



Incidents of police misconduct and public opinion

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Abstract

Highly publicized incidents of police misconduct have adverse effects not only on the victims of abuse but also on public perceptions of the police departments implicated in the incident. Yet the magnitude and longevity of such effects have rarely been investigated. This article examines the impact of several celebrated incidents of perceived police misconduct in Los Angeles and New York City over a fairly lengthy time span, including the most recent scandal involving the Rampart Division of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) and the killings of Amadou Diallo and Patrick Dorismond in New York City. The analysis tracks public attitudes toward the police before and after each incident, and examines similarities and differences in the opinions of Whites, African Americans, and Hispanics. The often dramatic increase in unfavorable attitudes toward the police in the wake of highly publicized events suggests that such incidents have a pronounced effect on public opinion. Policy implications are discussed, drawing on citizens' attitudes toward measures that might prevent or reduce the frequency of future incidents of misconduct.

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Introduction

The scholarly literature identifies a number of predictors of citizens' attitudes toward the police. Opinions of the police are shaped by citizens' age, race, class, personal experiences with officers, and type of neighborhood in which the citizen resided. Young people generally register more disapproval than older age groups (Greenfeld, Langan, Smith, & Kaminski, 1997; Leiber, Nalla, & Farnworth, 1998). Blacks and Hispanics are more inclined than Whites to hold negative views of the police (Flanagan & Vaughn, 1996; Smith, Graham, & Adams, 1991). Social class has been identified as a predictor of attitudes in several studies (Hagan & Albonetti, 1982; Henderson, Cullen, Cao, Browning, & Kopache, 1997; Sampson & Bartusch, 1998; Weitzer & Tuch, 1999). Personal experiences with officers tend

to affect attitudes toward the police (Dean, 1980; Scaglione & Condon, 1980; Smith & Hawkins, 1973; Walker, Richardson, Williams, Denyer, & McGaughey, 1972). Finally, neighborhood context seems to shape residents' attitudes and reported experiences with the police; people residing in disadvantaged neighborhoods tend to report more negative personal experiences, observations, and opinions of the police than do residents of middle-class neighborhoods (Apple & O'Brien, 1983; Sampson & Bartusch, 1998; Weitzer, 1999, 2000a).

One factor that has received little attention is the impact on attitudes of highly publicized incidents of police misconduct. Actions that attract media coverage can dramatically shake citizens' confidence in the police, and even a single high-profile event can seriously tarnish the image of a police department. Some previous research has examined the effects on public opinion of incidents of police use of perceived excessive force, finding that such incidents were followed by significant erosion in citizen satisfaction with the police (Jefferis, Kaminski, Holmes, & Han-

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ley, 1997; Kaminski & Jefferis, 1998; Lasley, 1994; Sigelman, Welch, Bledsoe, & Combs, 1997; Tuch & Weitzer, 1997). Most of these studies covered a fairly short time period; the present research built on this literature by tracking the impact of incidents over a longer time period in New York and Los Angeles. The two cities were selected because they had been the sites of several high-profile incidents of police misconduct and because longitudinal opinion data existed for each city.

The article draws on polls conducted by the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times*, taken before and after major incidents of apparent police misconduct in each city. All polls were representative telephone surveys of city residents, including a substantial number of African Americans and Hispanics (see Appendix A). The analysis focused on percentage responses to questionnaire items, data sufficient to track overall trends and racial differences in citizens' attitudes.

Attitudes were examined on three items in Los Angeles and three items in New York City. In the Los Angeles polls, the questions were as follows:

- “Generally speaking, do you approve or disapprove of the way the Los Angeles Police Department is handling its job—or haven’t you heard enough about it to say?”
- “Do you think incidents of police brutality involving the Los Angeles Police Department are very common, fairly common, fairly uncommon, or very uncommon?”
- “How common do you think racist feelings are among Los Angeles city police officers—very common, fairly common, fairly uncommon, or very uncommon?” (“racist sentiment or behavior” in the April 2000 poll).

In New York City the questions were as follows:

- “How would you rate the job the police in New York City are doing—excellent, good, fair, or poor?”
- “The police in New York City are sometimes accused of brutality. Do you think that most of the time they are using excessive force or are they using necessary force in a dangerous situation?”
- “Do you think that New York City police often engage in brutality against Blacks, or don’t they?”

Some of the polls included questions on specific reforms that might help to prevent future incidents. These results are analyzed in the final section of the article.

Los Angeles

The impact of celebrated incidents on attitudes toward the police can be tracked at four time points in the Los Angeles area:

- the 1979 fatal shooting of a Black woman, Eulia Love, after she allegedly threatened two officers with a knife;
- the 1991 videotaped beating of Rodney King;
- the 1996 videotaped beatings of Alicia Sotero Vasquez and Enrique Funes Flores, after an eighty-mile high-speed freeway car chase;
- the scandal involving the police department’s Rampart Division, involving a wide range of serious abuses of police power, which came to light in late 1999 and early 2000.

The vast majority of the Los Angeles population reported that they had heard about these incidents: between 85 and 95 percent of Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics had heard about the Love killing; between 84 and 93 percent had seen the King videotape within five days of its first broadcast; and between 61 and 92 percent said they had followed “closely” the news regarding the Rampart scandal.¹

After each incident, satisfaction with the Los Angeles Police Department’s (LAPD) job performance eroded substantially for Whites, Hispanics, and African Americans in Los Angeles (see Fig. 1). Of the four incidents, Rodney King had the most dramatic impact on public opinion, reflected in a huge drop in approval ratings of the LAPD. African American approval of the department dropped fully fifty percentage points between the 1988 poll and the March 20–21, 1991 poll, fielded a few weeks after the beating (from 64 to 14 percent); Hispanic approval dropped forty-nine percentage points and White approval dropped forty-three percentage points over the same period. Approval of the LAPD remained highest for Whites; attitudinal differences for the three racial groups (in the March 20–21, 1991 poll) were statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 35.6$, $df = 2$, $P < .001$).

