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Ferguson's Long Term Impact on Public Views about Police: Evidence Points to Some Recovery of Confidence and Trust among African American Residents

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Following the police shooting of Michael Brown last August and the civil unrest that followed in and around Ferguson, MO, interviews with residents of St Louis County (the County in which Ferguson is located) in September and October, 2014 revealed that residents of high crime, disadvantaged areas of the County perceived that aggressive policing tactics were more frequent and trust in police and procedural justice declined relative to interviews conducted with the same residents prior to August 2014. See Kochel (2015) (available online) for a full report.

Examining the effects by race (African American versus Nonblack residents) revealed that views differed drastically by race, with African American residents' opinions becoming considerably more negative, while Nonblack residents held fairly stable views. Specifically, three waves of interviews in the two years preceding the events compared to the time immediately following revealed an approximately 20% increase among African Americans regarding the frequency they saw aggressive policing tactics (stopping people without good reason, using insulting language, using excessive force), a 25% decline in trust and a sense of procedural justice in police (that police are fair, respectful, explain their actions, listen to people, and try to help citizens solve problems), and just under 10% decline in perceptions about the legitimacy of police authority and perceived police effectiveness. Among Nonblack residents, none of these comparisons pre- and post- the shooting and unrest were statistically significant. In other words, no dramatic changes in views about police legitimacy, trust and procedural justice, police effectiveness, or the use of aggressive tactics were found among Nonblack residents following the shooting and unrest.

Now that nearly a year has passed, the grand jury verdict not to indict Officer Wilson of the Ferguson Police Department has been determined, information about the incident has been shared with the public, other events involving police have transpired across the country, and local police made adjustments to their approach to protests, we have reassessed St Louis County residents' views, re-interviewing over 230 residents in May, June and July 2015. Analyses including *all* residents that we have interviewed between 2012 and 2015 revealed that overall, views about legitimacy, procedural justice and trust in police, and police effectiveness significantly improved in recent months relative to last fall, while overall, perceptions of aggressive policing tactics declined.

However, once again, trends differ by race. Examining the effects by race shows the greatest improvements among African Americans, whose opinions were most dramatically affected by the events in Ferguson last fall. Table 1 below provides the scores (1-100) for the average African American and Nonblack respondents in the sample prior to the shooting, immediately following the shooting, and now in the long term, nearly a year following the shooting. Since last fall, among African American residents, police legitimacy increased by nearly ten percent, and trust and perceptions about procedural justice improved by 17% among African American residents. Views among Nonblack residents are once again more stable than African American residents, shifting only a few percentage points since last fall. Graphs of the trends for the average African American and Nonblack resident in the sample are provided across all five time-points for each of five outcomes (police legitimacy, trust and procedural justice, perceived effectiveness, aggressive policing tactics, willingness to cooperate with police) in figures 1 through 5 below. Particularly evident are the detrimental effects on police legitimacy, trust and procedural justice, and aggressive policing experienced by African Americans last fall, and the recent rebound of these views among that same population.

This is important to the safety and wellbeing of the communities where these residents live. In democratic contexts like the U.S., police rely on citizens' voluntary cooperation with police and the law that derives from a sense of legitimacy and trust in police. This sense of trust and legitimacy of police authority should also promote the limited use of force in police efforts to create and maintain order. Additionally, numbers of effective, evidenced-based crime control strategies rely on police-community collaboration, underscoring the importance of a populous that views police authority as valid, fair, and using the appropriate amount of force—one with whom they can work for a shared goal of community safety.

As the results indicate, views about police among African American residents still tend to be lower than their Nonblack neighbors, however, the recovering findings are promising. In fact, these findings are revolutionary in that few past research studies have been able to scientifically examine and document how individuals' views are impacted by critical incidents such as that which followed from the police shooting of Michael Brown. Among past research that has been able to examine the impact of high profile, critical incidents on public opinions of police (such as Lasley (1994) following the Rodney King beating incident and Kaminski and Jefferis (1998) following the forceful televised arrest of a black male, Pharon Crosby, in Cincinnati) none have been able to follow-up with the same respondents in such a timely way as to assess both the immediate and long term impact on such a variety of specific and important outcomes.

