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DOES RACE MATTER? (PART II)

The Philadelphia story, and its implications for urban policing

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. On May 14, 2013, Philly.com, a website affiliated with the Philadelphia Inquirer, rocked the “city of brotherly love” with a post that questioned why Philadelphia cops were shooting more citizens – they shot 52 persons in 2012, seventeen more than in 2011 – even as violent crime was going down. Although the department offered some justification – gun assaults on officers had jumped to 101 from 76 in the preceding year – when compared to prior years the toll seemed decidedly excessive.

Within two weeks PPD officers shot four more civilians, three fatally. A Fraternal Order of Police official blamed the gunplay on criminals who were armed with everything up to assault rifles and often outgunned street cops. But police commissioner Charles Ramsey took a different tack. Admitting that the many shootings “gets people wondering if they were all justified,” he called for an inquiry by the Department of Justice, just like he did while police chief in Washington D.C. In 2014 PPD began posting officer-involved shooting data on the web.

DOJ wrapped up its inquiry earlier this year. It examined 394 officer-involved shootings (OIS's) between 2007-2014. During that period, in a city that was approximately 43 percent black and 37 percent white, eighty percent of those shot were black and nine percent were white. Fifty-six percent had been armed with a firearm and eight percent with a “sharp object,” while others carried blunt objects and bb guns. Fifteen percent, though, were completely unarmed. It's that group that drew our attention. Why were unarmed persons shot? Specifically, were unarmed blacks more likely to be shot than unarmed whites? And did officer race matter?

According to the study, officers usually shot unarmed persons for one of two reasons: a failure of “threat perception,” and during physical altercations:

Threat perception failures occur when the officer(s) perceives a suspect as being armed due to the misidentification of a nonthreatening object (e.g., a cell phone) or movement (e.g., tugging at the waistband). This was the case in 49 percent of unarmed incidents. Physical altercations refer to incidents in which the suspect reached for the officer's firearm or overwhelmed the officer with physical force. This was the case in 35 percent of unarmed OISs.

Perhaps surprisingly, unarmed whites were more likely to be shot than unarmed blacks (twenty-five percent of shootings versus 15.8 percent.) The reasons were also different: unarmed whites were most often shot because they physically resisted, while unarmed blacks were most often shot due to lapses in officers' threat perception. And there was another surprise: black officers seemed more likely than their white colleagues to misperceive threats when citizens were black:

We also examined the race of involved officers in threat perception failure OISs to gain a greater understanding of how cross-race encounters may influence threat perception. We found that the

threat perception failure rate for White officers and Black suspects was 6.8 percent. Black officers had a threat perception failure rate of 11.4 percent when the suspect was Black. The threat perception failure rate for Hispanic officers was 16.7 percent when involved in an OIS with a Black suspect.

So, did race matter? While DOJ's report doesn't say "no," its conclusions, which sharply criticized PPD's training and supervisory practices, don't mention race. Aside from this study, there is precious little data about cross-racial law enforcement encounters. And where it exists, the interpretations are decidedly mixed. Here are some examples:

- An analysis of surveys and observations in Indianapolis and St. Petersburg during 1996-1997 concluded that black cops seemed significantly more willing than white officers to defuse conflicts in predominantly black areas. To complicate matters, it also seemed that black officers seemed more likely than white officers to turn to coercion (Ivan Y. Sun and Brian K. Payne, "Racial Differences in Resolving Conflicts," *Crime and Delinquency*, October 2004, pp. 516-541.)
- [A study of 230 shootings](#) by St. Louis police between 2003-2012 determined that the most important determinant was not officer race but the level of firearms violence.
- A review of FBI and other data from 1994-1998 for 179 cities with populations of 100,000 or more found no significant relationship between police killings of felons and the prevalence of black or Hispanic officers (Brad W. Smith, "The Impact of Police Officer Diversity on Police-Caused Homicides," *The Policy Studies Journal*, 31:2, 2003, pp. 147-162).
- An examination of similar data for 2000-2003 found that, in line with the hypothesis that minorities were regarded as threats, *sustained* complaints of excessive force went up as the proportion of minority residents increased. Interestingly, sustained complaints went down as the proportion of black (but not Hispanic) officers increased (Brad W. Smith and Malcolm D. Holmes, "Police Use of Excessive in Minority Communities: A Test of the Minority Threat, Place, and Community Accountability Hypotheses," *Social Problems*, 61(1), 2014, pp. 83-104.)

It seems that the effects of race on officer decisions, if any, are often subtle, difficult to measure, and open to divergent interpretations. For example, it may be that officials feel more pressure to take excessive force complaints seriously in areas with larger minority populations. Really, policing yields sufficient anecdotes to confirm or refute virtually any position. Those who don't feel that race matters can point to the incident mentioned in [Part I](#), where Maryland officer Johnnie Riley was convicted for shooting a handcuffed prisoner. (It turns out that both officer Riley and his victim were black.) On the other hand, those convinced that race *is* important can bring up tragic events such as the shooting death of [Tamir Rice](#), a black 12-year old Cleveland boy who was killed by a white police officer while holding a toy pistol.

In the end, quarrels about the impact of citizen and officer race cannot be resolved with data alone. In this world, race obviously *does* matter. Police – those unique citizens we empower to use force and coercion – must represent the diversity of the communities they serve. And that's not just for the sake of appearances. In British tradition, cops are much more than peacekeepers and law enforcers – they're role models, whose conduct sets the standard to which all citizens should aspire. Consider just how useful it

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might be for youths living in disadvantaged areas to be regularly exposed to officers who really, *really* look like them. It's a crime-prevention strategy that could potentially yield great rewards.