

Colorism and the Killing of Unarmed African Americans by Police

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between colorism and police killings of unarmed African American suspects. Previous research has investigated police violence and colorism in arrests and found darker toned African Americans are disadvantaged. We hypothesized that the darker an unarmed victim's skin is, the more likely they are to be killed by police. We also predicted that the effect of colorism is greater in men than women. We also hypothesized that the officers' race doesn't contribute to the proportion of dark skinned African American victims that are killed. Data was collected from the Washington Post database, which has unarmed African Americans victims from 2015-2021. We found that the victims who were killed by police were darker than a controlled population of African Americans that have not encountered the police. This supports our hypothesis that the darker a victim is the more likely they are to be killed. Our hypothesis that men will face more colorism than women was only partially supported because there were only a few women victims to compare. Our last hypothesis that the officers' race does not have an effect on how many darker skin victims there was supported because white and black officers both killed darker than average skinned victims.

Introduction

The rate at which African Americans are killed by police is more than twice as high as white Americans: 33 per million versus 13 per million. Police killed 1,353 African Americans and 2,601 white Americans since 2015 (1). The current study analyzed the skin tone of unarmed African Americans killed by the police since 2015. Black people are more likely to be killed by police than whites; but what is missing are the differences in the black community. To truly make positive change, it is important to understand who in the black community is being killed, so we can do something about it.

Two concepts that are important in the discussion on skin tone and police violence are Critical Race Theory (CRT) and colorism. CRT is the argument that the criminal justice system (among other things) is inherently racist; it is the idea that because people benefit from a system that is racially biased, individuals who participate in society help that system continue and further inequality and continue the cycle of oppression (2). Colorism is discrimination amongst people of color based solely on their skin tone and some other phenotypes like hair or eyes; it usually benefits lighter skin tones (2). Combining both of these ideas, darker skinned Americans may be in more danger when interacting with police due to discrimination from colorism and society in general.

Criminal Perceptions of African Americans

There are negative perceptions in the criminal justice system (3). Researchers conducted a race stratified telephone survey asking if the participants think blacks and whites are treated the same based on if they were stopped by the police, jailed, or sentenced to death. The interviewers worded questions to see who blacks thought would be more likely to discriminate against them. They found that African Americans were far more likely to perceive racial injustice in the criminal justice system compared to whites. Conservatives were less likely to perceive racial injustice. Nearly all of the white respondents shared the same view on racial injustice while all of the black respondents' perceptions varied depending on personal characteristics. This connects with the current study because it shows that many whites do not see discrimination and black people do. Due to white people's perceptions, a white officer may not recognize their actions may be discrimination, even though it is discrimination.

A similar study interviewed white college students and a group of white police officers on their perceptions of potential criminals (4). They showed photos and had the participants point out an object they saw in the blurred photos. Throughout all the studies, the researchers found that the participants sensed criminality faster in the pictures with black people opposed to white people. This connects to the current study because it shows that many white people criminalize black people automatically and because they are seen as criminal, police officers may be more likely to use force.

Colorism and Arrests

A previous study reviewed the difference in arrest rates based on skin color between siblings; the researchers interviewed brothers and had them document their relationships between skin color and arrests then did the experiment again years later (5). They found that being dark skinned makes them more likely to be labeled delinquent and this makes the delinquent more likely to be arrested as an adult. When controlling for delinquency, the act of being dark also means he or she is more likely to be arrested. For every shade darker (on a 1-5 scale), a black person is 3.8% more likely to be arrested, ignoring all other factors. These findings suggest that the darker a person's skin, the more likely they are to be arrested and being arrested means you have interactions with the police which lead to more police violence.

Police Violence

Another study reviewed situations where policemen killed black people (6). Critical Race Theorists argue that the system is inherently racist due to unequal power and decades of discrimination. No individual officer or suspect is really the point, it is the overall pattern that shows that officers are not held accountable, so the system will continue to reinforce white supremacy and victimize black people (6). In another study, the odds of being killed by police were sorted by race, gender, unarmed/armed, and the neighborhood people live in (7). They found that black males were most likely to be killed by police. Also, black Americans who are unarmed are 6.6 times more likely to be killed by police than unarmed whites.

