation; the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation; the Center for Research on Child Wellbeing at Princeton University; the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative; the David and Lucile Packard Foundation; the Federal Reserve Banks of Atlanta, Boston, Cleveland, Dallas, New York, Philadelphia, Richmond, and San Francisco; the Ford Foundation; The James Irvine Foundation; the JPB Foundation; the National Science Foundation; the Pritzker Family Foundation; and the Russell Sage Foundation. The Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality is a program of the Institute for Research in the Social Sciences.

The authors thank Alex Camardelle, Jessica Coria, Sara Chaganti, Julia Gutierrez, Benjamin Horowitz, Susan Longworth, Kimberly Payne, and Julie Siwicki for their helpful comments. The views expressed here are the authors’ and not necessarily those of the Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality or the organizations that supported this research. Any remaining errors are the authors’ responsibility.

Suggested Citation

Fields, Corey D., Rahsaan Mahadeo, Lisa Hummel, and Sara Moore. 2022. “Talking about it and being about it: Differences by race in the perception of policing and protests.” In “Monitoring the Crisis: American Voices Project.” Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality.

Series Editors

Ann Carpenter, Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta
Vanessa Coleman, American Institutes for Research
Peter Cookson, Georgetown University
Kathryn Edin, Princeton University
Corey Fields, Georgetown University
Jonathan Fisher, Stanford University
Stephanie Garlow, Stanford University
David Grusky, Stanford University
Marybeth Mattingly, Federal Reserve Bank of Boston
C. Matthew Snipp, Stanford University
Charles Varner, Stanford University

Acknowledgements

The American Voices Project extends our sincere gratitude to everyone who shared their story with us. We would also like to thank our researchers and staff: Don Abram, Elias Aceves, Judy Alterado, Kenny Andejas, Karen Armendariz, Trevor Auldrige, Danya Axelrad-Hausman, Haeli Baek Andrew Barney, Kimberly Batdorf, Maddie Baumgart, Courtney Berthiaume, Hannah Bichkoff, Claudia Bobadilla, Kaitlyn Bolin, Sharie Branch, Mackenzie Brown, Rachel Butler, Kathrine Cagat, Mila Camargo, Annabel Campo, Marina Carlucci, Laurel Cartwright, Amy Casselman Hontalas, Kristin Catena, Esha Chatterjee, Ricardo Chavez, Cindy Cho, Alice Chou, Julia Corbett, Grace Corona, Cocoa Costales, Nima Dahir, Madalyn Damato, Amelia Dmowska, Anthony Duarte, Noa Dukler, Cody Eaton, Amanda Edelman, Anke Ehlert, Afroz Emami, Andrew Eslich, Rossana Espinoza, Hannah Factor, Megan Faircloth, Samantha Faul, Alisa Feldman, Priya Fielding-Singh, Jordan Fiulleateau, Alex Fuentes, Nicole Galicia, macario garcia, Raul Garcia Andrea Goepel, Sofia Goodman Arbona, Ayan Goran, Victoria Gorum, Lauren Griffin, Julia Gutierrez, Erin Hardnett, Kristina Harris, Tara Hein, Colleen Heidorn, Madeleine Henner, Daniel Hennessy, Thomas Henri, James Hiebert, Cameron Hill, Carla Ho, Christopher Hopson, Alexa Hui, Lisa Hummel, Lynn Hur, Karla Jimenez- Magdaleno, Nathaniel Johnson, Amy Johnson, Lillian Kahris, Anna Kallschmidt, Nikoo Karbassi, Noa Katz, Charlotte Kaufman, Sehajleen Kaur, Samantha Kern, John Kingsley, Mawuko Kpodo, Rachael Yoon Ah Ku, Paola Langer, Ellie Lapp, Catherine Lechicki, Sarah Lee, Rachel Lee, Tiffany Loh, Janet Martinez, Kaylee Matheny, Isabel Michel, Claire Miller, Bethany Miller, Eliane Mitchell, Pablo Mitnik, Sara Moore, Diana Mora, Paige Morrisey, Hannah Mueller, Aldo Munoz, Sky Myasia Sealey, Yasmeen Namazie, Sharoon Negrete Gonzalez, Bethany Nichols, Bailey Nicolson, Jennifer No, Jacelyn Omusi, Diana Orozco, Taylor Orth, Eleni Padden, Jillian Pak, Bunnard Phan, Rosina Pradhananga, Malena Price, Reginald Quartey, Vanessa Quince, Jocelyn Quintero, Emily Ramirez, Jennifer Reed, Tye Ripma, Karina Roca, Ricky Rodriguez, Karla Rodriguez Beltran, Cat Sanchez, Ximena Sanchez Martinez, Miguel Santiago, Melissa Santos, Liz Schnee, Michael Schwalbe, Grace Scullion, Victoria Shakespeare, Julie Siwicki, Lauren Sluss, Laura Somers, Sydney Sousa, Ingrid Stevens, Erik Strand, Andrew Suarez, Ashley Sunde, Catherine Sweeney, Alexis Takagi, Elizabeth Talbert, Daniel Te, Lucy Thames, Catherine Thomas, Chris Thomsen, Zachariah Tman, Thalia Tom, Marie Toney, Sonia Torres, Naomi Tsegaye, Saul Urbina-Johanson, Alina Utrata, Chaze Vinci, Brandon Wafford, Seth Walensky, Maya Weinberg, Robin Weiss, Rondeline Williams, Gretchen Wright, Katherine Wullert, Jenny Yang, Irina Zaks, Karina Zemel, Jonny Zients, Cassandra Zimmer.

