

How Police Behavior Frames Protests: Evidence from Black Lives Matter *

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Abstract

As Black Lives Matter protests swept across the United States in recent years, protestors encountered a mix of police reactions: some news reports describe police in military gear and widespread arrests, while others report minimal police involvement. In this paper, we develop an original dataset of BLM protests and show, first, that police reactions varied widely, even when comparing protests with similar messages and tactics. We then investigate this variation with a survey experiment, and find that observers are more likely to describe protestors as violent when militarized police deployments attend an otherwise peaceful protest. These findings highlight the role of the police in shaping public perceptions of violence and social movements, and extend a growing body of empirical research on BLM by shifting the focus from protest activity to the impact of protest policing.

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1 Introduction

After Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teenager, was shot by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri in August 2014, protests erupted in Ferguson and spread across the nation. These protests occurred under the banner of Black Lives Matter (BLM), a loosely connected social movement focused on a mix of national and local political issues (Foran, 2015; Lowery, 2016). The movement returned to the national headlines after the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, which sparked additional waves of protests that continued through 2021 (Buchanan, Bui and Patel, 2020).

Protesters across the United States encountered widely divergent responses from the police. In December 2014, for instance, San Francisco Magazine highlighted a “tale of two pictures”: in Richmond, California, police chief Richard Magnus joined demonstrators and held a “#BLACK-LIVESMATTER” sign, while just several days later in Oakland, an undercover officer pointed a gun directly at protesters (Lucas, 2014). Events from Buffalo, New York in June 2020 tell a similar story: some police officers knelt with demonstrators, while reports showed police pushing an elderly protester to the ground the very next day (ABC, 2020; NPR, 2020).

A closer look at the data suggests that this variation was not constrained to high profile examples. In the first section of this paper, we present a newly-collected dataset of police behavior at over one thousand Black Lives Matter protests between 2014 and 2017. With this dataset, we offer new descriptive evidence that police responses to these protests varied widely, even when comparing protests with similar messages and tactics.

In the second part of the paper, we investigate the implications of this variation in protest policing. Specifically, we draw on research on the subjectiveness of perceptions of violence (Manekin and Mitts, 2021; Edwards and Arnon, 2019), and the success of nonviolent resistance (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2014; Chenoweth and Cunningham, 2013), to examine whether militarized protest policing can create perceptions of violence and depress public support for BLM. We test this argument with a survey experiment conducted in April 2022. The experiment presented respondents with a news article about a BLM protest and manipulated the description of the police response. We find that when news of a peaceful protest is accompanied by a photo of a large and armed

police deployment, readers are more likely to describe the protest as violent, and more likely to ascribe violent and trouble-making intentions to protest participants. This finding underscores how protest policing decisions contribute to and shape perceptions of protest violence. In an exploratory investigation of racial heterogeneity, we also find that white respondents are more responsive to images of militarized policing than non-white respondents, and that Black respondents appear non-responsive to the militarized policing cue. These results build on research which finds racial differences in perceptions of the police (Tuch and Weitzer, 1997; Jefferson, Neuner and Pasek, 2021) and public opinion after protests (Enos, Kaufman and Sands, 2019; Carey and Cisneros, 2023; Davenport, McDermott and Armstrong, 2018).

These descriptive and experimental findings make several contributions to literatures on social movements, policing, and BLM. First, we extend a growing literature on the mutability of perceptions of violence. This literature demonstrates how the mass public's view of protests depends on the partisan, ethnic, and racial identities of protesters (Manekin and Mitts, 2021; Hsiao and Radnitz, 2021; Edwards and Arnon, 2019; Peay and Camarillo, 2021), and on media coverage and framing (Arora, Phoenix and Delshad, 2019; Phelps and Hamilton, 2021; Kilgo and Harlow, 2019). We extend this literature by showing how the police can play a similar framing role: protest policing provides cues about the nature of the protest, and may thus lead observers to infer information about the violence and intentions of protesters, regardless of their actual behavior.

Second, our findings contribute to research which finds that nonviolence is more effective than violence in achieving social and political change (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011; Nepstad, 2015). Explanations for this finding emphasize that nonviolence lowers barriers to participation and attracts more domestic and international support (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011, 2014). Our findings suggest that the police play an important role in creating perceptions of violence, and thus, that the police may have far-reaching effects on movement success regardless of actual levels of violence. This finding runs up against the argument that militarized policing generates public sympathy and support for nonviolent protestors (Wasow, 2020), and suggests that militarized police deployments can undercut this response if their presence creates the perception of protestor vio-

lence. More broadly, this finding underscores the point that public perceptions of violence can differ from observed levels of violence. If the mechanism between nonviolence and movement success runs through public opinion, scholars (and social movement actors) may want to consider that perceptions of “violence” or “nonviolence” can differ from observed violence, and specifically, that perceptions of violence can exist in the absence of violent tactics

Third, our findings contribute to research on policing by showing that police are important strategic actors in the construction of narratives about protests and social movements. Law enforcement organizations frequently enter the realm of politics, though they often avoid characterizing their actions as political (Huey and Hryniewicz, 2012). These organizations take explicit political action, like donating to politicians or lobbying on specific bills, as well as less overt actions, like press releases or videos with positive portrayals of officers (Sieg and Wang, 2013; Page, 2011; O’Connor, 2022; Cheng, 2021). We argue that protest policing should be viewed as another form of political action, one with repercussions for public opinion and social movements. This finding has more than theoretical relevance: political and police actors may want to incorporate these framing effects into their decisions about protest policing.

Finally, we contribute substantively and empirically to the study of BLM. While most recent empirical research has focused on the dynamics and consequences of protests (Williamson, Trump and Einstein, 2018; Reny and Newman, 2021; Drakulich and Denver, 2022), we emphasize instead the enormous variation in protest policing. On a substantive front, this leads us to develop a new police-driven explanation for public perceptions of protests. Empirically, we present a new dataset of Black Lives Matter protests between 2014 and 2017. This dataset provides details about over 1,000 protests (timing, size, tactics), alongside measures of police reactions to these protests. These data provide more fine-grained and geographically complete information about BLM protests than is currently available. The dataset is available with the replication materials, and we hope it will serve as a resource for future empirical research on BLM.

2 Descriptive Data on BLM Protests and Policing

We motivate this project with a descriptive look at Black Lives Matter protests from mid-2014 to early 2017. We introduce here a dataset that provides a detailed look at what happened at over a thousand street protests during the first few years of large-scale BLM protest mobilization, bringing together basic description of protest details (timing, size, tactics, etc.) with measures of police reactions to those protests. Collecting these various features required time-consuming examination of many news and social media sources, but it allows for a more comprehensive look at protest policing than a single source could have provided. This rich and multifaceted dataset lets us examine variation in protest policing within one key social movement, noting where otherwise-similar protests (affiliated with the same movement, responding to the same events, often occurring on the same dates) nevertheless face drastically-different police responses. In addition to allowing us to document the range of police responses to the BLM movement across the United States, we hope it will be useful to researchers seeking to examine other features of BLM protests, perhaps in conjunction with more recent protest datasets collected by the Crowd Counting Consortium and others (Consortium, 2023).

In constructing the dataset used for this analysis, we started from a database of protests compiled by Alisa Robinson via her own research and crowdsourcing (Robinson, 2017). This database includes protests covered in both national and local news outlets across the country, as well as some protests documented only by social media posts by participants, capturing events that would be missed by searching a single newspaper or database. We then trimmed this database to focus on public street protests (omitting actions like NFL players taking a knee), and edited it (correcting placenames and dates with typographical errors, and expanding brief multi-city entries into multiple rows of the dataset). We next undertook a process of investigating each protest through searches for relevant newspaper articles and manually coding various protest characteristics, including measures of police action (police presence, arrests, crowd control measures) and other background characteristics of the protest (whether a protest occurred after dark, whether it was organized by clergy, whether it involved a highway shutdown or other traffic disruption, etc.). Sec-

tion 1 of the Supporting Information provides more details on the coding process, as well as our coding instructions (including detailed definitions of all the variables we code about each protest).

Within this dataset, we observe over 1,000 Black Lives Matter protests across the United States between July 2014 and March 2017. For over 90% of these protests, we are able to code the approximate size of the protest as well as details about police presence, and for most protests we are also able to record details about protest tactics, such as whether the protest took place at night and whether it involved a highway shutdown. This new dataset provides a valuable window into the BLM protests and the breadth of police responses.

Figure 1 maps the protests in the dataset and gives a sense of how widespread BLM protests were in this period. We observe protests in 45 states and Washington DC, with many metropolitan areas seeing repeated protests. These protests were a nearby occurrence for many people: in the second half of 2014 alone, over one-third of the population had a protest in their county, and over 70% had a protest in their own or a neighboring county.