Only one previous study has looked at skin tone and the killing of unarmed black men by police (2). Two researchers sorted participants on a skin tone spectrum and compared results. Then, they examined who was more likely to be killed. Victims' skin tones were identified on a

scale from 1-9, with 1 being the lightest. Of the 68 victims in their study, 59% of them had a skin tone of 6 or darker. They also found males, ages 18-28, and city dwellers were most likely to be killed. We plan to recreate this experiment, to see if we find the same results based on our ratings of skin tone and the new updated cases of police killings.

Study Hypotheses

Overall, the available research argues that the criminal justice system is racially biased, and is colorist (2). Generally, lighter skinned black Americans (and whites) benefit from the current system because they are less likely to be arrested, and less likely to be killed by police (2, 5). Research on colorism and police killings is limited. The only available study includes only up to 2015, and black victims were rated by two researchers with no control group. Therefore the current study is important because it provides an additional perspective on the skin tone of victims, with the goal of confirming existing research. We plan to examine police killings of black people from 2015 to 2021, locate photos of victims, rate their skin tones, and see if the proportion of darker skinned victims is higher than the light skinned victims and higher than the proportion in America in general.

We hypothesize that the darker an unarmed victim's skin is, the more likely they are to be killed by police. This is consistent with other research on colorism and police killings (2). We also think that the effect of colorism will be larger for men than women. This is because other studies have found black men are more likely to be killed by police (4, 7). Finally, we expect there to be no effect of the officers' race on the proportion of dark skinned black Americans killed. We expect this because CRT argues that the system itself is biased, and police of all races are likely biased to black men (6).

Methods

The data in our study came from the Washington Post database on victims of police violence 2015-2021 (1). The database has filters such as state, gender, race, age, mental illness, weapon, body camera, fleeing the scene and year. We used the filters so that there were only unarmed black victims. There were 130 victims in total. We pulled victims' information that pertains to year, gender, age, color (using a nine shade color scale), and race of police officers. The name of the nine shade color scale is the Physical Characteristics Satisfaction Scale (PCSS)

(8), which has been used in previous research on skin tone (2). When a linked article had a picture, it was rated. But if we could not find a picture or the article lacked information about the officer, we searched Google. If we could not find the race of the police officer, we put it as “unknown”. When looking at Google, we looked for text around the image to ensure it was the right person then we downloaded it. If there was more than one picture, we looked for the clearest and best lit. To ensure we got the best results, multiple people rated the skin tones: the primary researcher (African American female), contributing researcher (white male), and another student (African American female, the primary author’s sister). We did the same color ratings for a set of high school students' school pictures, so we had something to compare to. The intraclass correlation for the three raters of police victims was 0.88, while the intraclass correlation for the two raters of the sample of students was 0.93. These numbers suggest a high degree of agreement between raters.

Results

We are researching if darker skinned males are more likely to be killed by the police. The primary researcher, contributing researcher, and another student, rated victims’ skin tones using the Physical Characteristics Satisfaction Scale (PCSS). The primary researcher and contributing researcher rated a random sample of high school students’ headshots using the PCSS so that we could compare a black population to the black victims. We expect to find that unarmed darker skinned African Americans in general, and males specifically, are more likely to be killed by the police.

Figure 1, a frequency distribution of deaths of unarmed African Americans, is left skewed with the most common skin tones between 7-9. There were a total of 129 unarmed victims, one was excluded because we could not find a picture. Six percent of the victims were women and 94% of the victims were men. Sixty six percent of the police officers were white, 22% of the police’ races were unknown, 2% were Hispanic, 8% were black, 1% were Asian, and 1% of shootings involved both black and white officers. The average age of victims is 32.3.

