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TaShanda Dennison  
*University of Central Florida*



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ATTITUDINAL TRENDS IN SUPPORT FOR POLICE USE OF FORCE BEFORE AND  
AFTER FERGUSON

by

TASHANDA DENNISON  
B.A. University of Central Florida 2016

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of Sociology  
in the College of Sciences  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term  
2018

Major Professor: Amy M. Donley

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## **ABSTRACT**

Since the 2014 death of an unarmed black teenager, Michael Brown by a white Ferguson police officer, there has been a string of similar incidents that have occurred in a relatively short period of time. These high profile incidents of police officers using questionable amounts of force have shaken public trust in law enforcement. Studies have shown that public confidence in law enforcement often erodes drastically following heavily publicized, controversial media reports of police misconduct (Tuch and Weitzer 1997; Weitzer 2002). The current levels of public outrage in response to allegations of police brutality have surpassed the levels of outrage that followed similar, highly publicized incidents in previous decades (Lawrence 2000; Weitzer 2015). Scholar suggest that recent events, may have a longer-term impact than those in previous decades (Lawrence 2000; Weitzer 2002). This study seeks to extend the current literature on citizens' interpretations of police violence and how, if at all it is impacted by highly-publicized incident of police misconduct. Specifically, the current research uses a national sample to compare citizens' endorsement of police use of force before and after the 2014 death of Michael Brown. Overall, the results from a series of logistic regression analyses found that public attitudes toward police use of force are multifaceted and are shaped by a variety of individual and contextual level variables. Race/ethnicity was determined to be the strongest predictor of citizens' endorsement for police violence. It was also revealed that attitudinal support varies depending on the situational-context surrounding police/citizen interactions.

I dedicate this project to the countless men, women and children who lives were unjustly taken at the hands of those sworn to protect and serve our community. The loss of your lives has forever changed mine.

Raymond Allen ▪ Wendell Allen ▪ Tanesha Anderson ▪ Anthony Baez ▪ Orlando Barlow ▪ Jerean Blake ▪ Sandra Bland ▪ Sean Bell ▪ Rekia Boyd ▪ Romain Brisbon ▪ James Brissette ▪ Duane Brown ▪ Michael Brown ▪ Tashii Brown ▪ Eleanor Bumpurs ▪ Aaron Campbell ▪ Miriam Carey ▪ Victor Carter ▪ Philando Castile ▪ Jamar Clark ▪ John Crawford ▪ Terence Crutcher ▪ Jordan Davis ▪ Shantel Davis ▪ Delron Dempse ▪ Akil Denkins ▪ Amadou Diallo ▪ Nehemiah Dillard ▪ Patrick Dorismond ▪ Sam Dubose ▪ Jordan Edwards ▪ Jonathan Ferrell ▪ Shereese Francis ▪ Shelly Frey ▪ Anthony Ford ▪ Ezell Ford ▪ Eric Garner ▪ Ramarley Graham ▪ Oscar Grant ▪ Freddie Gray ▪ Kimani Gray ▪ Jersey Green ▪ Akai Gurley ▪ Milton Hall ▪ Kenneth Harding ▪ Patrick Harmon ▪ Darrien Hunt ▪ Darnisha Harris ▪ Sheron Jackson ▪ Ervin Jefferson ▪ Kendrick Johnson ▪ Lavean Johnson ▪ Ronald Johnson ▪ Christopher Kissane ▪ Lennon Lacy ▪ Jeremy Lake ▪ Melvin Lawhorn ▪ Michael Lembhard ▪ Manuel Loggins Jr ▪ Laquan MacDonald ▪ Ronald Madison ▪ Symone Nicole Marshall ▪ Renisha McBride ▪ Kendrec McDade ▪ Travares McGill ▪ Gynnya McMillen ▪ Abdi Mohamed ▪ Bo Morrison ▪ Tendai Nhekaire ▪ Dante Parker ▪ Kameron Prescott ▪ Dante Price ▪ Kajieme Powell ▪ Tamir Rice ▪ Steven Rodriguez ▪ Timothy Russell ▪ Jocques Scott-Clemmons ▪ Antwan Sedgwick ▪ Justin Sipp ▪ Marquez Smart ▪ Anthony Lamar Smith ▪ Yvette Smith ▪ Aiyana Stanley-Jones ▪ Victor Steen ▪ Alton Sterling ▪ George Stinney ▪ Brandon Tate-Brown ▪ Alesia Thomas ▪ Kelly Thomas ▪ Leonard Thomas ▪ Timothy Thomas ▪ Kevin Turner ▪ Johnnie Kamahi Warren ▪ Steven Eugene Washington ▪ Stephon Watts ▪ Tyrone West ▪ Malissa Williams ▪ Tarika Wilson ▪ Ousmane Zongo ▪

**“We must be concerned not merely about who murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, the philosophy which produced the murderers.” — *Martin Luther King Jr.***

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

Police officers are charged with maintaining law and order within the United States (U.S.). Their ability to effectively maintain social order within our society is greatly influenced by the public's acceptance of police legitimacy. Police legitimacy refers to "the extent to which people are willing to accept the legal authority of individual officers" (Hinds and Murphy 2007:27). Research has shown that law enforcement officers' behaviors during police-citizen interactions have a significant impact on attitudes toward police (Mazerolle, Antrobus, Bennett, and Tyler 2013). Moreover, individuals that accept the legitimacy of the law and legal authorities are more likely to obey the law, including laws they feel are unfair (Tyler 2004). One aspect of policing that undermines the legitimacy and authority of law enforcement is police use of force. According to the International Association of Chiefs of Police, use of force refers to the "amount of effort required by police to compel compliance by an unwilling subject" (2001:14). Police use of force is considered to be excessive when the application of coercive violence against a suspect goes beyond the appropriate level required to obtain compliance (Gerber and Jackson 2017).

Within the past two decades there has been a string of high profile incidents of police using questionable force that have generated public outcry against police brutality. These incidents and the reactions to them, have manifested into protests, demonstrations, and in some cases, riots (Klahm, Papp, and Rubino 2016). These cases have ignited national conversations about race, economic disparities, and police use of excessive force. Incidents of police use of force are often controversial because different groups perceive them differently. These matters are further complicated by the lack of reliable data on excessive force as well as the inconsistent definitions used to characterize unreasonable force (Lawrence 2000).

