

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

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March 22, 2024

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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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ACS American Community Survey 4

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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)

That is, for Sanders, people being killed by law enforcement is inextricably tied with unemployment and economic inequality: Those residents in Freddie Gray’s neighborhood had little economic opportunity, which meant that they would frequently “hang out on street corners” and come into contact with police, often with deadly consequences. This was in contradistinction to the claims of activists like Marissa Johnson, who saw the issue primarily as a function of racism and white supremacy.

This project aims to take on this question. Of course, racial discrimination and economic inequality are not mutually exclusive, and this project does not suggest such a view. However, these two contrasting perspectives vis-à-vis police violence are worth exploring further. As I will contend, while African Americans are indeed disproportionately targeted and killed by law enforcement, the phenomenon is also much broader and affects many low-income people more generally. As researchers who are attempting to better understand the phenomenon, it is imperative that we not only understand the racial disparity frame of reference but also the role of economic inequality.

1. Background

From a disciplinary perspective, Political Science has not adequately researched issues

of policing and incarceration (a related phenomenon). In their 2017 article, “Police Are Our Government: Politics, Political Science, and the Policing of Race–Class Subjugated Communities,” in the *Annual Review of Political Science*, Joe Soss and Velsa Weaver highlighted how the discipline has failed to “heed the call” for greater research into the issues concerning policing (2017, 568). Consequently, the discipline “continues to offer a distorted portrait of democracy and government in America and a deeply incomplete view of how politics and power operate in RCS [race and class subjugated] communities” (Soss and Weaver 2017, 568). Significantly, the authors call upon the discipline to more closely examine the state’s second face: “the activities of governing institutions and officials that exercise social control and encompass various modes of coercion, containment, repression, surveillance, regulation, predation, discipline, and violence” (Soss and Weaver 2017, 567). It is in this spirit that this paper proceeds, as an undertaking aimed at better understanding these dynamics.

The rates of lethal uses of police force are remarkably high in the United States relative to other countries in the Global North, making it all the more urgent of an issue. While this project is not chiefly focused on comparative aspects, it nonetheless helps drive home the point regarding how serious of an issue this is. Espiner and Hancock (2022) observed that “America is in a league of its own with nearly 31 police shootings per 10 million people,” making the United States’s rate nearly four times that of New Zealand, and over 100 times that of England and Wales. Other countries that Espiner and Hancock (2022) investigated include Canada (9.2 per ten million) and Norway (3.6 per ten million). This underscores the urgency and need to further investigate causal forces contributing to the high incidence in the United States.

1.1. Research Question

Are lower-income people more likely to be killed by law enforcement, even when considering other variables such as race?

Part II: DATA AND METHODS

2. Data

Three sources will be used in the project. The Fatal Encounters data set is the primary source of incidents of someone dying in the course of police activity. Journalist D. Brian Burghart started the effort in 2012 after finding that there was no comprehensive database of people killed during interactions with the police. Data have been collected using paid researchers who aggregate data from other large data sets such as the *Los Angeles Times*' "Homicide Report," public records requests, and crowdsourced data (Burghart n.d.). Crowdsourced data is subsequently checked against published media reports or public records to verify accuracy. Every incident includes a link to a public record or media report substantiating the veracity of the details of the death (Burghart n.d.). Because of the limitations of the FBI's Uniform Crime Report (i.e., participation by law enforcement agencies is voluntary, and the number of persons killed by law enforcement is severely underreported), Fatal Encounters is one of the main sources that academics use when researching police use of deadly force (Feldman et al. 2017a; Feldman et al. 2017b; Feldman et al. 2019).

The US Census' American Community Survey (ACS) is the source of median household income data for each census tract. Since each incident in the Fatal Encounters data set includes a latitude and longitude, it can be matched with a census tract in the ACS. Census

tracts are “small, relatively permanent statistical subdivisions of a county or statistically equivalent entity” that “generally have a population size between 1,200 and 8,000 people, with an optimum size of 4,000 people” (Bureau 2023).

The Urban Displacement Project (UDP) is the source of gentrification data. The UDP conducts “data-driven, applied research,” including census tract-level identification of gentrification or lack thereof (UDP 2023).

Part III: CONCLUSION

[Conclusion goes here]

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