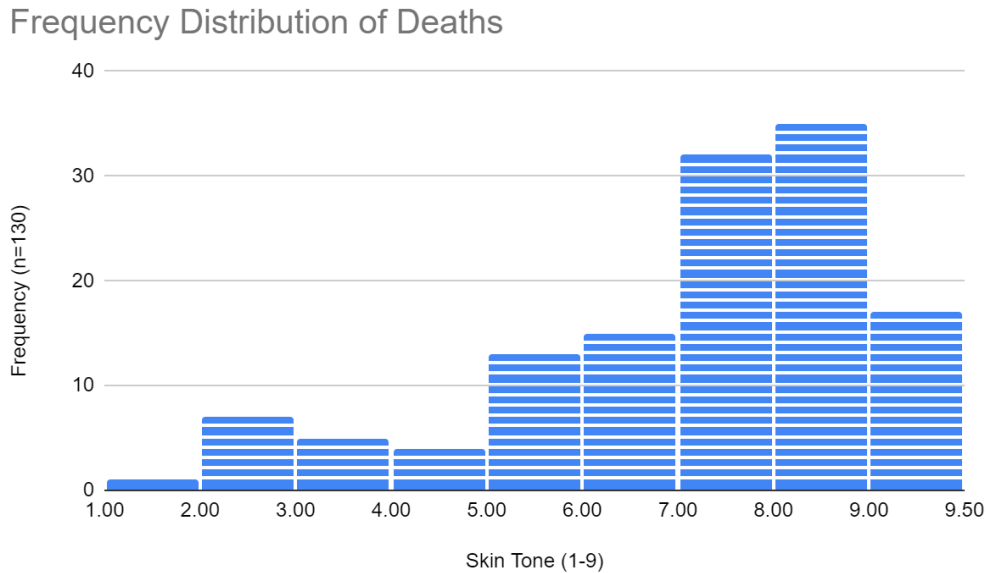


Figure 1. Frequency Distribution of Deaths. *In the above figure, the distribution of skin tones as measured by the Physical Characteristics Satisfaction Scale are displayed. Higher numbers represent darker skin toned African Americans. In this graph, most unarmed victims of police are darker in skin tone.*

We expected the darker the skin tone, the more common it was to be killed. We excluded one victim because the primary researcher couldn't find a picture. We averaged all three sets of skin tone ratings. We then collected 262 yearbook photos from a school's database. All available photos were included, except for 4 students because they were white. The primary researcher and the contributing researcher rated the skin tones of the students then we averaged the ratings. An independent t-test found a significant difference in skin tone between unarmed victims of police and a representative sample of African American students ($t(385) = 3.65, p = 0.0001$). Unarmed victims' skin tone was darker ($M=7.0$) than the sample of African Americans ($M=6.2$, Figure 2).

Average Skin Tone

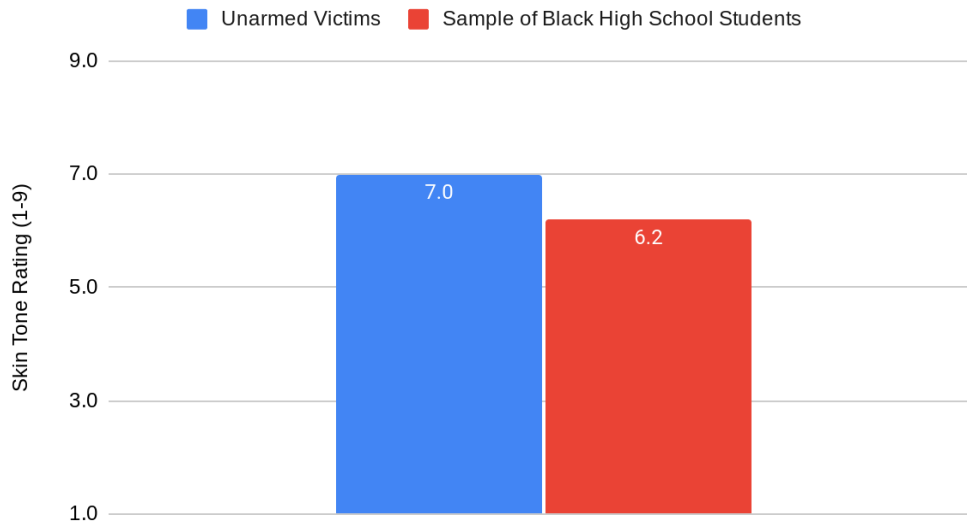


Figure 2. Average Skin Tone. *In the above figure, the average skin tone of unarmed victims and a sample of black high school students are displayed. The average skin tone of unarmed victims is higher than the average skin tone of the sample of black high school students.*

We expected men to face more colorism than women in regards to police brutality. There were 9 females and 120 males, one male was excluded due to not being able to find a picture of the victim. An independent t-test found no difference in skin tone between genders ($t(127) = -0.65, p = 0.26$). No clear conclusion can be drawn because of the lack of evidence due to the few numbers of females, but male victims were darked on average ($M=7.0$) compared to females ($M=6.2$).