Prior research has consistently found a significant racial divide in public sentiments toward the police use of force (Benson 1981; Huang and Vaughn 1996; Reisig and Parks 2000). Whites are more likely to favor aggressive law enforcement tactics compared to blacks (Arthur and Case 1994; Halim and Stiles 2001; Thompson and Lee 2004; Tuch and Weitzer 1997). Aside from race, little is known about what other factors may have a significant impact on perceptions of police use of force (Enns 2004). The present study addresses the gaps within the literature by examining the way that demographic characteristics shape public perceptions of police violence.

This research addresses three core questions: (1) how do individual characteristics affect the endorsement of police use of force? (2) do attitudes toward police use of force following a well-publicized incident of use of force change? and (3) what type of affect, if any, do these use of force incidents have on public support for police use of force overall? It is imperative for us to understand public sentiments and how it changes as evidence has shown that it can have a significant influence on criminal justice policies (Enns 2014; Mullinix 2011; Ramirez 2013). Citizens' opinions can be used "as a vehicle of social control, restraining police use of force" (Flanagan and Vaughn 1996: 126). Understanding the relationship between public support for police policies and practices is important now more than ever given the current strained relationships that police departments have with communities across the nation.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### Police Use of Force

It has been argued that use of force is a fundamental aspect of law enforcements' role in a democratic society (Bittner 1973) but it is also one of the most highly debated policies. The United States public has criticized the police of being overly reliant on their application of force since the 1850s (Tennenbaum 1994; Nelson 2001). The police are charged with a multifaceted role of serving and protecting various communities. Most Americans agree that policing is a difficult job and that on occasion officers are expected to physically restrain or subdue a suspect (Perry, and Esmail 2016). In accordance with their occupational hazards, police officers are granted legal authorization to use non-negotiable force when necessary. While citizens typically endorse this policy, problems can arise when officers improperly apply unreasonable or lethal force in a situation where it is not warranted. The undue use of force or the application of excessive force can have a negative impact on the relationship between the police and the residents of the communities they serve (Hawdon 2008). Research also indicates that law enforcements' ability to effectively do their job is associated with the cooperation and support that they receive from the public (Sunshine and Tyler 2003).

Americans typically hold positive attitudes toward law enforcement officers (Brown and Benedict 2002; Liu and Crank 2010), however, members of marginalized groups often have differing views of the police (Cao, Frank, and Cullen 1996). Historically research on attitudes toward police and their use of force have investigated the effects of various individual and contextual level variables.

## Effects of Race/Ethnicity

Race/ethnicity is arguably the most salient predictor of attitudes toward police and it is by far the most researched individual characteristic (Apple and O'Brien, 1983; Bartsch and Cheurprakobkit 2004; Benson 1981; Black and Reiss 1970; Brown and Benedict 2002; Brunson and Weitzer 2009; Cao et al.1996; Decker 1981; Engel 2005 Henderson, Cullen, Cao, Browning, and Kopache, 1997; Howell et al. 2004; Huang and Vaugh 1996; Liu and Crank 2010; Reisig and Parks 2000; Schuck and Rosenbaum 2005; Tuch and Weitzer 1997; Weitzer and Tuch, 2004). A large body of evidence suggests that minorities tend to have lower overall opinions of law enforcement in comparison to whites (Arthur and Case 1994; Hurst and Frank 2000; Tuch and Weitzer 1997; Weitzer and Tuch, 2004). A study conducted by the Pew Research Center (PRC) suggests that African Americans and Hispanics have significantly lower levels of confidence in the police in comparison to White Americans (2016). This study also found that Whites were twice as likely as Blacks to give their local police department high ranking scores in the areas of police performance (PRC 2016). Research has discovered that a racial hierarchy exists among public opinions of police misconduct, with Hispanics holding views in between those of whites and blacks (Schuck and Rosenbaum 2005; Weitzer and Tuch 2004) These racialized differences towards police misconduct remain constant even after other social factors such as education, income, and employment are controlled for (Rice and Piquero, 2005).

The negative attitudes that minorities tend to have towards law enforcement could be attributed to a combination of complex experiences that occur during police-minority interactions. For example, African Americans have an increased risk of being racially profiled,

over-policed and victims of police violence (Howell et al. 2004). Practices such as these have resulted in racial disparities through criminal justice processes. This is evidence in the arrest data from the FBI's index of eight offenses, which indicates a 5 to 1 ratio for minority arrest in comparison to whites. In addition, data obtain from the New York Police Department reports that 55% of all individuals stopped and frisked by NYPD officers between 2002 and 2014 were African Americans, whereas only 10% were white. It is worth noting that while majority of the research on attitudes towards police have consistently found race to be an important factor there are a few studies where race was found to be insignificant (Brown and Benedict 2005; Chermak, McGarrell and Weiss 2001; Reisig and Correia 1997).

In an unexpected reversal of roles, Frank, Brandl, Cullen, and Stichman (1996) found that within their study of Detroit residents, whites held less favorable attitudes toward the police than did blacks. Frank and his colleagues sought to reexamine the impact of race on citizen attitudes toward law enforcement. Specifically they wanted to see if the consensus of African Americans holding more negative views of the police held true in predominately black areas. Using a cluster sampling method they obtained a total sample of 560 adult respondents from four designated Detroit areas. In this study public views of police were measured on three different levels: general approval, satisfaction with the maintenance of law and order, and evaluation of drug control. Each measure was associated with a question asking the survey respondents to rate their satisfaction with the police using a Likert scale format. The results of multivariate analyses used in this study revealed that on every measure African Americans held more favorable attitudes toward police. Frank and his fellow researchers also discovered that the whites within their study were consistently more likely than black to select the lowest levels of satisfaction with police.

