

Opinion Don't give up on diversifying the police

By Jonathan Mummolo

February 2, 2023 at 7:00 a.m. EST

Jonathan Mummolo is an assistant professor of politics and public affairs at Princeton University. His research focuses on police behavior in the United States, the impact of police reforms and statistical methods for quantifying racial bias in policing.

The brutal killing of Tyre Nichols, a young Black man, by five Black police officers in Memphis has reignited debates over whether diversity in police agencies can help address racial disparities in police brutality. For some right-wing commentators, the race of the offending officers is evidence that racism played no role in the event. To some progressive activists, politicians and scholars, the implication is that even diversifying police forces makes a negligible difference in a system that is harsher toward Black civilians, and the only answer is to abolish the police. Both arguments imply that diversifying the police is not an effective way to help curb these abuses.

The reality, as with most social phenomena, is much more complicated. Recent advances in the study of race and policing indicate that while diversity in law enforcement is far from a panacea, it can substantially help reduce use of force by police on average — and abandoning diversity-focused reforms would be shortsighted.

Diversifying law enforcement is one of the oldest proposed police reforms, in part because for much of U.S. history nearly all police officers in the United States were White and male, even in predominantly Black neighborhoods. As law professor James Forman Jr. notes in his book “Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America,” the racial monolith of law enforcement was a focal point of the early civil rights movement, with Martin Luther King Sr. labeling the pattern “taxation without representation.”

In the decades that followed, police agencies in the United States have, to varying degrees, diversified substantially in terms of race, ethnicity and gender. Social scientists across several disciplines, myself included, have sought to quantify what role, if any, officer identity can play in day-to-day interactions between police and civilians.

For many years, determining whether diversification produced better treatment of civilians was difficult — the data was limited, and studies produced mixed results. The key challenge was that to discern whether deploying, for example, a Black or White officer to a particular environment makes any difference, it is necessary to examine officers facing common circumstances. Without these apples-to-apples comparisons, any disparity or similarity in officer behavior could simply be due to the diverse working environments, populations and scenarios they face.

But several recent studies have made great strides in understanding diversity in law enforcement, and their results show marked differences in the way Black, Hispanic and female officers treat civilians relative to their White and male counterparts, even when these groups are deployed to highly similar places, times and scenarios.

In 2021, I published a study in Science with co-authors Bocar Ba, Dean Knox and Roman Rivera that examined years of detailed deployment records of Chicago Police Department officers alongside their stops, arrests and uses of force, allowing for comparisons of officers facing common circumstances. What we found was striking: “Relative to white officers, Black and Hispanic officers make far fewer stops and arrests, and they use force less often, especially against Black civilians. These effects are largest in majority-Black areas of Chicago and stem from reduced focus on enforcing low-level offenses, with greatest impact on Black civilians.”

In a study published the following year, Mark Hoekstra and CarlyWill Sloan compared the responses of Black and White officers to 911 calls in similar places and times, and found that “White officers use force 60 percent more than Black officers on average, and use force with a gun more than twice as often.”

In a related study from 2019, Amalia Miller and Carmit Segal combined data on the gender composition of police agencies over time with crime records and victimization surveys to show that “as female representation increases among officers in an area, violent crimes against women in that area, and especially [domestic violence], are reported to the police at significantly higher rates.”

In sum, while many early studies showed little evidence diversity in policing could help curb abuses and improve service, more recent research that harnesses improved data and more rigorous techniques to isolate the causal effects of policies points to the opposite conclusions. And while many open questions about these policies remain, including their ultimate impact on public safety, the best evidence strongly indicates that officers of different racial, ethnic and gender identities do their jobs differently — a fact that we must take seriously as we consider strategies to curb excessive police violence.

Despite this new evidence, many leading progressive voices in debates over abusive policing are advocating for more extreme policy responses, up to and including the outright abolition of police. But whatever the costs and merits of abolition — which remain unknown — one inescapable political reality is already clear: The police are not going to be abolished.

Proposals to defund and eliminate the police have been shown to be political nonstarters, with even low-level reforms meeting stiff opposition. These proposals are broadly unpopular even in communities of color that are most disproportionately affected by police violence, and where polls consistently show people want fair policing, not no policing.

Given the political intractability of police abolition, we are left with two broad options: pursue imperfect but politically feasible reforms that show promise, or leave suffering communities to languish in the status quo. Diversification is one of many possible reforms, and there might be others with the potential to deliver even larger benefits, including reducing the role of police in responding to mental health crises, and enhancing penalties for police misconduct.

The unconscionable actions of those Memphis police officers show that diversification is, on its own, a woefully insufficient policy response. But to combat a scourge as persistent as abusive policing, we cannot afford to ignore even partial remedies.