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Assessing the Initial Impact of the Michael Brown Shooting and Police and Public Responses to it on St Louis County Residents' Views about Police

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Who We Spoke To

In September and October 2014, trained interviewers from Southern Illinois University Carbondale spoke by phone with 389 St Louis County, MO residents¹ to assess the impact that the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO on August 9, 2014 and the police and public responses to that incident had on public perceptions of police. As part of a U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice-funded study of hot spots policing, we had interviewed residents on up to three occasions during 2012-2013 (mostly in-person at their homes). Having captured residents' opinions about police prior to the events of August 9, 2014, talking to the same residents after the events in Ferguson allowed us to systematically examine whether and how St Louis County residents' opinions changed as a consequence of their exposure to the media, police, and public reactions to the shooting.

The original study was designed to assess the impact of different policing strategies in crime hot spots on public opinion; thus, the sample doesn't represent the County as a whole, but rather high crime and disadvantaged communities in the County. Compared to County residents, survey respondents were predominantly African American (71%), had lower incomes (48% made less than \$25,000), were more likely to be single and never married (44%), and are disproportionately from the Northern part of the County. Residents were 19 to 86 years old, 46, on average, and lived in their homes an average of 8.8 years.

Nearly all of the residents we spoke to (98%) claimed to be familiar with the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO in August 2014. Residents lived in close proximity to the location where Michael Brown was killed. As shown in Figure 1, just over a quarter of residents surveyed lived within two miles. Nearly half of residents lived within four miles, while over three-quarters lived within six miles.

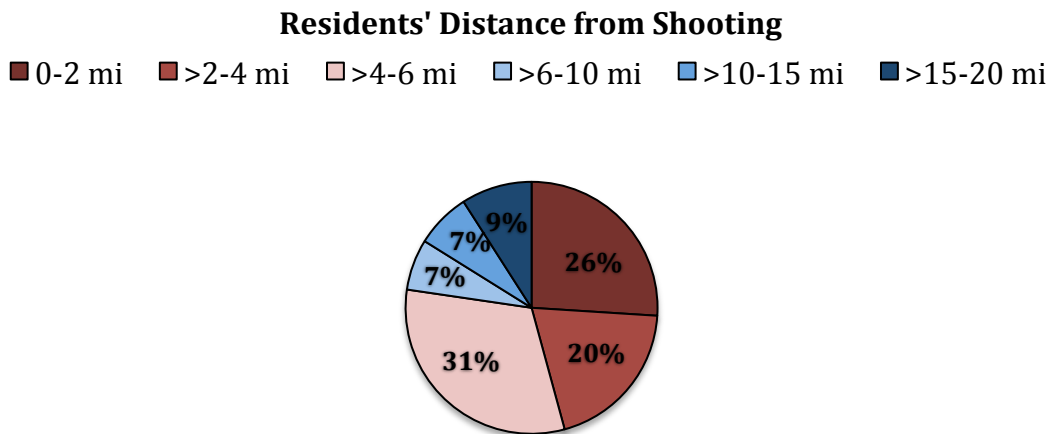


Figure 1. Survey Residents' Distance from the Location of Michael Brown's Death

¹ Four former residents of St Louis County had moved to St Louis city and one had moved to St Charles County by the time of the last interview.

In Residents Words

We asked residents some questions designed to learn, in their own words, how the shooting, riots, protests, and police response to these events impacted them. Three quarters of residents (76%) reported experiencing some type of impact. Most frequently, residents reported being emotionally impacted (shocked, frustrated, upset, afraid) (14%) or logistically impacted (14%), in terms of schools and stores closing or being burned down, and traffic disruption affecting the ability to get medicines, seek services, or go about daily living. Residents reported avoiding certain areas or stores or avoiding being outside at certain times because they were fearful of the protests, riots, and looting—one person stating that, “Police have lost control in that area” (7%). Some residents became ill or choked from the tear gas (4%) or experienced negative consequences for their businesses or livelihood—not being able to go to work or the business being shut down or damaged (2%). Other residents felt the events divided and harmed communities—splitting them along racial lines (3%). However, a small proportion of residents felt positively about the media coverage and attention to the events (2%), as well as how the events brought communities together (2%), or drew attention to important issues (1%).