The authors suggested that their findings could be linked to the racial makeup of the city government within Detroit at the time. They pointed out that:

In Detroit, African-Americans [were] a substantial majority of the population; the city has had a black mayor since 1973, and a significant number of major municipal government officeholders are black; nearly 50 percent of the police force is black, as are the chief and a substantial number of administrators in the department (Frank et al. 1996 pp. 331–332).

The results of this study suggests that belonging to a minority group could have a strong influence on public attitudes towards police. Within the context of the U.S., whites make up the majority of the population, 76.9% according to the U.S. Census (2016). However in Detroit at the time of this study, whites were the minority and their evaluations of law enforcement aligned with those of other minority groups within the larger population.

### The Effects of Social Class

An overwhelming amount of evidence suggests that attitudes toward law enforcement officers are strongly associated with race but as the previously mentioned research suggests these attitudes are influenced by a variety of individual characteristics (Arthur and Case 1994; Barkan and Cohn 1998; Brinden-Ball and Jesilow 2008; Carter, Mamadi and Jenks 2016; Garcia and Cao 2005; Halim and Stiles 2001; Thompson and Lee 2004; Worrall 1999). In Reiss's classic work he maintains that an individual's beliefs about police are more influenced by their socioeconomic status (SES) than their race (1971). Race and social class are often intertwined in American society (Franklin 1991), therefore one could expect social class to be an influential

factor in perceptions of law enforcement. Education and income are often used as proxies to measure social class. Previous works indicates that individuals with lower levels of education tend to view officers more favorably than those who are better educated (Percy 1986; Weitzer and Tuch 1999) However, some research has found that individuals in lower income brackets often have less favorable attitudes of police than those with incomes in the middle or upper income tiers (Arthur 1993; Huang and Vaugh 1996; Cao et al.1996).

Using data from the 1994 General Social Survey (GSS), Halim and Stiles (2001) found an increased probability of support for police violence in general among individuals with indicators of higher socioeconomic standing. Specifically increases in education and income were associated with increased general support of police use of force (11% and 7%, respectively). Although social class has been shown to influence attitudes toward law enforcement, the results are not consistent. Results from several studies found that highly educated and wealthy people are more critical of police than those with less education and lower incomes (Henderson et al.1997; Sims, Hooper, and Peterson, 2002). Weitzer and Tuch (2002) suggest that these mixed findings could be attributed to the various methodological differences when measuring police behaviors. Given these difference, “it is possible that race is the most important determinant of attitudes regarding certain kinds of issues, whereas class significantly affects views on other issues” (Weitzer and Tuch 2002:450).

### The Effects of Gender

The groundwork in understanding public opinions of police initially suggested that the impact of gender was insignificant (Decker 1981). However recent studies have indicated that a

gendered pattern exists, with men typically having less favorable opinions of police in comparison to women (Huang and Vaugh 1996; Hurst and Frank 2000; Reisig and Correia 1997; Weitzer and Tuch 2006). Several explanations can be offered for the differing opinions that males and females have towards law enforcement. For instance, women's opinions of officers may be influenced by their more favorable interactions with officers (Daly 1994; Weitzer and Tuch 2005). The gendered differences in police perceptions could also be attributed to the increased risk that men have of being involved, either as a victim or an offender, in the criminal justice system (Eschholz 2002). Furthermore, women are more apt to believe that the representatives within the judicial system act impartially whereas men often perceive their action to be biased (Hagan and Albonetti 1982). The gender disparities among opinions toward police has remained widely consistent, however some studies have found gender to be insignificant (Huang and Vaugh 1996; Wu 2014).

While men typically hold more negative view of police officers, men are also more likely to approve of police violence (Arthur and Case 1994; Barkan and Cohn 1998; Carter et al. 2016). Thompson and Lee (2004) found that men in their study endorsed police use of force at a rate 51% higher than women. Overall men have consistently shown greater approval for the use of violence especially when it is associated with maintaining social order (Blumenthal, Kahn, Andrews, and Head 1972). This pattern is consistent with the disparities men and women have regarding their approval of violence in matters concerning interpersonal relations, foreign affairs, along with other various criminal justice policies (Daly 1994; Smith 1984). In wake of the recent number of high profile police use of deadly force cases these views may have changed. Cochran and Warren asserts that "it is reasonable to expect minority group members to have gender-

specific perceptions of police behavior since we know that both males and females, Whites and minorities, experience and receive substantially different treatment from the police” (2011:213). Recent studies have shown an increased emphasis on the manner that citizens’ attitudes toward police are shaped by the intersections of their race/ethnicity, social class, and gender (Cobbina, Conteh and Emrich 2017; Cochran and Warren 2011; Gabbidon, Higgins, and Potter 2011; Weitzer and Tuch 2006).

#### Additional Individual Influences

In addition to the individual characteristics discussed thus far, previous research on public support of police violence has identified other factors that will serve as control variables in the current study. Past findings suggest that approval for police use of force is positively associated with endorsement of punitive criminal laws (Arthur 1993; Johnson and Kuhns 2009), and subscribing to conservative viewpoints (Carter et al. 2016; Ellis and Stimson 2012). Similarly, residing in the Southern region of the U.S. has been correlated with an increased approval for officers’ use of force (Nisbett and Cohen 1996). There have been mixed results in determining whether age is a significant factor in predicting support for police use of force. Some studies have shown that age has a negative effect on citizens’ endorsement of police use of force (Arthur 1993; Hurst and Frank 2000), while other results indicate a positive effect (Chermak et al. 2001; Reisig and Correia 1997). Furthermore, some research has reported that age has no effect on views of law enforcement (Halim and Stiles 2001; Thompson and Lee 2004). Police use of force literature has failed to consistently identify individual characteristics, aside from race, that have a salient influence on attitudes toward police. Little attention has been

devoted to understanding if public support of police use of force is influenced by the interactions of race, class, gender and other social demographics. As Brown and Benedict (2002) stated, “there is no consensus as to which combination of variable explain the greatest variance in attitudes towards the police” (p.564). The present study addresses this gap within the literature by investigating the way factors interact to influence endorsement of police violence.

## CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Researchers have examined public acceptance of police use of force using several theoretical perspectives to understand why demographic differences exist in citizens' interpretations of law enforcement. This study suggests that the explanation can be found in Group-Position theory, an extension of conflict theory. In his classic thesis, Herbert Blumer (1958) asserts that an individual's opinions are directly related to their position within the social hierarchy. Herbert Bulmer's (1958) group position theory can be used to explain the difference in opinions among African American and Whites. This theory states that group orientations towards social institutions arise from a sense of group position that involves 'group identity, preferred group status, out-group stereotyping, and perceived threat' (Bobo and Hutchings 1996). A sense of superiority is shared amongst members of the dominant group (also referred to as the in-group), who view member of the subordinate group (or the out-group) as different and alien. Ronald Weitzer (2017) expands this classical model to provide a contemporary understanding of the relationships between police and U.S. minority groups post Ferguson.

In this contemporary model of group position, Weitzer includes two additional core frameworks "vicarious experience" and "linked fate" to explain the impact that an individuals' intergroup status has on their assessment of law enforcement. Vicarious experience(s) were explained as the empathy that members of a subordinate group feels after or while witnessing a member of their group being subjected to harm. They often internalize these incidents as though it is happening to them thus creating a *vicarious* effect. Weitzer (2017) believes that vicarious experiences have a ripple effect when individuals have discussions about these events with

others in their social networks. Through this process Weitzer proclaims that “a certain kind of *learning* takes place (learning about group fate; learning about the Other) through this process of “differential identification” with a person of the same . . . background” (2017:1131). The multiplier effect is said to be most potent when the person inflicting the harm is both a member of the dominant group and holds a position of authority (i.e. a white police officer). In this adaptation of group position it is suggested that the law enforcement is a tool used to maintain and protect the status quo of the current social structure, thus safeguarding the interests of the dominant group. Therefore when the police actions are scrutinized, elite members may believe that their group interests are being threatened. Weitzer (2017) asserts that belonging to the dominant group will increase an individuals’ tendency to take positions in favor of police and doubt or dismiss claims of police abuse of authority. He cites the recent high profile police killings since 2014 as the ‘big event’ Blumer believed would play a crucial role in awakening “strong feelings of identification with one’s . . . group” (Blumer 1958:6). According to Weitzer, these cumulative events “appear to have crystalized both . . . group identification and divergent assessments of these incidents” (2017:1144). He argues that elite members view law enforcement agencies as guardians of their group interests and/or because they perceive police actions to be “rational responses” to minorities’ criminal nature or noncompliance to officers’ commands.

Using this theoretical model, the present study seeks to address three core questions: (1) how demographic characteristics affect citizens’ support of police use of force? (2) do highly-publicized incident of police misconduct change these attitudes? and (3) to what magnitude, if any, do these use of force incidents have on public endorsement of police use of force overall?

Based upon the current literature, I expect that members of the dominant groups (i.e. whites, men, and those with higher socioeconomic standing) to take positions in favor of police violence compared to subordinate group members. I also anticipate that allegations of police abuse of authority will have a profound negative affect on the attitudes among members of the subordinate group in comparison to those within the dominant groups. Finally, variables such as support of harsh criminal laws, political affiliation, region, and age were controlled for within this study.

### Current Study

Since the 2014 death of an unarmed black teenager, Michael Brown, by a white Ferguson police officer, there has been a string of similar incidents that have occurred in a relatively short period of time. These recent events have shaken the publics' trust in law enforcement and further strained the hostile relationship that minority communities have with law enforcement agencies across the nation. Studies have shown that public confidence in law enforcement often erodes drastically following heavily publicized, controversial media reports of police misconduct (Tuch and Weitzer 1997; Weitzer 2002). Scholars suggest that recent events may have a longer-term impact than those in previous decades (Lawrence 2000; Weitzer 2002). The current study analyzes data that were collected in the 2012 and 2016 survey years of the GSS. These survey years were examined to compare citizens' endorsement of police use of force before and after the death of Michael Brown. In addition, this study seeks to address three research questions: (1) how do individual characteristics affect public support for police violence?, (2) do attitudes toward police use of force change after a high-profile case of police brutality?, and (3) what type

of long-term affect, if any, do these incidents have on citizens' support for police use of force overall?

## CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

### Sample

This study analyzes secondary data obtained from the General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS is a biannually, national household survey of English speaking, adult citizens administered by The National Opinion Research Center (NORC). NORC utilizes a full probability sampling technic to ensure that all non-institutionalized Americans over the age of 18 years old have an equal opportunity of being selected for the survey. Since 1972, the GSS has gathered attitudinal, behavioral and demographic data from the American public to monitor and explain societal trends. The data used in this study includes only the 2012 and 2016 survey years from the GSS. As a result, the total sample size for this project was 2,557 respondents.

### Measures

#### Dependent Variables

For this study, three variables assessing approval for police violence against a male citizen in different situations served as dependent variables. Support for police use of force was measured using responses from both the general and situational questions within the GSS. Previous research has indicated the importance of distinguishing between citizens' approval of police violence overall and their endorsement of use of force based upon situational factors (Elicker 2008; Halim and Stiles 2001; Johnson and Kuhns, 2009; Thompson and Lee 2004). To

capture general attitudes of police use of force responses to the question, “Are there any situations you can imagine in which you would approve of a policeman striking an adult male citizen?” was dichotomized (yes = 1 and no = 0). Additionally, there are four questions within the GSS concerning situational approval of the application of police force. Specifically, these questions ask, “Would you approve of a policeman striking a citizen who: (a) used vulgar and/or obscene language towards the policeman? (b) was being questioned as a suspect in a murder case? (c) was attempting to evade custody? and (d) was attacking the policeman with his fists?” In their study, Barkan and Cohn (1998) ran a factor analysis that distinguished questions (a) and (b) from questions (c) and (d). Based upon their results two dependent variables were formed - an excessive force variable and a reasonable force variable. Excessive force was characterized using the situations where a) a citizen who had said vulgar and obscene things to the policeman and b) a citizen who was being questioned as a suspect in a murder case. The reasonable force variable was composed using the context of c) a citizen who was attempting to escape from custody and d) a citizen who was attacking the policeman with his fists. This study applied a modified approach similar to that of Barkan and Cohn (1998) to distinguish between reasonable and excessive force among the GSS situational items. For the purpose of this study endorsement of police use of excessive force is measured using the scenario where a citizen used vulgar and/or obscene language towards an officer. Public acceptance of reasonable force was measured using the variable in which a citizen uses their fist to physically attack a policeman. In accordance with Barkan and Cohn’s (1998) model support for both excessive and reasonable was coded such that participants who answered yes were coded as 1 and participants who answered no were coded as 0.

