THE IMPACT OF IMPLICIT RACIAL BIAS ON POLICE DECISIONS TO SHOOT: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND TRAINING IMPLICATIONS

By Dr. Lois James

Editor’s Note: At FLETC’s Summit on Trending Issues in Policing, Dr. James participated in the panel discussion on Biases Affecting Law Enforcement. She presented her research on decisions to shoot, highlighting the difference between implicit and behavioral biases.

Since the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, the policing profession has experienced a turbulent couple of years. Allegations of racially motivated policing abound, and many have called for widespread police reform (PERF, 2015). Implicit racial bias and police use of deadly force are at the forefront of the national conversation regarding reform. Yet, despite assumptions that implicit bias motivates police deadly force judgment and decision making, a great deal of uncertainty exists concerning how bias motivates officers and how police training should be crafted to overcome implicit bias. Some studies assert that regardless of circumstances officers are more likely to shoot black suspects than white suspects (the “implicit bias” effect). Other studies find no evidence of bias in police shootings (the “threat” effect). Emerging research suggests officers may be more hesitant to shoot black suspects than white suspects (the “counter bias” effect). This article summarizes these lines of research, discusses their implications for police training, and introduces a simulation-based implicit bias training program designed from the research evidence to date.
The Implicit Bias Effect

Some researchers strongly assert that police are racially motivated in their decisions to shoot. This idea was enshrined in Takagi’s (1974, p. 30) famous statement that “the police have one trigger finger for whites and another for blacks,” and both field and laboratory studies have produced evidence to support it. For example, researchers have found patterns in officer-involved shooting data suggesting that officers are more likely to use deadly force against black suspects than non-black suspects when controlling for situational variables (Fachner & Carter, 2015; Jacobs & O’Brien, 1998; Sorensen, Marquart, & Brock, 1993). Research from laboratories using seated “shoot/don’t shoot” button pressing designs have also found that, on average, officers tend to be quickest to press “shoot” when presented with armed black suspects (Correll et al., 2007; Correll, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2002; Correll, Urland, & Ito, 2006; Correll & Keesee, 2009; Sadler, Correll, Park, & Judd, 2012). Furthermore, in 2015 the Washington Post published a national data base on fatal officer-involved shootings which found that officers were more likely to shoot black suspects than white suspects, even when controlling for the dangerousness of the situation (Kindy, Fisher, Tate, & Jenkins, 2015).

The Threat Effect

A second line of research claims that officers do not respond to suspect race, but to objective and legal indicators of dangerousness and threat. Some field studies have found that the influence of suspect race and ethnicity on police use of deadly force is insignificant in the face of community-level violent crime rates and the dangerousness of the suspect’s underlying offense (Brown & Langan, 2001; Fyfe, 1978, 1982; MacDonald, Kaminski, Alpert, & Tennenbaum, 2001; Mulvey & White, 2014; White, 2002). Additional support for the threat effect hypothesis comes from laboratory-based studies that found—despite quicker reaction times to press a “shoot” button in response to armed black suspects—police officers were not biased in their shooting decisions (Correll et al., 2007). In other words, officers did not disproportionately make the mistake of pressing “shoot” for unarmed black suspects, or pressing “don’t shoot” for armed white suspects.
suspects. They responded accurately to the objective level of threat.

The Counter Bias Effect

A third perspective suggests that officers in recent years may be more hesitant to shoot black suspects than white suspects out of concern for the consequences of shooting a racial minority. For example, Dr. Roland Fryer of Harvard University found that officers from the Houston Police Department were 23.8% less likely to shoot black than white suspects (Fryer, 2016). Furthermore, experimental studies testing officers in deadly force judgment and decision-making training simulators have found that on average officers take longer to shoot black suspects than white suspects and are less likely to erroneously shoot unarmed black suspects than unarmed white suspects (James, Vila, & Daratha, 2013) despite evidence of implicit racial bias among the participants (James, James, & Vila, 2016).

