Demographics and Approval of the Police Use of Force in the General Social Survey, 2010

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Jeremy William Algate

March 20, 2013
The following study attempts to explore the relationship between the demographics of respondents and their approval of the police use of force. Many studies have determined that race seems to have the definitive effect on trust of the police. More than any other demographic, this variable is indicated as the determining factor. More recently, other studies have suggested that several other demographics and characteristics might help define trust in the police more fully. This study attempts to begin this determination using data from the aggregated General Social Survey (GSS). I hypothesized that while race would be the strongest relationship, we would also see a significant difference due to socioeconomic status (SES). SES is very strongly correlated to race in the United States, but the influence of these factors on one another can be controlled. Preliminary results suggest that while race indeed seems to be a strong predictor of approval of police of force, socioeconomic status does not have such a role.

**Introduction**

The police, more than any other institution, may be the most visible arm of government. People of all social strata come across law enforcement personnel almost daily. They work the roads, college campuses, neighborhoods, shopping centers, and virtually everywhere else. There is an ongoing debate in this nation, and most others, about the extent of police power and the adaptation of military technology and tactics by police force. More generally, approval of police might be used to make generalizations about the legitimacy of a nation. States must be able to enforce the rule of law and maintain a semblance of security if they desire to function properly.

The police’s effectiveness at maintaining order and deterring or punishing crime is based entirely in their constructed legitimacy. This presents a problem, as social and civil unrest are parts of modern life, especially in contemporary America. Riots, protests, and an everyday high crime rates demand attention. Community policing and other reforms draw particular focus on approval ratings and police legitimacy. “Many people underestimate the citizen’s role in law enforcement,” according to Derlega, et al. Police and the state have taken note of approval ratings and their correlations to effectiveness. Many schools, especially in suburbia, now include “McGruff” programs. But what role does being ascribed a minority status have on one’s perception of the police? Are the socially disenfranchised more likely to disapprove of the police?
Many studies have attempted to correlate just these two factors: minority status and police approval (Hagan et al, Howell et al, Johnson et al, Thompson et al, & Wortley et al). In fact, it appears that in the current body of research, many minority labels seem to have no appreciable correlation with lower police approval: gender and socioeconomic class, for example, have no relation (Thompson et al). Almost all studies found a very strong correlation with minoritized race or ethnic status and low approval, especially amongst African-Americans and Latino-Americans (Thompson et al, Hagan et al, Howell et al, Johnson et al, Sidanius et al, & Wortley et al). Interestingly, some studies have found that if whites are the minority in a geographic region, racial and ethnic minorities do not have higher approval ratings but whites have a much lower acceptance of police legitimacy (Howell et al). These attitudes towards law enforcement start very young (Hagan et al), but can also be positively affected in the short term at least (Derlega et al). Perhaps most disturbingly, these approval ratings hold generally true even for well-publicized police brutality: in the case of Rodney King, minorities became even more negative, while the opinions of whites changed very little (though still negatively) (Sidanius et al).

While this study does not expect to see any departures, it may be that the recent financial crises may have impacted the faith US citizens put in institutions. It may be that a general lack of faith in government may have cause a lower approval for the police's actions. This study will not look longitudinally at data, so this possible shift cannot be addressed. However, it may be possible to demonstrate that the independent effects of one's socioeconomic status, when controlled for race/ethnicity, may have come to have a correlation with the perception of police use of force.

This study will also attempt to establish for at least one dataset the effect of other demographic information (age and sex) on approval of police use of force.

Methodology

Data Collection
Implicit in my research are the following questions: Does ethnicity/race of an individual affect the perception of police use of force? Does socioeconomic status? And does the established strong correlation between race/ethnicity and class remove any statistically significant correlation with perception of police use of force?

In order to answer these questions comprehensively, I needed to collect a representative sample of the United States and be able to demonstrate that the sample was also random—that it did not have other biases. At the very least, this would have required much more time than possible. In all likelihood, it would also require multiple researchers and some amount of money.

In order to achieve results worth reporting, I instead chose to use secondary data analysis. I consulted the General Social Survey Data from 2010, which is available for use such as this.

The samples were collected by NORC, the National Opinion Research Center, from a national random sample. Their sample size was 2044 respondents, each one individually interviewed. The median length of interviews was 90 minutes. The sample was composed of English-speaking and Spanish-speaking persons over the age of 18 who were currently “living in non-institutional arrangements” within the United States. Full probability sampling was used in half of the 2010 surveys, and NORC also sub-sampled non-respondents. Illegitimate or inconsistent coding was “cleaned” according to coding specifications and interviewer instructions.

