

A Racial Divide: College Student Attitudes Concerning Police in South Louisiana

by

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Abstract

This study explored differences between African American college students' attitudes toward the police in comparison to White college students in south Louisiana, a region in the national spotlight in the U.S. regarding race and police violence. With participants from Louisiana State University and Southern University, the study sought to examine differences in attitudes toward the police based on race and university history. Significant differences existed between African American students' attitudes toward police compared with their White student counterparts. Results also indicated a significant difference in said attitudes when comparing university history, with a significant racial disparity in college students' attitudes toward police to indicate the need for student communities of color and police to work together to propose and implement strategies to improve relations, including community policing.

Keywords: African American, attitudes, Caucasian, college students, police

Introduction

In recent years, the political climate and media coverage regarding the link between race and use of police force have brought forth a plethora of inquiries into public attitudes toward the police. Altercations between minority communities and police officers command visiting these events to examine their effect on the public's attitudes toward police and police legitimacy. Hinds (2009) found that hearing about a negative police encounter could have a significant impact on the public's attitudes toward the police. Public opinions of police legitimacy can have a direct effect on the officers' ability to successfully perform their duties (U.S. Department of Justice [DOJ], 2014a).

In 2014, Ferguson, Missouri, was thrust into the national spotlight when an 18-year-old African American male named Michael Brown was shot and killed by a White police officer, Darren Wilson, (Healy, 2014). The shooting of Brown and the failure to indict Wilson sparked outrage and protest in Ferguson and surrounding communities (Healy, 2014). DOJ (2015) found in its report on policing in Ferguson that the police department's unlawful and harmful practices, which included racial bias, brought harm to the African American community. The report found that these practices negatively affected the community's trust in the police and views of police legitimacy. Deaths of African American individuals such as Eric Garner and Freddie Gray, among others, have sparked further protests and continue to propel discourse about racial bias among police officers and attitudes toward police among minority communities into the national consciousness (BBC, 2015).

More recently, events in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, underscore the need to understand how perceptions of police may influence community interactions with law enforcement officials. On July 5, 2016, Alton Sterling was shot and killed while pinned to the ground by two officers of the Baton Rouge Police Department (Sollis, 2016). Numerous protests and demonstrations against police brutality and racial bias followed Sterling's death (Sollis, 2016). One week later, three young men were arrested and charged with plotting to kill Baton Rouge police officers as a form of retaliation (Visser, 2016a). Twelve days following Sterling's death, three Baton Rouge police officers were shot and killed by an African American male from Missouri. The shooter was reported to have made multiple online videos referencing *fighting back* against police (Long, 2016; Visser, 2016b). These events underscore the importance of understanding perceptions and their ability to influence both police and members of the community.

The purpose of this study was to assess college students' attitudes toward the police in the Greater Baton Rouge area. The DOJ (2014b) reported on *police legitimacy* defines the term as the belief that law enforcement officials should be permitted to use their position to maintain societal order and handle issues present in their local communities.

To accomplish these tasks, police must be seen as honest persons who attempt to perform their job to standard and protect the community (DOJ, 2014b). To gauge student attitudes toward the police, this study employed two influential factors—race and race related university type (traditional vs. designated Historical Black College or University [HBCU]). The literature review begins with a brief overview of attitudes about the police.

Literature Review

Role of Attitudes Toward Police

Positive public attitudes toward the police can make crime prevention and control easier for police to accomplish on a day to day basis. Relatedly, fairness and positive treatment by law enforcement are important aspects of the public's perception of police as a legitimate force (Correia, Reisig, & Lovrich, 1996). Views of police illegitimacy and mistrust have been found to contribute to the failure of citizens to obey police instructions (Mazerolle, Antrobus, Bennet, & Tyler, 2013). Research posits that when the public views police as legitimate, citizens are more likely to cooperate with police authority (Tyler, 2005; Mazerolle et al., 2013).