There are a number of words with the syntactic capacity to accurately represent the feel of the rebellions of 2020: “intense,” “furious,” “eruptive,” “explosive,” and “transformative.” To describe the uprisings as “spontaneous,” though, would be disingenuous. There is a genealogy to the massive protests of 2020 that can be traced back to historical forms of structural and racialized violence that endure today. Mark Twain once said, “history doesn’t repeat itself, but it rhymes.” The continued police violence against Black people and other racialized people living in the United States suggests that history has been “rhyming” for quite some time. Does history really need to repeat itself or even rhyme, when the soundtrack of racialized violence has never skipped a beat?

The purpose of this report is to show how this “genealogy” of long-standing racialized violence has led to two very different conversations about race and the massive protests of 2020. For most white people, these protests were seen as a “call to awareness,” an opportunity to reflect on white privilege. By contrast, the very same protests were seen by most Black people as a “call to action,” an opportunity to convert talk into concrete reform. Although the ways in which Black and white people talk about race has long differed, the protests of 2020 may accordingly be seen as a wedge event that sharpened this conversational divide. To understand why it became a wedge event, it is useful to lay out this historical backdrop, a backdrop of long-standing systemic racism in the United States. We will first rehearse this backdrop and then turn to the key question of how it bred two very different conversations about the protests.

The backdrop and its effects

From slavery to its “afterlife,”¹ Black people in the United States are continuously assailed by a “history that hurts.” Chattel slavery, the Black Codes, and Jim Crow are not relics of the past, but

KEY FINDINGS

There are profound differences by race in attitudes about recent protests against police violence. For white respondents, the protests were a call to awareness, whereas nonwhite respondents saw the protests as a call to action. The “call to awareness” entails talking about privilege and achieving understanding, whereas the “call to action” entails concrete reform rather than mere talk.

When asked about their views of the police, white respondents often resort to very abstract characterizations of police, typically referring to them as a benign force. By contrast, nonwhite respondents turn immediately to concrete examples of their interactions, most of which were anything but benign.

The differences by race in attitudes about protest may reflect the differences by race in experiences with police. The concrete “call to action” comes from respondents with concrete negative experiences with police, whereas the abstract “call to awareness” is associated with respondents who typically have limited, abstract, and benign experiences with police.

timeless forms of anti-Black violence whose logics survive in the form of impoverishment, residential segregation, political disenfranchisement, voter suppression, racialized medicine, truncated life expectancies, arrest, incarceration, and foreclosed life chances.

According to U.S. Census Bureau data, Black people represent only 13 percent of the U.S. population, yet make up nearly 40 percent of the nation's prison population.² Black men are incarcerated in state or federal prison at a rate five times that of white men.³ During their lifetime, 1 in 3 Black men can expect to face imprisonment compared with 1 in 17 white males.⁴ Black males ages 18 to 19 were 12 times as likely to be imprisoned as white males of the same ages, the highest black-to-white racial disparity of any age group in 2019.⁵ State and federal prisons held more than 1 percent of black male U.S. residents ages 20 to 64 at the end of 2019, and more than 1 percent of Hispanic male U.S. residents ages 20 to 54. Indigenous men are also incarcerated at 4.2 times the rate of white men.⁶ It would be misleading, though, to describe such stark differences as “disparities.” As Dylan Rodriguez notes,

*“Disparity” is a bullshit concept, when we already know that the inception of criminal justice is the de-criminalization of white people, particularly propertied white citizens and those willing to bear arms to defend the white world. “Mass Incarceration” is worse than meaningless, when it’s not the “masses” who are being criminalized and locked up. So there is some furtive and fatal white entitlement involved in this discursive political structure.*⁷

In other words, terms like “disparity” presupposes the idea of “parity” when no such equivalence is possible because the legal system, police, and the prison industrial complex remain intent on targeting Black and other racialized persons for arrest, incarceration, and even death. The question is not whether Black and Indigenous people commit more crime than their white counterparts. Rather, we must consider how the law itself is designed to

make “crime” and “criminals” synonymous with blackness. As Michelle Alexander writes,

*The term white crime is nonsensical in the era of mass incarceration, unless one is referring to white-collar crime.... In the era of mass incarceration, what it means to be a criminal in our collective consciousness has become conflated with what it means to be black, so the term white criminal is confounding, while the term black criminal is nearly redundant.*⁸