2.1 Variation in BLM Protest Policing

These widespread protests provided ample opportunity for Americans to develop opinions about the Black Lives Matter movement. Importantly, the movement also provided the public with a range of protest images. On August 14, 2014, for example, 88 cities held vigils to observe the “National Moment of Silence for Victims of Police Brutality.” In most cases, people marched or stood quietly with little to no visible police presence. In other cases, however, the police pursued a more visible and forceful response: after the vigil in Minneapolis, for instance, a woman was arrested and placed in a squad car for a supposed violation of traffic laws, prompting a demonstration at the police station (Collins, 2014). In New York, protesters used social media to warn each other about police using “kettling” tactics on demonstrators in enclosed areas (Capps, 2014).

Subsequent waves of protest paint a similar picture: despite reacting to the same events with the same message and tactics, protesters across the country received varied responses from the police. On average, two-thirds of protest events in our dataset saw some police presence, with 17% seeing

Black Lives Matter Protests, July 2014–March 2017

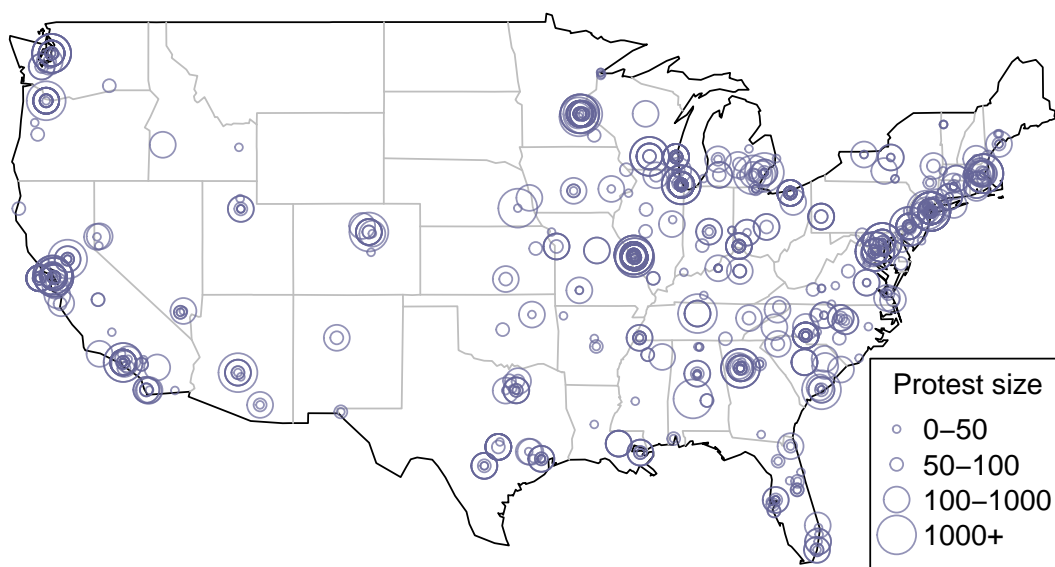


Figure 1: Protest locations in contiguous United States, with point sizes scaled by approximate protest size

at least one arrest and 14% seeing police deploying some sort of crowd control measures. Even within the same type of event, such as the 2014 National Moment of Silence or the nationwide protests following the non-indictment of Darren Wilson for killing Michael Brown, we see broad variation in whether police appear at protests and whether they take further actions.

What explains this variation in protest policing? Table 1 uses the protest dataset to examine variation in police behavior. Specifically, we explore whether protest characteristics predict police presence at a protest (columns 1-2), arrests at a protest (columns 3-4), and use of crowd control tactics (columns 5-6).¹ These data show that some protest features are associated with police responses: when protesters block highways or protest in the evening, for instance, protests are more likely to be met with police presence and arrests. Similarly, protests with some “other disruption” (e.g., protesters blocking local traffic or chaining themselves to objects) were more likely to prompt police presence, arrests, and crowd control tactics. And larger protests of 1000 or more people are more likely to see police presence than smaller gatherings. These patterns are consistent with existing work on protest policing, which would predict both heavy policing of system-challenging protests such as Black Lives Matter demonstrations and particularly harsh treatment of unruly protests or those using extreme tactics (Earl and Soule, 2006; Davenport, Soule and Armstrong, 2011; Reynolds-Stenson, 2018).²

However, the most striking feature of Table 1 is that protest characteristics explain only a fraction of the variance in protest policing. In none of these models does the r^2 exceed .3. Even when we use state fixed effects to compare police departments in the same state, this variation in police responses is poorly explained by protest tactics (table shown in Appendix Section 2). These findings then, suggest that police departments exercised significant discretion in their responses to BLM protests, and that this discretion yielded very different protest experiences in different places.

¹We asked coders to track whether police used crowd control measures such as riot gear, barricades, or tear gas. The most commonly-reported measure was police wearing riot gear, but coders also recorded the use of barricades, batons, horses, dogs, tear gas, and other materials and tactics.

²We do not see more intense policing of protests with Black participants (see null/negative coefficients on the “Majority-Black Protesters” indicator variable) as past work might have predicted (Davenport, Soule and Armstrong, 2011). We note that the measure of protester composition here is quite coarse and is noisily-estimated based on crowd descriptions and photos from news coverage.

In addition to shaping the experiences of people who attended these protests and may have faced arrest or worse depending on police decisions, we hypothesize that harsher police responses can shape public perceptions of the protest and of the broader movement it represents.

Table 1: Protest Characteristics and Police Response

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>					
	Any Police Presence		Any Arrests Made		Crowd Control Measures	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Highway Blockage	0.124*	0.089	0.182*	0.169*	0.104*	0.090
	(0.052)	(0.059)	(0.042)	(0.050)	(0.041)	(0.047)
Other Disruption	0.352*	0.315*	0.207*	0.195*	0.089*	0.076*
	(0.030)	(0.033)	(0.024)	(0.028)	(0.023)	(0.027)
After Dark	0.076*	0.084*	0.055*	0.055	0.122*	0.129*
	(0.030)	(0.033)	(0.024)	(0.028)	(0.023)	(0.027)
Protest Size Under 50		-0.219*		-0.081		-0.164*
		(0.059)		(0.050)		(0.048)
Protest Size 50-100		-0.143*		-0.062		-0.109*
		(0.060)		(0.050)		(0.048)
Protest Size 100-1000		-0.051		-0.072		-0.062
		(0.056)		(0.048)		(0.045)
Majority-Black Protesters		-0.017		-0.034		-0.007
		(0.031)		(0.026)		(0.025)
Policing-focused Protest		0.025		-0.035		-0.074*
		(0.044)		(0.038)		(0.037)
Constant	0.504*	0.628*	0.052*	0.171*	0.049*	0.230*
	(0.019)	(0.064)	(0.015)	(0.055)	(0.015)	(0.052)
State FE	No	No	No	No	No	No
Observations	977	778	980	780	951	767
R ²	0.177	0.207	0.132	0.125	0.074	0.101
Adjusted R ²	0.174	0.199	0.129	0.116	0.071	0.092

Note:

*p<0.05

3 Protests, Policing, and Public Opinion

In the previous section, we used a large dataset of BLM protests to show that police departments exercised significant discretion in their responses to protests between 2014 and 2017. Data from more recent waves of protests paint a similar picture: despite the fact that BLM demonstrations were overwhelmingly peaceful, more than 9% were met with government intervention in 2020 (ACLEED, 2020). Moreover, these data show that the police used force—like tear gas, rubber bullets, pepper spray, and batons—in over half of the protests in which they intervened. Overall, then, these data indicate that police departments used their discretion to take a disproportionately heavy-handed approach to the protests.

What are the implications of this use of discretion? Beyond their effect on protesters and protest dynamics (Davenport, 2007; Siegel, 2011; Young, 2019; Steinert-Threlkeld, Chan and Joo, 2022), we suggest, in what follows, that police responses can shape public opinion on the protests and the broader BLM movement. Specifically, we propose that militarized police responses can create the perception of protest violence, regardless of the actual tactics or behavior of protesters. Importantly, this test coheres with a key feature of the polling data on BLM: namely, the fact that BLM protesters were disproportionately viewed as violent, despite the overwhelmingly peaceful nature of the demonstrations (FiveThirtyEight, 2020; Chenoweth and Pressman, 2020).

Theoretically, this argument builds on recent work on the mutability of perceptions of protests. One strand of this literature highlights how public perceptions of protests depend on the partisan, ethnic, and racial identities of protesters. Manekin and Mitts (2021), for instance, show that nonviolent resistance by ethnic minorities is perceived as more violent than identical resistance by ethnic majorities. Peay and Camarillo (2021) find that protests with all Black participants are perceived to be more likely to end in violence than more diverse demonstrations. Similarly, Hsiao and Radnitz (2021) show that people perceive higher levels of violence in protests by partisan outgroups.

A second strand of this literature demonstrates the role of media framing in shaping elite and mass attitudes about protests (Arora, Phoenix and Delshad, 2019). In a study of BLM protests, for example, Kilgo and Mourao (2021) find that media frames that emphasize disruptive or violent

protest incidents can have damaging effects on perceptions of the movement. Edwards and Arnon (2019) show that public perceptions of whether a protest is violent shift based on the framing of the types of protest action and the identities of participants. Wasow (2020), similarly, finds that positive mainstream media coverage of civil rights protesters in the 1960s tilted public opinion and policy making in their favor.