Encounters with police have been shown to be a key dimension in influencing public perception of police. These encounters have a direct reflection on police activities being viewed with legitimacy or otherwise (Mazerolle et al., 2013; Mbuba, 2010; Webb & Marshall, 1995). Negative encounters with police can likely result in negative attitudes toward the police (Chaney & Robertson, 2013; Mazerolle et al., 2013). Inversely, community policing draws on research that positive encounters with law enforcement official will foster positive public attitudes toward the police and compliance with police instruction (Gaarder, Rodriguez, & Zats, 2004).

Race and Police

Race is a robust predictor of attitudes toward police (Lee & Gibbs, 2015; Mbuba, 2010; Webb & Marshall, 1995). An established finding in the United States is that African American and other racial minority groups view police less favorably than the White American majority (Lee & Gibbs, 2015; Mbuba, 2010; Schuck, Rosenbaum & Hawkins, 2008). Wu, Sun, and Triplett (2009) further supported the finding that African Americans tend to have less positive attitudes toward the police even with control of socioeconomic status. Webb and Marshall (1995) found that Hispanic attitudes toward the police were higher than the African American population, but still scored lower in attitudes toward the police than the White majority.

Mbuba (2010) reported among student attitudes toward the police that race was the most significant role in his study among four-year university students. Mbuba's research demonstrated that White college students showed more positive student attitudes towards the police when compared with students of minority status. Wu et al. (2009) study also supported that minorities tend to have lower views than the majority population. The Mbuba (2010) study contended that racial makeup of neighborhoods plays a significant factor in student attitudes towards the police.

Schuck et al. (2008) supported the understanding that aggregately, African Americans hold more negative attitudes toward the police than their White counterparts, especially considering the factor of police contact. Contradicting previous studies, Lee and Gibbs (2015) found that race becomes an insignificant factor after introducing interactive and relational aspects of social distance as a measurement of attitudes toward the police; however, this finding is not well researched and, thus, warrants further inquiry.

Theoretical Foundation

Wu et al. (2009) used the *sense of injustice model* as a theoretical tool to explain the negative attitudes toward the police held by African Americans in the United States. Specifically, the belief that minorities are treated unfairly by police officers may profoundly influence minority attitudes toward the police. The practice of police presence through patrols may add support to this model in that patrols along with problem oriented policing can have a detrimental effect on minority attitudes toward the police. Problem oriented policing correlates with the most patrolled areas of a city being those that are higher in crime and lower in socioeconomic status, which often means higher minority populations (Mbuba, 2010; Tolliver, Hadden, Brown- Manning, & Snowden, 2016). The practice of foot patrols may further stimulate feelings of discrimination in minority communities rather than positive relations between police and communities sought through community policing strategies (Bain, Robinson, & Conser, 2014; Cohen, 1987). Bain et al. (2014) also posited that public perceptions of police might correlate with a lack of general knowledge of police provided services in the local community.

Specific to the Baton Rouge community, recent focus groups involving both community members and law enforcement officers have revealed the level of mistrust for police (Barthelemy, Chaney, Maccio, & Church, 2016). While some focus group participants reported positive interactions with police, more common themes involved fear and mistrust, while others reported harassment and targeting (e.g., repeated stops) by police officers. In the same study, law enforcement officers most commonly endorsed increased face to face contact with their communities as a way to improve relationships. Based on the findings of Barthelemy et al. (2016), the current study sought to further explore attitudes toward police within the Baton Rouge community.

Purpose and Research Questions

The broad purpose of this study is to examine attitudes toward the police among college students. More specifically, the purpose is broken down to gauge any differences among variables of race and race related university type. Five additional questions were added to gauge any differences in college students' attitudes about police in the domains of excessive force, violence against minorities, cultural competency, and de-escalation. The study examined the following two research questions amid the current, volatile relational climate among police and racial minorities in the Greater Baton Rouge metropolitan area:

Research Question 1. Are there significant differences in current, overall perception toward police via two racial variables: African American college students and White college students; and students from traditional university (Louisiana State University [LSU]) and those from an HBCU (Southern University [SU])?

