Effects of Physical Appearance on Police Decision Making

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Introduction: The study of police-citizen interactions has a research history of over fifty years. One of the main foci of this research has been the role played by race/ethnicity in police arrest decisions. The current study was designed to investigate whether police bias operated in the Southeast, by partnering with a police jurisdiction in the Southeast, in order to conduct an observational study.

Method: Participants in the research project observed the police officers and collected data about their interactions with citizens. The data includes background information about the officers, physical traits of the officers and citizens involved in each incident (as well as officers’ preferences for certain physical traits), and the outcome of each incident. The project takes into account other potential causes for an officer’s bias such as citizens’ attitudes, condition of their vehicles, and reputation of the area in which incidents occur.

Analysis: At a glance, it seems as if the majority of the suspects getting arrested are African Americans. Of 190 black citizens contacted by the officers, 18.4% of them were arrested; while, out of 23 white citizens, 17.4% of them were arrested. This suggests that the officers do not use demographic race as a primary concern when making arrest decisions. However, it is possible that race operates in a subtler unconscious manner. We find that 28.6% of those who have stereotypically African American hair (dreadlocks, braids, kinky hair), compared with the 15.1% of those who do not have stereotypical hair who were arrested. Similarly, of those wearing baggy pants 25.8% were arrested, while 16.2% of those who did not wear baggy pants were arrested.

Conclusion: The insignificant difference between arrest rates of different racial groups suggests that race is not a primary factor shaping the police decision-making in this study. Physical appearance appears to be a factor impacting police decision-making and should be further explored.