We argue that the presence and behavior of police can play a similar framing role by providing cues about the nature of the protest. Specifically, we propose that news coverage of protests with heavy police deployments and militarized police tactics (riot gear, tanks, tear gas, etc.) may lead observers to infer that the protest is violent, regardless of the actual behavior of protesters. This argument generates the following hypothesis:

H1: Protests met with a militarized police response are more likely to be perceived as violent than identical protests without a militarized police response.

We also expect protest policing to affect public support for the broader movement. This argument builds on an extensive literature suggesting that nonviolent campaigns are more likely to achieve their goals than violent campaigns (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011). The proposed explanation for the effectiveness of nonviolent resistance centers on the appeal of nonviolence: nonviolent campaigns are thought to reduce the barriers to participation, and attract more domestic and international support, than their violent counterparts (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011; Nepstad, 2015; Chenoweth and Cunningham, 2013).

Recent experimental evidence supports this mechanism by showing that violence reduces public support for protesters and social movements (Huff and Kruszewska, 2016; Feinberg, Willer and Kovacheff, 2020; Muñoz and Anduiza, 2019; Orazani and Leidner, 2019). Dahlum, Pinckney, and Wig (2022), for instance, conduct a survey experiment in 33 countries and find that nonviolent tactics strongly increase movement support relative to violent tactics. Arves, Cunningham, and McCulloch (2019) examine the impact of rebel behaviors on American public opinion and

find that the use of terrorism decreases public support. Simpson, Willer, and Feinberg (2018) find that the use of violence in antiracist protests against white nationalists reduces public support for protestors. This experimental literature, then, provides compelling support for the mobilizing effects and success of nonviolent movements.

Building on this literature and our first hypothesis, we argue that protest policing may have more far-reaching effects on the movement’s ability to mobilize support. Specifically, we propose that if militarized police can create the perception of violence, so too may they undermine public support for the movement. We specify this second hypothesis as follows:

H2: Protests met with a militarized police response are more likely to reduce public support for the movement than identical protests without a militarized police response.

This hypothesis qualifies the argument that repression generates sympathy and support for non-violent protestors (Wasow, 2020), and suggests that militarized police deployments may undercut this sympathetic response from the public if they create the perception of protest violence. In line with our proposed mechanism, polling data shows that public support for BLM peaked when the 2020 protests were first reported and declined sharply after (Civiqs, 2023).

4 Survey Experiment

4.1 Study Design

To test our hypotheses, we conducted an online survey experiment in April 2022. We recruited a diverse sample of 2710 US-based respondents through Prolific. The experiment presented respondents with a realistic news story about a BLM protest. In the news story, we randomly varied the police response to a BLM protest, while holding constant all other information about the demonstration (Figure 2). Some respondents were presented with a news story describing a march and an image of peaceful protesters (Figure 3), while other respondents received the news story, the same

image of peaceful protesters, and an additional sentence about an image of militarized police at the protest (Figure 4). The italicized text in Figure 2 indicates the militarized police condition. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of these conditions with equal probability.

Figure 2: News Article Vignette

Protesters rallied in front of City Hall on May 2 after a young man died in police custody, demanding action by city officials. Local organizers and members of the Black Lives Matter movement are asking that charges be brought against officers, since the man died of an injury suffered after his arrest. The crowds began to assemble around noon near the site of the man's arrest, then marched to City Hall. *Police responded with a large deployment.*

Figure 3: Control Condition Image



We then asked outcome questions relating to our two hypotheses: perceptions of protester violence (H1) and support for the BLM movement (H2). We measured perceptions of violence by asking respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with three statements on a five-point Likert scale: “The event in question was violent,” “The protesters had violent intentions,” and “These protesters were out to cause trouble.” We measured support for BLM with four measures. First, we asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with the statements (1) “I would consider

Figure 4: Treatment Condition Images



getting involved with a group who supported causes similar to those of the protesters” and (2) “I support these protesters” on a five-point Likert scale. Then, we asked respondents to indicate their willingness to (3) “Go to a protest like this one” and (4) “Post something positive about a protest like this on social media” on a scale from 1–100, where 0 means that a respondent would “absolutely not take that action” and 100 means that a respondent would “definitely take that action.”

4.2 Experimental Results

We present the estimated effects of our “militarized police response” treatment condition on two sets of outcome measures in turn, analyzing the experiment as described in a pre-analysis plan filed with the Evidence in Governance and Politics (EGAP) registry before the experiment was fielded.³

Figure 5 reports the estimated effects of militarized policing on perceptions of protest violence. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, the figure shows that the presence of militarized police increases the perception that protesters are “out to cause trouble” substantially. The mean score on this item for those shown the news article with an image of militarized police is .15 points higher (on a 1-5 scale) than the mean for those shown the control article. For scale, this treatment effect is similar in size to the baseline difference between seniors (over 60) and other respondents on this question (.17 points) and to the differences between white and non-white respondents (.22 points) in their perceptions of protesters’ troublemaking; both age and race are often thought of as key moderators of policing and protest opinion (Robinson, 1970; Carey and Cisneros, 2022).

We see similar effects for the violent intentions measure, which shows that militarized police increase the likelihood that protesters are perceived to have “violent intentions” by .21 points on a 1-5 scale. We also find that the presence of militarized police significantly increases the perception of violence by 0.15 points on a 1-5 scale. These effects are relatively small but notable given the limited nature of the treatment (a sentence and photo in one news article).

³The original pre-registration is visible at <https://osf.io/beuzc>. We include a blinded copy of the pre-analysis plan in the SI.

Figure 5: Effects of Militarized Police on Violence Perception

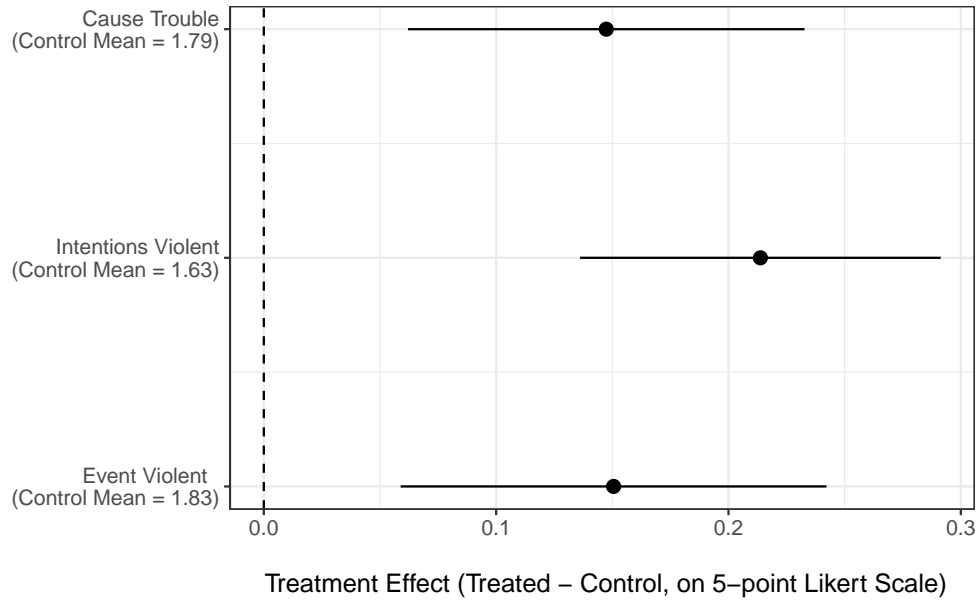
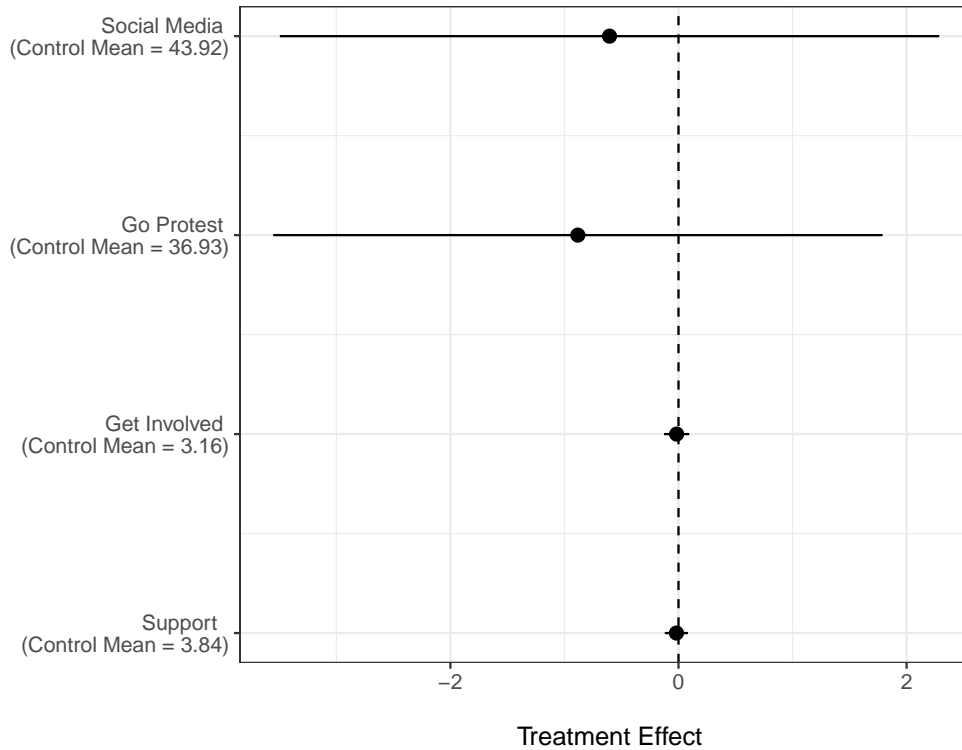


Figure 6 displays the difference-in-means tests for the support for Black Lives Matter outcomes. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, we find suggestive evidence that the presence of militarized police substantively reduces (1) willingness to get involved with a similar group, (2) willingness to attend a similar protest, (3) willingness to post something positive about a similar protest on social media, and (4) support for these protesters. These effects are all in the expected (negative) direction but are not statistically distinguishable from zero.