One intriguing finding in the Los Angeles data was the tendency for approval ratings to eventually recover to roughly their preincident levels.² Approval of the LAPD dropped between 1977 and April 1979, after Eulia Love was killed, but rebounded by the time of the next survey, in 1988, to levels that were equal to or better than the 1977 ratings for Blacks, Hispanics, and Whites. Similarly, approval of the LAPD among Blacks rose from 14 percent after the Rodney King incident in 1991 to 61 percent in 1994, and among Hispanics from 31 to 61 percent. This striking resurgence of public approval three years

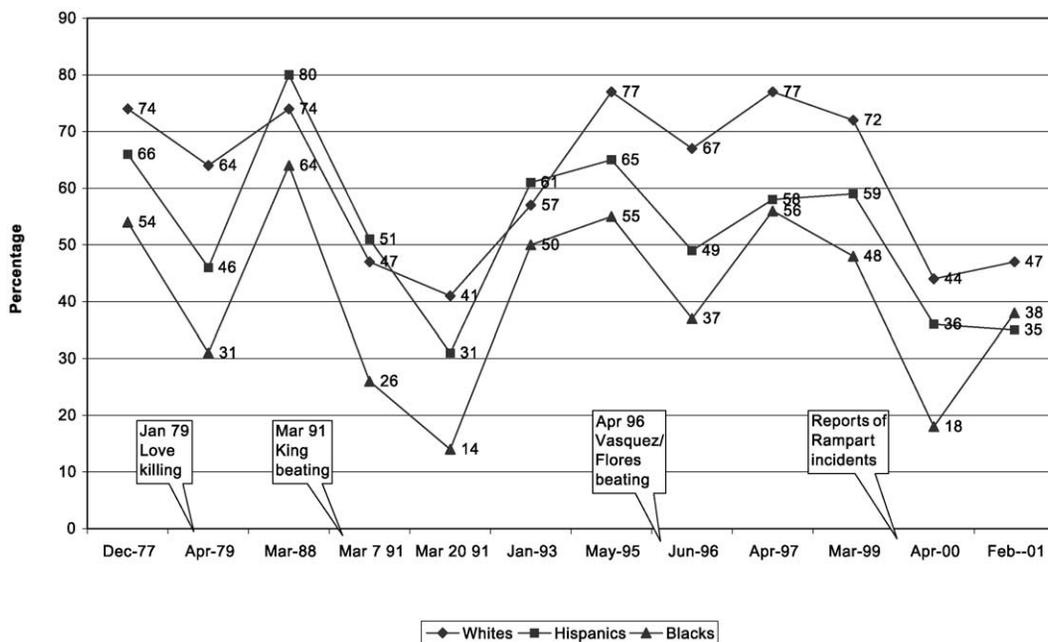


Fig. 1. Respondents approving of LAPD's job performance.

after the incident might reflect a simple fading of memories or the statistical rule of “regression to the mean”—a well-established pattern in the relationship between events and public opinion. It might also have been influenced by certain reforms in the LAPD (such as the hiring of more minority officers since 1991), by changes that produced somewhat greater accountability of the police department to the Board of Police Commissioners (the LAPD's civilian oversight body), and by the appointment in 1992 of an African American police chief (Willie Williams) who actively pursued improved police–community relations. While the impact of the reforms should not be exaggerated, they likely had at least some positive influence on citizen evaluations of the LAPD, in conjunction with the abovementioned attrition over time of memories of the King beating. Attitudinal data existed regarding the appointment of Willie Williams as chief of police to succeed the controversial and widely disliked Daryl Gates. Polls in 1995 and 1997 found that two-thirds of Los Angeles residents approved of the way Chief Williams was doing his job and the 1997 poll found that a substantial majority credited him with helping to improve the LAPD—the opinion of 58 percent of Whites, 80 percent of Blacks, and 70 percent of Hispanics.³ Williams' controversial predecessor, Daryl Gates, had a much lower job approval rating (33 percent) at the time of the Rodney King beating in March 1991. Moreover, a majority of Los Angeles residents

felt that Gates should get “most” or “a good amount” of the blame for the Rodney King incident; this was the view of 50 percent of Whites, 70 percent of Blacks, and 67 percent of Hispanics in the March 20–21, 1991 *Los Angeles Times* poll. Williams was replaced as chief of police in 1997 with another African American, Bernard Parks.

Of course, growing confidence in a police department may be shattered by new events. Approval ratings of the LAPD dropped again after the videotaped beating in April 1996 of two Mexican immigrants, Alicia Sotero Vasquez and Enrique Funes Flores, after a long, high-speed chase by deputies from the Riverside County Sheriff's Department. The videotape was broadcast locally and nationally, and the incident sparked protests in Los Angeles and complaints from the Mexican government over police brutality against immigrants in America. In this case, the LAPD appeared to have been tarnished by the actions of officers from a nearby agency: Fig. 1 shows that approval of the LAPD dropped significantly in the aftermath of the beating. Between May 1995 and June 1996, the change in approval ratings was statistically significant for all three groups (Blacks, $\chi^2=18.09$, $df=2$, $P<.001$; Hispanics, $\chi^2=38.01$, $df=2$, $P<.001$; Whites, $\chi^2=24.5$, $df=2$, $P<.001$). The vast majority of Whites, however, continued to express satisfaction with the LAPD, in contrast to Hispanics and African Americans ($\chi^2=48.99$, $df=2$, $P<.001$).

