

Abstract

Exploring the Role of Skin Tone in the Risk of Being Killed by Police among Black Americans

Police-involved deaths—or, civilian homicides that occur through contact with law enforcement—organize mortality in the United States. Police are estimated to kill approximately three men per day; to be responsible for about 8% of all homicides with adult male victims; and be the sixth leading cause of death among young men. Prior research has shown that stark racial disparities exist in the risk of experiencing police-involved mortality, with people of color being at significantly higher risk than their white peers. Despite this informative work, our understanding of how race(-ism) influences who is at risk of dying in contact with law enforcement is incomplete. Indeed, prior research has shown that skin tone shapes how individuals are interpreted and processed by law enforcement, with darker skin toned individuals often experiencing more/more punitive criminal justice outcomes than their same race, lighter-toned peers—yet this insight has yet to be incorporated into research on inequalities in police-involved deaths. This presentation will describe a new data collection project utilizing images of victims from novel data on police-involved deaths (Fatal Encounters) to examine if and how one’s risk of being killed by law enforcement varies by skin-tone within African American populations in the U.S.

Hedwig Lee, Washington University in St. Louis

Ellis P. Monk, Jr., Harvard University

Michael Esposito, Washington University in St. Louis

Frank Edwards, Rutgers University