Existing laws, policies, and policing strategies further ensnare Black, Indigenous and people of color in the web of the legal system. “Stand your ground” laws, the “war on drugs,” “quality of life” campaigns, and law enforcement strategies such as “stop and frisk,” “broken windows,” and “predictive policing,” work to construct not just “crime,” but “criminals.” On August 12, 2013, U.S. District Court Judge Shira Scheindlin’s ruling in *Floyd v. City of New York* deemed stop-and-frisk unconstitutional. According to a 2019 report from the ACLU of New York, “Between 2014 and 2017, young black and Latino males between the ages of 14 and 24 account for only five percent of the city’s population, compared with 38 percent of reported stops. Young Black and Latino males were innocent 80 percent of the time.”⁹ The strength of these laws, policies, and strategies increases as civilians assume the role of law enforcement in order to maintain “clean streets” and “protect” their community. “If you see something, say something” is a familiar phrase that invokes the spirit of neoliberalism to give everyday people the opportunity to play citizen and cop, while ignoring how one group’s safety requires the unsafety of others.

Beyond the threat of arrest and incarceration, encounters between police and Black, Indigenous, and other people of color are also more likely to be fatal than encounters between police and white people. In their research on differences in the risk of being killed by police, Frank Edwards, Hedwig Lee, and Michael Esposito find that “African American men and women, American Indian/

Alaska Native men and women, and Latino men face higher lifetime risk of being killed by police than do their white peers.” They also find that “Latina women and Asian/Pacific Islander men and women face lower risk of being killed by police than do their white peers.” Black men faced the highest risk (1 in 1,000 chance) of being killed by police. According to the authors, “For young men of color, police use of force is among the leading causes of death.”¹⁰

Those who participated in the uprisings of 2020 sent a clear message to systems of power and domination: No longer will they give consent to allow this hegemonic order comprising racist police and white vigilantes to kill Black people with impunity. The endurance of the protests signaled a refusal to suffer in silence. In the wake of ongoing anti-Black and racial-colonial violence, Black and other racialized persons refused to “take a number,” “hold for the next representative,” or “wait their turn.” In the words of James Baldwin, “There is never time in the future, in which we will work out our salvation. The challenge is in the moment; the time is always now.”¹¹

As protests against racialized violence by police peaked in the spring and summer of 2020, a great deal of media attention focused on how police and politicians reacted. Pundits weighed in on how the protests might inform voter preferences in the presidential election,¹² yet there was limited exploration of how the protests informed public perceptions of race, racism and police violence.

In our examination of interviews with people from across the country, we find that the protests figured prominently into respondents’ categories of relevant and significant social issues. Like the Covid-19 pandemic, the protests were on most people’s radar. However, similar to the pandemic, even when a wide range of people were watching the same events unfold, the lived experience of the protests (and police relations more generally) varied significantly by race and ethnicity. We analyzed conversations with 135 people of different races and ethnicities to understand their experiences during the summer of 2020. The purpose of this report is

to describe reactions to the protests and to understand the public response.

We find that race and ethnicity are critical in shaping the very different ways that Americans viewed protests against police violence, as well as how Americans view the issue of racial justice in general. The interviews suggest that many white people talk about issues related to police violence and racial inequality from a remove, with their thinking about racial inequalities primarily focused on abstract implications for discourse and conversation. By “abstract implications,” we are referring to the way in which white respondents disconnect race from the material conditions and consequences of racism. Minority respondents offered up a diametrically opposed perspective. For non-white respondents, particularly Black respondents, thoughts around racialized violence by police and racial injustice are grounded in closely lived experiences of inequality and discrimination. These respondents focused on actions, not conversation.

The key point here: The same shocks to the social order are not necessarily experienced equally by everyone. One way to think about this is the difference between “talking about it” and “being about it.” White respondents were content to talk about racial inequality. For them, this conversation itself is considered a real, material achievement. But minority respondents want more. They wanted to see actions aimed at reducing racial inequality and police mistreatment. Responses to the summer protests are a vivid illustration of this difference. For white respondents the protests were a call to *awareness*, but Black respondents saw the protests as a call to *action*.

Data and analysis strategy

The American Voices Project (AVP) interviews members of U.S. households aged 18 and older. This report uses a subset of those interviews to examine how different racial and ethnic groups talked about their experiences. We have a two-pronged sampling strategy. First, we use transcripts from interviews conducted between May 1 and August 31, 2020. Second, we selected all the

interviews with nonwhite respondents from this period and drew a random sample of interviews with white respondents. This decision ensured a robust representation of Black, Latino/a, Asian, and multiracial respondents.

The final sample for this report includes 136 interviews. Our respondents are racially, socioeconomically, and geographically diverse (see Table 1), but the relatively small sample size means that it is more difficult to identify systematic differences across social groups. While the racial and ethnic differences identified here are informative, readers should exercise the usual cautions given that our sample is small.