The most recent scandal involving the LAPD centered on the department’s Rampart Division. Officers working in Rampart had been accused of framing suspects, falsifying police reports, giving false testimony in court, stealing drugs, and shooting unarmed suspects without cause. Thus far, seventy officers have been implicated in these crimes, forty have been disciplined for actions in connection with the scandal, and five have been fired. Two hundred lawsuits have been filed against the city by persons who claimed that they were victims of police abuse, and over one hundred tainted criminal convictions have been overturned (Lait & Glover, 2000). Moreover, the Justice Department and the Los Angeles City Council recently entered into a consent decree to ensure implementation of reforms in the LAPD.

Almost universally in Los Angeles it was believed that the Rampart scandal had “damaged the reputation” of the LAPD: 93 percent of Whites, 87 percent of Blacks, and 90 percent of Hispanics subscribed to this view in an April 2000 *Los Angeles Times* poll. A substantial number also believed that the misconduct of Rampart officers was not confined to a few rotten apples, as the mayor and police chief had claimed. Only 14 percent of Blacks and 24 percent of Hispanics believed that the events were “isolated incidents and not representative of the Los Angeles Police Department as a whole,” while 55 percent of Whites took this view. A majority of Blacks and Hispanics instead believed that these events were “symptomatic of a

larger problem within the police department”—the view of 79 percent of Blacks, 52 percent of Hispanics, and 42 percent of Whites.

The revelations had a profound impact on popular assessments of the police department. Approval of the LAPD’s job performance dropped between March 1999 and April 2000 fully twenty-three percentage points among Hispanics, twenty-eight percentage points among Whites, and thirty percentage points among Blacks. For Blacks, the decrease in approval from 48 to 18 percent approximated the record erosion of confidence in the LAPD after the Rodney King beating (Fig. 1). Almost a year later, in late February 2001, there had been little change in White and Hispanic ratings of the LAPD’s job performance, while African American approval increased from 18 to 38 percent (Fig. 1).

Data on the two other survey questions in Los Angeles—police brutality and police racism—covered a shorter time span than for the job-performance question. After the Rodney King beating, a growing number of Blacks and Hispanics saw police brutality as common in Los Angeles (see the March 7 and March 20–21 polls, Fig. 2). The Vasquez/Flores beating was followed by an increase in Hispanic perceptions of *police brutality* in Los Angeles, but did not influence White or African American attitudes on this item (Fig. 2). Fig. 3 shows that this incident did not adversely affect the opinions of the three racial groups with regard to the scope of *police racism* in the

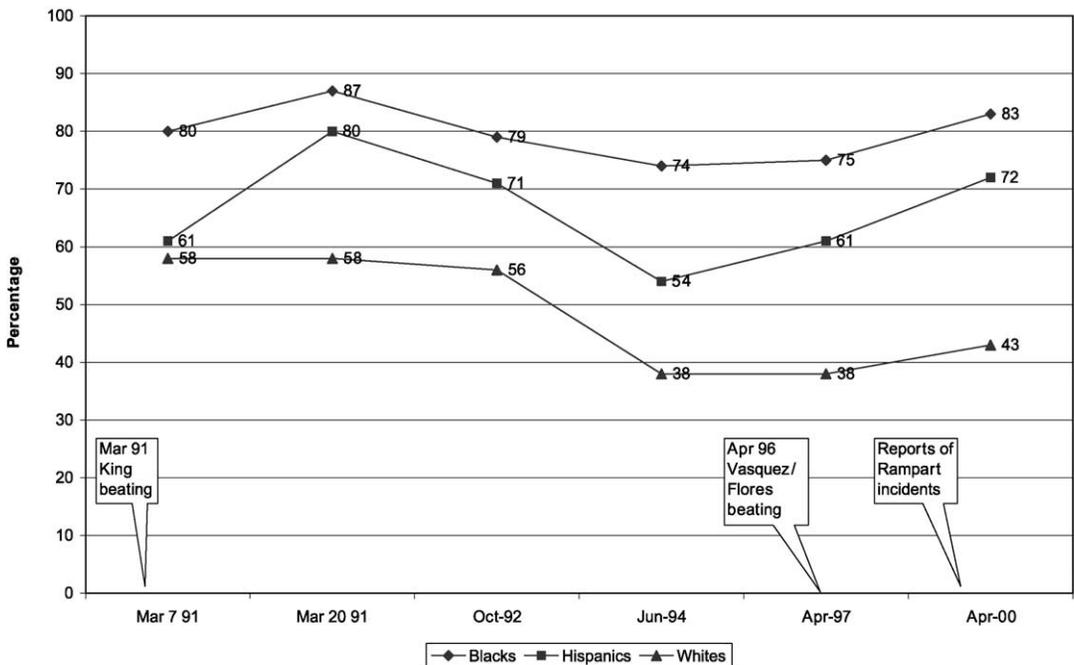


Fig. 2. Respondents agreeing that police brutality by the LAPD is common.

