

The Policing of the “Reserve Army”:  
Economic Inequality and Police Killings

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the relationship between race, class, gentrification, and police use of lethal force (LUOF) in U.S. census tracts. Analyzing US Census data from 2015 to 2020 reveals that while there is a disproportionate incidence of LUOFs in the majority non-white census tracts and of non-white victims, rates within racial groups differ significantly by income. Across all racial/ethnic groups, lower-income census tracts experience more LUOFs than higher-income tracts, but these income-based disparities are sharpest within majority black and majority Latino tracts. These findings suggest that while class matters across all groups, for blacks and Latinos, the class disparity is even greater. Gentrification's impact on LUOF rates is more nuanced. In general, gentrifying tracts did not experience a greater LUOF rate than low-income, nongentrifying tracts. However, within majority black census tracts, those undergoing gentrification experienced the highest LUOF rate.

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## Part I: INTRODUCTION

On August 8, 2015, US senator and Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders spoke at “Social Security Works,” an event commemorating the 50th and 80th anniversary of the enactment of Social Security and Medicare, respectively (Wilson and Smilowitz 2015). But before Senator Sanders could speak, several Black Lives Matter activists interrupted because they felt Sanders was inadequately responding to issues of racial justice, particularly as it pertains to the killings of black Americans by law enforcement. One activist, Marissa Johnson, in an MSNBC interview, elaborated that the interruption aimed to “put pressure on people who claim that they care about black lives” (Hall 2015). Specifically, regarding Sanders, she averred, “if you look at Bernie Sanders’s platform, you look at what he said on racial equality, he’s basically a class reductionist. He’s never really had a strong analysis that there is racism and white supremacy that is separate than [sic] the economic things that everyone experiences. So, we want to continue to push him on that” (Hall 2015). The issue for Johnson and the other activists who stormed the stage that day was that while Sanders had a fairly expansive economic justice platform, those policies were an inadequate response to issues of racism and white supremacy. Hence, from this perspective, his politics were class reductionist.

Earlier that year, in an interview with CNN’s Wolf Blitzer, Senator Sanders was asked about his thoughts on the unrest in Baltimore following the murder of Freddie Gray by law enforcement. Sanders emphasized that “too many mostly black suspects have been treated terribly and, in some cases, murdered,” and that “police officers have got to be held

accountable for their actions,” but also that economic factors were related to the killing of

Freddie Gray:

[I]n the neighborhood where this gentleman [Freddie Gray] lives [sic], as I understand it, the unemployment rate is over 50 percent, over 50 percent. What we have got to do as a nation is understand that we have got to create millions of jobs to put people back to work to make sure that kids are in schools and not in jails. So, short term, we’ve got to make sure that police officers have cameras. We’ve got to make sure that we have real police reform so that suspects are treated with respect. Long term, we’ve got to make sure that our young people are working, they’re in school, they’re not hanging out on street corners. (Sanders 2015)

## Part II: CONCLUSION

[Conclusion goes here]

### References

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