Table 1. Distribution of sociodemographic characteristics¹

	COUNTS	PERCENTAGE
Gender		
Female	49	36.0
Male	83	61.0
Race or ethnicity		
Non-Hispanic white	77	56.6
Non-Hispanic Black	22	16.2
Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish (of any race) ³	--	--
Non-Hispanic other race ²	11	8.1
Household income		
Low (<\$30,000)	29	21.3
Middle (\$30,000–\$85,000)	24	17.7
High (>\$85,000)	20	14.7
Age		
18–39	42	30.9
40–64	58	42.7
65 and older	27	19.9

1/ N=136. Counts of missing responses do not appear separately in the table.
 2/ Respondents reporting a race not specified above or reporting more than one race.
 3/ Category counts of less than 10 respondents are suppressed for confidentiality purposes.

We then identified our themes for analysis. We were broadly interested in how respondents from communities of color were talking about the events of spring and summer 2020. We were also interested in how the experience of nonwhite respondents differed from their white counterparts. We examined respondents’ thoughts about Black Lives Matter protests, and their general attitudes and experiences with law enforcement. Additionally, we coded interview transcripts to ascertain respondents’ attitudes about U.S. race relations more generally.

It is worth noting that although AVP respondents across all racial and ethnic categories were talking about police protests and racial injustice, these issues were more present in the interviews with white and Black respondents, both in terms of frequency of the topic and depth of engagement. However, these issues were not exclusively relevant only to Black and white respondents. Respondents of all races and ethnicities were exposed to the issue of racial justice in spring and summer 2020, but not everyone processed it the same way. This report focuses, primarily, on responses from Black and white respondents. Responses from interviewees of Latino or Asian descent closely echoed those of Black respondents, a similarity that showed up both in their experiences with the police and in their responses to the protests of police violence. Although the tone and content of their responses were similar to those of Black respondents, the frequency and intensity was lower among Latino and Asian interviewees. Additionally, discussion of the police and related protests was more frequent among male respondents.

In the discussion below, we describe only those themes that were common to a set of transcripts.¹³ Throughout the analysis, we were attuned to variation across racial and ethnic groups. We were particularly interested in variation in how respondents talked about their *experiences* of the protests. Again, given the relatively small sample size, we counsel the usual caution. However, in our analysis of AVP interviews, we will show such stark differences between racial and ethnic groups in

their discussions of police violence that one can be reasonably confident that there's indeed substantial variation.

Awareness versus action

In the spring and summer of 2020, Americans were already grappling with how to handle the uncertainty of a global pandemic. Then police killings of unarmed Black people sparked large protests. Once again, Americans struggled with anxiety and fear, this time in response to actions by agents of the state.

When it comes to racial justice, white respondents exist on a continuum of denial, in which questions about race and racism are articulated through abstraction.

Certainly, racialized police violence and responses to it are not new phenomena. There have long been protests and complaints about police misconduct, and there have been regular protests about it since the mid-2000s. However, the level and intensity of the protests in the summer of 2020 were noteworthy. Additionally, the issue garnered a high level of media attention. As a result, AVP respondents frequently discussed race and racial justice, though it is worth noting that across all racial and ethnic groups, talk of Covid-19 dwarfed conversations about racism and police violence against people of color (see forthcoming report on racial disparities and Covid-19).

When it comes to racial justice, white respondents exist on a continuum of denial, in which questions about race and racism are articulated through abstraction. At one end of that continuum, there's a denial that racial inequality is a real problem. At the other end, the summer protests

are frequently cited as a point of awakening to concerns about racial inequality. But across this continuum, engagement with issues of racial justice operates at a remove for whites. Racial inequality is treated as an abstract idea to be debated, something to talk about and understand.

I guess the Black Lives Matter protests have made me that much more sensitive to the ways in which Black people and people of color in general having get left behind.

—White man

At the same time, I feel like there are really important conversations happening regarding law enforcement and police brutality and especially, you know, sort of fairness, injustice based on race and ethnicity.

—White woman

Well, I've got several Black friends and, you know, we'd sit around and talk about things and they'd always tell me about their experiences and I just didn't ever really take it to heart until the George Floyd incident and that really, really, made me realize just how prevalent the problem is.

—White man

This contrasts sharply with the way Black, Asian, and Latino/a respondents talk about racial inequality. For our minority respondents, particularly Black interviewees, the conversations around racial injustice are grounded in actions, both in terms of what happened to them and in regard to what they want to see done. Our nonwhite respondents don't just talk vaguely about racial "problems" or race "issues." They speak to specific things that happened to them because of their race. They talk about things like discrimination in employment and unfairly aggressive police behavior that damages their property.

I was tired of all these doors closing in my face. 'You're overqualified.' 'No, I can't pay you because it's against the law,' like that. Until I already

figured it out: Yeah, it's a white neighborhood. They don't want me in these neighborhoods.

