

Background

By some measures, public confidence levels in the police have reached a new low, with particularly pronounced declines among Black and Hispanic communities. Reduced faith in the police has been linked to a decreased willingness to report crime to law enforcement and increased violent crime. Given these consequences, many strategies have been advanced to restore trust in law enforcement, including increasing the racial and gender diversity of police forces to better represent the communities they serve. Despite the attention given to this idea, little research has tested the extent to which increasing diversity impacts people's confidence in, and willingness to cooperate with, law enforcement.

Research Question

How does police diversity shape the public's confidence in law enforcement and belief that the police can be held accountable?

Study Strategy

In September 2020, researchers conducted a survey of 1,500 adults, split roughly evenly between Black and White individuals, in which each respondent was presented with information about a hypothetical police department that varied in terms of the following characteristics:

- Percentage of non-White officers: 4%, 16%, 29%, 41%, 54%
- Percentage of women officers: 6%, 17%, 28%, 37%, 46%
- Felony solve rate: Below average, average, above average
- Civilian complaints of police misconduct: Below average, average, above average
- Rate of use of force: Below average, average, above average
- Rate of deadly force: Below average, average, above average
- Resources allocated to community policing: Below average, average, above average
- Local budget allocated to police: Below average, average, above average
- Population served: Urban, rural, suburban

Half of the respondents were asked about their confidence in this hypothetical police force; the other half were asked about the degree to which they felt the department was accountable. By randomly varying diversity levels and other characteristics, the researchers were able to identify how each factor shaped people's perceptions.

Findings

In general, the impact of police diversity was limited. Racial diversity did significantly increase perceptions of trust and accountability, but this effect was only consistent when respondents read about a department containing the highest hypothetical level of racial diversity (54 percent non-White).

Additionally, this impact was slightly stronger among Black respondents (increased the likelihood of viewing the police as trustworthy and accountable by 3.8% and 4.3%, respectively) as compared to changes among White respondents (increases of 2% and 2.6%, respectively). Similarly, greater gender diversity boosted both trust and accountability attitudes, but specifically among women, and only when this gender diversity was at its peak. Police forces that were 46% women were 2.2% more likely to be viewed as trustworthy and accountable among women. By contrast, gender diversity had neither a positive nor negative influence on police perceptions among men.

The impact of police behavior and effectiveness was consistent and relatively large. Across all respondents, lower levels of use of force and citizen complaints, and higher levels of felony solve rates raised confidence and accountability perceptions, with the effect sizes generally larger than those witnessed for changes in diversity levels. For example, respondents were approximately 5% more likely to express confidence in police forces with below-average levels of lethal use of force.

The level of community police resources, police budget, and the type of population served had no impact on people's views of the police.

Implications

These findings suggest that increasing the gender and racial diversity of law enforcement does have some ability to improve perceptions of the police, but this impact is generally small and limited to communities that are seeing their representation increase (i.e., women and Black people) and only occurs when these communities approach or surpass 50% of the force, a number that is significantly higher than current levels.

In contrast to the weaker influence from diversity, the findings indicate that solving serious crimes while limiting civilian complaints and use of force can more consistently and effectively build perceptions of confidence and accountability, underscoring the value of investing in police training that builds capacity in these areas. Finally, as this research was conducted through a survey experiment, it remains to be seen if these results would replicate in response to real-world changes in policing behavior and diversity.

“Examining the effects of agency performance, we see that these factors clearly play a strong role in shaping public assessments of legitimacy. Agencies with a higher than the average number of complaints, above-average use of force (and deadly force), and below-average felony solve rates are punished heavily, with legitimacy decreases.”

– Stauffer et al. (2022)

“These findings indicate that increased diversity can influence perceptions of the police among women and Black Americans – but only in the most extreme scenarios tested. Thus, while diversifying may help forces at the lowest end of the spectrum, more generally anything less than substantial gains in diversity may do little to increase trust.”

– Stauffer et al. (2022)

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