Section 6 of the Supporting Information presents further robustness tests. Combining the survey measures into a single index measure for hypothesis 1 (perceived protest violence) and hypothesis 2 (support for the protesters) yields similar estimates: militarized police presence significantly increases respondents' perceptions of violence and appears to reduce their support for the movement (though the latter effect is still not statistically distinguishable from zero).

Taken together, these results show that protests with a militarized police response are more likely to be perceived as violent, and suggest that the presence of militarized police reduces public support for BLM. Regarding the generalizability of these findings, we tried to maximize our external validity by using photos and details from real news coverage of protests in Baltimore after the police killing of Freddie Gray (Burton, N.d.). The experiment was thus designed to resemble

Figure 6: Effects of Militarized Police on Support for BLM



actual news coverage of BLM, such as news consumers might see after protests. Further, we expect our findings to travel beyond the immediate time period of this survey experiment. That we found similar results in a pilot study during an earlier (Fall 2019) wave of protests supports this point.⁴ In addition, BLM news coverage was at a low ebb during the 2019 pilot, which addresses the related concern that our findings depend on the presence of salient news about violence between police and protestors (e.g., as was the case in 2022). Finally, while our study is based on Black Lives Matter protests, we do not think our results are unique to this movement. Variation in protest policing is not unique to BLM or the United States (Della Porta and Reiter, 1998), and we expect militarized policing to contribute to perceptions of protest violence beyond this particular movement and context.

⁴The details of the pilot study are reported in the SI.

4.3 Racial Heterogeneity: Who responds to police cues?

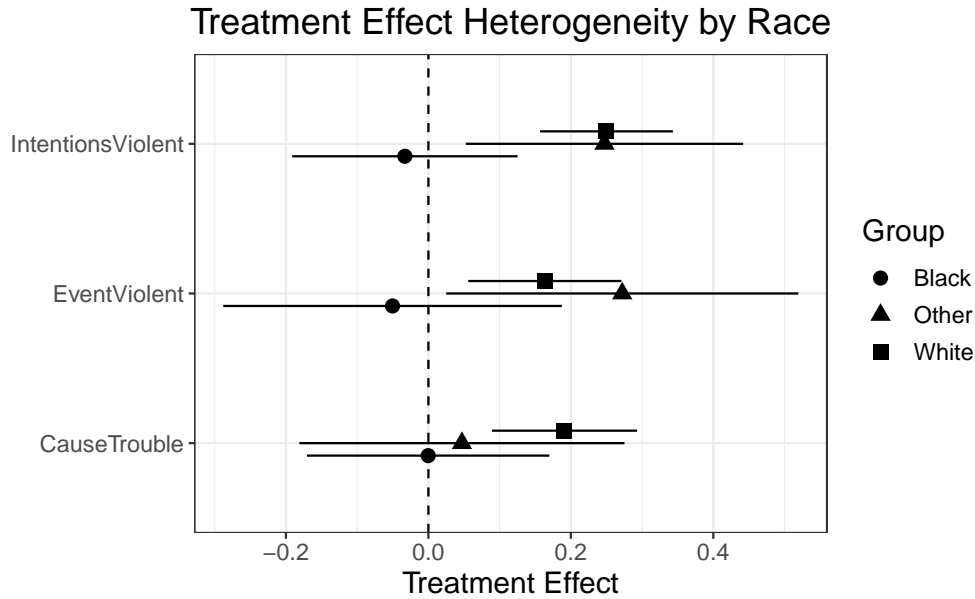
Our main pre-registered hypotheses are about average effects of protest-policing imagery on people's reactions to protest events. But it is possible that some people are particularly likely to react to police cues; for example, people who hold the police in high regard may trust that police responses are proportionate to the threat posed by protesters and thus be especially likely to infer protester violence when they see militarized police tactics. People who distrust the police may not reach the same conclusions.

In this section, we look for heterogeneity in experimental treatment effects. Because we did not pre-register this test or design the study with it in mind, it should be considered exploratory. We focus here on racial differences in response to the experimental treatment condition, given well-established differences in how people experience policing and view the police along racial lines (Tuch and Weitzer, 1997; Jefferson, Neuner and Pasek, 2021). We do not have direct measures of respondents' pre-existing attitudes towards police, but we expect that Black survey respondents will on average have lower trust in police than white respondents. We thus expect that Black respondents may be less likely to follow police cues and infer from militarized police images that a protest was violent.

Figure 7 presents experimental effects by race for our three measures of protest perceptions.⁵ Indeed, white survey takers appear quite responsive to images of militarized policing, showing clear and precise increases in beliefs that protesters had violent intentions, that the event was violent, and that protesters were out to cause trouble. Black respondents appear non-responsive to the militarized policing cue, with essentially no difference between treatment and control in their perceptions of protester violence. Across all three outcome measures, there appears to be a large difference between Black respondents' treatment effects and those for the rest of the sample,

⁵The racial-identity question included in the survey allowed respondents to select any racial/ethnic categories with which they identified, including allowing for multiple selections. For this plot and the tests described in this section, we divide the sample into people who selected only "White, not Hispanic" ("White" on the plot, 2006 respondents), those who selected only "African American or Black" ("Black" on the plot, 331 respondents), and everyone else, including those who selected "Hispanic or Latino," "Asian American," any other category, or multiple categories ("Other" on the plot, 373 respondents).

Figure 7: Racial Heterogeneity in Effects on Perceptions of Violence

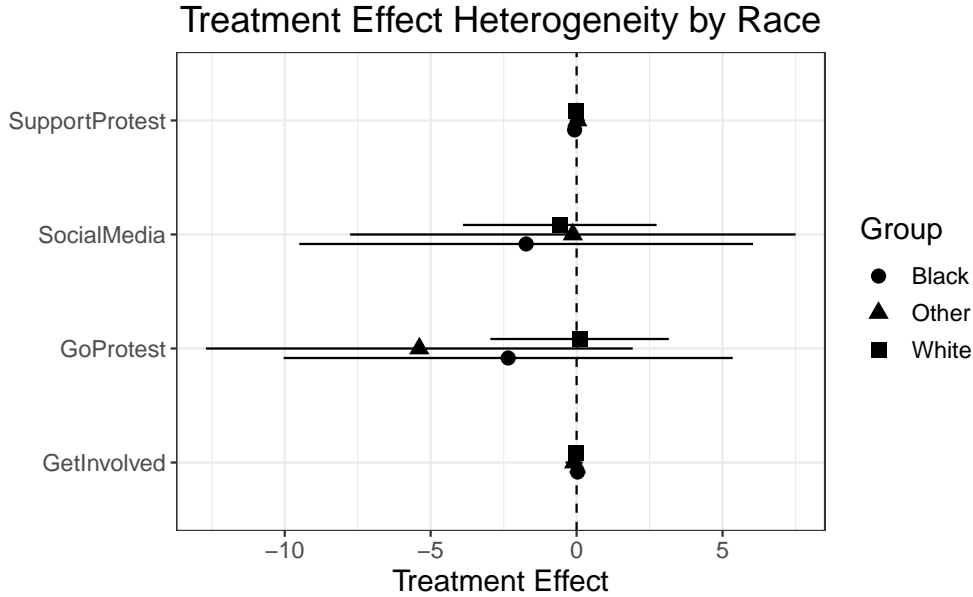


though only for the “violent intentions” measure does that difference reach conventional levels of statistical significance. We report this pattern with caution, as the study was not designed to be powered for subgroup analyses and interactions of this type, but consider it suggestive evidence of heterogeneity.

We also look for heterogeneity in effects on our “protest-support” outcome measures, though we have less clear predictions for these measures. One prediction builds on our interpretation in Figure 7: namely, that white respondents are more likely to react strongly to militarized police images, and thus more likely than non-white respondents to reduce their support for the movement. Another prediction is that treated Black respondents are more likely to reduce their support for the movement: if Black respondents are more likely to be afraid of the police than non-Black respondents, they may be less willing to get involved with, attend, and express support for protests with militarized police due to fears of police violence. These stories point in different directions and yield less clear predictions for treatment effect heterogeneity on our measures of support.