Research Question 2. Are there significant differences in attitudes regarding continuum of police force, likelihood of minority violence, cultural competency, and situation de-escalation via the aforementioned two racial variables?

Methods

Design and Sampling

This study utilized an empirical, self-report design to examine a large sample of students' attitudes toward the police at cross sectional point in time (Rubin & Babbie, 2013). A large sample of college students were solicited, as past research has indicated that younger persons are more likely to view police unfavorably compared to older persons (Brown & Benedict, 2002). Institutional review boards at LSU and SU granted explicit permission to conduct this study and to disclose their institutional names. Through the assistance of university administrators and department heads, online surveys were emailed to students via multiple student mailing lists. To ensure anonymity, researchers did not have access to personal identifying information.

Measures

Demographics. The surveys collected demographic information consisting of age, race, sex, academic major, and university.

Attitudes toward Police scale (ATP). Dunham and Alpert (1988) developed four content areas in their study on neighborhood effects on attitudes toward the police: officer demeanor (ODEM), responsibility (RCC), discretion (DISC), and patrol (APS). Webb and Marshall (1995) added an additional content area regarding personal officer characteristics (OCR) to the measure and used it in multiple attitudes toward the police studies. Features in this content area include active listening and responding, candor, and discrimination (Webb & Marshall, 1995). Global scores range from 23 to 115 points, with a higher score indicating a more positive attitude toward police. The full ATP scale showed high internal consistency for the present study ($\alpha = .91$).

Student Attitudes toward Police scale (SATP). Mbuba's (2010) SATP questionnaire consists of fourteen items with similar content to the aforementioned ATP measure. Total possible global scores for the SATP scale range from 14 to 70. The higher global score reflects a more positive student perception of the police. Similar to the ATP scale, the full SATP scale also showed high internal consistency ($\alpha = .90$).

Additional items regarding attitudes toward police. The researchers also included five questions to investigate further student attitudes toward police. The questions specifically addressed excessive police force; likelihood of minority victimization (two items); possible need for police cultural competency; and possible need for situation de-escalation training. A five point Likert response format was used with each item ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Analytic Strategy

Research question 1 addressed the differences in mean global scores on the ATP and SATP scales between two pairs of groupings: (1) African American vs. White college students; and (2) traditional university (LSU) vs. HBCU (SU) students. Each pair of analyses utilized an independent *t*-test. For each result, Cohen's *d* effect sizes were calculated. The significance threshold was set at $p = .05$, while Cohen's (1988) standard cutoffs for small (0.2), medium (0.5), and large (0.8) effect sizes were also used.

Research question 2 examined any significant group differences in levels of agreement with statements regarding police use of force, minority victimization, cultural competency, and situation de-escalation for the same, aforementioned pairs of student groupings.

Chi square tests were utilized with additional Cramer's *V* coefficients showing strength of association for each result. Cramer's *V* ranges from 0 to 1 and may be interpreted similarly to a correlation coefficient with 0 indicating no relationship and 1 indicating a perfect relationship between two variables (Cohen, 1988). The standard cutoffs for weak, moderate, and strong associations are 0.01, 0.03, and 0.05, respectively (Cohen, 1988).

Results

Sample Characteristics

The final sample consisted of 1,108 student participants. The sample's mean age was 22.8 (*SD* = 6.12). The sample was majority female (59.8%). A plurality reported their race as African American (49.1%). While both universities were well represented, a small majority of students attended LSU (57.6%). Please note that test results for participants of other races were not reported because their sample sizes were too small. Table 1 details sample characteristics.