When asked to state their level of agreement with the public response to the shooting, 55% of residents agreed while 45% disagreed with the public’s response. Views differed significantly by race: African American residents, on average, somewhat agreed with the public’s response while non-Black residents, on average, somewhat disagreed. See figure 2.

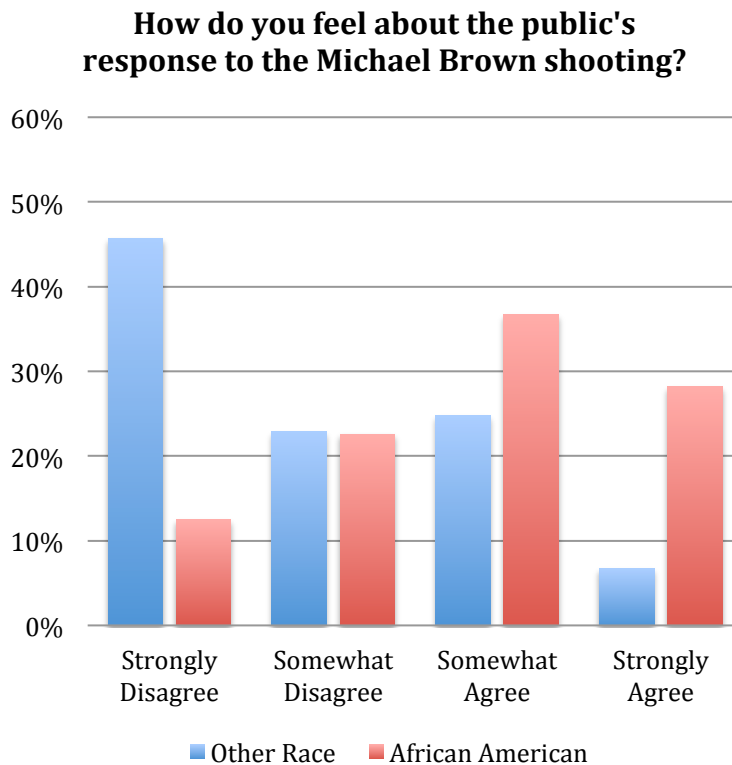


Figure 2. Comparison by Race of Views about the Public Response

However, the focus of this report is on how the experiences following the shooting of Michael Brown impacted views about police: 10% of impacted residents offered that the experience made them question police, lose trust in police, made them question what truly happened, or raised concerns that more police training is needed. Additionally, 9% of impacted residents said the events made them feel more negatively toward police, while 4% reported being fearful or anxious of police. A small portion (2%) felt appreciative or positive toward police and the importance of the police role. When asked their level of agreement with the police response, overall, 35% of residents agreed while 65% disagreed. Once again, views differed significantly by race: African American residents, on average, somewhat disagreed, while non-Black residents somewhat agreed with the police response. See figure 3.

