

Scenario 1: The Police Officer's Dilemma

Late at night, at the end of a long shift, whilst patrolling for a suspect in a house robbery case, Police Officer X encounters person Z and shoots him dead.

After the incident the X reports that he believed Z had a gun, and that X was in imminent danger. A citizens group reports that there is a racist pattern in police shootings, such that officers are more likely to shoot at blacks than whites.

Z was black and unarmed.

X's decision was a mistake. How do you stop mistakes like this from happening in the future?

Notes for participants

This scenario is based on research into the so-called "Shooter Bias" Phenomenon (Correll et al, 2002; Mekawi, & Bresin, 2015). Experiments show that UK and US participants are quicker to decide to shoot (in a simulation) a target if he is black compared to white. They are also more likely to mistakenly shoot an unarmed target if he is black compared to white. The effect is also found in serving US police officers (Correll et al, 2007). Related work suggests that the results are not solely due to the thresholds people adopt for their decisions, but may reflect an increased likelihood of misperception - ie when the target is black, participants are more likely to actually "see" a gun which isn't there.

One caveat to bear in mind is that although differential rates of shooting between black / whites indicate racial injustice, they aren't certainly because of explicit or implicit bias on the part of individual police officers. This New York Times article argues that structural factors, such as poverty, have a more powerful influence on who is involved in police killings than racial bias of individual officers:

Killings of Blacks: Here Is What the Data Say

<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/18/upshot/police-killings-of-blacks-what-the-data-says.html>

BBC article: Black people 'three times more likely' to be Tasered

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-3451532>

'The Police Officer's Dilemma' <http://psych.colorado.edu/~jclab/FPST.html>
pages from the researchers who elucidated this effect experimentally

Correll, J., Park, B., Judd, C. M., & Wittenbrink, B. (2002). The police officer's dilemma: Using ethnicity to disambiguate potentially threatening individuals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83, 1314-1329.

Correll, J., Park, B., Judd, C. M., Wittenbrink, B., Sadler, M. S. & Keesee, T. (2007). Across the thin blue line: Police officers and racial bias in the decision to shoot. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92, 1006-1023.

Mekawi, Y., & Bresin, K. (2015). Is the Evidence from Racial Bias Shooting Task Studies a Smoking Gun? Results From a Meta-Analysis. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0022103115000992>