



PRESS RELEASE

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**Public Opposes Repressive Policing of Protesters,
But Fear, Racial Beliefs, Protests' Goals Can Boost Support for Police Control**

Amid protests across the United States over racialized issues (e.g., Black Lives Matter [BLM], immigration, Confederate monuments), a new study examined public attitudes toward police's response to protesters. The study found that the public generally opposes repressive policing of protesters, but certain tactics by protesters made individuals more fearful, which boosted support for police repression. The goals of the protest also affected support for police repression, but the effect depended on individuals' racial beliefs.

The study, by researchers at the University of South Carolina (UofSC) and the University at Albany, appears in *Criminology*, a publication of the American Society of Criminology.

"Despite a growing literature on protests, we do not know how different characteristics of protests influence public fear of protesters or support for police repression," explains Christi Metcalfe, associate professor of criminology and criminal justice at UofSC, who led the study. "Increases in the number of protests and differential police reactions have raised many questions about when and how police should get involved, and where the public stands on their involvement."

Understanding public attitudes toward policing of protests is important for police legitimacy and policy. In this context, researchers conducted a nationwide survey in October 2020, after George Floyd was killed by police earlier that year, and protesters took to the streets. The experiment was embedded in a survey fielded by YouGov, a global public opinion and data firm, to 1,000 American adults.

Researchers used vignettes drawing on real protest goals and circumstances; each respondent read a vignette describing a protest, and the study randomized the protest's characteristics (including goals, duration, size, effect on traffic, presence of weapons, and level of violence or property damage). The protests had one of four goals, three of which were racialized, including support of minorities (pro-immigrant and pro-BLM) and support of White history and symbols of White dominance (pro-Confederate); the fourth dealt with COVID-19 and social distancing.

In their work, the researchers sought to answer several questions: Are citizens willing to trade civil liberties (e.g., the right to assemble) for security, and if so, do disruptive or dangerous protest tactics boost support for police control by elevating public fear? Do members of the public view protests through the lens of group position, and will they support efforts to repress those with goals that conflict with their racial attitudes or that threaten their racial interests?

The study found that respondents were generally not afraid of protesters and supported more supervisory rather than repressive policing of protests. The practice most supported by respondents was establishing a border around protests; the least-supported practice was using nonlethal force (e.g., rubber bullets, tear gas) to disperse protesters.

When protesters in the vignettes delayed traffic, carried firearms, or behaved unlawfully (damaging property or assaulting citizens), respondents' fear of the protesters increased, which in



turn boosted support for police repression. Researchers note that it was not just violence that had this effect, but also disruption, dangerousness, and property damage.

The study also found that respondents who were racially resentful were more supportive of police repression. Racial resentment moderated the effect of protest goals on support for police repression: When protesters advocated for the rights of racial and ethnic minorities, support for repression rose among respondents with a lot of resentment and declined among those with little resentment. This finding suggests that members of the public evaluate protests through personal lenses, and based in part on their position in social groups and racial attitudes.

The study's authors point to several limitations of their work: First, they did not study all elements of protests (e.g., diversity, unity) that might influence public fear and policing attitudes. Second, while the study manipulated the goals of protests, the way these goals were framed in the vignettes and respondents' exposure to news about actual protests may also have influenced their attitudes. Third, the study did not measure the effect of counter-protesters, who might also influence public perceptions. Finally, because racial resentment could not be randomized, the findings related to racial resentment and support for police control, which were observational, should be interpreted with caution, the authors suggest.

"Our findings have implications for policing as well as for social movements," says Justin T. Pickett, associate professor of criminal justice at the University at Albany, who coauthored the study. "For policing, the lesson is that policies and practices that are not favored by the public, especially those perceived as unfair or unjust, are counterproductive. For social movements, protests that involve tactics supported by the public and that do not induce fear are likely to be more effective in bringing about desired social and political change."

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Summarized from *Criminology*, *Public Fear of Protesters and Support for Protest Policing: An Experimental Test of Two Theoretical Models* by Metcalfe, C (University of South Carolina), and Pickett, JT (University at Albany). Copyright 2021 The American Society of Criminology. All rights reserved.