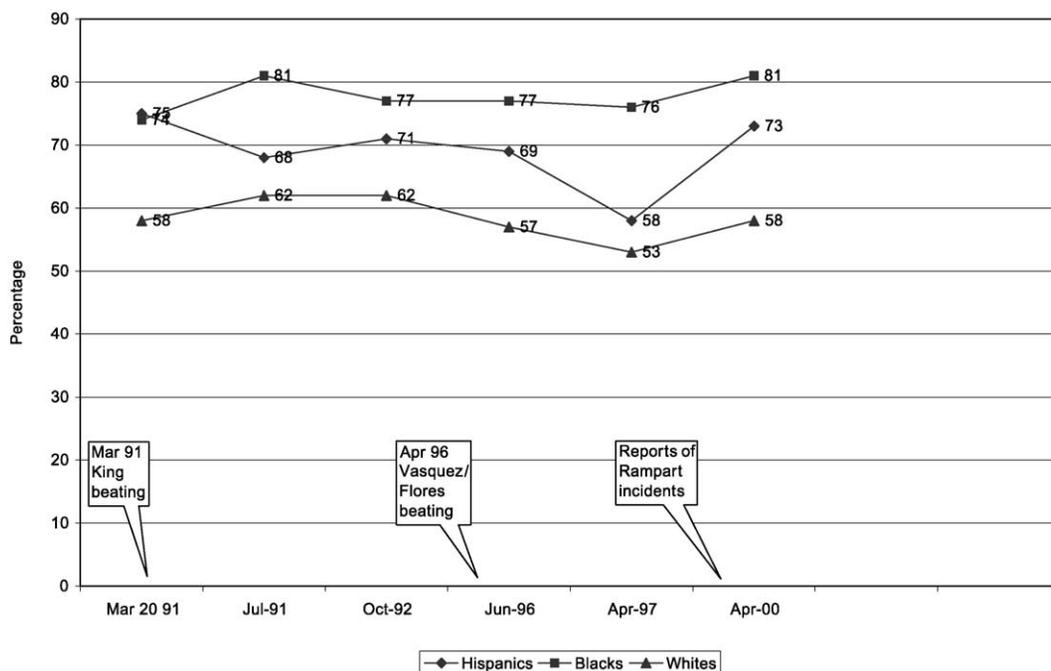


Fig. 3. Respondents agreeing that racism is common in LAPD.

LAPD. This might be a function of the location of the incident—in Riverside County rather than Los Angeles—though the incident did appear to influence general impressions of the LAPD, as documented in Fig. 1.

The recent Rampart scandal appeared to have influenced views about the scope of both police brutality and police racism in Los Angeles. Between April 1997 and April 2000, a growing number of Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics considered police brutality and racism common in the LAPD (Figs. 2 and 3). Again, Blacks were more likely than the other two groups to see brutality and racism as common, but disapproval levels rose most dramatically among Hispanics, probably because much of the alleged misconduct occurred in Hispanic neighborhoods served by the LAPD's Rampart Division. The fact that many of the incidents occurred in Hispanic areas might also explain why Hispanic ratings of the LAPD's job performance did not recover between April 2000 and February 2001, whereas ratings improved slightly for Whites and substantially for Blacks during this time period (Fig. 1).

New York

Citizens' evaluations of the job performance of police officers in the New York Police Department

(NYPD) could be tracked beginning in June 1994, one month before the release of the Mollen Commission's report on police misconduct in the city. The commission was appointed by Mayor David Dinkins in 1992 to investigate allegations of serious police abuses in certain precincts, including brutality against suspects, stealing money and drugs from drug dealers, selling drugs, and a variety of other crimes. Public hearings in the summer and fall of 1993 and frequent media coverage of the ongoing investigation in 1994 preceded the release of the commission's highly critical report in July 1994 (Commission, 1994). This scandal likely explained why the "poor" rating (the lowest rating out of four options) given to the NYPD in June 1994 was higher for Blacks and Hispanics than in the next poll in March 1997 (Fig. 4).

Erosion of popular support for the police was also evident in the wake of three tragic events involving Black immigrants in New York City:

- In August 1997, Abner Louima was arrested during a street disturbance and then beaten and sodomized with a stick by an officer in the 70th Precinct station house. His injuries resulted in three months of hospitalization.
- In February 1999, Amadou Diallo was shot and killed by four police officers who fired a total of forty-one bullets, nineteen of which hit him. The