Figure 8 displays treatment effects by race on our four measures of protest support. In line with the cross-cutting stories described above, we do not see clear patterns of racial differences in response to the militarized-police cue here. If anything, it appears that Black respondents may

Figure 8: Racial Heterogeneity in Effects on Protest Support



become slightly less willing to attend a protest after receiving the militarized-police cue (consistent with fears of police violence), but these differences are small and noisily-estimated.

5 Conclusion

In early 2023, Memphis police fatally beat Tyre Nichols during a traffic stop. In the wake of his death, news stories trickled out about the details of the stop and about the imminent release of police body-camera footage of the beating. As Memphis officials prepared to release the footage on a Friday evening in late January, police departments across the country called up large groups of officers and prepared riot gear and other militarized equipment (Pegues, 2023; Zraick, 2023). With this police mobilization, media coverage of the situation rapidly became about the anticipated violence of the protesters who would turn out after the video’s release. News stories and social media images included photos of officers lining up and preparing for a long night of protest policing. After an evening of largely peaceful protests, news coverage reported on those peaceful events while continuing to stoke concerns of potential violence (Heyward, 2023; Bennett and Cuevas, 2023; Sadowski, Lee and Hind, 2023). Why, after an event of extreme violence by police officers, was

the public conversation so thoroughly focused on hypothetical protester violence?

We believe, at least in part, that this pattern emerged because police mobilizations can help to frame media coverage and public perceptions of protests. Large deployments of police imply that there is something to defend against, and can thus lead members of the public to believe that protesters are violent and dangerous even in the absence of violent protest tactics. In other words, we think the chain of events after Tyre Nichols' death represents a broader phenomenon in which militarized policing can create the perception of protest violence.

In this paper, we present an original dataset of over one thousand BLM protests between 2014 and 2017. With this dataset, we demonstrate that the police pursued strikingly varied responses to these protests, and that observed protest characteristics explain only a fraction of this variation. These findings suggest, first, that police departments exercised discretion in their response to the demonstrations. When coupled with the largely peaceful nature of the protests, these findings also suggest that the police pursued a disproportionately militarized response to BLM, an observation which finds additional support in more recent data on protest interventions (ACLED, 2020).

In the second part of this paper, we build on these insights to examine whether militarized policing can contribute to perceptions of violence and depress support for BLM. Our survey experiment shows that when a photo of armed police accompanies a report of an otherwise-peaceful protest, respondents are more likely to describe the protest as violent, and more likely to ascribe violent and trouble-making intentions to participants. Our findings suggest that militarized policing (e.g., riot gear, tanks, tear gas) can create the perception of violence, regardless of the behavior of protestors, and that these results are the strongest among white respondents.

This paper makes several contributions to research on BLM, social movements, nonviolence, and protest policing. First, we make a substantive contribution to the study of BLM by presenting a police-centered explanation for public perceptions of BLM protests. Empirically, we present an original dataset that researchers can use to explore various aspects of the movement. The dynamic nature of digital news and social media means that it can be difficult to reconstruct what happened at protests years after they took place. Researchers working with current datasets about recent

BLM protests may thus find it useful to refer to this dataset on earlier protests to learn about continuity or change within the movement.

Second, our results join recent work on the effects of media framing and protestor identity on perceptions of violence in social movements (Manekin and Mitts, 2021; Hsiao and Radnitz, 2021; Arora, Phoenix and Delshad, 2019). Our findings show that the police can play a similar role in the construction of perceptions of violence, and underscore the broader point that these perceptions are subjectively shaped. Future work might bring these experimental findings into conversation and ask, for instance, how variation in policing and the racial or partisan identities of protestors can impact perceptions of protest violence. Alternatively, researchers might investigate the conditions under which militarized policing creates the perception of violent and trouble-making protestors versus public sympathy for the movement (Wasow, 2020).

Third, and building on this point, our findings highlight that perceptions of nonviolence depend on more than protester violence. This point is significant for the study of nonviolent resistance (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011; Nepstad, 2015; Chenoweth and Cunningham, 2013), and suggests, in particular, that scholars should be attuned to the potential for differences between actual and perceived violence, and to the role of the police in shaping these perceptions. Social movement actors, too, should be attuned to this possibility: if nonviolence is a more effective means of social and political change, then interactions with the police take on additional strategic importance.

Finally, our findings contribute to theoretical and practical literatures on protest policing. On a theoretical front, we highlight that the police should be viewed as important strategic actors in protests and social movements. While much of this literature focuses on the interaction between policing and protestors (Earl, Soule and McCarthy, 2003; Earl and Soule, 2006; McAdam, 1983; Williamson, Trump and Einstein, 2018), we emphasize instead the impact of policing on public opinion about protests. Specifically, our results present the police as strategic and influential actors in the construction of broader narratives about social movements.

From a policy perspective, our findings suggest that political and police actors may wish to incorporate public opinion effects into their decisions about protest policing. In the wake of the

2020 protests following George Floyd's death, many cities have considered or passed rules about police use of force or of specific weapons at protests: Boston restricted the use of tear gas and rubber bullets, while Columbus passed a law stating that officers cannot inflict pain to punish or deter nonviolent protesters and must have their names clearly visible on their riot gear (Services, 2021; Bush, 2022). These policies are clear responses to cases of immediate physical harm done to protesters in these cities. But our findings suggest that cities may also want to constrain the political impact of protest policing on broader movements. Police arriving in riot gear (even with their names visible) at a nonviolent protest can dramatically shift the public perception of that event, even without any escalation by protesters. As such, police departments may have the opportunity to strategically use their discretion to deploy large and militarized forces in ways that misportray or discredit protesters with whom they disagree. Just as top-down directives can limit harsh street-level policing tactics (Mummolo, 2018), policies requiring clear justification and documentation of militarized police tactics at protests could limit their discretionary use and their political ramifications.

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Online Appendix for 'How Police Behavior Frames Protest'

March 9, 2023

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1 Coding Details for BLM Protest Dataset

We used a two-stage coding process to collect information about protest events. We describe that process here and then enclose the coding instructions we gave to RA's for the second round of coding (these instructions include detailed definitions of all of included variables).

First round: read a single source article We began our coding process by reading the news article associated with the protest event in the original elephrame.com database of BLM protests. We (and our research assistants) read each of these articles and did a preliminary coding of each event, leaving many of our columns blank when we could not determine the codings from this one article.

After this first round, we evaluated the dataset and noticed several things:

- First, there were several large protest “waves” in the dataset that had been collapsed to a single daily observation. On August 14, 2014, for example, activists held scores of protests across the country. The database we used as a starting point for our dataset included one row for all of these protests together, listing the protest location as “119+ cities”. Before starting the second round of coding, we “expanded” these rows as best we could, using data from the news articles in the database (several of which included lists of dozens of cities that had protests on a given date), as well as manual inspection of the “map” tab at this website with a visualization of BLM protests over time: <https://elephrame.com/textbook/BLM/> This yielded a dataset with (as far as possible) one row per individual city protest, even if there were many protests on the same day nationwide.
- Second, we found that some of the variables we had defined, particularly “mostlyblack-crowd”, were largely missing after this first round. Very few news articles explicitly mention the race of protesters, so most coded observations left this column blank. We decided to introduce another variable where coders in the second round would examine available photos of protesters and attempt to guess the race of protesters; see the attached coding instructions for full detail.

Second round: search for more news coverage and fill in gaps Next, we sought out more news coverage on each of the protest observations in our dataset, reading additional articles and attempting to fill in missing information that had not been found in the first round of coding. See the included instructions (on the next page) for the details of the search process. At this stage, we also added in rows for any other protests that coders encountered in their search process.

After this coding process was complete, we wrote code that further standardized the database and made minor corrections such as fixing typos in placenames so that the dataset could be merged to Census geographic data.

Coding instructions for second coding pass Protest Policing Project

February 2018

Basically, we want to search around for more news coverage of the protests in our database, to allow us to fill in any columns that are currently missing. In the first round of coding, students read the articles that are already linked to in the database, and filled in the columns as best they could with that information. Now, we're going to search for additional articles, and try to fill in any missing columns.

So, for a given column, you'll skim over and see whether there are any blank columns remaining. If there are, you'll search for news articles about that specific protest.

You'll want to search Google for some relevant keywords, then select "News" so you're looking only at news stories, then select "Tools" and rather than "recent", select "Custom Range" and put in a time range that should include the protest in question (maybe the date of the protest to a week or so later?). As for keywords, try things like [city name] + "protest", maybe including "BLM" or "Black Lives Matter" if you need to narrow down. But the city name and the date range should do a lot of the work here.

Once you have some news results, you'll want to open the first few articles, read through them, make sure they're about the correct protest, and see if they allow you to fill in any more protest characteristics in the spreadsheet (see coding rules below). You'll then also add links to those articles to the spreadsheet (copy-paste them into the "additionalarticles" column).