Table 1

Sample Characteristics

	N	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Sex				
Female	663	59.8		
Male	440	39.7		
Other	5	0.5		
Race				
Black	544	49.1		
White	498	44.9		
Other	66	6.0		
University History				
LSU	638	57.6		
SU	470	42.4		
Age			22.8	6.12

Research Question 1 Findings

Significant differences were observed between African American students' and White students' mean global scores on the both the ATP and SATP measures. African American students' mean global scores were significantly lower than their White counterparts on both measures, indicating aggregately a more negative attitude toward police. The standardized Cohen's *d* scores for both the ATP (0.80) and SATP (1.06) results indicate large effect size in mean differences between African American and White students. Table 2 shows statistical details for these *t*-test results.

Similar significant differences were observed on mean global scores for both attitudes toward police measures between traditional university students and HBCU students in the Baton Rouge area. LSU students had higher mean global scores on both scales, indicating a more positive view from traditional university students toward police. Cohen's *d* for both ATP (.51) and SATP (.77) mean score comparisons indicated a moderate effect size. Again, Table 2 reveals statistical details for these tests.

Table 2

T Test Results

	<u>ATP</u>				<u>SATP</u>			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>d</i>
Race								
Black	62.7	12.16	-12.89***	.80	40.9	7.80	-16.95***	1.06
White	73.8	15.42			50.5	10.15		
University								
LSU	71.2	15.97	8.62***	.51	48.6	10.43	12.99***	.77
SU	64.0	11.86			41.3	8.06		

Note: Equal variances not assumed for all analyses.

*** $p < .001$

Research Question 2 Findings

Chi square analyses were used to evaluate the association between race and university on five additional scale items. For these results, responses were dichotomized as agreement (*strongly agree* or *agree*) or disagreement (*strongly disagree* or *disagree*) responses are reported together as disagreement. Table 3 details all chi square results with Cramer's *V* association coefficients, while Tables 4 through 8 show response distributions for each of the five items.

Table 3

Chi Square Test Results

	χ^2	<i>df</i>	<i>V</i>
<i>Race</i> (African American vs. Caucasian)			
Continuum of Police Force	161.03***	8	.27***
Likelihood of Minority Victimization			
Police Brutality	211.53***	8	.31***
Deadly Force	268.99***	8	.35***
Cultural Competence	143.11***	8	.25***
Situation Deescalation	77.34***	8	.19***
<i>University History</i> (traditional vs. HBCU)			
Continuum of Police Force	87.10***	4	.28***
Likelihood of Minority Victimization			
Police Brutality	102.27***	4	.30***
Deadly Force	142.32***	4	.36***
Cultural Competence	74.90***	4	.26***
Situation Deescalation	30.44***	4	.17***

*** $p < .001$

Findings on Additional Items Regarding Attitudes Toward Police

Attitudes regarding continuum of police force. The chi square test results indicated a statistically significant relationship, $\chi^2(8) = 161.03, p < .001$ between race and agreement with the statement *Police use too much force in the daily conduct of their duties*. African American students were more likely to answer in agreement (54.6%) with the statement than White students (27.3%). Analysis of the relationship between university and agreement with the statement yielded similarly significant results, $\chi^2(4) = 87.10, p < .001$. LSU students were less likely to answer in agreement (35.4%) with the statement than students from SU (51.1%). Cramer's *V* for both race and university (.27 and .28, respectively) indicated a weak strength of association between race and university and attitudes about the continuum of police force.

Attitudes regarding likelihood of minority victimization. The chi square test results indicated a statistically significant relationship, $\chi^2(8) = 211.53, p < .001$, between race and agreement with the statement: *More minorities are likely to become victims of police brutality than White persons*. African American students were more likely to answer in agreement with the statement (80.7%) than White students (50.4%). Similarly, chi square test results also indicated a statistically significant relationship, $\chi^2(4) = 102.27, p < .001$, between university and agreement with the same statement. LSU students were less likely to answer in agreement (58.3%) than SU students (77.0%). For both race (.31) and university (.30), *V* coefficients showed moderate associations with attitudes about police brutality against minority victims.