Their process is not traditionally random, but uses a technique dubbed “a multi-stage area probability sample to the block level.” At the block level, it is a quota sample of ages, sexes, and employment status. This has the limitation of contacting “not-at-home” respondents, as NORC puts it, which could lead to sampling biases in some ways. This is controlled by planning calls around the typical workday.

**Variables**

The first of the control variables was race/ethnicity. Due to the constraints of the data set used—namely, very few respondents who were not black or white—it was recoded to a binary of white versus non-white racial designation.
Next, I created an index of socioeconomic status using several variables. Several variables related to status were recoded to make this work more effectively. This required arbitrary divisions in that there is no research to suggest that, say, one group of incomes has more in common with one another than the next. However, it is assumed for the purposes of this research that an overall higher score in the SES index indicates a likelihood of an overall higher social and/or economic status in society.

To attempt to work around foreseen issues with internal consistency, an index of respondent’s years of education was used to very loosely indicate status, and reported 2006 income was used to indicate class. The year 2006 was used because it was the only question asked regarding income in this dataset. These, of course, do not offer any definitive measure of class or status, and can therefore less reliably inform someone about the relationship about SES and approval of police use of force. However, results here may indicate the need to investigate the relationship more effectively.

Finally, for my independent variable, I created an index of several questions in the GSS regarding approval (measured on the Likert scale) of the police use of force. The original questions posed four separate situations where the respondent indicated whether they strongly agree, agree, neither disagree nor agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with the police officer’s authority to use force. There is also a general question about whether there are ever situations where police may use force. Those who indicate ‘no’ to this last question were not asked the former four questions. Therefore, it is also valuable to analyze the results of this latter binary question.

The four questions asked the respondent to indicate their level of agreement with the police officer’s authority to use force in each of the following situations: against a civilian who swore at the officer (with no included definition of “swearing” or “force”), against a suspect in a murder investigation, against an escaping suspect, and against a civilian physically striking the officer. Each of these variables was recoded to a binary, with “yes” being “1”, and these four were then combined into an index.

The indexes I have created were run through a Cronbach’s Alpha test to see if they have internal consistency of a significant amount to be considered reliable.
Finally, each of the control variables was compared using regression techniques to determine if the various categories had significant influence on the respondent’s approval of police force measured through their score on the police force index.

To control for the influence of race that was noted in the literature, social status, the SES index, and class were controlled for race/ethnicity. This was done by running the two variables together in a linear regression, which demonstrates how much of their variation may be explained by one another. In the second step, an interaction term was created using race and the SES index. This was done by creating a new variable that was “race*SES” in SPSS. Interaction variables attempt to control for the influence one independent variable has on another. Literature has established there is a very strong correlation between race and SES in the United States, so it is reasonable to expect a chance for interaction. Interaction analysis attempts to explain whether these two variables have an additive effect (where they enhance one another’s effect on data) or erroneous (where one may not have much of an effect if the other is considered). This eventually revealed that they have an additive effect on one another. This model is often called hierarchal linear modeling, as the models are built on top of one another.

I hypothesized that in general there would be a negative relationship between non-white race and approval, and a similar relationship between approval and SES. I suspected this would be more pronounced for both when comparing the demographic information to the index as opposed to the vaguer question of whether force is ever acceptable. In other words, being white or owning class or higher status would likely indicate a higher approval of police use of force, especially in the specific situational questions that form the police approval index.

Data Analysis

Descriptives

Data were analyzed using SPSS. Focusing only on the questions relevant to my own investigations and editing a copy of the GSS data set to use of my purposes yielded
a sample size (or N value) of 2044. Below is a table of descriptive statistics for these variables:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>.2417 (.24.2% nonwhite)</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>0=white 1=nonwhite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>48.0</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>18-89+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>1.56 (43.6% male)</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>1=male, 2=female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES Index</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>0-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Binary Police Use of Force</td>
<td>.433 (.42.8% yes)</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>0=yes 1=no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police Use of Force Index</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0-4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

White respondents comprised 75.8% of the population, while the remaining 24.2% identified as non-white. This means that non-whites are slightly overrepresented in this dataset. The US Census from 2010 identified that 63.7% of the population was "Non-Hispanic white" while another 8.7% of the population was "white Hispanic," for a total of roughly 71%. However, such minor variation between the GSS and Census is to be expected, because the questionnaires are framed very differently. The GSS simply asked respondents to identify themselves as one of several categories (of which Latino/Hispanic) was an option, while the US census codes ethnicity separately for people who identify as Hispanic/Latino.