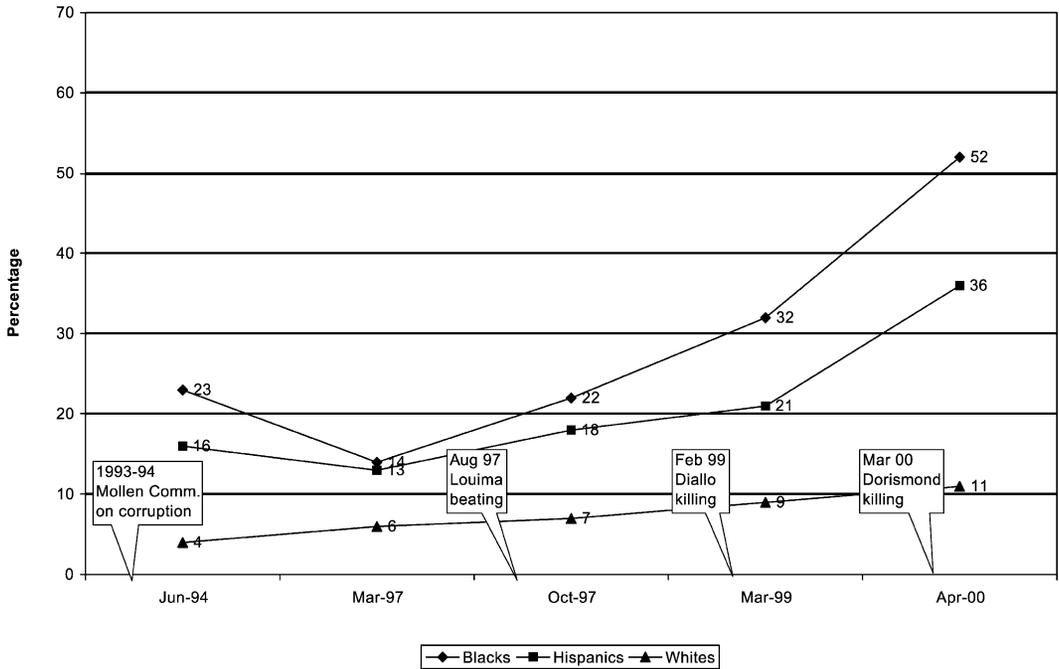


Fig. 4. Respondents agreeing that New York City police are doing a poor job.

officers involved claimed that Diallo appeared to be reaching for a gun, which was actually his wallet.

- In March 2000, Patrick Dorismond was shot and killed after a scuffle with an undercover narcotics officer. Dorismond had been approached by the officer who tried to buy drugs from him. Dorismond angrily refused, and during the ensuing altercation one of the backup officers, a Hispanic, shot Dorismond, who was unarmed.

Each incident received heavy media coverage in New York, and the Louima and Diallo incidents also attracted considerable national media attention. One month after the Diallo incident, the vast majority of New Yorkers reported that they had been following the case “closely”: 69 percent of Whites, 79 percent of Blacks, and 68 percent of Hispanics. Data were not available on popular awareness of the Louima and Dorismond events, but the intensive media reporting on these events likely generated similarly high levels of familiarity among New Yorkers.

The 1997 Louima beating prompted street protests, the transfer of two precinct commanders, a federal civil rights investigation, and arrests of four officers, two of whom were later convicted and sentenced to lengthy prison terms. Public confid-

ence in the police was shaken by this event, as indicated by the increasing percentage of people who rated the job performance of the police in New York “poor” between March and October 1997, two months after the incident. “Poor” ratings rose from 14 to 22 percent among African Americans and from 13 to 18 percent among Hispanics, while the number rating the NYPD “excellent” or “good” fell from 45 percent in March to 30 percent in October among Blacks and from 47 to 40 percent among Hispanics. White opinion was not affected.

The 1999 killing of Diallo created a similar furor, including daily demonstrations at police headquarters, a shakeup of the Street Crimes Unit involved in the shooting, and murder charges against the four officers, who were later acquitted. A March 1999 *New York Times* poll reported that the vast majority of New Yorkers believed that there was “absolutely no excuse” for the shooting of Diallo: 61 percent of Whites, 89 percent of Blacks, and 81 percent of Hispanics subscribed to this view. One month after the killing, negative ratings of the police climbed above their previous peak in October 1997 (after the Louima beating). In March 1999, the percentage of citizens giving the NYPD a “poor” job rating reached 32 percent among Blacks and 21 percent among Hispanics. In April 2000, one month after Patrick Dorismond was killed, fully 52 percent

of Blacks and 36 percent of Hispanics gave the NYPD a “poor” rating—an increase in twenty percentage points for Blacks and fifteen percentage points for Hispanics over the previous, 1999 figures (Fig. 4). Moreover, 84 percent of Blacks, 64 percent of Hispanics, and 35 percent of Whites thought there was “absolutely no excuse” for the shooting.

For Blacks and Hispanics, therefore, each of the three incidents was followed by growing disapproval of the police department. Moreover, as Fig. 4 shows, a progressively widening gap separates the views of African Americans and Hispanics, on the one hand, and Whites, on the other, whose ratings on this item changed little. It was not clear why White opinion on the NYPD’s job performance remained stable, but it was possible that Whites drew a distinction between the general performance of the department and the more specific use of force against minorities, examined below. This was consistent with the literature documenting differences between *general* and *specific* opinions of the police, which might vary independently (Brandl, Frank, Worden, & Bynum, 1994; Kaminski & Jefferis, 1998; White & Menke, 1982). Citizens’ ratings of the police on general questions (overall “approval,” “confidence,” “satisfaction” with a police department) was typically higher than on specific kinds of practices, and incidents of police misconduct might have a stronger impact on specific views, particu-

larly regarding misconduct itself, than on general views. White residents of New York City arguably equated much of the NYPD’s job performance with its record of reducing crime in recent years—including the “zero-tolerance” policy regarding minor crimes and quality-of-life offenses, a crackdown initiated under Mayor Giuliani’s administration. Insofar as Whites credited the NYPD with reducing crime, this might explain the resilience of their approval of the department’s job performance. Blacks and Hispanics had been less impressed with the aggressive zero-tolerance approach to crime, indicated in part by a rising number of complaints against the police from minority groups in the city (Greene, 1999), and less inclined than Whites to separate their general assessment of the NYPD from controversial practices, including beatings, shootings, and other kinds of misconduct. This helped to explain why Black and Hispanic views of the NYPD’s job performance paralleled their views on police use of force, discussed below. A major incident of police misconduct might therefore have a uniform effect, coloring both general and specific attitudes toward the police (as was the case here for Blacks and Hispanics in New York) or it might have a differential effect on general versus specific attitudes (as is true for Whites in New York).