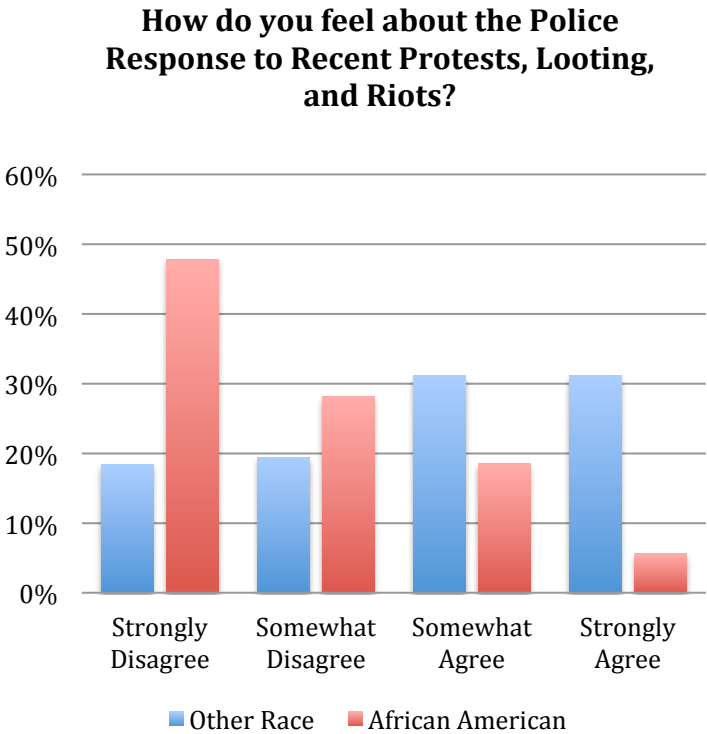


Figure 3. Comparison by Race of Views about the Police Response

Empirical Test of the Effects on Public Opinion

However, because we have spoken to these residents over time—both before and after the shooting, we can statistically examine how residents’ attitudes about police changed following the shooting and the police and public responses to it. We asked nearly 80 questions, including multiple questions about residents’:

- 1) Views about *police legitimacy*—a view that police authority is valid and to be respected and adhered to

- 2) *Trust in police and procedural justice* (procedural justice refers to a belief that police act fairly, impartially, and respectfully)
- 3) Perceptions of *police effectiveness* at maintaining order and controlling crime
- 4) Frequency that residents see *police misconduct* (stopping people without good reason, using insulting language, and using more force than needed in the circumstances)
- 5) *Willingness to cooperate* with police by providing information and reporting crime and suspicious behaviors.

I undertook four steps to assess how the shooting and responses to it affected these five dimensions.²

- 1) First, I compared residents' perceptions on these five dimensions in September and October 2014, after the Michael Brown shooting, to their opinions prior to that time, to see if views were significantly different.
- 2) Subsequently, I examined how residents' race (African American vs. Other Races) affected opinions and changes in these views.
- 3) Separately, I examined how residents' distance from the shooting location affected these views.
- 4) Finally, since St Louis County has a much higher concentration of African American residents in the Northern portion of the County (where these events occurred) than elsewhere, the effects of both distance from the event and residents' race were simultaneously considered, to tease out how each independently influenced residents views and changes in views.

I then created graphs that depict residents' views across the four time points that we spoke to residents—the first three preceding the shooting and the last time during the two months following the shooting.

Differences Immediately Following the Shooting Compared to Prior Interviews

Survey results show that overall, St Louis County residents' views about police legitimacy, procedural justice and trust, and effectiveness were significantly lower in the time

² The statistical analysis used is mixed effects regression in Stata 13. I modeled the repeated measures of individuals over time, as well as the nesting of individuals within addresses, addresses within hot spots of crime, and whether the hot spot is in North County or not, consistent with the sampling strategy of the original study. Likelihood ratio tests supported the importance of modeling the random effects over a one-level regression.

immediately following the shooting than at prior times. Residents’ perceptions of the frequency of police misconduct were significantly higher at this time. However, residents’ willingness to cooperate with police was also, overall, significantly higher—as this is the only positive outcome, some might raise concerns about the motives residents had for this increased willingness to cooperate (e.g., fear of the public or of police). Follow-up conversations with residents would help to ascertain the basis of this outcome and whether it was sustained beyond the point of severe civil unrest.

All of these views about police appear to have been impacted by the events in Ferguson in August. To ease discussion about these findings, all of the measures of public perceptions were converted to scores ranging from 0-100, such that zero reflects the minimum possible score, while 100 reflects the maximum possible—interpreted like percentages. Table 1 shows the average change in each of these views as a consequence of the shooting and reactions to it, as well as the average percentage scores preceding and following the event. The largest percentage change was observed for residents’ trust in police and their sense that police act impartially, as well as with the perceived frequency residents see misconduct. Both changed by 16% for the worse.

Table 1. Changes in Public Opinion Pre- Versus Post-Shooting

| Public Opinion | Percent Change | Average Percent Prior to Shooting | Average Percent Following Shooting |
|----------------------------|-----------------------|--|---|
| Police Legitimacy | -5.2 | 67.5 | 64 |
| Trust & Procedural Justice | -16.6 | 63.1 | 52.6 |
| Effectiveness | -4.6 | 70.4 | 67.2 |
| Frequency of Misconduct | +16.5 | 46.9 | 54.6 |
| Willingness to Cooperate | +3.3 | 89.0 | 91.9 |

Race and the Effects of the Shooting and Reactions to it on Views about Police

These changes and general views about police were not equally observed by race. In general, and across time (meaning not just as a consequence of events in Ferguson), African American residents had significantly lower views about procedural justice and trust in the police and reported seeing police misconduct more frequently. African American residents also were less willing to cooperate with police in general.³ However, perceptions of police legitimacy did not, overall (meaning on average and apart from these events), differ significantly by race.

