 CS109A: Final Project Report

Group #39 - Police Violence in the US

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# BACKGROUND

### Motivation

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| Black Lives Matter is a social movement started in 2013 after the officer involved in the Trayvon Martin murder was acquitted. The underlying goal is to seek racial justice by eliminating systemic white supremacy and empowering local communities inflicted by violence from Police. The ideas have transformed into a worldwide movement putting racial equality at the forefront of discussions in popular media, news, and communities around the world. | Text  Description automatically generated |

The popularity of this movement has shifted over time, and has clear inflection points each time there is an unjustified murder, particularly of African American victims (*Figure 1*).

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*Figure 1: BLM Hashtag Popularity over Time*

The widely accepted opinion is that despite heightened awareness of this issue, protests, and requests for police and justice reform, there have been no significant changes to the rate of incidents involving use of lethal force by police over the last 5-10 years. The goal of this project will be to understand those relationships and determine some potential underlying causes of inequality.

### Research Questions

The following questions will be addressed:

1. What factors best predict whether the victim of an officer-involved killing is black?
2. How has the population-weighted incidence rate of police shootings shifted over the period 2015 to 2019?
   1. By race of victim?
   2. By geographic region?

### Data

**Washington Post:** In 2015, The Post began tracking more than a dozen details about each killing — including the race of the deceased, the circumstances of the shooting, whether the person was armed and whether the person was experiencing a mental-health crisis — by culling local news reports, law enforcement websites and social media, and by monitoring independent databases such as Killed by Police and Fatal Encounters.

Washington Post sources their data from an alternative the Mapping Police Violence dataset, which they cleaned. Therefore, the best data source to answer the proposed analysis questions is the Washington Post dataset.

# EXPLORATORY DATA ANALYSIS (EDA)

This analysis is broken down into various investigations to answer the problem statement question. A lot of effort was given to normalizing the data by population and by racial diversity using external data sources to help understand the bias in the incidents more clearly.

### Location-Based Analysis

Initially it appears there is a large disparity with incidents in particular states. However, after correcting for state populations, there is a much more standard distribution of violent incidents. *Figure 2* looks at states which have the highest rates of violent police shootings.

![Chart, histogram

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*Figure 2: States with Highest Rates of Fatal Police Shootings*

### Race-Based Analysis

Race has a similar issue where the initial estimates revealed that whites were most frequently involved in violent incidents, but after correcting for racial population distributions, there is more bias toward minorities, particularly black victims. Whites are overwhelmingly involved based on total incident count, but they are the 2nd least likely to have a violent incident by percentage when normalizing the population.

![Chart, bar chart

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*Figure 3: Frequency of Fatal Police Shootings by Race*

### Time-Based Analysis

The other key item of interest for our model predictions is whether the trends have shifted over time, shown in *Figure 4*. Considering 2020 is a partial year, there is a very even number of total incidents over the last 5 years, but some trends arise when filtering by race, particularly a decrease for whites and an increase in unknown data, generally flat trend otherwise.

|  |
| --- |
| *Figure 4: Count of Police Killings over Time Sorted by Race* |

Discuss how a larger majority of the “unknown” category is made up of Latino population. Dig into why white is dropping. Possibly join/average 2019/2020

# METHODS

### Data Pre-Processing

While the Washington Post data was generally well curated, there were a number of additional processing steps taken to assist in generating higher fidelity models.

**Cleaning Categorical Data**

Some of our predictors were categorized by text which had many unique values and was not grouped in any sensible way.

**Adding additional Predictors**

By using external data sources, we were able to add key predictors which should yield more insightful predictions

* Population Density: Used lat/long coordinates to identify location and subsequent population density
* Urban Classifier: Sorted population density by {urban, suburban, and rural}
* Political Party: Selected political affiliation of the state and year by election results {Red State, Blue State}
* Average Income: Used zipcode of incident to determine the median income in that area

**Encoding Categorical Predictors**

Key categorical parameters were One-Hot-Encoded using sk-learn to create Boolean predictors.