The chi square test results indicated a statistically significant relationship between race and agreement with the statement: *Police are more likely to use deadly force against an African American male than a White male*. African American students were more likely to answer in agreement to the statement (81.6%) than White students (41.4%). The chi square test results likewise indicated a statistically significant relationship, $\chi^2(4) = 142.32, p < .001$ between university and agreement with the same statement. LSU students were less likely to answer in agreement to the statement (51.9%) than SU students (77.5%). On the item regarding attitudes toward likelihood of deadly force used against minority victims, *V* coefficients were highest relative to all other researcher created items. Both race (.35) and university (.36) were moderately associated with attitudes about police brutality against minority victims.

Attitudes competent. African American students were more likely to answer in agreement (78.3%) to the regarding cultural competence. Chi square test results indicated a statistically significant relationship, $\chi^2(8) = 143.11, p < .001$, between race and agreement with the statement: *Police need more training to be culturally* statement than White students, who were significantly less likely to answer in agreement (54.4%). Additionally, results also indicated a statistically significant relationship, $\chi^2(4) = 74.90, p < .001$, between university and agreement with the statement regarding cultural competence. LSU students were less likely to answer in agreement (62.1%) to the statement than SU students (73.8%). *V* coefficients showed a weak association of race and university to attitudes regarding cultural competence of police.

Attitudes regarding situation de-escalation. Chi square test results indicated a statistically significant relationship between race and agreement with the statement: *Police need more training on how to deescalate a situation*. African American students were more likely to answer in agreement (83.2%) to the statement than White students (69.4%). Results also indicated a statistically significant relationship between the university and agreement with the statement regarding situation de-escalation. LSU students were less likely to answer in agreement (75.0%) with the statement than SU students, who had more students in agreement (79.2%) with the aforementioned statement. Of all the additional scale items, situation de-escalation showed the weakest strength of association (*V* coefficients) with race (0.19) and university (0.17).

Table 4

Responses for “police use too much force in the daily conduct of their duties”

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Race					
Black	18.4 %	36.2 %	33.3 %	9.7%	2.4%
White	9.0 %	18.3 %	26.9 %	32.9 %	12.9 %
University					
LSU	11.6 %	23.8 %	25.2 %	28.5 %	10.8%
SU	16.8 %	34.3 %	35.1 %	10.9 %	3 %

Table 5

Responses for “police are more likely to use deadly force against a Black male than a White male”

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Race					
Black	60.5 %	21.1 %	14.0 %	2.4 %	2.0 %
White	19.5 %	21.9 %	18.7 %	15.7 %	24.3 %
University					
LSU	29.3 %	22.6 %	15.2 %	13.0 %	19.9 %
SU	56.2 %	21.3 %	16.8 %	2.8 %	3.0 %

Table 6

Responses for “more minorities are likely to become victims of police brutality than White persons”

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Race					
Black	54.2 %	26.5 %	14.3 %	2.2 %	2.8 %
White	18.7 %	31.7 %	14.9 %	17.3 %	17.5 %
University					
LSU	29 %	29.3 %	12.9 %	14.6 %	14.3 %
SU	48.1 %	28.9 %	16.8 %	2.6 %	3.6 %

Table 7

Responses for “police need more training to be culturally competent”

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Race					
Black	49.8 %	28.5 %	18 %	1.7 %	2 %
White	27.9 %	26.5 %	16.9 %	16.9 %	11.8 %
University					
LSU	34.8 %	27.3 %	14.7 %	13.6 %	9.6 %
SU	44.7 %	29.1 %	21.5 %	2.3 %	2.3 %

Table 8

Responses for “police need more training on how to deescalate a situation”

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Race					
Black	56.4 %	26.8 %	14.0 %	1.5 %	1.3 %
White	36.9 %	32.5 %	16.1 %	8.8 %	5.6 %
University					
LSU	42.6 %	32.4 %	13.2 %	7.1 %	4.7%
SU	51.1 %	28.1 %	17.2 %	2.1 %	1.5%

Discussion

Summary of Findings

ATP and SATP scale mean scores differed significantly across race and university. African American and HBCU students in Baton Rouge were more likely than their White, traditional university counterparts to have more negative attitudes toward the police. Based on effect size, the race variable demonstrated a stronger difference in attitudes toward police than university type. Worth noting, however, is that overall attitudes tended toward neutral or positive across race and university.

