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## Study Finds Police Training Plays Key Role in Shootings

By [BENEDICT CAREY](#)

In making snap decisions about whether to shoot a potentially armed suspect, police officers are far less influenced by racial bias than students or community members forced to make the same decision, a large study has found.

The study, which was based on video simulations of armed and unarmed confrontations, found that racial stereotypes influenced the reaction times of both officers and civilians, but swayed the ultimate decision to fire only in civilian participants.

The findings, while offering little solace to the relatives of [Sean Bell](#), [Amadou Diallo](#) and other minority victims of police gunfire in New York City, suggest that the impact of race on police behavior is subtler than previously understood, and is strongly shaped by professional training.

In previous research, investigators have found evidence that the police use greater force to restrain minority suspects than white ones. And in the wake of the Rodney G. King beating in 1991 in California, an investigation of the Los Angeles Police Department concluded that officers with antiblack attitudes were more likely to be promoted than others.

But the new study, reported yesterday in *The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, is the first to rigorously compare the influence of race on such life-and-death decisions in officers and in non-officers.

“We don’t mean to suggest that this is conclusive evidence that there is no racial bias in police officers’ decisions to shoot,” said Joshua Correll, a psychologist at the [University of Chicago](#) and lead author of the study. “But we’ve run these tests with thousands of people now, and we’ve never seen this ability to restrain behavior in any group other than police officers.”

Dr. Correll said that the findings were unexpected, given that the police were exposed to the usual racial stereotypes in popular culture, as well as in roll calls, confrontations on the beat and other cruelties of the system up close. His co-authors were Bernd Wittenbrink of the University of Chicago; Bernadette Park, Charles Judd and Melody Sadler of the [University of Colorado](#) in Boulder; and Tracie Keese of the Denver Police Department.

Donna Lieberman, executive director of the [New York Civil Liberties Union](#), which has called for an investigation of the Sean Bell shooting, said the study was good news, both for police departments and for those who advocate for equal justice. Mr. Bell, a groom-to-be, was killed in November when five officers fired 50 shots at his car as he left a bachelor party in Queens.

“It demonstrates that people can be trained not to rely on racially biased cues in deciding to pull the trigger,” Ms. Lieberman said of the new study. But the findings, she added, “should compel departments with histories of shooting unarmed black men to undertake a re-examination of their firearms training.”

The research was conducted in 2004, and included 157 officers from the Denver Police Department, 113 officers from departments around the country, and a diverse group of 245 adults from the Denver area. The police officers and the civilians were drawn to represent blacks, whites and Latinos, but the sample was not nationally representative.

In one experiment, participants watched a video screen as a series of 50 threatening images flashed by, one after another: men, half of them black and half white, each shown once while armed and once while holding something innocuous, like a can of Coca-Cola or a cellphone. The participants hit a button to shoot or to hold fire for each image they saw.

The researchers measured reaction times down to the millisecond, and found a clear effect of stereotyping. Both officers and civilians took 10 to 20 milliseconds longer to make a decision when they saw either an unarmed black man, or an armed white man, compared to the other images. This tiny twitch of time reflects the cultural expectation that it is black men who are more likely to have a gun, experts say, and some studies suggest that blacks as well as whites are susceptible to it.

But when it mattered — pull the trigger or not — the police officers tuned out race. They shot at about 13 percent of the unarmed black men and roughly the same number of the unarmed white men. By contrast, the civilians shot at about 35 percent of the unarmed black men and 29 percent of unarmed white men.

To check the results, the researchers ran the entire trial again, and speeded the rate that the images flashed by. The results were the same. Compared to the public at large, the authors concluded, police officers had a “less trigger-happy orientation.”

Ms. Keese, a commander, has patrolled all over Denver, and said that in some areas suspicions of police racism ran high.

“Whenever there’s a shooting of a black suspect by a white officer,” she said, “it has a significant effect on the community, and the elephant in the room, the big question, is, Do you train your officers to shoot black males? This affirms that we’re on the right track.”

Ronald Weitzer, a sociologist at [George Washington University](http://www.georgetown.edu) who was not involved in the research, called the result a major finding.

“It suggests that police officers are far more circumspect than they’re usually given credit for,” Dr. Weitzer said. “But at the same time there’s the age-old problem of the lab studies versus the real world.” Officers may be tired, afraid or unable to see clearly, or all of those things, when a partner starts firing.

“Or let’s say officers might respond to a situation and suddenly are surrounded by onlookers, bystanders

who are yelling at them; that is going to make you more tense,” Dr. Weitzer said. “It’s not possible to capture all that in a study like this.”

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