Fig. 5 depicts trends in citizens’ views of police use of force, which grew steadily more negative after

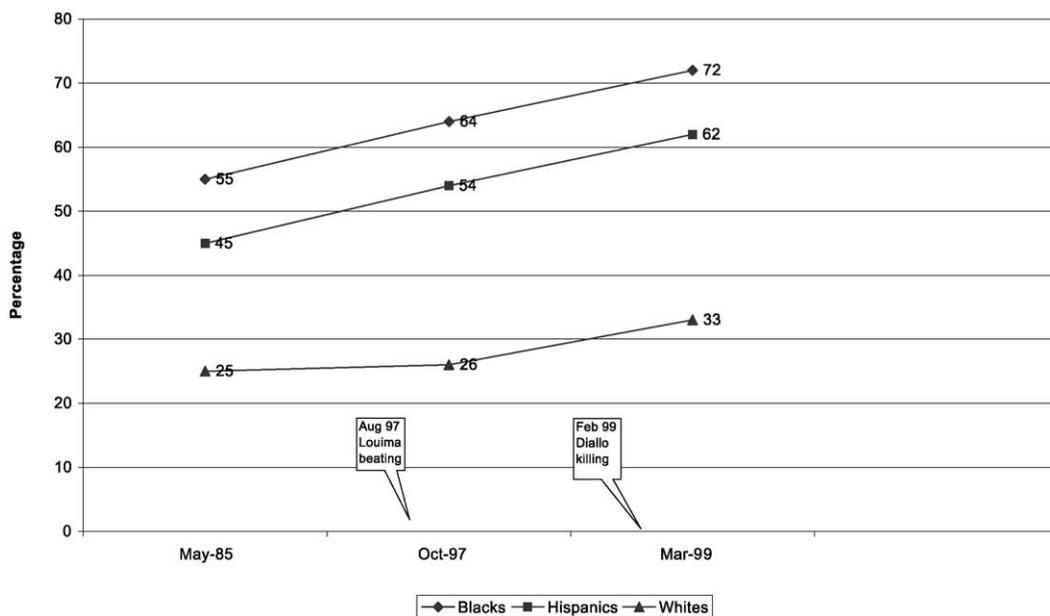


Fig. 5. Respondents agreeing that New York City police use excessive force.

the August 1997 Louima beating. By October 1997, increasing numbers of Blacks and Hispanics thought that most police officers who had been accused of brutality had used “excessive force” as opposed to “necessary force in a dangerous situation.” This view was even more widely endorsed after the Diallo killing in February 1999, as seen in the March 1999 poll results (Fig. 5). The increasing perception, between October 1997 and March 1999, that police officers used excessive force was statistically significant for all three racial groups (for Blacks and Whites, $P < .01$; for Hispanics, $P < .05$). A virtually identical trend was evident in responses to a second item regarding use of force: whether “police often engage in brutality against Blacks” (Fig. 6). What was different was the *magnitude* of the increase in unfavorable ratings. Whereas negative opinions increased seven to eight percentage points for all three groups between 1997 (post-Louima) and 1999 (post-Diallo) on the race-neutral “excessive force” question (Fig. 5), they jumped sixteen to seventeen percentage points for the three groups on the “brutality against Blacks” item (Fig. 6). White opinion grew more negative on these two questions after the Diallo killing, even as their overall impression of the NYPD’s job performance remained unchanged. Perhaps it was the barrage of forty-one bullets fired at Diallo (literally “overkill”) that made it easier for

respondents to conclude that the NYPD was prone to using excessive force.

The four incidents in Los Angeles were distributed over a fairly long time period, allowing sufficient time for citizen evaluations to rebound to their preincident level, whereas the three brutality incidents in New York City were clustered within a thirteen-month time span, the most recent in March 2000. It remains to be seen whether the level of popular confidence in the NYPD will eventually grow—in the absence of another highly publicized scandal—or whether the cumulative impact of Louima, Diallo, and Dorismond has left a more lasting stain on the image of the New York police.⁴

Popular support for reforms

Surveys tapping citizens’ attitudes on policing issues usually focus on general opinions of the police (“satisfaction,” “confidence,” “job performance”) or on controversial practices (racial discrimination, excessive force, verbal abuse), rather than on reforms that might help to prevent future incidents. Only rarely have surveys included questions on such things as civilian review boards, sensitivity training, or community policing. The polls examined here,