Yet, views about police legitimacy, as well as procedural justice and trust and effectiveness declined more sharply among African American residents than other residents after the shooting, while perceptions of police misconduct increased at a greater rate among

³ These results are consistent with studies in other U.S. jurisdictions and nationally that show more negative views about police among minority residents, especially from disadvantaged areas (See Gallagher, Maguire, Mastrofski, & Reisig, 2001; Smith, Steadman, Minton, & Townsend, 1999; Tyler, 2005; Weitzer, 1999).

African American residents in the time immediately following the shooting. The trajectory of residents' willingness to cooperate with police immediately following the shooting, however, did not vary by race. Residents reported a strong willingness to cooperate over time (ranging from 88.2% among African Americans prior to the shooting to 95.2% among nonblack residents following the shooting).

Table 2 details the extent of the differences. In several cases, the shooting and events surrounding it had a negative effect on African American residents and a positive effect on other residents. For example, among African American residents', views about procedural justice and trust in the police declined by 25% following the shooting, while nonblack residents perceptions of procedural justice and trust improved by 1.9%. Perceptions among African American residents about police legitimacy and effectiveness declined by 8% following the shooting, but among nonblack residents, increased by 1.7 and 5.5% respectively. While African American residents' perceptions about the frequency of police misconduct increased by nearly 21%, nonblack residents' views increased only by 4.7%.

Table 2. Changes in Public Opinion by Race

| Public Opinion | African American Residents | | | Nonblack Residents | | |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| | Percent Change | Average Percent Prior to Shooting | Average Percent Following Shooting | Percent Change | Average Percent Prior to Shooting | Average Percent Following Shooting |
| Police Legitimacy | -8.1 ^a | 66.6 | 61.2 ^b | +1.7 | 69.8 | 71.0 |
| Trust & Procedural Justice | -25.5 ^a | 61.5 ^b | 45.8 ^b | +1.9 | 67.5 | 68.8 |
| Effectiveness | -8.2 ^a | 70.7 | 64.9 ^b | +5.5 | 69.5 | 73.3 |
| Frequency of Misconduct | +20.9 ^a | 50.8 ^b | 61.4 ^b | +4.7 | 36.2 | 37.9 |
| Willingness to Cooperate | +2.6 | 88.2 ^b | 90.5 ^b | +5.0 ^a | 90.7 | 95.2 |

NOTE: ^a Refers to a significant difference *within race* in the scores prior to versus after the shooting event.

^b Refers to a significant difference in scores between African American and nonblack residents at that time point (prior or after the shooting)

Distance and Effects of the Shooting and Reactions to it on Views about Police

However, I also examined how distance that a person lives from the shooting location might also affect their views. Some residents we spoke with had described experiencing protests near their homes and on routes to and from work, some participated in protests, or experienced tear gas and helicopters, while other residents who lived farther from the events

may have formed many of their views based on media coverage, rather than firsthand experience and observation. These varied experiences might reasonably alter the impact of the shooting and protests on perceptions of police.

Distance was measured in terms of miles that a resident lived from the shooting location. Some residents lived within a half-mile from the shooting, while others lived nearly 20 miles away (See figure 1). When I examined just the effects of distance on views about police (not accounting for race), I found that living farther from location in the time immediately following the shooting had a stronger positive influence on views about police legitimacy, procedural justice and trust, police effectiveness, and declines in the frequency residents see police misconduct immediately following the events in Ferguson. For example, for each mile farther away a resident lived following the shooting, their views about procedural justice and trust improved by 1.2 points above the effects that distance had apart from the shooting (.9 points). The only outcome that was not significantly impacted by the distance away from the shooting in fall 2014 was willingness to cooperate with police. Although in general, residents who lived farther away were more willing to cooperate, this was not specific to timing of the events in Ferguson.