## Independent Variables

To predict attitudes toward police use of force a model was developed using race, social class, and gender as independent variables. Each survey participant was asked to self-identify their race by selecting the racial identity that they most closely identified with from three options “white”, “black” or “other.” Due to the importance of race and ethnicity in the current literature, dummy variables were created to include Hispanic respondents in the study. To identify respondents with Hispanic heritage a *select if* statement was processed using the GSS ethnicity question asking whether the participant was Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino/Latina (Hispanic variable). If an individual selected yes, they were asked to indicate which group they belonged to from a list of twenty-seven options. Within the GSS it is difficult to determine individuals with other racial and ethnic identities, so they were excluded from the total sample using a *select if* statement in SPSS. Race/ethnicity was then coded into three dichotomous variables: *White* (white = 1, all else= 0) *Black* (black = 1, all else= 0) and *Hispanic* (Hispanic = 1, all else= 0). Social class was measured using the survey participants’ self-report education and income levels. Each participant’s education level was measured using their highest years of school ranging from zero years to twenty years. Total family income was measured using a 25-point scale in 2012 and a 26-point scale in 2016 with the highest category representing an income of \$150,000 and greater. To correct for the unequal distribution in this measure between the two years, the income categories were rescaled into percentiles (ranging from 0-100). In addition, a mean substitution was used for respondents who refused to indicate their family income. Gender was later dummy coded into two categories: male and female. Female respondents served as the reference group.

## Control Variables

The analyses for this study also included sociodemographic control variables. A dichotomous variable was created for support of capital punishment (favor = 1, oppose = 0). Political ideology was measured using a seven point scale that ranged from “extremely liberal” to “extremely conservative.” Participants also indicated their regional residence at the time of the interview. The GSS uses a regional coding format similar to the one used by the U.S. Census Bureau. A dummy variable was created to identify respondents who lived in the southern region of the United States. Those who identified as residing in the South Atlantic, East South Central, West South Central regions were coded as Southern residences (South = 1, all others = 0). Given the varying results for age it was also utilized in this analysis as a control variable. Within the dataset age is coded using a two digit actual year format that ranges from 18 to 89.

## Analytic Strategy

To provide a more in-depth analysis, a series of logistic regression models were used to examine the effects that demographic characteristics have on attitudes toward police use of force. Given the binary nature of the dependent variables, this study calculated the effects that the demographic variables would have on the respondents’ probability of supporting police use of force in each scenario. The analyses for each of the three dependent variables was processed individually and displays the relationship between the independent and control variables during that survey year. Model 1 looks at attitudes towards police use of force using only the 2012 GSS dataset and the second model was conducted using the responses found in the 2016 GSS dataset. This research design makes it possible to directly identify the presence of a significant

relationship between the survey participants' demographic characteristics and each of the dependent variables. It also allows for a direct comparison of support for police use of force before and after the 2014 death of Michael Brown.

## CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS

Tables 1 and 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the variables analyzed in this study. Based upon the most recent U.S. Census data (2016) whites account for 61.1% of the U.S. population however, in this study they made up 71.7% of the total sample. Blacks made up 15.5% of the sample, while 12.8% of the sample was comprised of Hispanics. Overall the racial composition for the combined survey years are fairly representative of the U.S. population. The 2016 U.S. Census reported that blacks made up 13.3% and Hispanics account for 17.6% of the population. With regards to education, 58.9% of the sample had obtained some level of education beyond high school. Women were slightly overrepresented within the sample accounting for 53.4% of the survey respondents however, they made up 50.8% of the current U.S. population (U.S. Census 2016). The average age of the respondents was around 48-49 years. A majority of the demographic variables were slightly correlated with each other, with the highest being a moderate, positive relationship between education and income ( $r = .4$ ).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics (N=2,557)

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<b>Race / Ethnicity</b>		
Whites	1,834	71.7
Blacks	395	15.5
Hispanic	328	12.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,557</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Females	1,366	53.4
Males	1,191	46.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,557</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Education</b>		
Up to H.S. Diploma/GED	1,049	41.1
Some College/College Graduates	1,508	58.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,557</b>	<b>100</b>

### Descriptive

The univariate analyses of the dependent variables highlight the profound impact that the context has on public endorsement of police violence. Within the 2012 and 2016 datasets, a majority of the respondents took positions in favor of police use of force in two of the three dependent variables, including the general support for police violence (71.5% and 71.4% respectively) and the situation classified as reasonable force (89.2% and 87.6% respectively). However, there were very low levels of public support for the excessive use of police violence among the survey participants. Nearly 10 percent (9.7%) of 2012 respondents were in favor of police use of force against a citizen who was being verbally abusive towards the officer and only 10.7% approved of it 2016. These preliminarily findings concur with previous scholars who have

reported that context matters in citizens' assessments of police behaviors (Barkan and Cohn, 1998; Halim and Stiles 2001; Johnson and Kuhns, 2009; Thompson and Lee 2004).