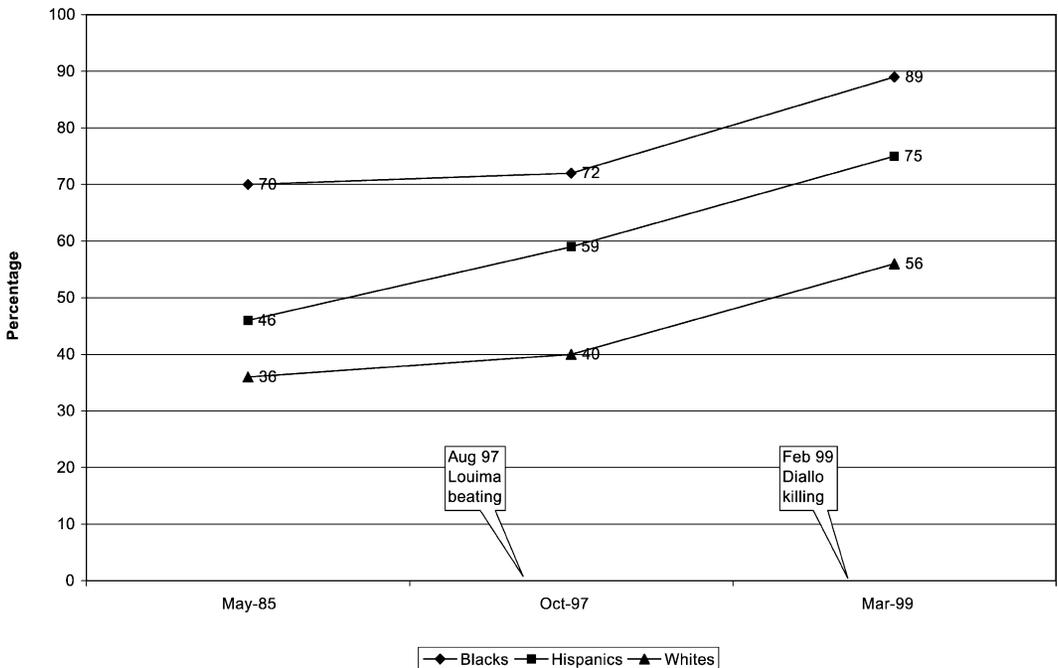


Fig. 6. Respondents agreeing that New York City police often use brutality against Blacks.

however, provided valuable information on citizens' evaluations of a few corrective measures. In New York City, for instance, there was considerable support for hiring more minority officers, in order to bring the racial composition of the NYPD into conformity with the city's racial profile. In March 1999, 57 percent of Whites, 73 percent of Blacks, and 60 percent of Hispanics supported this idea. (For Whites and Blacks these figures were somewhat higher than in the previous [October 1997] poll: 53, 69, and 68 percent, respectively.) A national poll found considerable support for a policy that would give minorities preference in hiring to achieve this end: 48 percent of Whites and 69 percent of Blacks endorsed this practice (*Newsweek*, 1995). The principle of proportional representation, or matching the racial composition of a police department to that of the city, was now widely accepted in national political and law enforcement circles ([Walker, 1985](#); [Weitzer, 2000b](#)), though most police departments remained unrepresentative of their city's minority populations ([Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999](#)). Currently, Blacks constitute 27 percent of New York City's population but only 14 percent of NYPD officers, and Hispanics are 25 percent of the population and 17 percent of the NYPD ([Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999](#)). The LAPD is representative of African Americans, who comprise 14 percent of both the LAPD and the city, while Hispanics account for 30 percent of the LAPD and 44 percent of the city population ([Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999](#)).

A change in police leadership could help to increase public confidence in a police department. It was noted above that the appointment of Willie Williams to replace Daryl Gates as chief of the LAPD was seen as a positive change by Los Angeles residents. A related reform pertained to a city's political leadership. A growing percentage of New York's population believed that the policies of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's administration had "caused police brutality to increase" in the city. The number of Blacks who took this view increased from 49 percent in October 1997 to 67 percent in March 1999 to 82 percent in April 2000, and the same trend was found among Whites (18, 30, and 38 percent, respectively) and Hispanics (33, 49, and 69 percent, respectively). In March 1999, many New Yorkers believed that Giuliani's public statements about the Diallo incident had "made the situation worse": this was the opinion of 47 percent of Whites, 61 percent of Hispanics, and 79 percent of Blacks. After the Dorismond killing, the Mayor attempted to discredit Dorismond by releasing his juvenile and adult arrest records to the media, claiming that he was not an "innocent" victim. New Yorkers overwhelmingly

criticized this action: 67 percent of Whites, 94 percent of Blacks, and 83 percent of Hispanics thought that Giuliani's action was "unjustified" according to the April 2000 poll. And, once again, the public concluded that the mayor's statements had made the situation worse—64 percent of Whites, 92 percent of Blacks, and 77 percent of Hispanics, significantly higher figures for each group than after the Diallo killing.

No comparable questions were asked of Los Angeles residents after the Rampart scandal surfaced, but the available data suggested that it was not so strongly associated with the mayor, perhaps because he was more restrained than Giuliani in his public defense of controversial police actions. In April 2000, Mayor Richard Riordan's job approval rating remained about as high as it ever had been: 66 percent of Whites, 34 percent of Blacks, and 63 percent of Hispanics approved of the way he was doing his job.

Accountability had been conspicuously lacking in the police units or precincts implicated in abuse in Los Angeles and New York ([Christopher Commission, 1991](#); [Shuster, 2000](#); [U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1999, 2000](#)). One change favored by the overwhelming majority of Los Angeles residents was the creation of a civilian review board to handle complaints regarding police misconduct. In March 1991, 75 percent of Whites, 88 percent of Blacks, and 78 percent of Hispanics supported the creation of such a board. This widespread support for civilian review in Los Angeles was consistent with opinion elsewhere in the country. A national survey found that 58 percent of Whites and 75 percent of Blacks believed that authorities external to the police were needed to investigate and discipline officers accused of brutality against citizens.⁵

Another reform was suggested by residents' confidence in the city's Police Commission, which set policy and had oversight authority over the LAPD. Most city residents believed that the commission should not be involved in the investigation of the Rampart allegations and that an "independent" body should conduct the inquiry: this was the preference of 75 percent of Whites, 88 percent of Blacks, and 74 percent of Hispanics in the April 2000 poll. For years, civil rights leaders had criticized the Police Commission for its inability or unwillingness to hold the LAPD accountable, and this poll suggested that the overwhelming majority of the public agreed. The commission was evidently viewed as either too weak or as insufficiently independent of the LAPD to investigate the department in a satisfactory manner.