- If you don't find any relevant articles, try playing around with the keywords to see if you get anything.
- If you find a ton of relevant articles, read the first 5 articles and fill in the spreadsheet based on those-- no need to read dozens of articles about the same protests.
- Once you're done reading the articles, filling in as many columns as you can, and then copying the article URLs into the spreadsheet, you're done with that row: move on to the next protest.

As for the spreadsheet columns, they should be about the same as the first round; instructions for each column appear below. Anything you can't answer from the article(s) should be left blank (not 0, but empty).

howmanydemonstrators How many demonstrators were at the protest? Give us your best guess from the following options: <50, 50-100, 100-1000, 1000+, or leave it blank if you really can't tell.

policepresence Does the reporting indicate that the police were present at the protest? (0=no, 1=yes, blank=can't tell).

anyarrests Did anyone get arrested at the protest? (0=no, 1=yes, blank=can't tell)

howmanyarrests How many people got arrested? This should be a number, or blank if you can't tell.

crowdcontrol Were there reports of police using riot gear, shields, or any other tools like that? Were there reports of tear gas or other crowd control measures? (0=no, 1=yes, blank=can't tell)

whichcrowdcontrol If you marked "crowdcontrol"=1, use this space to fill in what kinds of gear/actions were reported.

anyprotesterinjuries Were there any injuries to protesters reported? (0=no, 1=yes, blank=can't tell)

anypoliceinjuries Were there any injuries to police reported? (0=no, 1=yes, blank=can't tell)

anyotheragencies Did any other agencies besides the municipal police show up at the protest, such as the national guard? (0=no, 1=yes, blank=can't tell)

whichotheragencies If you marked "anyotheragencies"=1, use this space to fill in what other agencies were there.

publicstreet Did the protest take place primarily on a public street/sidewalk? (0=no, 1=yes, blank=can't tell)

otherpublicspace Did the protest take place primarily in some other public space (a park, a transit station, etc.)? (0=no, 1=yes, blank=can't tell)

afterdark Did any part of this protest take place after dark? (0=no, 1=yes, blank=can't tell)

shutitdown Did protesters use any tactics such as blocking traffic on local streets or chaining themselves to objects? (0=no, 1=yes, blank=can't tell)

highwayblockage Did protesters attempt to move onto a highway and block traffic there? (0=no, 1=yes, blank=can't tell)

mostlyblackcrowd Was the crowd mostly Black? (0=no, 1=yes, blank=can't tell)

mostlyblackphoto If you find one main news article, look at the photos: if there are more than 10 individual protesters visible, make your best guess about their race; if more than 50% appear to be Black (so, 6/10 but NOT 5/10) mark 1. If 50% or fewer are Black, mark 0. If there are no photos, you can't identify the race of enough people, or there are too few people visible in photos, leave this column blank.

if you find many news articles, make your best assessment. At a minimum count the people in one photo. There is research evidence that people who aren't used to seeing majority-Black (or majority-female) crowds systematically overestimate the share of people

who are Black (or female, or otherwise less visible in media portrayals), so it's worth actually counting rather than following one's initial guess of the proportion.

Race is a social construct and guessing where other people fit into it is really unpleasant, so it's ok for this to feel uncomfortable, but this data is important enough to be worth the discomfort.

mostlyblackphotonotes Any notes about weird or difficult aspects of coding photos go in this column.

clergyorganizers Did the protest have substantial visible support from, or organizers who are, clergy members (of any religious tradition)? (0=no, 1=yes, blank=can't tell)

spontaneous Was the protest planned well in advance (like for MLK day), or was it relatively spontaneous in response to an event like a police killing or a non-indictment of an officer? (0=planned, 1=spontaneous, blank=can't tell)

permitsforally Did the protest have a permit? (0=no, 1=yes, blank=can't tell)

aboutpolicing Was the protest explicitly about policing issues? (0=no, 1=yes, blank=can't tell)

othernotes Use this space to note anything you think was especially weird about any of the prior answers.

changedround2 Did you change anything from the previous round? Only mark yes if you *changed* data rather than filling in missingness (0=no, 1=yes)

2 Additional descriptive tables for BLM Protest Dataset

Table A1: Protest Characteristics and Police Response (Extra Specifications)

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>								
	Any Police Presence			Any Arrests Made			Crowd Control Measures		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Highway Blockage	0.124*	0.089	0.090	0.182*	0.169*	0.197*	0.104*	0.090	0.114*
	(0.052)	(0.059)	(0.059)	(0.042)	(0.050)	(0.051)	(0.041)	(0.047)	(0.048)
Other Disruption	0.352*	0.315*	0.303*	0.207*	0.195*	0.205*	0.089*	0.076*	0.082*
	(0.030)	(0.033)	(0.034)	(0.024)	(0.028)	(0.029)	(0.023)	(0.027)	(0.028)
After Dark	0.076*	0.084*	0.078*	0.055*	0.055	0.028	0.122*	0.129*	0.114*
	(0.030)	(0.033)	(0.034)	(0.024)	(0.028)	(0.029)	(0.023)	(0.027)	(0.028)
Protest Size Under 50		-0.219*	-0.163*		-0.081	-0.040		-0.164*	-0.131*
		(0.059)	(0.060)		(0.050)	(0.052)		(0.048)	(0.049)
Protest Size 50-100		-0.143*	-0.106		-0.062	-0.029		-0.109*	-0.082
		(0.060)	(0.060)		(0.050)	(0.051)		(0.048)	(0.049)
Protest Size 100-1000		-0.051	-0.033		-0.072	-0.047		-0.062	-0.042
		(0.056)	(0.057)		(0.048)	(0.048)		(0.045)	(0.046)
Majority-Black Protesters		-0.017	-0.035		-0.034	-0.060*		-0.007	-0.023
		(0.031)	(0.033)		(0.026)	(0.028)		(0.025)	(0.027)
Policing-focused Protest		0.025	0.009		-0.035	-0.063		-0.074*	-0.086*
		(0.044)	(0.046)		(0.038)	(0.040)		(0.037)	(0.039)
Municipal Population (Thousands)			0.00003*			0.00003*			0.00002
			(0.00001)			(0.00001)			(0.00001)
Constant	0.504*	0.628*	0.059	0.052*	0.171*	0.113	0.049*	0.230*	0.121
	(0.019)	(0.064)	(0.297)	(0.015)	(0.055)	(0.254)	(0.015)	(0.052)	(0.243)
State FE			X			X			X
Observations	977	778	778	980	780	780	951	767	767
R ²	0.177	0.207	0.282	0.132	0.125	0.197	0.074	0.101	0.163
Adjusted R ²	0.174	0.199	0.229	0.129	0.116	0.138	0.071	0.092	0.101

Note:

*p<0.05

3 MTurk Experimental Pilot (Fall 2019)

In fall 2019, we ran a small pilot experiment on Mechanical Turk using the same treatment text/photos as in the main study reported in the paper, and some of the same outcome measures. We collected 772 responses (dropping people who left the survey prior to treatment assignment, and keeping anyone who was assigned to treatment even if they did not complete all portions of the study).

This pilot encountered several challenges: we received some open-ended text responses that suggested participation by either bots or very inattentive humans, and several participants told us they did not see the treatment article.¹ We present intent-to-treat estimates without excluding any of these problem observations, noting that such problems should tend to make it harder to distinguish between experimental arms.

The following table describes all the outcome measures included in the pilot study as well as the experimental treatment effects observed. The “diff” column presents the difference in means between the “heavy police presence” and “no police photo” conditions, and the “p-value” column presents the p-values of those differences, adjusted to control the false discovery rate using the Benjamini-Hochberg approach.

The estimates in the pilot are generally consistent with our theoretical predictions, though we urge caution in interpreting them given the limited pilot sample size and implementation problems discussed above. People exposed to the police imagery were significantly more likely to say that the protesters had violent intentions or were out to cause trouble. They were significantly less likely to say that the protesters’ actions were justified or that they would consider getting involved with a group that supported similar causes. These differences range from about a quarter to a third of a point on a five-point scale, which is usually about a third of a standard deviation.

Several other outcomes, such as whether people report that they would go to a protest like this or whether it is important to listen to these protesters, have effects that are either null (substantively small coefficients indistinguishable from zero) or quite noisily-estimated.