Age was distributed appropriately for a random sample, that is, so that no subgroup of respondent ages was represented in a larger amount than any other. This does mean the sample is not representative of the age differences in the population, but it also means that the sample will have results from every age demographic.

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1 The last category of age, 89+, is coded as such in the GSS, and therefore cannot be separated in age categories.
Women are slightly over represented in this sample, making up 56% of the population.

This is likely due to the fact that not every respondent is asked every question, nor do they have to answer every question, nor can every response be coded accurately.

The second index detailed above, which was created through the respondent’s education and household income in 2006, produced an N value of 1802, which makes it much more reliable.

The index contained 6 categories, from 0 to 5. The distribution can be found in this table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
<th>Percent of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>344</td>
<td>16.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>435</td>
<td>21.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>24.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results are consistent with, though not identical to, the relative distribution of perceived SES in America: roughly 55% of respondents considered themselves to be middle class (here, value 3) or higher. Other attempts to have Americans self-report indicate a similar perception, that the vast majority of citizens believe themselves to be middle class or owning class, with very few self-identifying as poor or working class.

The binary question regarding police use of force (roughly, are there situations where police use of force are appropriate?) had 42.8% of respondents respond with a yes, and 32.6% of respondents respond with a no. The remaining respondents responded with a non-committal answer, did not understand the question, did not prefer to answer, or were not asked the question.

2 Does not include missing data
We can make no assumptions about this missing or invalid data, but there is a much larger proportion of respondents missing or invalid on this single question than most others in the dataset (N=1542, down from 1802 overall). Controlling for the missing data, 56.7% of respondents who did answer did so with an affirmative, with 43.3% answering with a solid “no.”

Going forward to the index created regarding police force, we see a similar population of respondents (N=1255):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approval of Police Use of Force Index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The index actually shows a strong trend toward a normal distribution, with roughly 80% of respondents scoring a 1 or 2 on the five point scale. The mean of this dataset is 1.8. This demonstrates that within the population, we see a relatively measured response: there are certainly some situations where the vast majority of respondents approve of police force, but there are others that very few actually think acceptable.

**Regression**

Four models of linear regression were tested. Model one examines the control variables, age and sex, which are not assumed to have strong predictive ability. This is to establish how much more data can be predicted by the independent variables than could be explained by other cofactors. Model two examines the two controls plus race, which is expected to show the effect that race has at predicting the dependent variable,

³ Does not include missing data
while controlling for age and sex. Model three examines the same phenomenon, but considers SES as a independent variable, and this therefore shows us how much individual variation can be attributed to SES (the difference between the r-squared of models two and three is this amount). Finally, Model four examines whether or not race and socioeconomic status considered together and controlled for overrepresentation can explain more or less variation. In other words, if r-squared increases in model four, it indicates that considering race and class together explains more of the variation than race or class alone. The R-squared value is reported because it demonstrates what proportion of the responses may be explained with the independent variables considered. The table is located below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable Name</th>
<th>B(SE)</th>
<th>B(SE)</th>
<th>B(SE)</th>
<th>B (SE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.003°</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>.003°</td>
<td>.003°</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>-.091</td>
<td>-.090</td>
<td>-.121°</td>
<td>-.123°</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race (coded as 'Nonwhite' binary)</td>
<td>-.179°</td>
<td>-.122°</td>
<td>-.288°</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES Index</td>
<td></td>
<td>.022</td>
<td>.069</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race*SES</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.063</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>.008</td>
<td>.016</td>
<td>.019</td>
<td>.021</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When the control and independent variables were explored against the police force approval index, they produced relatively low r-squared results, meaning that they can explain very little of the variation in the dependent variable (approval of police use of force). However, age of respondent still produced a positive relationship with the index, in that older respondents were more likely to score higher on the police approval index. In other words, a respondent is expected to have a score on the index .003 units higher for each year over 18 they are.

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4 B is the coefficient of linear regression, here for the linear regression with Approval of Police Use of Force; SE is the standard error
Sex produced equally lackluster results, but also demonstrated a negative relationship, which indicates women are more likely to be less supportive of police use of force. This is consistent with those who argue that women are socialized to be less confrontational. While it is absurd and even problematic to argue someone is “more female,” conceptually we could say that looking from an identical male to female respondent, we’d expect the score on this index to drop by .123 points on the index.