Table 1.

Public Opinion	African American Residents					Nonblack Residents				
	Average Percent Prior to Shooting	Average Percent Sept-Oct 2014	Short Term Percent Change	Average Percent May-Jul 2015	Long Term Percent Change	Average Percent Prior to Shooting	Average Percent Following Shooting	Short Term Percent Change	Average Percent May-Jul 2015	Long Term Percent Change
Police Legitimacy	68.3 ^c	61.6 ^c	-9.8 ^a	67.5	+9.6 ^b	73.6	72.7	-1.2	73.6	+1.2
Trust & Procedural Justice	62.6 ^c	46.8 ^c	-25.2 ^a	54.9 ^c	+17.3 ^b	66.9	67.1	+0.3	61.8	-7.9 ^b
Effectiveness	74.2	67.4 ^c	-9.2 ^a	67.6 ^c	+0.3	71.2	73.3	+2.9	70.0	-4.5
Aggressive Policing	51.1 ^c	60.7 ^c	+18.8 ^a	57.4	-5.4 ^b	39.5	41.9	+6.1	46.0	+9.8
Willingness to Cooperate	84.0 ^c	88.1 ^c	+4.9 ^a	85.8	-3.0 ^b	88.5	92.8	+4.9 ^a	87.1	-6.1 ^b

NOTE: ^a Refers to a significant difference ($\alpha=.05$) *within race* in the scores prior to versus immediately after the shooting event.

^b Refers to a significant difference ($\alpha=.05$) *within race* in the scores in the long term versus immediately following the shooting.

^c Refers to a significant difference ($\alpha=.05$) in scores between African American and nonblack residents at that time point (prior, immediately after the shooting or long term)