Table 2. Frequency Statistics on Dependent Variables (N=2,557)

	2012 Survey		2016 Survey	
	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)
<b>General Support of Use of Force</b>				
No	290	11.34	440	17.21
Yes	729	28.51	1098	42.94
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,019</b>	<b>39.85</b>	<b>1,538</b>	<b>60.15</b>
<b>Would you approve of a policeman striking a male citizen who:</b>				
<b>Was attacking the policeman with his fist (<i>Reasonable Force</i>)</b>				
No	104	4.07	190	7.43
Yes	915	35.78	1,348	52.72
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,019</b>	<b>39.85</b>	<b>1,538</b>	<b>60.15</b>
<b>Said vulgar and obscene things to the policeman (<i>Excessive Force</i>)</b>				
No	918	35.9	1,373	53.7
Yes	101	3.95	165	6.45
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,019</b>	<b>39.85</b>	<b>1,538</b>	<b>60.15</b>

### Multivariate

#### Logistic Regressions Examining General Support of Police Violence

The findings for the logistic regression models examining general attitudes toward police use of force during both the survey period are presented in Table 3. Results from 2012 (Table 3 Model 1) indicate that race, education, income, gender and political ideology are significant factors in predicting if respondents could imagine a generic situation where an officer would be

justified to hitting an adult male citizen. The coefficients suggest that minorities and females tend to be more critical of police violence in general than their comparison groups. Accordingly, the odds of blacks generally endorsing police violence is 44.9% lower in comparison to whites; the odds of endorsing police violence for Hispanics is 68.9% lower than whites; and the odds of women endorsing use of force in the general scenario is 41.3% lower than men, controlling for all other variables in the model. Respondents with higher socioeconomic standing had increased odds of believing overall that justification for an officer to exert force upon a citizen exists compared to those with lower social class statuses, net the effects of all other variables within the model. Specifically, the results determined that every one unit increase in education and/or income among the subjects increased their odds of generally supporting use of force by 20.6% and 1.1% respectively. In addition the results this model suggest that as a respondent's political ideology increased toward more conservative viewpoints, the odds of them generally approving police violence increased by 14.4%.

Examination of the 2016 *General Force* model (Table 3 Model 1) indicates that approval of police violence appear to be influenced by the respondents' racial identity, socioeconomic status, gender, views on capital punishment, and age. Controlling for all variables, those who identified as nonwhite (73.3% for blacks and 62.5% for Hispanics) were significantly more likely than whites to oppose police violence in general. Every one year increase in education, increased the odds of supporting police violence in the general scenario by 17.2%. The likelihood of supporting use of force also increases (by 0.6%) with every one percentile increase in income, net the effect of the other variables in the model. Holding constant all other variables, female respondents were 43.2% less likely than males to believe that there was any circumstance

in which police violence was considered justifiable. The coefficients indicate that holding supportive views of capital punishment increased the odds that a subject could imagine a scenario where police violence is acceptable by 56.8%, net the effect of the all other variables. On the other hand, the odds of supporting police use of force decreased by 0.6% as the subjects grew older.

#### Logistic Regressions Examining Support of Reasonable Police Violence

The 2012 *Reasonable Force* model (Table 3 Model 2) demonstrates that race, income, and views on the death penalty have a significant effect on attitudes concerning police violence towards a citizen who physically attacked an officer, controlling for all other variables in the model. Within the sample, minority participants (64.9% for blacks and 67.7% for Hispanics) were significantly less likely than whites to take positions in favor of police use of force in this scenario. Net the effect of other demographic variables, for every one percentile increase in income the odds of approving of police use of force decrease by 0.8 %. Respondents who were in favor of capital punishment had an 83% increase in odds of justifying police violence if an officer is being physically attacked. Education, gender, political ideology, residing in the south and age were negligible factors in predicting if an individual takes a position in favor of police use of force when an officer is being physically assaulted.

The results for 2016 *Reasonable Force* model (Table 3 Model 2) indicates that race and political ideology were significant variables in predicting support for police use of force when an officer was being physically assaulted. Social class, gender, views on capital punishment, residing in the south and age were not statistically relevant in the reasonable force scenario.

Overwhelmingly minority respondents were opposed to the force being used on a person who was physically attacking an officer compared to their white counterparts. Controlling for all other variables in the model, there was a decreased odds ratio of .208 and .308 for African Americans and Hispanics, respectively. As a respondent's political beliefs became more conservative their approval of an officer striking a physically aggressive citizen increased by 13.6%, holding constant the other variables within the model.

#### Logistic Regressions Examining Support of Excessive Police Violence

The results for the excessive force variable in 2012 (Table 3 Model 3) indicate that income, capital punishment beliefs, and political views have a significant impact on citizens' support for use of force when a citizen is being verbally abusive to police personnel. Among those surveyed, for every one percentile increase in income there is a 0.9% decrease in support for police violence in this situation, net the effect of the other variables in the model. This means that as a respondent's income increases, their agreement with use of force against a verbally combative citizen decreased by .009. Respondents who were in favor of the death penalty were at an increased odds of favoring police violence in this situation (AOR =2.079), holding constant the other variables within the model. In addition, this model also revealed that a one increment within political ideology lead to in a 23.1% increase support for police violence. Race, education, gender, regional location, and age were found to have no militate effect on the 2012 excessive force variable.

Social class, capital punishment beliefs, and political ideology were all significant factors in predicting if an individual held beliefs that use force was justified when an officer is being verbally abused during the 2016 survey year (Table 3 Model 3). Education reduced the

likelihood of supporting police use of force in the excessive force situation by 7.9%, controlling for all other variables in the model. Among those surveyed, for every one percentile increase in income there is a slight decrease in the probability 0.6% decrease in believing that police use of force was justified in this situation, net the effect of the other variables in the model. Those in favor of capital punishment were at an increased odds of favoring police violence in this situation (AOR =1.851), holding constant the other variables within the model. In addition, this model also revealed that as a respondent's political ideology increased toward more conservative viewpoints their approval of an officer striking a verbally combative citizen increased by 17.4%.