When the linear regression of race versus the police force index was calculated, it yielded a coefficient of -.288, which indicates that being non-white has a slight negative relationship with approval of police use of force. In other words, if one considered two identical respondents who differed only in race, the nonwhite respondent would be expected to have an index score that is .288 lower than the white respondent.

For the SES index, it still produced a positive relationship, which agrees with the hypothesis, that higher SES should indicate higher approval of police use of force. For each point higher on the index of SES used here, one would expect to see the police index score rise by .069 units. This means class has a predictive influence on police use of force.

Next, an interaction term was created using race and SES to see the effect these two had on one another and to judge the effects of the control variables. Essentially, this demonstrates something similar to the multiple regressions. To use an example, an interaction term can demonstrate the effects of adding sugar to coffee, and also stirring coffee on its perceived sweetness. It is likely that doing one or the other does not make the drink sweeter, but doing both has an additive effect on sweetness. Here, we are investigating a similar theory, only with class and race: how do the two variables interact to influence the dependent variable, as opposed to how they do so separately. Finally, the interaction variable produced a regression coefficient of -.063. This means that an increase of 1 point in the interaction term indicates that approval of police use of force score should decrease by .063 units. This term also allowed the study to control the established correlation between race and SES. In other words, data is controlled so that the strong correlation between race and status does not disrupt the regressions.
Judging by the overall trend of this data, the results suggest that older, white, and/or male respondents of higher SES were more likely to approve of police use of force in more situations. Younger, non-white, female respondents, and/or those of lower SES were more likely to not approve of police use of force in the same situations.

Regardless, none of these results can be considered definitive at prediction because of the low r-square value.

It is worth noting, however, that these trends generally agree with the general body of sociological research. Thompson et al argued that the general trend between sex and approval of police was functionally nonexistent; they argued the same for SES.

In fact, the hierarchal model used above does demonstrate that race is the most determinant variable in this model. The low r-square values may suggest limitations, but the obvious upward trend shows that these variables, particularly race, come to describe much more of the data together than they could ever separately—and that race in particular can describe a good portion of the data.

It has been exhaustively established that race/ethnicity generally has a strong correlation with approval of police in that respondents of color (especially people who are black or Latino) have lower rates of approval (Thompson et al, Hagan et al, Howell et al, Johnson et al, Sidanius et al, & Wortley et al).

**Conclusions**

As this dataset was secondary, there are several limitations that were obvious from the start. The data was not collected with this sort of specific investigation in mind.

My hypotheses are true for this data set. However, the trends are not strong, and it is likely this is at least in part due to the size of the population and all of the missing values inherent to investigating a data set that due to indices dropped by roughly 39% (from 2044 to 1255).
The literature that exists at this point does support the conclusion that might be reported from this study. Race was the most effective independent variable at predicting police use of force; SES was much less so.

The literature available argues that this is because of socialization. Even among children, people of color see police as more hostile. Theorists, academics, activists, and people of color themselves experience the criminal justice system—which affects communities of color differently than it does white communities. The people then pass on these expectations to their children, and go on to approach police with more hostility.

With an expected r-squared value for a strong variable in the range of .25 to .50, a .02 is almost more perplexing than no relationship. It means that for the sample, only 1% of the variation in the police force index can be explained by variation in race. There are several potential factors. The simple act of recoding data can always pose a risk to statistical analysis. This effect can only be exaggerated as the amount of data that is rendered invalid by recoding increases. Both race and the index were recoded in the course of the analysis. In fact, the index of police force was originally four questions, recoded to binary, and then made into an index. In a sense, this might be similar to five recodes. This can explain some amount of the lower N, but does not seem to explain the near-complete lack of relationship at hand. At the end of this study, the dependent variable had something like 98% of its variability unexplained.

The literature is functionally silent on this matter. Obviously, one thing that contributes to the frustration here is that no demographic is determinant in opinions. In other words, being a person of color does not guarantee or even make it much more than likely to see any particular beliefs. We might say political beliefs and ideology are not strongly correlated with race.

Potentially, some of the variation left unexplained could be down to political beliefs. However, the literature does not make this suggestion, and there is little to indicate this is the case. It is relevant to mention that both Democrats and Republicans, existing as the only viable options in the minds of many Americans, both generally
advocate for stricter legal repercussions for law-breaking and neither has made a point of addressing low approval of police officers. This makes sense: both parties are “reformist” in that they both pursue changes within the existing institutions, for the most part. Also, judging by the overall trend, the vast majority of Americans, presumably across demographics, approve of police use of force in some situations. It may be that the relatively rare political “radicals” such as libertarians or anarchists, existing outside of the typical dichotomy and with different paradigms of what makes a functional society, might have radically different approval ratings for the police use of force.