In fact, apart from the timing of events in Ferguson, living farther from the location of the shooting was associated with more positive assessments about each of these things. What that means is that in precincts farther away from North County, where Michael Brown was shot, residents have more positive views across time—even prior to the shooting. As a high proportion of the St Louis County population that lives in close proximity to the shooting location is also African American, however, these findings could be an artifact of the unequal geographic distribution of residents by race in the County. To account for this, I simultaneously examined the influence of both race and distance on residents' perceptions. While the trend remains that more positive views are reported farther from the event, distance was not generally a significant factor affecting the difference in views about police following the events in Ferguson. What was driving the difference in views about legitimacy, procedural justice and trust, and effectiveness immediately following the shooting event is race.

Figures 4-8 show how views about police changed across time by race. Although the statistical assessments above evaluate the impact of the shooting on perceptions about police by comparing views prior to versus following the event (thus a pre versus post comparison), these graphs show views at each individual time point we spoke to them, providing a more nuanced image of views over time by race. Time points 1-3 precede the Michael Brown shooting incident (and thus are all part of the “pre” part of the assessment, shown as dashed line), while the fourth time point reflects September and October 2014, the two months following the incident during which the nearby communities experienced a great deal of civil unrest.⁴ Figures are presented in the order of largest to smallest percentage change, based on the analyses presented in table 2.

⁴ All of these views predate the grand jury's decision not to prosecute Officer Darren Wilson.