n=2208 St Louis County residents interviewed 1-5 times 2012-2015

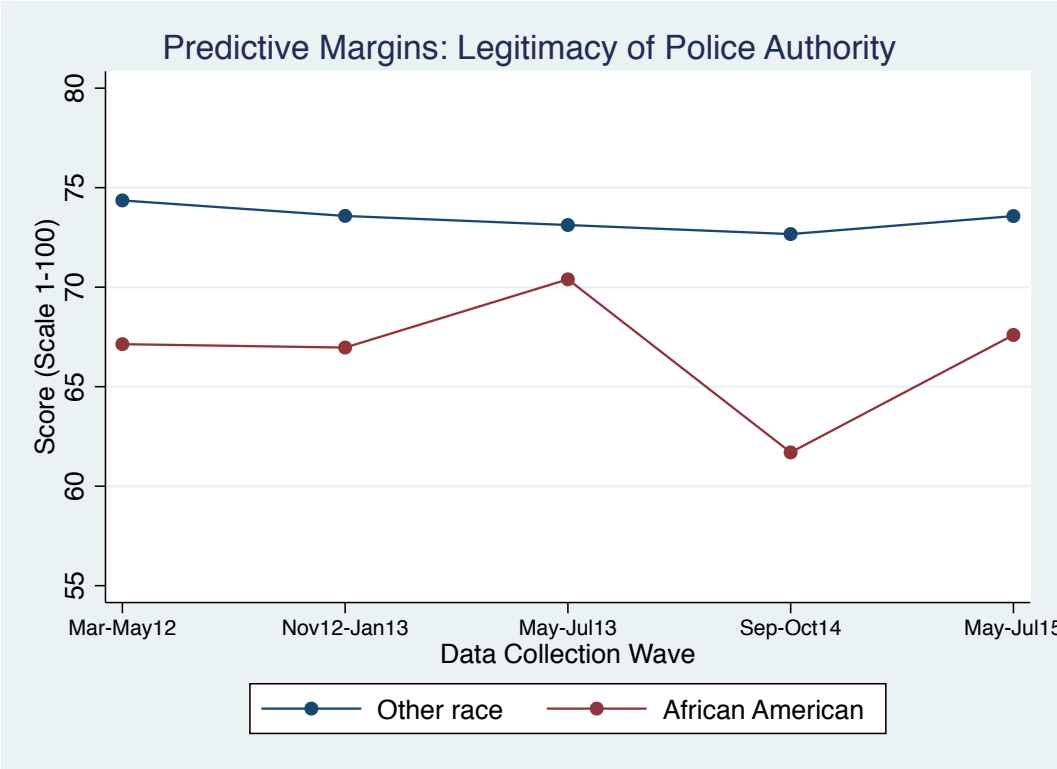


Figure 1. Perceptions of Police Legitimacy By Race

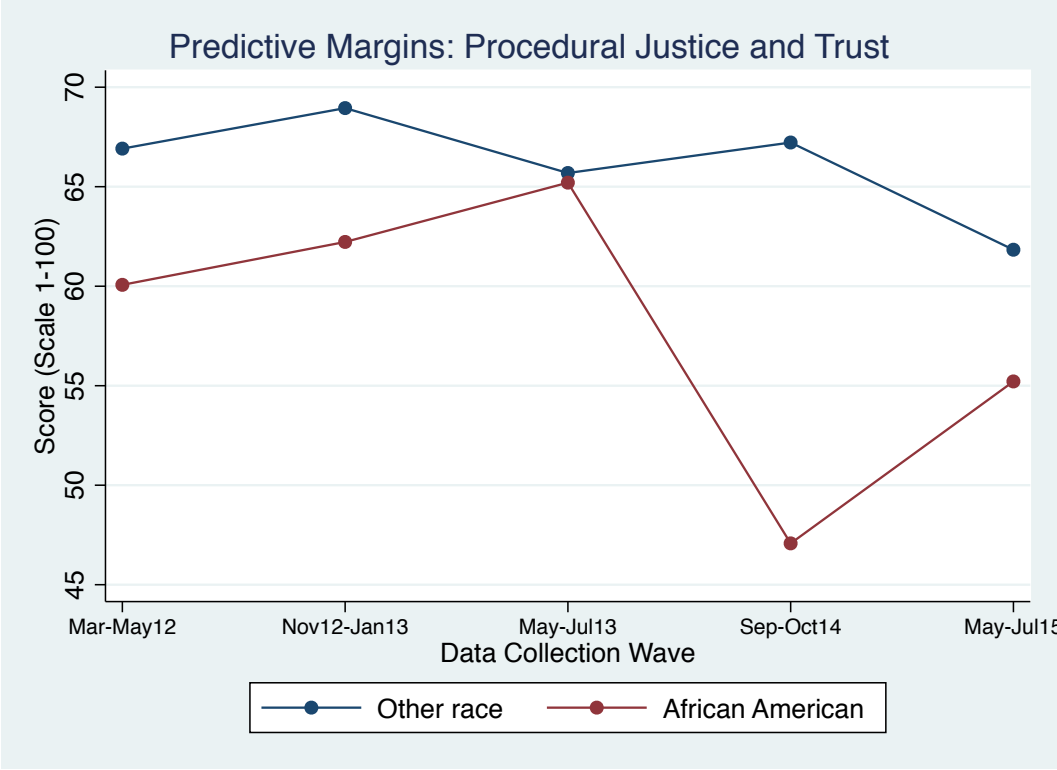