### Research Question #1 – Prediction Models

The goal is to predict whether the victim of a fatal police shooting is likely to be African American based on all other predictors. In doing so, we will be able to answer our first research question:

* What factors best predict whether the victim of an officer-involved killing is black?

**Prediction Models Evaluated:**

* Logistic Regression – Baseline Model
* Logistic Regression - Regularized Lasso with Cross Validation
* Random Forest
* Neural Network

### Research Question #2 – Linear Regresssion Model

The goal is to understand whether the incidence of fatal police shootings has changed since the heightened national dialogue on policing began (after 2015). In doing so, we will be able to answer our second research question:

* How has the population-weighted incidence rate of police shootings shifted over the period 2015 to 2019?
  + By race of victim?
  + By geographic region?

**Linear Regression Model Specification:**

* where denotes the total shootings per capita in state *s* during year *t* for race *r*. This expression will be evaluated at least for when race is white and when race is black
* denotes the total shootings per capita in state *s* during year *t* for geographic region *r*
* denotes fixed effects
* denotes with time fixed effects
* denotes the year. As 2015 is omitted from the regression specification, the coefficients are normalized such that the 2015 values are set to 0
* are a series of state and year controls
* The coefficient of interest is , which demonstrates the relative impact on the outcome variable for each subsequent corresponding year, compared to the normalized year of 2015.

# RESULTS

### Research Question #1: Prediction that Victim is Black

**Review of Model Prediction Accuracy:**

After attempting each model, the Logistic Regression model utilizing Lasso regularization and Cross Validation was determined to be the most effective, by highest accuracy score in the test data, see *Figure 5*.

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*Figure 5: Race Model Accuracy Scores*

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Figure 6: Receiver Operating Characteristic for Race Models

Key Predictors from Logistic Regression Model are shown in *Figure 7*. Some key takeaways from this feature importance analysis:

* City Density and Age are the top two predictors
* Louisiana, Maryland, California, Georgia, and Missouri are the top 5 states with most easily differentiate racial groups in police shooting events.
* Mental Illness is a better predictor than whether the suspect is armed with a gun

**Table

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*Figure 7: Logistic Relative Feature Importance*

*Figure 8* takes a closer look at our top predictors to see how the data are distributed.

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*Figure 8: Review of Top 2 Classification Predictors*

### Research Question #2: Evolution in Police Shootings Over Time

The table below graphically depicts estimates of the evolution in the police killing rate per capita over time, both by racial group and by region. These graphs follow the regression specifications under the Problem Statement #2. All estimates are calculated relative to the year 2015, which is normalized to 0. 2015 corresponds with the first full year after the heightened national dialogue on policing began (the lack of indictment for the police shooting of Michael Brown happened on Nov 24, 2014). All estimates are in log points. A log point estimate of *a* approximates a (100\**a*)% effect when the magnitude of *a* is small. In short, log points approximate percentage change for small changes in the independent variables. Vertical lines represent two standard errors.

The graph on the left in *Figure 9* provides evidence that the police killing rate per capita declined most over time for the white racial group, followed by the black racial group. In contrast, the police killing rate per capita *increased* for the “other” racial group. At the aggregate level, there was not a statistically significant shift in the overall shooting rate per capita over this time period. This suggests that the rate of police killings has remained relatively flat over this time period, but that the composition of the victims by racial groups has changed over time—away from white and black victims and toward the “other” racial categories (predominantly Latino). This shift might be explained by changes in police presence across communities, and is consistent with other findings that have found that the “Ferguson Effect” has led to lower police presence in predominantly black communities since the Ferguson uprising in 2014.

The graph on the right in *Figure 9* provides little evidence of regional differences in the evolution of the police killing rate over time. No geographic region has statistically significant differences from the baseline year of 2015, suggesting that the flat trend in the total levels (illustrated by the graph on the left) is matched by a flat trend at each geographical subregional level (illustrated by the graph on the right).