¹We could not replicate this problem on any computer/browser combination we tried, but we think it may be related to the “timing” feature in Qualtrics, which we were using to track whether people went through the study more quickly than expected.

question_text	question_scale	ctrl_mean	trt_mean	diff	pvalue
The protesters had violent intentions	5-pt Likert agreement (Strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat agree, strongly agree)	1.93	2.30	0.36	0.00
These protesters were out to cause trouble	5-pt Likert agreement	2.13	2.46	0.33	0.00
It is important to listen to these protesters	5-pt Likert agreement	4.29	4.25	-0.04	0.58
The protesters' actions were justified	5-pt Likert agreement	4.25	3.97	-0.28	0.00
I would consider getting involved with a group who supported causes similar to those of the protesters	5-pt Likert agreement	3.46	3.26	-0.20	0.10
On the following scale, how close are your beliefs to those of the protesters you just read about?	4-point closeness (Not at all close, not too close, somewhat close, very close)	2.91	2.82	-0.09	0.22
How likely would you be to take the following actions? Go to a protest like this one	0-100 probability slider	49.25	44.58	-4.67	0.11
How likely would you be to take the following actions? Post something positive about a protest like this on social media	0-100 probability slider	56.22	51.23	-4.99	0.11

Table A2: Outcome measures and differences-of-means from pilot study (adjusted p-values)

4 Descriptive Statistics: Prolific Sample

	All	Control	Militarized-Police	Treatment
Female	0.504	0.499		0.508
Asian	0.060	0.058		0.061
Black	0.122	0.120		0.124
Hispanic	0.041	0.043		0.038
White	0.740	0.735		0.746
Democrat	0.492	0.486		0.497
Republican	0.193	0.183		0.203
Independent	0.280	0.285		0.275
Under 18	0.001	0.001		0.000
18-29	0.236	0.237		0.236
30-39	0.206	0.203		0.209
40-49	0.169	0.172		0.166
50-59	0.173	0.164		0.183
60+	0.208	0.210		0.207

Table A3: Covariate Means, April 2022 Prolific Sample

5 Experimental Study: Ethical Considerations

This section describes how our experimental study adheres to APSA's Principles and Guidance for Human Subjects Research.

Voluntary and Informed Consent

Participants for our experimental study were recruited from Prolific, an Oxford University-based platform for opt-in survey research. Before the survey, we informed participants about the research study and asked for their voluntary and informed consent. We used the following text to inform participants about the research study and ask for consent: "I agree to participate in a research study conducted by researchers from REDACTED. In order to analyze responses to the questionnaire, my answers will be recorded. No identifying information about me will be made public and any views I express will be kept completely confidential. Findings from this study will be reported in scholarly journals, at academic seminars, and at research association meetings. The data will be stored in a secured location and retained indefinitely. My participation is voluntary. I am free to withdraw from the study at any time."

Compensation

Participants were compensated for our four minute survey in exchange for \$0.95 (a rate recommended by Prolific).

Impact

The experimental study did not directly intervene in political processes. However, it is possible that our treatments indirectly affected the political opinions or behaviors of participants by providing information about protests and/or policing. This possibility is unlikely because the treatments are similar to what individuals encounter in their daily lives. Moreover, the study was not done at a scale liable to alter electoral outcomes or inject false information into political processes. For these reasons, we deemed the risk of impacting political outcomes to be minimal.

6 Regression Tables for Main Estimates

Table A4 reports the estimated effects of militarized police on perceptions of protest violence. Table A5 presents the estimates for the outcomes about support for Black Lives Matter protests.

Table A6 reports the estimates effects of our militarized-police treatment on perceptions of protest violence, as in Table A4, but the different columns subset the sample by race. Table A7 similarly presents treatment effects by race for the outcomes about support for BLM protests. Then, Table A8 includes an interaction term testing for different treatment effects between Black respondents and the rest of the sample, for all outcomes shown in both Tables A6 and A7.

Table A4: Effect of Militarized Police on Violence Perception: Regressions

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Event Violent	Intentions Violent	Cause Trouble
Militarized Police	0.151*** (0.047)	0.214*** (0.040)	0.147*** (0.044)
Constant	1.832*** (0.033)	1.628*** (0.028)	1.792*** (0.031)
Observations	2,644	2,646	2,646

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A5: Effect of Militarized Police on BLM Support: Regressions

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Get Involved	Go Protest	Social Media	Support
Militarized Police	-0.016 (0.056)	-0.883 (1.361)	-0.605 (1.474)	-0.018 (0.052)
Constant	3.165*** (0.040)	36.927*** (0.973)	43.923*** (1.053)	3.839*** (0.037)
Observations	2,640	2,637	2,637	2,637

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A6: Effect of Militarized Police on Violence Perceptions by Race: Regressions

	Event Violent			Intentions Violent			Cause Trouble		
	Black (1)	White (2)	Other (3)	Black (4)	White (5)	Other (6)	Black (7)	White (8)	Other (9)
Militarized Police	-0.050 (0.120)	0.163*** (0.055)	0.272** (0.126)	-0.033 (0.080)	0.250*** (0.048)	0.247** (0.099)	-0.0003 (0.086)	0.191*** (0.052)	0.047 (0.116)
Constant	1.646*** (0.086)	1.888*** (0.039)	1.682*** (0.090)	1.354*** (0.057)	1.696*** (0.034)	1.497*** (0.071)	1.405*** (0.062)	1.864*** (0.037)	1.743*** (0.083)
N	326	1,972	346	326	1,973	347	326	1,973	347

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

Table A7: Effect of Militarized Police on Protester Support by Race: Regressions

	SupportProtest			GetInvolved			GoProtest			SocialMedia		
	Black	White	Other	Black	White	Other	Black	White	Other	Black	White	Other
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
Militarized Police	-0.069 (0.105)	-0.019 (0.062)	0.024 (0.130)	0.034 (0.138)	-0.015 (0.066)	-0.085 (0.149)	-2.345 (3.902)	0.104 (1.557)	-5.388 (3.711)	-1.729 (3.954)	-0.577 (1.691)	-0.131 (3.878)
Constant	4.414*** (0.076)	3.721*** (0.045)	3.976*** (0.093)	3.669*** (0.099)	3.046*** (0.047)	3.376*** (0.106)	48.541*** (2.805)	33.593*** (1.112)	45.154*** (2.647)	62.771*** (2.843)	39.793*** (1.208)	49.976*** (2.766)
N	325	1,968	344	325	1,970	345	325	1,968	344	325	1,968	344

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

Table A8: Effect of Militarized Police on Violence Perceptions and Protester Support: Black respondents compared to the rest of the sample

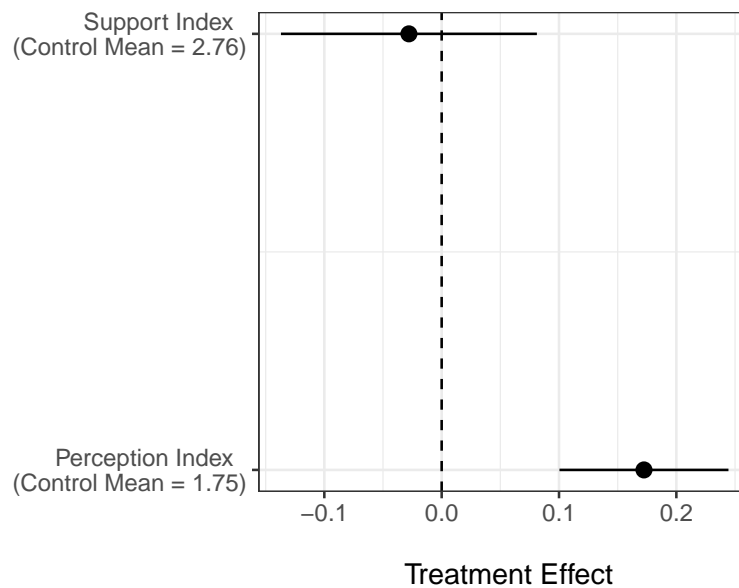
	EventViolent (1)	IntentionsViolent (2)	CauseTrouble (3)	SupportProtest (4)	GetInvolved (5)	GoProtest (6)	SocialMedia (7)
Militarized Police	0.180*** (0.050)	0.250*** (0.042)	0.170*** (0.046)	-0.013 (0.055)	-0.026 (0.060)	-0.720 (1.444)	-0.519 (1.549)
Black	-0.212** (0.102)	-0.312*** (0.086)	-0.440*** (0.094)	0.655*** (0.112)	0.574*** (0.122)	13.224*** (2.957)	21.459*** (3.170)
Militarized Police X Black	-0.230 (0.142)	-0.283** (0.119)	-0.170 (0.131)	-0.056 (0.156)	0.059 (0.170)	-1.625 (4.116)	-1.211 (4.413)
Constant	1.858*** (0.035)	1.666*** (0.030)	1.845*** (0.033)	3.759*** (0.039)	3.095*** (0.043)	35.318*** (1.031)	41.312*** (1.106)
N	2,644	2,646	2,646	2,637	2,640	2,637	2,637

*p < .1; ** p < .05; *** p < .01

7 Difference-in-Means for Index Variables

Figure A1 presents the estimated effects of militarized police on an index variable composed of our three perceptions of violence outcomes and an index variable composed of our four BLM support outcomes. To create this second index, we re-scaled respondents' willingness to "Go to a protest like this one" and "Post something positive about a protest like this on social media" from 1-100 to 1-5 scales so that all four survey items were scaled the same before combining. Consistent with the item-specific estimates shown in the main paper, we see that respondents shown the "militarized-police" treatment were more likely to view the protest as violent and appear to be less likely to support a protest of this sort (though this estimate is noisier and not statistically distinguishable from 0).