Figure 2. Trust and Perceptions of Procedural Justice by Race

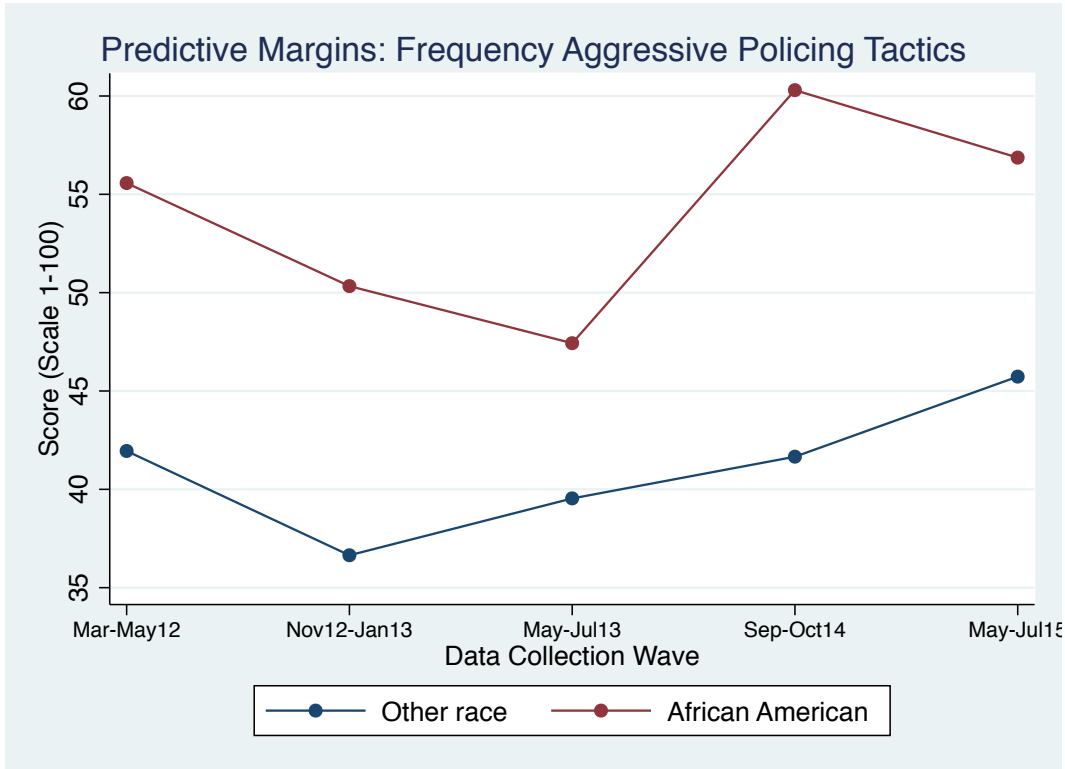


Figure 3. Perceived Frequency of Aggressive Police Tactics by Race

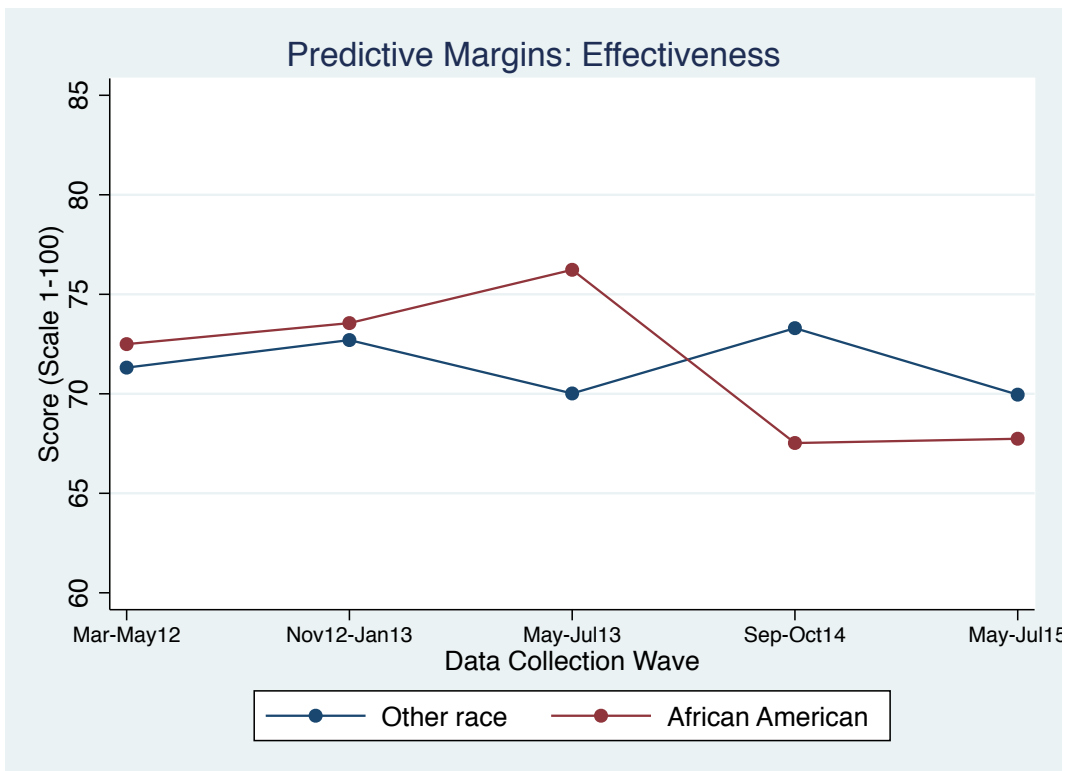