A separate study of police involved in deadly force encounters provides a possible explanation for this hesitation – officers reported that, in the moment, they had been wary about using deadly force against a black suspect for fear of how it would be publically perceived and the associated consequences (Klinger, 2004). Evidence from these studies raises the possibility that officers’ concerns about the social and legal consequences of shooting a minority suspect may lead them to hesitate before using deadly force in real threat situations, thereby putting themselves at an increased risk of being injured or killed.

Implications for Police Training

Three very different sets of findings have emerged regarding the relationship between implicit racial bias and police decisions to shoot. Those supporting the threat effect are clearly the most encouraging—it is desirable for officers to make decisions to shoot based on objective levels of threat and not suspect race. The two bias effects (implicit and counter bias) are more concerning. On one hand, officers should not let implicit associations between race and threat influence their decision making process. Neither, however, should officers let the atmosphere surrounding police use of force against racial minority suspects cause them to hesitate in the face of real danger. Fortunately, in each case the training implications are the same.

Highly volatile vehicle stop scenarios featuring white and black suspects
Police departments need to train officers to improve accuracy in detecting objective threats and in subsequent use of force decision making, using high-quality, scenario-based deadly force judgment and decision making simulators. Officers can become conditioned to ignore suspect demographics if they are consistently unrelated to the scenario outcome. Careful manipulation of scenarios within this type of training has the potential to reduce officer biases by exposing them to “counter stereotypes” (for example an armed white female). Effective programs feature threatening suspects that are equally as often black, white, or Hispanic, male or female, young or old, rich or poor, intoxicated or sober, and so on. Furthermore, this form of counter conditioning will also improve accuracy if an officer tends to be more hesitant to act based on suspect race, because the training improves overall decision-making based solely on objective threat indicators.

**Counter Bias Training Simulation (CBTsim)**

One example of scenario-based training intended to reveal and overcome biases in shooting decisions is Counter Bias Training Simulation, a 4-hour long simulation-based training program grounded in the experimental work from James and colleagues at Washington State University (James & James, 2016). Officers train in teams of five, each responding to different evidence-based, highly realistic “shoot/don’t shoot” video scenarios depicting a range of suspect demographics (race, gender, age, socio-economic status, level of intoxication, mental illness, etc.). Following each scenario, the responding officer is asked to self-reflect on his or her performance and identify what factors in the video he or she cued off. Team members are then asked to comment on what they may have done in the same situation. Finally, the instructor solicits additional reflection if he or she feels the trainees have not adequately identified motivating factors in their decisions to shoot or not shoot. The goal of the training is to get officers to make decisions to shoot based solely on the level of threat, while disregarding suspect characteristics. Two evidence-based processes fuel this goal: counter-conditioning (the idea that repeated exposure to scenarios in which suspect demographics are not predictably related to scenario outcomes dampens any stereotyping trainees may rely on) and self-reflection (in which any implicit biases can come to light in a non-threatening way).
The national debate regarding racial bias and police use of deadly force can be heated, fueled by disparate agendas, and lead to confusion and blame. The research waters surrounding the influence of implicit racial bias on officer decisions to shoot are murky. Much is unknown despite a large body of research dedicated to this critical and controversial topic. Fortunately, contradictory research findings point down the same path forward, with a clear training implication—high-quality, scenario-based training that teaches officers to focus on objective threat indicators and not suspect characteristics in their decisions to shoot.

References


James, L., James, S. M., & Vila, B. J. (2016). The reverse racism effect: Are cops more hesitant to shoot black than white suspects? Criminology & Public Policy.
Lois James, Ph.D., is an assistant professor in the Washington State University College of Nursing. Dr. James’s research on the impact of suspect race on police decisions to shoot has significantly advanced what is known about bias and use of force. She is the founding director of Counter Bias Training Simulation, a reality-based police training program, grounded in rigorous experimental research and designed to help officers identify and overcome implicit biases. She is a member of the International Association of Chiefs of Police Research Advisory Committee and has received several honors and awards for her work, including the Best Violence Research Award by the American Psychological Association in 2013.