—Black woman

For example, it's fine for them to kill a person during the process [of executing a search warrant] because they have the right to do so. I said to the judge, 'This isn't right. They came to my place for no proper reason and damaged my house.' They said they needed to search the place.

—Man of color⁴

These were just two of many instances of specific discrimination or unfair treatment that minority AVP respondents linked to their race. Furthermore, when they talked about what needs to happen in regard to racial injustice, they don't just want a conversation. They want to see change. They want the people they perceive to be perpetrators of racial injustice to be punished, and they want to see changes in the organizational practices and individual behaviors that perpetuate inequality.

I'm happy that the movement is happening and things are hoping to change, and that police brutality gets handled and that people get charged for their wrongdoings, especially when they have a badge that was supposed to come help us.

—Black woman

Like when they lock you up, I don't care what you did, you are getting a beating...I'm just so glad that young people is doing what they do because they is really helping with this thing that we have to deal with.

—Black man

The stories our respondents told reveal a real tension embedded in calls for conversations about race. For white respondents, the conversation itself is considered an achievement in and of itself. But minority respondents want more. The summer protests are a vivid illustration of this. For white respondents the protests were a call to awareness,

but Black respondents saw the protests as a call to action.

The AVP interviews raise a profound question about race and racial justice in the United States: How, in the midst of so many seemingly “universal” crises, is it possible for white respondents to see things so differently from their nonwhite counterparts? Talk of racial justice shows a clear divergence in how people from different racial and ethnic groups experience life in the United States. Although these perspectives are distinct, they are not unconnected. The distanced stance of white Americans is possible because the negative effects of racial injustices are abstractions that happen to others. For Black and other nonwhite respondents, it was impossible to process the issues at a remove because life was structured by racial injustice. When respondents talked about the specific issue of police violence against people of color, these divergent perspectives were even more stark.

Divergent perceptions of and interactions with police

Black AVP respondents, along with other nonwhite respondents, have very different experiences with police than white interviewees. These experiences differ in two main ways. First, we find that nonwhite respondents can often turn directly and immediately to describing concrete interactions with police, whereas white respondents tend to talk about police in vaguer and more abstract terms, not as frequently grounded in direct experience. Nonwhite people are much more likely to have concrete experiences with police, and these experiences lead to preferences for concrete reforms and action.

The second point of difference pertains to the content of these experiences rather than the mere frequency of them. Nonwhite respondents tend to have very negative interactions with police, whereas white respondents tend to have more benign ones (when they have interactions at all). This difference is hardly surprising, but it does help us understand differences by race in reactions to the current wave of protests. When there's

a long history of negative interactions with the police, what comes to matter most isn't talking yet more about race but instead the need for concrete reforms that address the problem.

Although there is much research on disparate policing practices, the AVP interviews make it starkly clear that such practices shape everyday lives in powerful ways. Even during a pandemic, the conversation among nonwhite respondents would turn quickly to policing. For many of the nonwhite respondents who talked about the police, the threat of police misconduct had been in their lives long before the coronavirus, and would likely remain well beyond the time the virus was eradicated. In contrast, the police barely registered to white respondents, indeed they often expressed surprise that anyone would feel threatened by police. Because racial minorities lived with constant police misconduct, they were quick to relate their negative experiences with the police and to express deep skepticism over their function and legitimacy.

There is no safety here. The cops don't do shit, sorry again. Cops don't do anything.

—Black man

I feel – I mean, rather bluntly, I feel that the way that things are set up and the folks are socialized, it's not a system that I am particularly interested in interacting with...there is a very noticeable difference in terms of how I've seen some of these communities interact with, say...[my] basketball team when I was a kid and a lot of the kids are darker and I am watching how the authorities chose to interact with those kids and to treat them based on that which was very obvious...I just never felt a large sense of trust...Yeah, I've been lucky enough to not have to interact with the justice system too much or the representatives of that and I don't have any super particular desire to, as a general rule.

—Woman of color¹⁴

Distrust of the police was very common among nonwhite respondents, and almost universal among Black AVP interviewees. Hearing these respondents talk about the police, one gets the impression that the police do not keep people safe. Instead, they induce an overwhelming sense of vulnerability and violability. And, nonwhite respondents also recognize that their view of police is not universal among all Americans. The distrust towards law enforcement emanated from perceptions of disparate treatment between white and nonwhite groups. For nonwhite respondents, racial bias in policing was not thought of as anomalous, but part of the “way things are set up,” and thus foundational to the practice of police work.

Distrust of the police was very common among nonwhite respondents, and almost universal among Black AVP interviewees.

In contrast to nonwhite people who questioned the function and overall motivation of police, many white respondents naturalized and legitimated the existence of law enforcement. They thought of the police as a vital institution empowered to serve and protect them. There was little consideration of whether or not they would be treated fairly by police. They did not see themselves at odds with the police in any meaningful way. In fact, most had not considered the police much at all.

The law enforcement around here is adequate. I've got nothing bad to say about it.