Figure 4. Perceive Police Effectiveness by Race

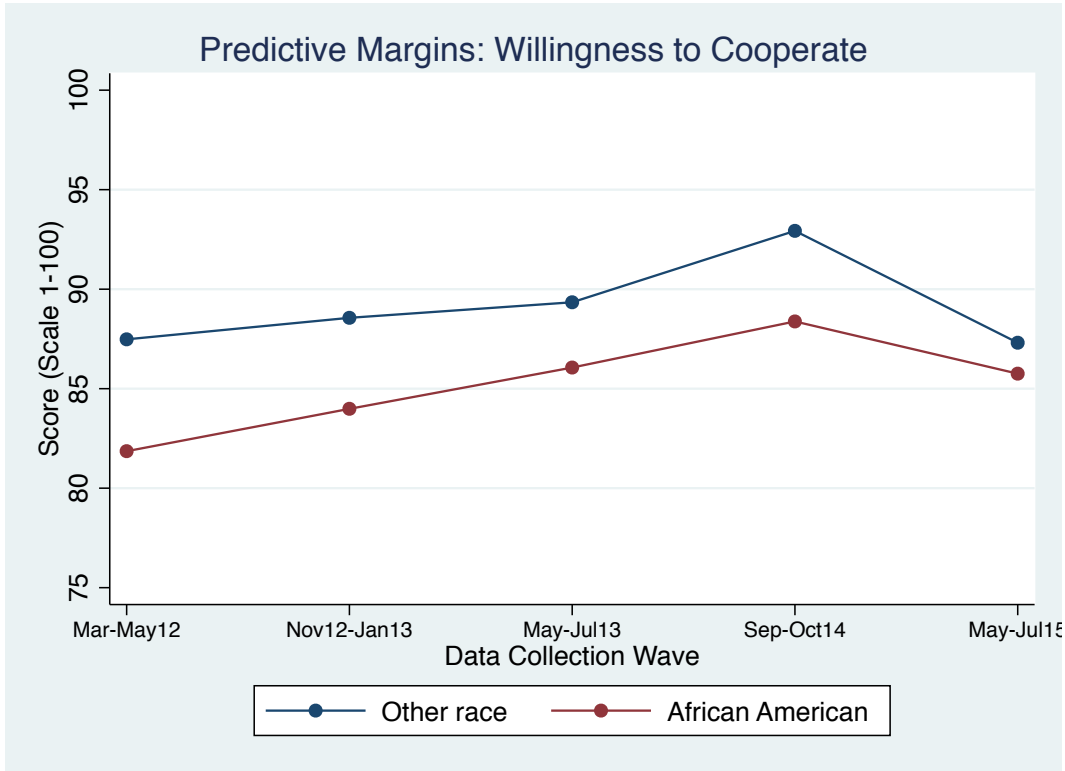


Figure 5. Residents' Willingness to Cooperate with Police by Race

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