Blacks are more likely to be killed by police, but that's because they're more likely to be stopped, study says

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When African Americans and Latinos are stopped and questioned by police, they are no more likely to be killed or seriously injured than are white people drawn into similar encounters with the police, says a new study.

But African Americans and Latinos — especially men — are far more likely than are non-Latino whites to be stopped and questioned by police, the [new research](http://ip.bmj.com/lookup/doi/10.1136/injuryprev-2016-042023) finds.

The resulting pattern — a higher probability of being stopped and an equal likelihood of being badly injured — produces a pattern long alleged by activists: that people of color, and especially men of color, bear an uneven burden of harm at the hands of U.S. law enforcement officers.

At the same time, the new research offers some support for the narratives of American policemen and women, who maintain that in encounters with those suspected of wrongdoing, they do not discriminate by race or ethnicity. The new findings are also consistent with simulation studies, which show that police officers are no more likely to fire their weapons on an unarmed black person than they are on an unarmed white person.

“The excess per-capita death rate of blacks from U.S. police action rightly concerns policy analysts, advocates and the press,” wrote the authors of the new research, which was not sponsored by any government organization or activist group. But, for blacks and Latinos who suspect they are subject to harsher treatment, they added, “the excess appears to reflect exposure” to police, not more violent police tactics during encounters.

The latest study, published Monday in the BMJ journal Injury Prevention, comes against the backdrop of mounting tension over police treatment of minorities, which in recent months has claimed lives on both sides of the divide and fueled heated rhetoric in the presidential campaign. The research weaved together data from several repositories to generate national estimates of police-inflicted injuries and deaths and to glean insights into behavioral patterns in law enforcement.

The picture it paints is of police actions that fall more heavily on minority populations, even as police mete out violence evenhandedly. When African Americans or Latinos are stopped and questioned by police, the new research found that police arrested them in 82% to 85% of cases.

Non-Latino whites and Native Americans who were stopped and questioned by police were arrested about 70% of the time. And when police stopped and questioned Asians, about 60% of the encounters resulted in arrest.

The study falls in line with [findings published](http://www.nber.org/papers/w22399) earlier this month by the National Bureau of Economic Research and based on 1,000 shootings in 10 major police departments in Texas, Florida and California. That research reported that police officers are more likely to pepper-spray, handcuff or point a weapon at a black person during an encounter than they are to take any such actions with a white person. But it found that blacks were no more likely than whites to be shot by police.

The new study also offers what no single database has provided to date: a comprehensive national view — at least for a single year — of serious injuries and deaths sustained by U.S. residents in encounters with police.

In 2012, it found, U.S. police killed roughly 1,000 people and injured another 54,300 during legal stop-and-search incidents and arrests.

Firearms accounted for 95% of those deaths and for 23% of hospital admissions. Virtually all the remaining deaths involved the use of Tasers by police officers. In 2012, an estimated 65 Taser incidents resulted in an admission to a hospital, and 48 more were fatal.

When someone stopped by police was subsequently treated in a hospital but did not die, his or her injuries were most commonly caused by blows or blunt objects, the new research found.

Ted Miller, a health economist and lead author of the new research, said his findings upended his expectations in many ways.

“Certainly the dialogue we’re hearing is that there are a lot more minorities being killed” in police encounters, said Miller, a senior research scientist at the [Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation](http://www.pire.org/focusarea_crime.aspx) in Calverton, Md., which funded the study. “And I was expecting to see that the likelihood of being killed was higher if you’re a minority. It turns out that once the police have stopped you, there is not a racial difference in the likelihood of your being seriously hurt.”

Australian criminologist Timothy Prenzler, who was not involved in the latest research, said the patterns it highlights have been [suggested by studies](https://tryingtothrivenotjustsurvive.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/reducing-police-use-of-force-case-studies-and-prospects.pdf) conducted in the United States and elsewhere.

It doesn’t take racist intent for policing to produce higher rates of harm to minorities, said Prenzler: discriminatory policing — higher rates of stop-and-search among minorities, for example — can contribute.

And patterns that suggest racial or ethnic discrimination can emerge “simply from the fact that these groups are often involved in greater numbers of 'street crimes,’” Prenzler added. “Their greater involvement in street crime is a result of higher levels of poverty, unemployment, drug addiction and alienation from mainstream society.”

Miller said his findings underscore that police officers across the land should focus on adopting measures that engage the communities they police in non-confrontational encounters — often called “community policing.” Police organizations should also be stepping up their use of training and methods that avert escalation to violence when they stop someone for questioning, he said.

On the other side of the encounter, Miller said whites should be no less careful than African Americans and Latinos to avoid actions that could provoke a police officer’s fear for his or her safety.

Many African American parents have spoken of “the talk” they have with their sons — urging compliance with and a show of respect for police officers during traffic stops so as not to provoke an escalation of violence. Given the similar probabilities that a person of any ethnicity could be seriously hurt in an encounter with the police, “maybe ‘the talk’ is not a bad idea for all of us,” said Miller.

Miller, who is white, said that when he is pulled over by an officer, he has become much more careful about keeping his hands where they can be seen and asking for permission before reaching into his pocket for his license.

Indeed, Miller suggested his parsing of the 2012 data might reflect a generational difference brought about by parents’ delivery of “the talk” to young men of color. Records culled from hospital admissions and Justice Department statistics show that in 2012, people under 30 were much less likely than those over 30 to die or be seriously injured by police.

Despite media reports that have focused on police-inflicted injuries of young black men, these findings may suggest that “those interactions are going better, that maybe we’ve learned how to reduce the violence of the interaction,” said Miller.

“This says to me is we need to look at how behavior of police and citizens differs among younger groups than older ones,” he said.