—White man

The foregoing nicely illustrates the typical generic, abstract response to police offered by white respondents. Describing law enforcement in terms of “adequacy” or “inadequacy” reduces the issue of police violence against people of color to a matter of quantity, while foreclosing any conversations about the potential of police to be a source of racialized violence and occupying force. Consider the following remarks from Steve Martinot and Jared Sexton about the function of police.

There are two possibilities: first, police violence is a deviation from the rules governing police procedures in general. Second, these various forms of violence (e.g., racial profiling, street murders, terrorism) are the rule itself as standard operating procedure.¹⁵

White people took solace in knowing that they did not need to worry about being racially profiled, harassed, or harmed by police because of their lifestyles.

I'm not exactly afraid of the police because they're not going to really arrest me for the things that I do. I have so much safety in our society, so much privilege.

—White man

I'm a generally law-abiding white guy. So, you know, mostly I don't have interactions with law enforcement...I would say for me personally that my interactions have all been positive. I know – at least a couple of guys who were on the ... police force and, you know, good guys. And, you know, they're trying to do their best.

—White man

Describing himself as a “law-abiding white guy,” this respondent reinforces Alexander’s claim that “white crime” and thus, the “white criminal” sound absurd. The respondent seems largely unaware that “law-abiding” is already implied in “white guy.” Using the terms together then seems redundant. The law always already abides by this

respondent, so being “law-abiding” requires little effort. Both white and nonwhite people’s perceptions of the police were largely informed by lived realities. Overall, when asked about their interactions with law enforcement, white people described their relationships with law enforcement in mostly amiable terms. More than one white respondent talked about friendships with law enforcement officers. Because many white people believe that they were well served and protected by police, they had little reason to question the legitimacy of law enforcement. Encounters with police did not require white people to question their own mortality. Instead, most white people tended to treat encounters with law enforcement as banal and predictable. Even when those interactions involved them getting arrested, white peoples’ accounts were indexed by what Cheryl Harris describes as the “settled expectations”¹⁶ linked to “whiteness as property.”

I got a DUI, so I was smoking weed when I was 19 and driving too fast and just, you get pulled over, they find weed, you get a DUI. That's the way it works. That's the way the laws are written.

—White man

Anyway, my buddies come walking down the street and they're yelling, 'Give him a break. He's from Wisconsin.' I still had the Wisconsin plates on the car. I explained to him, 'Yeah, I'm just trying to get to the bar. Yes. Those are my jackass friends yelling over there.' He's perfectly fine with it. He gave me directions to the bar, a warning, wished me a good night. That's the majority of my experience with cops. At least right up there's never been anything but positive really or nothing too negative.

—White man

For many white people, this sort of convivial exchange appears to be the rule, rather than the exception. Disclosing plans to go to a bar after being stopped by a police officer signals a level of

comfort and privilege (i.e. “settled expectations”) that many nonwhite respondents not only lacked, but their lived experience prohibited them from having. Using their own experiences with police as reference points meant that many white people had little reason to consider how seemingly benign encounters with law enforcement might prove perilous for nonwhite groups. This lack of reflexivity or “white solipsism”¹⁷ prevents white respondents from seeing things from the perspective of people of color, particularly Black people.

I've never heard any Black person [here] say they feel profiled...I asked some of my neighbors about what was going on and the answers I got was like, that stuff doesn't happen here.

—White woman

This respondent seems to dismiss concerns of racial profiling because she “has never heard any Black person say they feel profiled.” When they are not directly harmed by racial profiling or racist police, it is easier for white respondents to dismiss the concerns of protesters.

Not all white respondents assumed policing was a benign, protective force. Indeed, in the wake of the protests of George Floyd’s killing, they began considering the possibility of unfair police treatment. Some white respondents also demonstrated greater awareness that their own benign experiences with police were affected by their race. Sensitivity to this reality was particularly strong among white respondents with social connections to nonwhite people.

I think, partly because I'm a white male, I don't get as much as negative interaction with police... For some people, like if you're been learning, if you are a Black, maybe it's harder, even if you are deferential can still get in big trouble and my boyfriend who's half Black, he's told me stories of being followed by police because he used to live in a nicer and hipper area of Minneapolis... Back in the 90s they were following him and ask him why he was walking in that neighborhood and he tried to tell them he lived there. And

they still followed him and waited outside of his apartment building. Nothing happened, but it still seemed rather intimidating for him.

—White man

This person acknowledges that Black and white people’s encounters with police will inevitably result in distinct and perhaps incommensurable outcomes. Other white respondents shared some awareness of the role whiteness plays in affecting their interactions with police.

My husband is a white male, so he's never had any sort of issues at all with anything. And you know, as a white female I can't say I have either...So, we – our run-ins with law enforcement are few and far between.