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*Figure 9: Results of Baseline Model*

# CONCLUSION

### Social Impact

At a high level, it’s very clear that a racial bias still exists in the United States based on police killings and our response to those events. Furthermore, the bias appears to be present in many of the other predictors like location, mental condition of the victim, age of the victim, and other characteristics of the event.

Despite the heightened awareness of issues like Black Lives Matter, there has been no appreciable change in the disproportionate police killings of African Americans.

Add more thoughts

### Extending Predictions

While the results of the project didn’t align directly with our initial predictions, there were some other very interesting conclusions through modeling different types of predictions.

1. We are able to predict mental illness of a victim based on other data predictors (how could this be used in real-time?)
2. The mapping police violence data can produce an adequate model to predict justification of the police shooting (was the officer charged, acquitted, etc.) based on other raw and derived predictors related to population density.
   1. The two key predictors in these models is signs of mental illness and Year
      1. Expand on mental illness playing a role
      2. While the original baseline model doesn’t show a clear time-based trend in the number of killings, this analysis suggests there is a difference over time on how the cases are handled after the event. (discuss how this could related to change in dash-cams/availability of information)

### Conclusion

The project initially intended to show clear trends between police shootings over time, including differences between races. However, the EDA and modeling process yielded no definitive time-based or race-based connection with the occurrence of a deadly police shooting.

Answers to the problem statement questions:

1. *Is the population-weighted incidence rate of police shootings different for white vs. black victims (vs. other races)?*
   1. Yes, there is a higher probability of fatal police shooting occurrence for African Americans than other races. Add statistics
2. *Has the population-weighted incidence rate of police shootings shifted over the period 2015 to 2020?*
   1. No, there is no statistically significant difference over time between the distribution of police violence when controlling for population based on racial group or other key predictors
   2. This was predominantly answered during the EDA process and initial baseline model building. After showing that no strong time based relationships, the team focused heavily on answering question 1 with more detailed predictive models to assess the various types of racial bias.

# REFERENCES

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3. Population Density Estimates: <https://simplemaps.com/data/us-cities>
4. Urban/Suburban Classifier: <https://medium.com/codait/got-zip-code-data-prep-it-for-analytics-7022b47652d9>
5. Race Classifications:
   1. Original Set: <https://github.com/washingtonpost/data-police-shootings>
   2. Additional Categorical from Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Race_and_ethnicity_in_the_United_States#Racial_categories>
   3. 2019 Estimates from Census Bureau: <https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/distribution-by-raceethnicity/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D>

# APPENDIX: FINE-TUNING OF MODELS

###### LOGISTIC Model – LASSO regularized with CROSS VALIDATION:

There was a slight improvement in performance with **79.9% training accuracy and 78.6% testing accuracy**, using a hyperparameter C=10.

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Figure 10: Lasso Regression Model Classification Accuracy Scores

###### Random Forest Model:

Based on the structure of the original dataset, we were hopeful that the decision tree classifier architecture would be more capable of achieving good prediction results.

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*Figure 11: Cross Validation of Random Forest Tree Depth to Optimize Test Accuracy*

By using cross validation to select the best tree depth (max\_depth = 20), the prediction capability improved over previous models at **88.0% training accuracy and 78.0% testing accuracy**. Note that while this is not the maximum test accuracy achieved, this depth is a good balance between high test accuracy without overfitting too much.

###### Neural Network Model:

The last model attempted was a neural network with the following parameters:

* 1 input layer
* 2 hidden layers with ‘relu’ activation function
* 1 output later with sigmoid activation function

The model was fit with 50 epochs using ‘binary\_crossentropy’ as the loss function and ‘adam’ as the optimizer function.

Results: *Figure 10* explores the loss function and prediction accuracy of the model, indicating that 50 epochs is sufficient to reach stability of the model. The overall prediction capability is average compared to other models at **76.2% training accuracy and 74.6% testing accuracy**.

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*Figure 12: Loss Function and Accuracy of Neural Network*