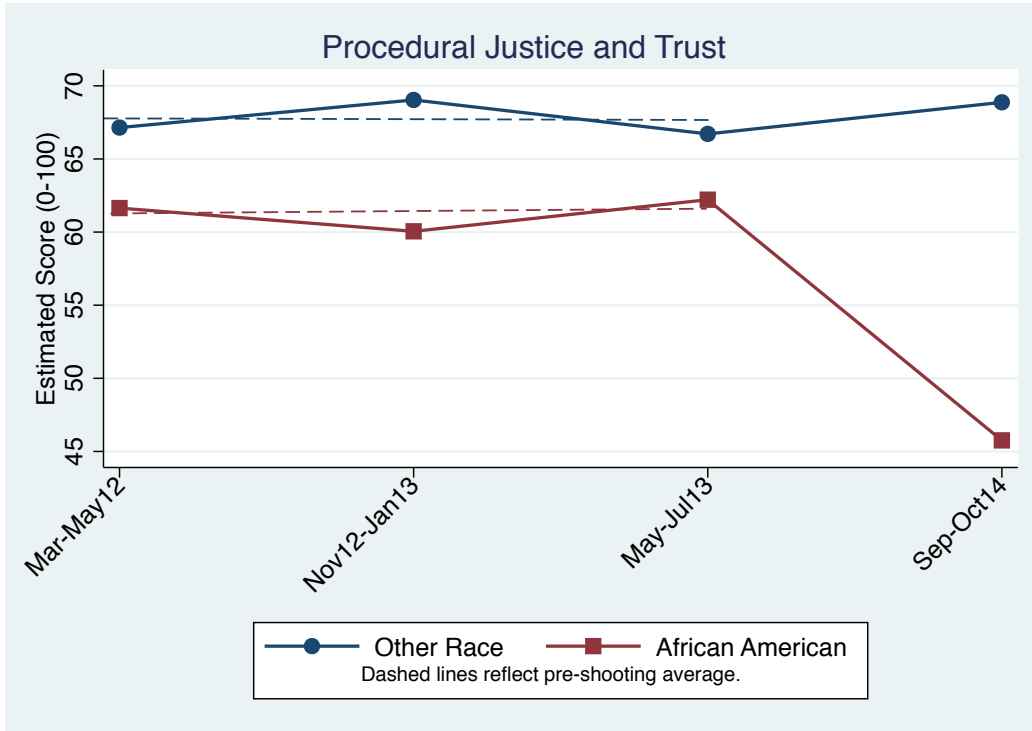


Figure 4. Views about Procedural Justice and Trust by Race

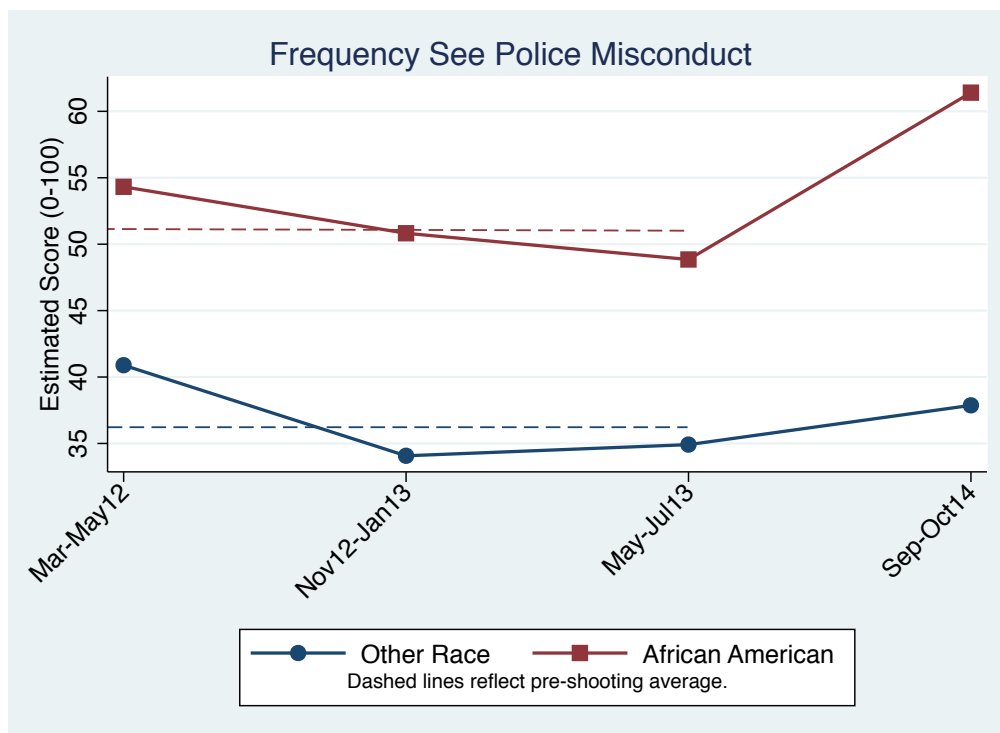


Figure 5. Views about the Frequency of Police Misconduct by Race

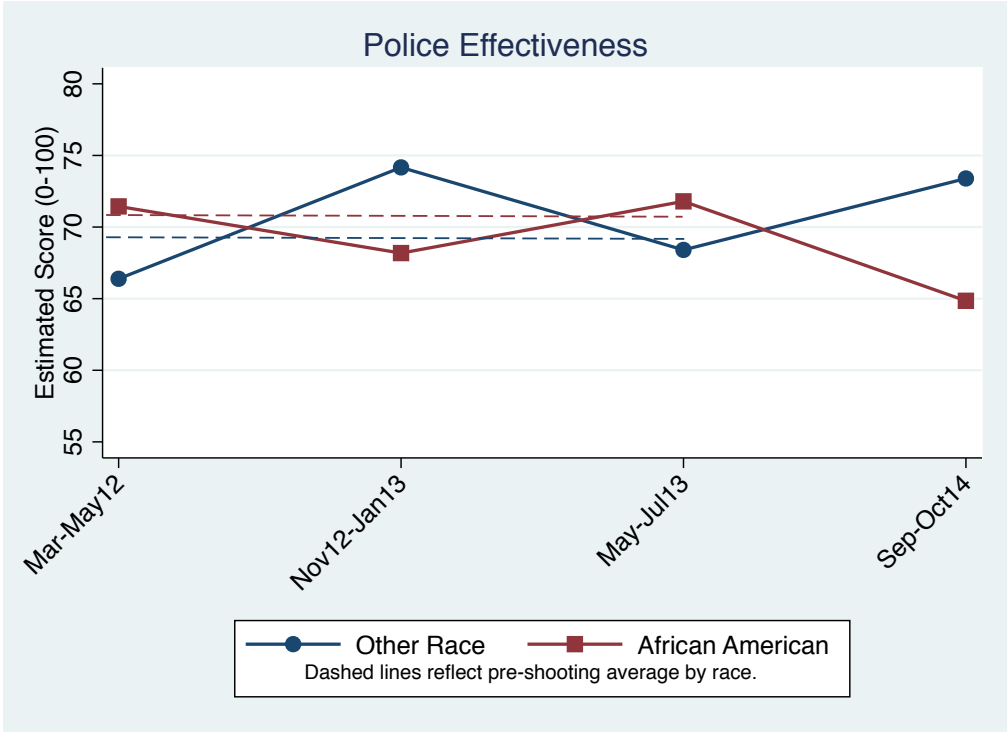


Figure 6. Views about Police Effectiveness by Race

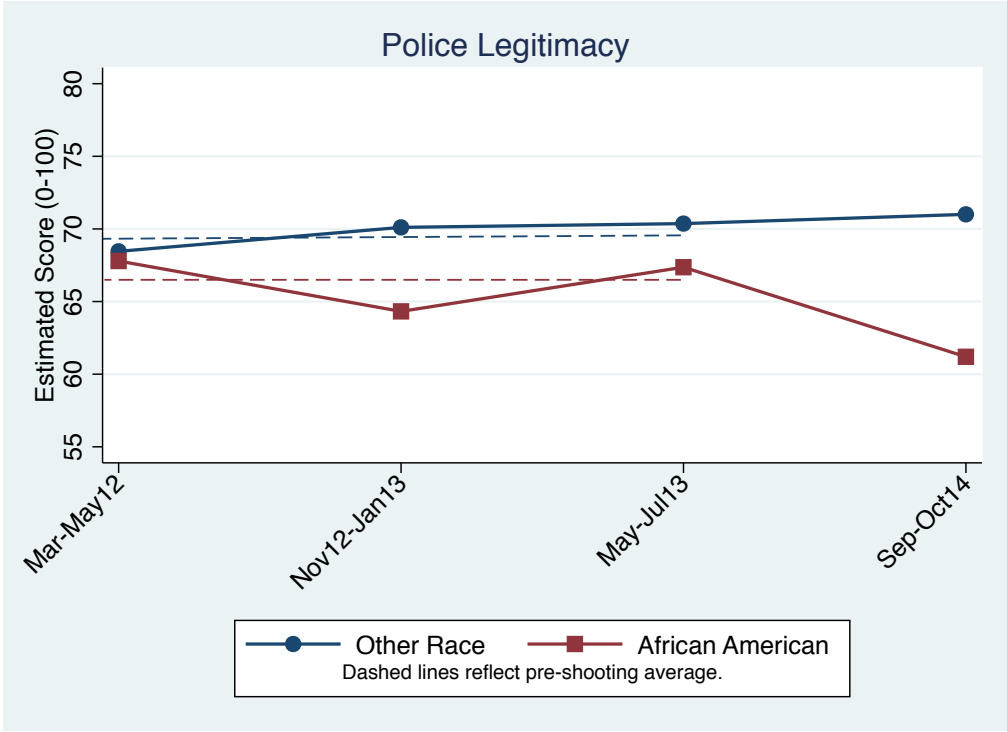


Figure 7. Views about Police Legitimacy by Race

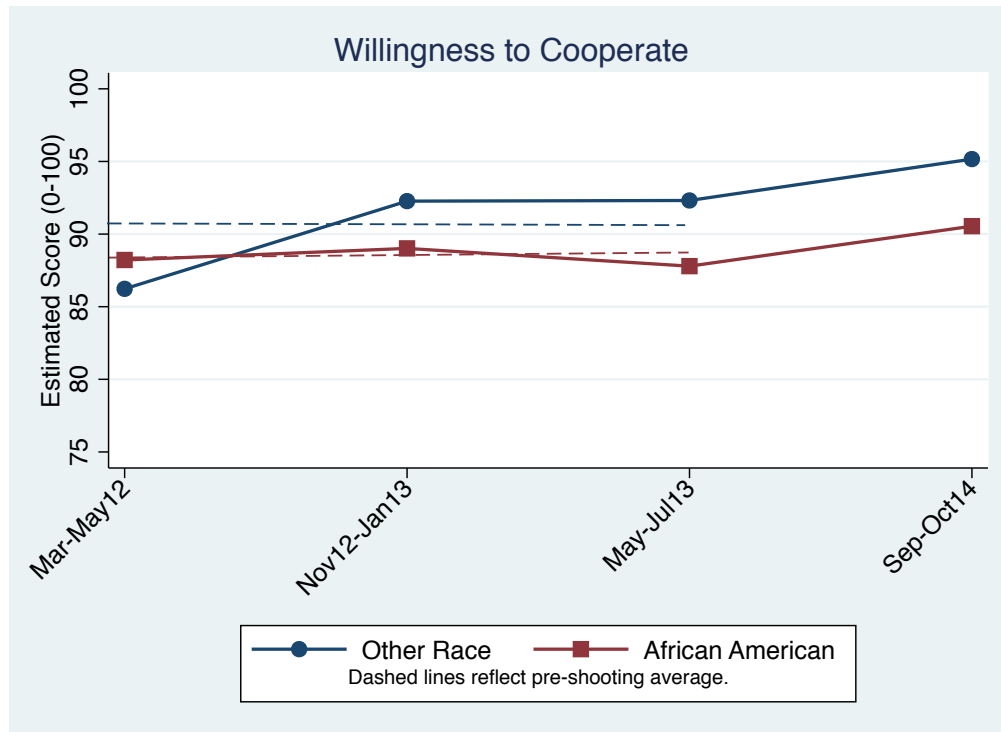


Figure 8. Willingness to Cooperate with Police by Race

Conclusions

The results clearly demonstrate that residents of disadvantaged and higher crime locations in St Louis County were affected by the shooting of Michael Brown and all of the events that immediately followed. Views about police declined, particularly among African American residents. Having spoken to residents prior and following the events in Ferguson, MO, I can state with confidence that these declines in residents' perceptions of the trustworthiness of police and their fairness and respectfulness; as well as the frequency with which residents believe they see police stopping people without good reason, using insulting language and using more force than is necessary in the circumstances; and concerns about police legitimacy and effectiveness can be attributed to their combined personal, vicarious, and media experiences in the wake of the Michael Brown shooting and police and public responses to it.