Figure A1: Effects of Militarized Police on Index Variables (Violence Perceptions and Support for BLM Protesters)



8 Pre-Analysis Plan as filed with EGAP at OSF

This is a blinded copy of the pre-analysis plan filed with EGAP prior to fielding the survey experimental study described in the paper. The original copy is available at: REDACTED

Pre-Analysis Plan: How Police Behavior Frames Protest



April 25, 2022

1. Study Design Overview

The objective of the study is to understand how police responses to Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests shape public perceptions of protest violence and public support for the BLM movement.

We use an online survey experiment to evaluate the effect of *police responses to BLM protests* (Explanatory variable) on *perceptions of protest violence* (Outcome 1) and *support for BLM* (Outcome 2). We conduct this experiment in the United States, where Black Lives Matter protests have been widespread, and police reactions varied.

2. Conditions

We present respondents with different versions of truthful news stories describing a BLM protest. First, participants read the following introductory text:

We're interested in your views on current events in the United States. First, please take a look at the information provided below about a real protest that occurred recently.

In the news stories, we randomly vary the police response to the protest. Some respondents see a news story accompanied only by a photograph of peaceful protestors (“no police” condition), while



others see the story with an additional photo illustrating a heavy police presence at the protest (“militarized police” condition). All other details remain the same. Below are the descriptions and photos used for each condition. The red text indicates the militarized police condition.

*Protesters rallied in front of City Hall on May 2 after a young man died in police custody, demanding action by city officials. Local organizers and members of the Black Lives Matter movement are asking that charges be brought against officers, since the man died of an injury suffered after his arrest. The crowds began to assemble around noon near the site of the man’s arrest, then marched to City Hall. **Police responded with a large deployment.***

Figure 1: No Police Condition



Note: The figure shows pictures used in the experiment’s “no police” condition

Figure 2: Militarized Police Condition



Note: The figure shows pictures used in the experiment’s “militarized police” condition

3. Outcomes

Our two outcomes of interest are (1) perceptions of protest violence and (2) public support for the Black Lives Matter movement. We measure these outcomes and close with a brief free-text response that asks for respondents' thoughts about the protest. This section describes the measurement of the two outcomes and the covariates.

Outcome 1. We measure perceptions of protest violence with three measures. First, we ask respondents to read the following introductory text:

Next, we would like to ask your opinion of the protest you just read about. For each statement below, please indicate whether you agree or disagree with it.

Then, we ask respondents to indicate whether they “strongly agree,” “somewhat agree,” “neither agree nor disagree,” “somewhat disagree,” or “strongly disagree” with the following three statements: (1) “The event in question was violent,” (2) “The protesters had violent intentions,” and (3) “These protesters were out to cause trouble.” These questions create three five-point outcome measures of protest violence.

Outcome 2. We measure public support for Black Lives Matter with four measures. First, we ask respondents to indicate whether they “strongly agree,” “somewhat agree,” “neither agree nor disagree,” “somewhat disagree,” or “strongly disagree” with the following statement: “I would consider getting involved with a group who supported causes similar to those of the protesters.” Second and third, we ask respondents to indicate their willingness to “Go to a protest like this one” and to “Post something positive about a protest like this on social media” on a scale of 1–100, where 0 means that a respondent would “absolutely not take that action” and 100 means that a respondent would “definitely take that action.” Fourth, we ask respondents whether they “strongly agree,” “somewhat agree,” “neither agree nor disagree,” “somewhat disagree,” or “strongly disagree” with the following statement: “I support these protestors.”

Covariates. We collect a set of demographic covariates on gender, race, age, and political affiliation. We also include an attention check after the demographic questions, and a manipulation check after the treatment.

4. Hypotheses

We specify our two main hypotheses as follows:

H1: Protests met with a militarized police response are more likely to be perceived as violent than identical protests without a militarized police response.

H2: Protests met with a militarized police response are more likely to reduce public support for the social movement than identical protests without a militarized police response.

5. Estimation Procedure

First, we use a difference in means to test both hypotheses. We take the expected difference in perceptions of protest violence (Outcome 1) and public support for Black Lives Matter (Outcome 2) between respondents who received the “militarized police” and “no police” conditions.

Second, we use OLS to regress (1) perceptions of protest violence and (2) public support for the movement on a treatment indicator for the militarized police condition. The linear regression estimations take the form of:

$$Outcome_i = \alpha_1 + \beta_1 Police_i + \delta_1 X_i + \epsilon_i$$

where $Outcome_i$ is the perception of protest violence or support for BLM by respondent i , $Treatment_i$ is the assignment status for the “militarized police” or “no police” condition for respondent i , and X_i is a vector of pre-treatment individual characteristics. For both hypotheses,

the estimand is β_1 : the average treatment effect (ATE). The baseline are respondents assigned to the “no police” condition.

For the first set of regressions (i.e., those that pertain to Outcome 1), the data will provide support for Hypothesis 1 if β_1 is greater than zero at a conventional threshold for statistical significance ($\alpha = 0.05$). We expect the respondents in the “militarized police” condition to perceive the protest as more violent than the control group. For the set of regressions that pertain to Outcome 2, the data will provide support for Hypothesis 2 if β_1 is less than zero at a conventional threshold for statistical significance ($\alpha = 0.05$). We expect respondents in the “militarized police” condition to view BLM less favorably than the control group. We use two-tailed tests for both sets of regressions ($H_1 = H_0$).

We estimate separate regressions for each outcome measure (i.e., separate regressions for the three measures of perceptions of protest violence, and for the four measures of support for BLM). We will also estimate regressions with indices for perceptions of protest violence (Outcome 1), and for support for BLM (Outcome 2). To correct for multiple testing, we will control the false discovery rate using the approach described in Benjamini and Hochberg (1995).

6. Sample

We aim to recruit 2,500 respondents via Prolific, an Oxford University-based platform for opt-in survey research. When participants agree to take the survey, they will be directed toward the external Qualtrics website where our survey is hosted. Participants will receive monetary compensation when they complete the survey and return to Prolific.

The main analysis will include all respondents except those who drop out before the treatment. We will also report robustness tests limiting the analyses to those respondents who pass the attention check.

7. Power Analysis

We conduct power calculations using results from a pilot survey. This survey was administered to 772 respondents in 2019 on Mechanical Turk. The pilot survey used the conditions described in Section 2.

We base the power calculations on two outcomes from the pilot survey. First, we use the question asking respondents to agree or disagree with the statement, “The protesters had violent intentions,” on a 5-point scale from “Strongly agree” to “Strongly disagree.” This outcome is one of our proposed questions for perceptions of protest violence (Outcome 1). Second, we use the question that asked, “How likely would you be to go to a protest like this one?” on a scale from 0 (“absolutely not”) to 100 (“definitely”). This outcome is one of our proposed questions for support for BLM (Outcome 2).

Figures 3 and 4 report the power calculations for different sample sizes, based on the treatment effects and standard deviations of the dependent variables from the pilot. The red line indicates the conventional target power level (0.8). Figure 3 shows that a sample of ~420 is powered to detect effects for the first dependent variable (“The protesters had violent intentions”). Figure 4 shows that a sample of ~1700 is powered to detect effects for the second dependent variable (“How likely would you be to go to a protest like this one?”).

Figure 3: Power Calculations for Outcome 1

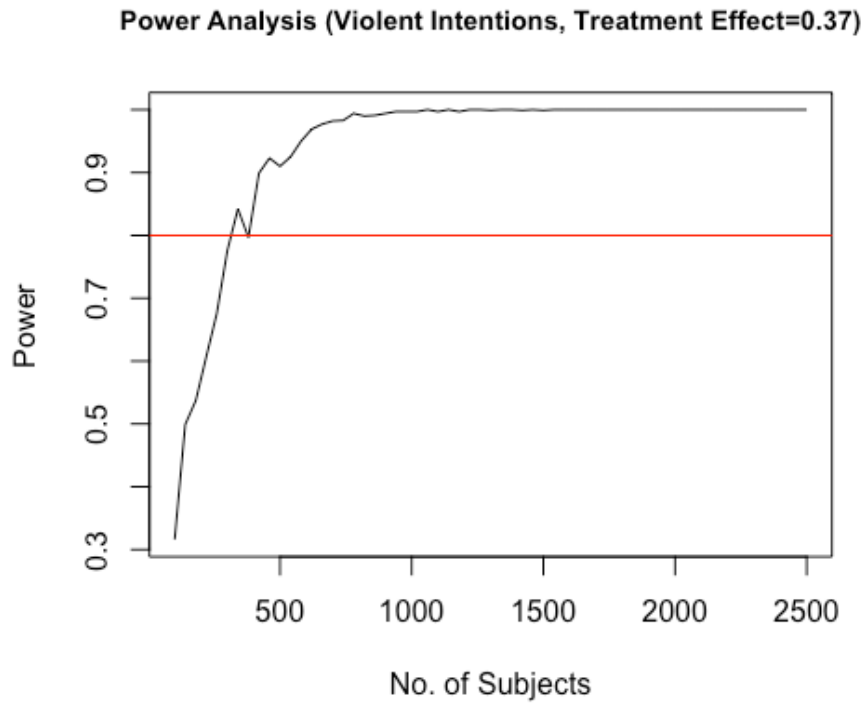


Figure 4: Power Calculations for Outcome 2