Table 3. Logistic Regression Models Predicting Support of Police Use of Force

Variables	Model 1 General Force		Model 2 Reasonable Force		Model 3 Excessive Force	
	2012	2016	2012	2016	2012	2016
<b>Race / Ethnicity</b>						
Black	-.596 / .551** (.217)	-1.322 / .267*** (.167)	-1.048 / .351*** (.280)	-1.569 / .208*** (.206)	-.096 / .909 (.337)	.101 / 1.106 (.246)
Hispanic	-1.168 / .311*** (.218)	-.982 / .375*** (.184)	-1.13 / .323*** (.293)	-1.179 / .308*** (.232)	-.021 / .979 (.334)	-.198 / .820 (.281)
<b>Social Class</b>						
Education	.188 / 1.206*** (.031)	.159 / 1.172*** (.025)	.032 / 1.033 (.039)	.058 / 1.060 (0.31)	-.078 / .925 (.042)	-.082 / .921* (.033)
Income	.011 / 1.011*** (.003)	.006 / 1.006** (.002)	.013 / 1.013*** (.004)	.005 / 1.005 (.003)	-.009 / .991* (.004)	-.006 / .994* (.003)
<b>Gender</b>						
Female	-.533 / .587*** (.159)	-.566 / .568*** (.127)	-.151 / .86 (.222)	-.295 / .744 (.167)	-.274 / .761 (.217)	-.029 / .971 (.169)
<b>Control Variables</b>						
Harsh	.21 / 1.233 (.163)	.45 / 1.568*** (.131)	.604 / 1.83** (.222)	-.008 / .992 (.172)	.732 / 2.079** (.267)	.616 / 1.851** (.199)
Political Ideology	.134 / 1.144* (.054)	.061 / 1.063 (.044)	.095 / 1.1 (.074)	.127 / 1.136* (.057)	.207 / 1.231** (.078)	.161 / 1.174** (.061)
Southern Region	.218 / 1.244 (.164)	-.005 / .995 (.131)	.352 / 1.421 (.238)	.067 / 1.069 (.172)	.269 / 1.308 (.221)	-.164 / .849 (.180)
Age	-.003 / .997 (.005)	-.008 / .992* (.004)	-.008 / .992 (.006)	-.007 / .993 (.005)	.007 / 1.007 (.006)	.001 / 1.001 (.005)
Constant	-2.173	-.956	1.17	1.457	-2.431	-1.752
N	1019	1538	1019	1538	1019	1538
Chi-Square	182.16***	246.455***	69.527***	111.725***	40.1***	43.978***
Cox & Snell R <sup>2</sup>	.164	.148	.066	.070	.039	.028
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	.235	.212	.137	.133	.081	.057

Note: Cell entries are given as unstandardized regression coefficient / standardized (beta) coefficient with the standard error given in parentheses.

\* p < .05 \*\* p < .01 \*\*\* p < .001

Race, income, education and gender were significant in the direction hypothesized within the context of the *General Force* variable during both survey years (Table 4 Model 1). Blacks, Hispanics, and women were more likely to oppose police use of coercive violence in general than their comparison groups. On the other hand, those with higher levels of education and income were more likely to approve of police violence than those with lower socioeconomic standings. Attitudes towards capital punishment, political affiliation, and age were shown to have a variable effect on respondents' approval of police use of force in general, however they did not demonstrate a consistent pattern across the survey years. This model tracks the attitudinal trends in public support of police violence in general before and after the highly publicized death of Michael Brown, which appears to have a profound impact on public opinions. The disapproval rates in the general force model increased by 28% for African American respondents between the 2012 and 2016 polls. There was also an increase in general opposition of police violence among Hispanics (6.4%) and women (1.9%) in the survey period following Brown's death. In addition, acceptance rates of the general use of force dropped by 3.4% and 0.5% among participants with higher levels of education and income, respectively.

It is important to note that race and ethnicity continues to be significantly correlated with attitudes in the *Reasonable Force* models, even when controlling for other sociodemographic variables (Table 4 Model 2). Minority participants were consistently less supportive of police violence in the scenario where a policeman was being physically assaulted. Sociodemographic characteristics such as income, having beliefs in support of the death penalty, and subscribing to more conservative viewpoints were found to increase the likelihood of supporting police violence in this situation but these variables lacked consistency throughout the survey period. A

comparison of the racial coefficients indicates that minority respondents' unfavorable views of an officer exerting force in this situation increased over the survey period. Specifically there was a 14.3% increase in opposition among blacks and 1.5% for Hispanics.

The collective results of the *Excessive Force* regressions suggest that income, capital punishment and political affiliation are key factors in predicating attitudes towards police violence against a verbally combative citizen (Table 4 Model 3). Unexpectedly, higher income percentages were correlated with the tendency to be less support of police using force in this situation in both models. The coefficients indicates that views on capital punishment and political ideology have significant impact on the approval of police violence towards a verbally aggressive citizen. Education predicted attitudinal support in the 2016 *Excessive Force* model, however had no predictive power in the 2012 model. A side by side comparison of the findings indicates that there was a 0.3% decrease in opposition among participants with incomes in the higher percentiles between the 2012 and 2016 survey years. On the other hand, the approval ratings in favor of use of force in this situation dropped by 0.2% for those in favor of the death penalty and 5.7% among respondents with more conservative political ideologies.

Table 4. Comparison Logistic Regression Models Predicting Support of Police Use of Force

Variables	Model 1 General Force		Model 2 Reasonable Force		Model 3 Excessive Force	
	2012	2016	2012	2016	2012	2016
Race / Ethnicity						
Black	-	-	-	-		
Hispanic	-	-	-	-		
Social Class						
Education	+	+			-	-
Income	+	+	+		-	-
Gender						
Female	-	-				
Control Variables						
Harsh		+	+		+	+
Political Ideology	+			+	+	+
Southern Region						
Age		-				

Note: Cell entries are given as unstandardized regression coefficient / standardized (beta) coefficient with the standard error given in parentheses.

General Force Question: "Are there any situations you can imagine in which you would approve of a policeman striking an adult male citizen?"

Reasonable Force Question: "Would you approve of a policeman striking a citizen who was attacking the policeman with his fists?"

Excessive Force Question: "Would you approve of a policeman striking a citizen who used vulgar and/or obscene language towards the policeman?"

## CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

### Discussion

The current study sought to extend the literature on public support for police use of force. Overall, the collective results from the 2012 and 2016 GSS datasets met the research expectations of this study and several attitudinal patterns emerged. As hypothesized, members of subordinate groups (i.e. minorities, women, and those with lower socioeconomic statuses) were typically less likely to approve of police violence in comparison to dominant group members. These findings broadly support Ronald Weitzer's (2017) assertions that an individual's location in the social hierarchy influences their perceptions of acceptable police behaviors. It is important to note that none of the sociodemographic variables were consistent in predicting attitudes toward police across all of the models. Nonetheless, the directionality of their significance typically concurred with the theoretical framework of the group position thesis.