Residents' feedback, when they were asked to explain in their own words any unfavorable views about the police response to civil unrest, may provide some insight on specific activities that could have contributed to these outcomes. Most often, when residents held unfavorable views, they thought that the police response was excessive or an over-reaction (24%) and substantial numbers of residents specifically mentioned being against specific tactics: military tactics (19%), the use of tear gas (12%), and rubber bullets (2%). Others disagreed with tactics, without being specific (6%). Some residents felt that the police response may have exacerbated the protestors, contributing to further unrest (9%).

This is not to say that residents were supportive of the public's behavior either: 45% of residents disagreed with the public's response and specifically mentioned concerns about looting (33%), riots (21%), violence (8%), vandalism (9%), and just disagreed with the approaches taken by the public (17%) or thought that people were being senseless (4%). Thus, residents did recognize a need for police action to address the unrest, but a substantial proportion disagreed with the tactics used, albeit 27% of the residents also said that they agreed with the police response, because police did what they had to and responded to the public appropriately under the circumstances. Thirteen percent of residents we spoke to felt police were protecting themselves and the community.

In an effort to guide the restoration of police-community relations, during the last part of the interview, residents were asked to what extent eight potential strategies would improve their confidence and trust of police. As many as 60% of residents thought that police using body and/or dash cameras would *greatly* improve their trust and confidence in police, and half thought police organizing focus groups of residents to discuss police practices would greatly improve trust and confidence. Increasing the proportion of minority officers and increasing the frequency of patrols were also highly regarded (44% and 40% respectively thought they would greatly improve confidence and trust). Differences by race were few: African American residents felt more positively than nonblack residents about increasing the proportion of minority officers as a solution, while nonblack residents felt more positively than African American residents that seeing police officers participate in community events would improve trust and confidence.

If the goal is to restore police-community relations in the area, it will be critical to reassess the impact on public opinion of events and changes in policing. Since this last survey, the situation continues to evolve, with the release of the grand jury decision not to indict Officer Wilson, the U.S. Department of Justice Report identifying a pattern and practice of violating citizens' rights by Ferguson Police Department, as well as changes in policing by St Louis County Police—even handling additional protests, and public events derived from the tension created by these events (e.g., officers recently shot in Ferguson during a protest). As public opinion of police in St Louis County appears to be malleable, the hope is that changes in policing that are underway are already improving these negative effects initiated last fall.

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