We hypothesized the race of the police officer should not affect the distribution of skin tone of the victims. The race of the police officer is independent of the fact that the darker a person's skin tone is the more likely they are to be killed. There were 1 Asian, 1 pair of black and white officers, 3 Hispanic officers as well as 29 unknown police officers, which were all excluded. This left 85 white and 10 black officers who killed unarmed African Americans. An independent t-test found no difference in skin tone of victims by police officer's race ($t(93) = 1.18, p = 0.24$). Victims killed by black officers were darker ($M=7.6$) than those killed by whites ($M=6.8$), but the difference was not significant.

Discussion

Our first hypothesis was that unarmed victims of police shootings tend to be darker than African Americans in general. This was supported by our data (Figure 2). We also hypothesized that the effect of colorism will be larger in men than women regarding police brutality. This hypothesis was partially supported but we were unable to make a clear conclusion due to the low number of females. However, males were darker on average compared to females. Our last hypothesis was that there will be no effect of the officers' race on the proportion of dark skinned African Americans killed. This hypothesis was supported because both black and white officers killed darker skin toned African Americans. We also found no difference in skin tones between races of officers.

In a prior 1999-2014 study, Crutchfield et al. also found that police killed darker African Americans (2). The median skin tone in that study was 6, 58% had a six rating or more. We also found that police killed darker African Americans as well in 2015-2021. The average skin tone in our study was 7.0. We used the same scale for color, the PCSS, as Crutchfield et. al.. Now that we have strong evidence that darker African Americans are more likely to be killed by the police, we are more confident than before. We updated and expanded beyond 2014 until modern day. Also, our study compared a group of African Americans who do not have contact with police, and we used a third rater to make color ratings better. This adds more confidence to what we found. Police violence is not just a question of race but of color as well.

Research shows that race is more important than gender, in odds of being killed, but with so few black women being killed compared to males, it is hard to draw a conclusion. Prior research found only 8 women unarmed victims in 1999-2014, but most were a "6" or darker, like the males. We found that there were very few female victims (9), their average skin tone was a 6.2, which is lighter than the males' average skin tone (7.0). It is impossible to make a conclusion because there is very little data on women but we do know men face racism and colorism more than women when it comes to police killings but it does not mean women are not discriminated against.

Our research suggests it's not about the race of the individual cops, the stereotype that all white cops are racist and black cops are not racist is not true. Our data suggests it is the system that is racist not the individuals. We found that both black and white cops kill darker people. Our findings are consistent with what others have found. Other researchers have used critical race

theory to argue that the police participate in a racist and biased system and the system is unfair to black people (6). Therefore, the criminal justice system has biases regardless of the individual and everyone has a responsibility to help because they are part of the system. Our society needs to talk about the justice system, not just the individual officers.

One limitation we encountered while collecting data is that we could not find a photo for one of the victims. Another limitation is that rating skin tone is hard. Separating out colors is difficult because it depends on your focus and mood. Two of the raters knew the hypothesis, one did not however, the raters matched very well. This is a limitation because the raters that know the hypothesis could have been biased in their ratings. The last limitation we had was that we only collected data for 5 years. In the future, more years should be added to the data. There should also be more people rating the skin tones, especially people who are uninvolved in the study design. Future researchers should try to find a larger, diverse sample of African Americans who have not encountered the police as well to confirm our findings.

According to our research, darker skinned African Americans are likely to be killed by police than lighter skin toned victims, providing support for critical race theory. This means the criminal justice system itself may be biased, not just a few officers. People in power need to have the will to change this. Regardless, African Americans must understand the risks of being black and especially dark, when interacting with the police. Black lives matter, but so does color within the African American community.

Acknowledgments

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