Levels of agreement with police use of force were found to vary in the present study, depending on the nature of the male citizen-officer interaction. This suggests that approval for police violence is situational and that the conditions surrounding use of force incidents have a profound impact on public support. There appears to be a consensus among the survey respondents' beliefs regarding the scenarios where police use of force is justified. Over 87 percent of the participants approved of coercive violence when an officer was being physically assaulted. However, only 10 percent of them were in favor of police exerting force in the situation where a citizen used vulgar or obscene language. This was shown to be in accordance with previous studies that reported support for police violence to be highest in situations where

officers encounter physical danger (i.e. being physically assaulted) and lowest in the conditions where the police were not physically threatened (Johnson and Kuhns, 2009; Thompson and Lee 2004). In addition, a majority of the respondents (71%) could think of a generic situation where an officer would be justified in hitting an adult male citizen. This suggests that overall the survey participants were inclined to endorse police violence.

Despite the fact that none of the purportedly important sociodemographic factors consistently predicted approval of police violence across all of the models, race and/or ethnicity had a profound effect. Race was a significant predictor of attitudes in two-thirds of the use of force models analyzed in this study. This is consistent with previous studies that identified race is the single most significant predictor of attitudes toward police use of force (Halim and Stiles, 2001; Mbuba 2010; Thompson and Lee 2004). Overwhelmingly, blacks and Hispanic respondents were less likely to justify police use of force compared to Whites, this effect was constant net the effect of all other demographic variables. Ronald Weitzer implies that these racial disparities can be attributed to the fact that “blacks and Hispanics [often] view the police as contributing to their subordination through the use of both legal and improper methods” (2017:1142). In addition, these groups may be less supportive of police violence because historically they are the primary targets of coercive police violence (Prosser, Smith, and Talley 1995). From this perspective, one can easily associate the racial disparities in attitudinal support for use of force among minorities as the results of their group-position within the social hierarchy as well as an extension of centuries of abusive police practices. In this sense perceptions of law enforcement agents are therefore correlated with both real and perceived vulnerability that a particular group has to being subjected to abusive police practices.

Overall, the data appears to suggest that there was a decline in support for police use of force in the survey period following the 2014 Michael Brown incident. This supports the idea that highly publicized incidents of police brutality have an adverse effect on public perceptions of police violence (Tuch and Weitzer 1997; Weitzer 2002). The most profound effect was observed in the attitudinal changes of blacks in the sample. The magnitude of this change is best understood using Weitzer's (2017) expanded version of the group-position model. He asserts that when minorities experience these events *vicariously* it reinforces the notion that they share a "linked fate" with victims of police violence from similar backgrounds, it multiplies negative perceptions of law enforcement. Weitzer states that the most pronounced impact can be observed in situations where a minority victim was harmed by an individual who is "a member of the dominant racial group and an authority figure—e.g. a white police officer in America" (2017:1131). Since the death of Michael Brown there has been an alarming number of police brutality cases that have received national and global exposure (Klahm 2016; Smiley and Fakunle 2016). Most of these incidents involves a minority victim and a white police officer.

As with all research, the findings of the current study are not without limitations. The most notable limitations are associated with using a dataset that was not primarily focused on police use of force. As a result the analyses conducted did not include variables that are often associated with public perceptions of police behaviors. Scholars have determined that attitudes toward police use of force can be impacted by found that fear of crime (Arthur 1993; Barkan and Cohn 1998), personal experiences with law enforcement (Weitzer and Tuch, 2004), neighborhood context (William and Reisig 2003) and exposure to media reports of police misconduct (Chermak et al. 2001). Unfortunately, these theorized mechanisms were not included in the

models used in this study. The greatest limitation the current research is establishing whether there are any statistical differences between the respondents who were included in the total sample and those excluded. To correct this issue and ensure that the findings of this study are generalizable a sensitivity analysis will be conducted prior to submitting this project for publication. Despite these limitation, this research adds to the established findings on attitudes towards police use of force. However, the questions used for the dependent variables excluded women and children from the scenario. Given the importance of situational context in citizens' interpretations of police violence, focused solely on an adult male slightly limits the findings of this study. At the mercy of the way the questions were asked. Indicate that despite this flaw, the strength is that it allows for comparison before and after the highly publicized death of Michael Brown. It also allows for the observation of attitudinal trends before and after Michael Brown's catalyst death in 2014.

### Conclusion

This paper reexamined the relationship between demographic characteristics and attitudes toward police use of force. The results reinforce that race/ethnicity is a salient factor in predicting support of police use of force. This study also emphasizes that the nature of police-citizen interactions significantly influences public acceptance of police violence. The lack of consistency suggests that other sociodemographic variable may not play a significant role in predicating acceptance of use of force as others scholars have suggested. It is imperative that researchers continue to investigate which factors have a significant influence on attitudes toward police violence. Understanding the relationship between public support for police policies and

practices is important now more than ever given the current strained relationships that police departments have with communities across the nation.

The results of this study emphasizes that procedural justice has a profound impact on police legitimacy. Citizens are often more likely to obey the laws and cooperate with law enforcement agents when they believe that officers are acting in a fair and justified manner (Tyler, 2004). The recent string of highly publicized police brutality cases has further divided public opinions regarding acceptable police practices and their legitimacy to act as public servants. As a result, police departments across the nation are now faced with the challenge of reestablishing and maintaining public trust. It has been argued that an effective way to strengthen police–community relationships is the establishment of a constant dialog between officers and the residents that they serve (Johnson and Kuhns, 2009). Through this dialogue both parties can gain a better understanding of the views and needs of each other, which may help prevent and alleviate any tension that might arise following an encounter police–citizen encounter where coercive violence is employed. As Stewart (2007) notes, that community policing initiatives can foster environments where residents work alongside police, when they are based on practices that cultivate a partnership that allows and encourages public input on police activities. Law enforcement agencies across the nation has taken many steps to improve officer-citizen relations over the last few decades but there is still more work to be done, this is especially true in disadvantaged and high-crime communities.

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