—White woman

In a very matter-of-fact way, this respondent notes that she and her husband have had few “run-ins with law enforcement” because they are both white. For these respondents, there is an acknowledgement that being white shields them from the worst excesses of racialized violence. This theme ran through other interviews when white respondents talked about policing. It certainly emerged when nonwhite respondents talked about racialized violence by police. However, even when reflecting on the possibility of police engaging in unfair treatment, most white respondents could not draw on personal experiences with unfair treatment. They instead drew on what they heard.

Just as positive experiences structured the perception of police for white respondents, the inverse was true for racial and ethnic minorities. For many, Black, Asian, Latino/a, and Indigenous respondents, negative perceptions of the police derived from some direct experience with harassment, racial profiling, violability and brutality.

Oh, I've only been arrested one time, but it was on probable cause. Meaning I wasn't guilty, but they had to make sure...You know what probable cause is. Like “maybe you did, maybe you didn't.” So that's the only time I've ever been in

trouble. Never did time for it or nothing. And I never got in trouble again. I don't do the police. I wasn't a troubled kid. So, me going to jail one time was just devastating because I always said I don't want to have a record. So that one time was enough. It was too much the one time....I've seen loved ones get arrested right in front of me. It's kind of irritating. It's bad. It does kind of stress you out a little bit because you don't really want none of your family members behind bars. So, it can be a little stressful.

—Black woman

Despite this respondent maintaining that she was not guilty, she was still arrested. While adverse encounters with police were rare among white people, they frequently shaped the attitudes that nonwhite respondents (and especially Black respondents) had towards police. For many of these respondents, the issue is not whether they should abide by the law, but rather whether the law will abide by them.

But – and you know, I got put in the system at a young age and stuff like that...You know, what – yeah, it's pretty bad. Been harassed by the police officers before. They got the wrong person... You know, that was really – that was kind of traumatizing to me because the way they were like frisking me and stuff, and I guess that – it was like a gang strike force, I guess...I was like I was gonna shit my pants cause he had his pistol pointed right at me...And he was like – he's going to the other side of his car ducking, and I'm like, I had my hands up, and I'm wearing my T-shirt and stuff, and I am like, I'm just sitting here. I have nothing to do with. And they had me out there for like half an hour at first, and they took a picture of – with me holding a sign...I'm like, thinking like if this is what people that live in there like young people have to deal with all the time, cause it's very – yeah, it's pretty bad. The cops out here, they like to intimidate people cause of the power they have...it's ridiculous.

—Man of color⁴

Facing a police officer with their gun drawn and aimed at you is more likely to produce overwhelming fear, rather than anything remotely related to a sense of protection. Not only was this respondent confronted by the threat of his own mortality, but he also assumed residents in the building must feel similarly if police treated them in a similar way. Intimidation proved to be one of many tactics police have at their disposal to assert their power over civilians. Encounters with police left respondents not only feeling violated, but inherently violable.

The experiences of minority respondents stand in stark contrast to white interviewees, even those who admit to criminal behavior. In stark contrast to the experiences of nonwhite people, a white AVP respondent discussed his numerous speeding tickets in young adulthood—speeding tickets that never resulted in jail or even arrest.

Okay, well minor stuff. Growing up and learning how to drive, I got a crap load of speeding tickets like a lot of people do. So, sometimes you got to go to court, take care of that, sometimes you don't as far as anything illegal stuff, whatever I may have done illegal back 30 years ago, I never got caught. I can't remember exactly what those things were, I don't do them now, but never been arrested, almost a couple times, never been put in jail, obviously, I've been to court for various different things, traffic tickets, legal stuff with my ma, stuff like that, but technically, no, I don't have a record, as far as that goes...Never been charged with anything, not like that, just mainly over the years traffic stuff, until I got older, back in the 80s and 90s and learned how to control them things, typical teenage stuff.

—White man

In “Whiteness as Property,” Harris describes whiteness as a “consolation prize”¹⁸ that white people can redeem in the event that their social, racial, gender, and/or economic status is ever threatened. This respondent seemed to recognize that regardless of how many times he was pulled over or cited for reckless driving, he would be granted a “get out

of jail free card” and maintain a clean arrest record. No such consolation prizes existed, though, when Black, Indigenous, Asian, and Latino/a respondents talked about their interactions with police. Instead, many nonwhite people, particularly Black respondents, were presumed guilty before proven otherwise.

It is clear that discourse shapes action. Still, it is worth thinking about how experience shapes discourse. For example, how do such divergent experiences with police shape discourse around broader issues of racial justice? How might white people’s more amicable encounters with police lead them to diminish or completely ignore more antagonistic views held by nonwhite respondents?

Conclusions

When it comes to issues of racial justice and racialized violence by police, AVP interviews do not only suggest a very fractured public. The data indicate that, at least on this issue, there is no meaningful unified American “public” to speak of. The very distinctive experiences of racial discrimination and policing fundamentally separate Black people in America from their white counterparts. It is easy for Black and other nonwhite respondents to retrieve concrete and very negative experiences with police (in addition to many other experiences of racial discrimination in other domains). These experiences drive a desire for concrete reform. The goal is tangible change rather than having another abstract conversation about inequality.