Further evidence that the Los Angeles public supported greater police accountability and oversight

was found in assessments of a reform agreed to in a November 2000 consent decree between the Los Angeles City Council and the Justice Department: An independent federal monitor would be appointed, with broad powers to oversee reform measures and to probe police department operations. A February 2001 *Los Angeles Times* poll found that 52 percent of Whites, 58 percent of Blacks, and 61 percent of Hispanics agreed that such a monitor was needed to ensure that “a Rampart-like scandal will not happen again and will ensure that much-needed changes will be made within the department.” A minority of Whites (33 percent), Blacks (28 percent), and Hispanics (15 percent) took the opposing view that a monitor would “lower police officer morale and hamper their ability to do their job as they see fit.”

Conclusion

The findings reported here suggested that celebrated incidents of police misconduct, like scandals regarding other institutions, may color citizens' attitudes toward the police. Attitudes appeared to be negatively influenced by well-publicized brutality and corruption events. At almost every point in the time series, incidents were followed by increasing unfavorable ratings of the New York and Los Angeles police departments. The *trends* for the three racial groups mirrored each other (with some exceptions), but there was interracial variation in the *magnitude* of attitudinal change, usually most striking for African Americans. This finding is consistent with the literature, which found disapproval of the police to be more common among African Americans than among Whites, with Hispanics occupying an intermediate position.

The impact of controversial policing incidents on public confidence in a police department might last for a considerable period of time. If attitudes toward the police—as measured by the survey items examined here—eventually returned to pre-incident levels, there might nevertheless be some long-term, diffuse damage to public confidence. The most disturbing incidents are not easily forgotten, and can become deeply rooted in the beliefs of minority communities—contributing cumulatively to resentment and suspicion, if not a full-fledged oppositional subculture, toward the police (Jacob, 1971; Weitzer, 1995). Indeed, the incidents involving Rodney King, Abner Louina, and Amadou Diallo are now part of the cultural repertoire with which African Americans conceive of the police. As a result, they might become less cooperative toward officers and more predisposed to accept

allegations of police misconduct, even when officers act properly.

None of this analysis was meant to imply that heavily publicized incidents of police misconduct were the sole predictor of postincident changes in public opinion of the police. However, the often dramatic increases in unfavorable attitudes in the wake of highly publicized and politically charged events suggests that incidents of this sort did indeed have a pronounced effect on public opinion. This dynamic had largely been neglected in the literature, however, and as Flanagan and Vaughn (1996) noted, much more research is needed to analyze the short- and long-term effects of such incidents on public confidence in the police.

Acknowledgments

The author is grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on this article.

Notes

1. No comparable question measured public awareness in Los Angeles of the 1996 beating of Vasquez and Flores, but the videotape of the beating was broadcast repeatedly on the local news, and a national poll taken two weeks after the incident revealed that 86 percent of the population had heard or read about the beating (perhaps even higher among Los Angeles residents), and 71 percent thought the deputies were “unjustified” in using force against Vasquez and Flores (*Los Angeles Times* poll, April 13–16, 1996, $N=1,374$, national sample).

2. This applied to the first three incidents in Los Angeles, not the Rampart scandal, which was still unfolding at the time of writing.

3. *Los Angeles Times*, July 2, 1995; *Los Angeles Times* poll, January–February 1997, unpublished results.

4. The most recent poll, in August 2001, suggested that attitudes toward the NYPD *might* be improving, but since the poll surveyed only registered voters in New York City, the figures were not directly comparable with previous polls of the city population as a whole. In August 2001, the percentage of registered voters rating the NYPD's job performance “poor” was 25 percent among Blacks, 16 percent among Hispanics, and 7 percent among Whites—substantially fewer than in the previous poll of city residents (April 2000, see Fig. 1). The 2001 poll also found that a plurality (48 percent) of registered Black voters disagreed with the idea that the NYPD was “working toward improving relations with minority communities”; 41 percent of Blacks agreed with the statement, compared to 69 percent of Whites and 51 percent of Hispanics.

5. *New York Times*/CBS News poll, April 1–3, 1991, unpublished results.

Appendix A. The Polls

A.1. Los Angeles Times polls

December 1977 (N)	352 Whites	106 Blacks	Hispanics NA
April 1979 (N)	414 Whites	702 Blacks	111 Hispanics
March 1988 (N)	340 Whites	111 Blacks	144 Hispanics
March 7–8 1991 (N)	382 Whites	92 Blacks	250 Hispanics
March 20–21 1991 (N)	382 Whites	116 Blacks	317 Hispanics
July 1991 (N)	626 Whites	189 Blacks	519 Hispanics
October 1992 (N)	581 Whites	180 Blacks	484 Hispanics
January 1993 (N)	681 Whites	211 Blacks	558 Hispanics
June 1994 (N)	429 Whites	166 Blacks	321 Hispanics
May 1995 (N)	362 Whites	108 Blacks	272 Hispanics
June 1996 (N)	409 Whites	127 Blacks	325 Hispanics
April 1997 (N)	668 Whites	195 Blacks	526 Hispanics
March 1999 (N)	600 Whites	213 Blacks	277 Hispanics
April 2000 (N)	658 Whites	176 Blacks	263 Hispanics
February 2001 (N)	594 Whites	284 Blacks	519 Hispanics

A.2. New York Times polls

May 1985 (N)	1,557	subgroups NA	
June 1994 (N)	598 Whites	312 Blacks	Hispanics NA
March 1997 (N)	1,397	subgroups NA	
October 1997 (N)	733 Whites	393 Blacks	368 Hispanics
March 1999 (N)	414 Whites	257 Blacks	234 Hispanics
April 2000 (N)	248 Whites	161 Blacks	139 Hispanics

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