It is worth mentioning, however, that though race is very much not definitive, it is the best variable used here. The literature has exhaustively established why this is. The only explanation that makes sense across the board is that people of color, particularly black people, are more likely to distrust police. This socialization, it has been established, starts relatively early. The “why” implicit in this finding is the source of much politically charged debate. It is the opinion of this writer, and of many respected theorists and sociologists, that this is because of the lasting effects of institutionalized racism. In a nation that is roughly 15% black, black men make up almost 30% of the imprisoned population. This gross overrepresentation is the product of police and justice systems that target people of color — to be charitable, this is sometimes done inadvertently and unconsciously.

SES is much less effective at predicting variation in perceptions of police use of force. The literature is less clear on the why here, but we might take notes from the matter regarding race. Class is much more nebulous in the United States. Most people can identify the rich from the poor, but the gradient is more fluid between them. The social construction of race, on the other hand, is usually made of clear categories. SES might also fail to describe perceptions of police use of force because of the American concept of class. An overwhelming majority of Americans define themselves as middle class, and so we might argue they are less likely to perceive themselves as a minoritized
group. This could lead them to be less aware of discriminatory practices by the justice system.

There is another explanation that reads less like “finger-pointing” at the establishment. Because of the existence of class and race inequality, and differential treatment based on race and class in society, members of minoritized groups might be more likely to approach a situation with authority with hostility. This, in turn, might provoke officers—the rest seems simple enough. In this narrative, the frame of reference of both the viewers and the police officers work together to produce a more conflict-prone environment, even though hardly anyone involved wants conflict.

One of the most important things to be drawn from this study is that more research should be done on the subject. Police are a core part of this society’s structure, and departments around the nation are making moves to address their standing in the community. Officers are a daily part of life in the United States for most citizens. Police make the news daily in a nation obsessed with crime media. The image this projects has the ability to influence the function and effectiveness of officers.

Perhaps just as important is the changing social landscape. From Occupy Wall Street to the Tea Party to any number of less publicized but growing social movements, the US may be facing an era of social unrest. In such a time, it is important to gauge trust in social institutions. One of the easiest to see and fundamental to social function is the police officer. Even outside of democracies, most sociologists agree that a society that does not derive authority from the people risks facing upheaval. It may be possible to predict unrest and change in the relative perception of police.

More specifically to this research, there were several limitations enforced on this data. I was not able to phrase the questions, or offer follow up questions. There were many demographic questions I think it would be valuable to pursue.

The inherited nature of some wealth may well change how SES influences the independent variable. The SES index in general was far from ideal. Originally, it was intended to include input from labor status, family income of the respondent when they were children, and the education of their spouse and parents. It would be useful to
pursue these in data collection. Another limitation, other than a very low N value for the index, was that all internal divisions (e.g. the separation of labor status=0 from labor status=1) had to be made arbitrarily. This compounds itself, so that an arbitrarily assigned “1” in labor status is weighted equally with the arbitrary income designation “1.” There may be research that could address this, finding a way to objective correlate some level of an occupation’s prestige with a level of income.

If it were possible to conduct this study over a longer period of time, the effects of protests, police shootings, highly publicized crime, and other events could be measured across demographics. Very little information exists that currently measures approval in a population longitudinally. Sociologists have had to mostly collect data reactively, moving quickly to do so after events like the beating of Rodney King and subsequent riots. Even such snapshots of data do very little to establish our understanding of how events affect populations over time.

Most interesting to me is the power of labeling and social scripts. The questions in the GSS do not delve into the individual’s definitions of “civilian”, “force”, “police officer”, or any number of other variables. Trends may emerge in how various respondents picture the officer (their race, gender, class, etc.) versus the citizen’s, or suspect’s, or offender’s demographics. It could be that the definition of force (striking, using a TAZER, firing a gun) drastically changes the response. It might be that most respondents hear “citizen” and picture a white male, but hear murder suspect and picture a black male—or the opposite. These could radically alter their answers. Would they respond the same if all parties involved were Latino? If they were women? If they were gay?

These sorts of presuppositions inform most of our beliefs and decisions, according to some research, and it is vital in my belief to document just how quickly they come into play in our everyday thoughts and actions.

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References