For the white public, experiences with police are less frequent and typically benign, and the need for reform is seen as less pressing. Because reform isn’t a front and center concern, the recent protests have, at best, evoked an interest in having more conversations about race. This is engagement with race and racial inequality at a remove and thus focused on abstract implications for discourse and conversation. The conversation itself becomes the goal and the achievement. Still, there is a serious risk of equating conversation with conversion, specifically transformative change.

These are striking differences and suggest that the very same event—ongoing protests against police violence—is being interpreted in starkly different ways. These differences may make meaningful progress more difficult to achieve.

There is a serious risk of equating conversation with conversion, specifically transformative change.

The more abstract point here, when put technically, is that discourse is a dependent variable as well as an independent variable. We often treat discourse as a precursor to action, defaulting to a model where we start by “talking it through” and then settle, via that conversation, on some well-considered action. We have suggested instead that experience also shapes discourse and makes it more complicated: If you’re in the thick of experiencing inequality, there’s much less interest in talk and much more interest in action. The disparate experience of police means that the conversation about policing (and racial inequity more generally) starts at a different point for Americans based on their race and ethnicity. These different conversations make it difficult to conceive of actions and responses to policing that can speak to divergent experiences.

Corey D. Fields is an associate professor and the Idol Family Chair in the sociology department at Georgetown University. Rahsaan Mahadeo is an assistant professor in the department of sociology and Black studies at Providence College. Lisa Hummel is a PhD candidate in sociology at Stanford University and Sara Moore was previously a research manager at the Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality.

Notes

1. Hartman, Saidiya. 2008. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 6.
2. Guerino, Paul, Paige M. Harrison, and William J. Sabol. 2012. "Prisoners in 2010." Bureau of Justice Statistics. Retrieved from <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/p10.pdf>.
3. The "imprisonment rate of Black adults at year-end 2019 was more than five times that of white adults (263 per 100,000 white adult U.S. residents) and almost twice the rate of Hispanic adults (757 per 100,000 Hispanic adult U.S. residents)." Carson, E. Ann. 2020. "Prisoners in 2019." Bureau of Justice Statistics. Retrieved from <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/p19.pdf>.
4. Bonczar, Thomas P. 2003. "Prevalence of imprisonment in the U.S. population, 1974–2001." Bureau of Justice Statistics. Retrieved from <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/piuspo1.pdf>.
5. Carson, 2020.
6. Hartney, Christopher and Linh Vuong. 2009. "Created Equal: Racial and Ethnic Disparities in the US Criminal Justice System." National Council on Crime and Delinquency.
7. Rodriguez, Dylan. 2016. "Policing and the Violence of White Being: An Interview with Dylan Rodriguez." *Propter Nos*. 1(1), 13.
8. Alexander, Michelle. 2010. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: New Press, 193.
9. New York Civil Liberties Union. 2019. "Stop-and-Frisk in the de Blasio Era." Retrieved from <https://www.nyclu.org/en/publications/stop-and-frisk-de-blasio-era-2019.9>
10. Edwards, Frank, Hedwig Lee and Michael Esposito. 2019. "Risk of Being Killed by Police Use of Force in the United States by Age, Race–Ethnicity, and Sex." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*. 116(34), 16793–16798.
11. Baldwin, James. 1985. *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Non-Fiction, 1948–1985*. St. Martin's Press, 148.
12. See Alter, Charlotte. 2020. "How Black Lives Matter Could Reshape the 2020 Elections." *Time*. Retrieved from <https://time.com/5852534/black-lives-matter-2020-elections-voting>. See also PBS. 2020. "How will nationwide protests affect the 2020 election?" Retrieved from <https://www.pbs.org/weta/washingtonweek/web-video/how-will-nationwide-protests-affect-2020-election>.
13. We followed standard procedures for the analysis of qualitative interview data, e.g., Gerson, Kathleen, and Sarah Damaske. 2020. *The Science and Art of Interviewing*. New York: Oxford University Press.
14. Race not provided to maintain confidentiality.
15. Martinot, Steve and Jared Sexton. 2010. "The Avant-Garde of White Supremacy." *Social Identities* 9(2), 170.
16. Harris, Cheryl I. 1993. "Whiteness as Property." *Harvard Law Review* 106(8), 1777.
17. Rich, Adrienne. 1979. "'Disloyal to Civilization': Feminism, Racism, and Gynophobia." In *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966–1978*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 299. Adrienne Rich describes white solipsism as the ability to "think, imagine, and speak as if whiteness described the world." Consequently, white people fail or refuse to acknowledge the significance of nonwhite experience and/or existence.
18. Harris writes, "Nevertheless, whiteness retains its value as a 'consolation prize': it does not mean that all whites will win, but simply that they will not lose, if losing is defined as being on the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy—the position to which blacks have been consigned." Pages 1758–1759.