Results from the five additional items revealed similar differences between races and universities. African American students and HBCU students in Baton Rouge differed significantly from White and traditional university students in levels of agreement with all five statements. The majority of African American and HBCU respondents agreed that police tend to use excessive force; are more likely to brutalize or kill minority individuals; and need more training in cultural competence and de-escalation tactics. The starkest differences in attitudes occurred on the two items regarding likelihood of minority victimization by police. A large majority (77% to 82%) of African American and HBCU respondents agreed that minority individuals were more likely to become victims of police brutality and that police are more likely to use deadly force against an African American male than a White male. A substantially smaller percentage (41% to 58%) of White and traditional university student respondents agreed with statements about minority victimization by police.

Implications

The implications of these findings demonstrate a significant disparity between African American college students and White college students' attitudes toward police in the Greater Baton Rouge metropolitan area. Negative attitudes toward police among communities of color may represent a symptom of a much larger issue of racial bias present in policing structure and policies. These biases manifest in laws targeting minorities, such as problem oriented policing and stop and frisk laws (Otuyelu, Graham, & Kennedy, 2016, Tolliver et al.; 2016, Tyler & Fagan 2008). A compilation of statistics of police involved shootings found that members of African American population were three times more likely to be killed by police than the White population and other minorities (Kindy, 2015). These facts help to explain the negative attitudes toward the police held by African American college students, including those in Baton Rouge and surrounding area. A critical component of improving relations between the community and police must lie in changing the public perception of the police.

Prevention, cornerstone in many issues, should be used before negative attitudes toward the police are developed (Kindy, 2015). This means using community policing strategies to encourage more positive interactions between communities and law enforcement, such as involving local residents in problem solving and locating police stations inside the community (DOJ, 2014b). Additionally, the public should have opportunities to address their issues with the police and offer direction on how to improve the relationships between the police and community. Local police should be encouraged to consume results of this study and other similar studies to enhance awareness of negative public perceptions and its deleterious impact on officers' ability to perform their duties. Local communities could then serve as models for future national policy implementation.

Another way to improve relationships with minority communities is for law enforcement officers to participate in cultural competence and racial sensitivity training (Otuyelu et al., 2016). The term *cultural competence* may trigger apathy among police officers and, as such, cultural competence training may be met with skepticism. One suggestion to alleviate this potential obstacle is to infuse aspects of culture and cultural competence, where relevant, in de-escalation trainings. De-escalation and similar tactics may already be present at police academies and annual training, making infusion of cultural competence and racial sensitivity more practical.

Study Limitations

Limitations from this study should be mentioned. Generalizability of this study to universities outside of the Deep South and specifically, the Mississippi Delta region, is limited. This study was conducted in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Although a large sample size was obtained, it may not be appropriate to generalize results outside of the geographical region.

Additional focus should be given to the question of whether contact with police affects public attitudes toward the police. Future studies might consider student a qualitative or mixed methods approach to ascertain why these perceptions of police exist and strategies to ameliorate these perceptions. Future studies should also include zip code mapping to determine if race is the major factor in ATP or SATP, or if socioeconomic status might also play a factor. By mapping zip codes, police could gain valuable information on where to increase their efforts in improving community relations.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to assess collegiate students' attitudes toward the police in the Greater Baton Rouge metropolitan region. Using race and race related university type, this study observed significant differences in attitudes toward the police. As demonstrated earlier, African American college students have significantly more negative perceptions of police than do their White student counterparts. Future research should attempt seek out solutions to improve relations between police officers and communities of color, especially in large urban environments like Baton Rouge with a history, recent or otherwise, of volatile dynamics and consequent protests between minority communities and law enforcement. This study added to the body of knowledge by exploring a topic that has been under researched in the past but is now at the forefront of our national media outlets.

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