

The News Media 'Blackbox': Media's Relationship with Police Brutality Protests in America

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Introduction



This study explores the role of the American news media in influencing public decisions to protest acts of police brutality. Despite frequent reporting of police brutality cases, only a select few receive substantial media attention, which in turn can catalyze public protests. This research investigates the underlying reasons for such differential media coverage and its impact on public mobilization. By analyzing various factors such as the victim's race, armed status, the availability of body camera footage, and the geographic location of the incident, this study assesses the media's framing of police brutality cases. A detailed headline analysis of online news outlets was conducted to determine how media narratives vary for Black versus White victims, armed versus unarmed victims, and victims whose shootings were filmed on body cameras versus not.

This study underscores the media's powerful role in shaping public discourse and action, advocating for more equitable media coverage to honor all victims of police violence and encourage informed public activism.

Naked Black Man Fatally Shot by White Police Officer in Georgia

The New York Times

NEWS > LOCAL NEWS



CMHA Police say officer fatally shot man after he charged at officers twice

Body camera video released Wednesday

News 5 Cleveland

Man dies in officer-involved shooting in west Baltimore

Darin Hutchins, 26, had knife, wouldn't obey commands, police say

The Baltimore Sun

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Angry Over Fatal Police Shooting, Protesters Take to Streets in Venice

City News Service California

Accused murderer dies after fight with police officer in Texas

CBS News Texas

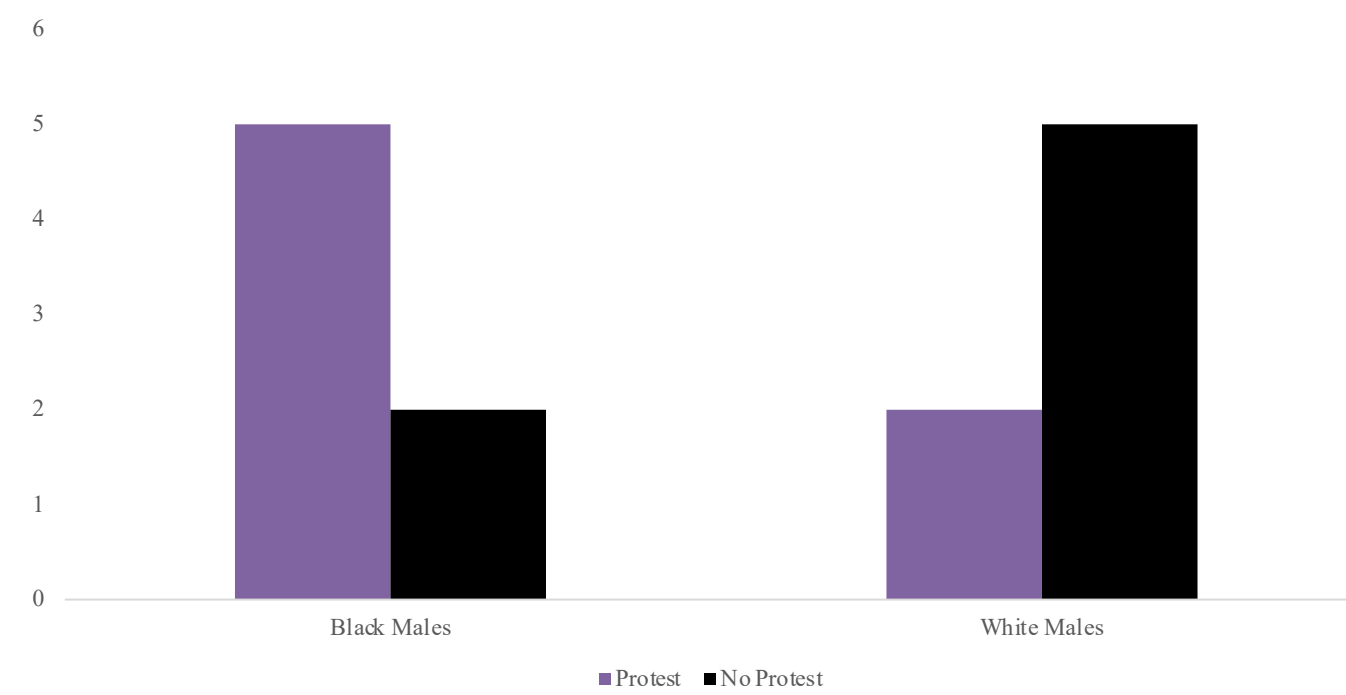
Letter: I don't want to depend on the benevolence of the police for my rights or my protection

The Salt Lake Tribune

Study Results

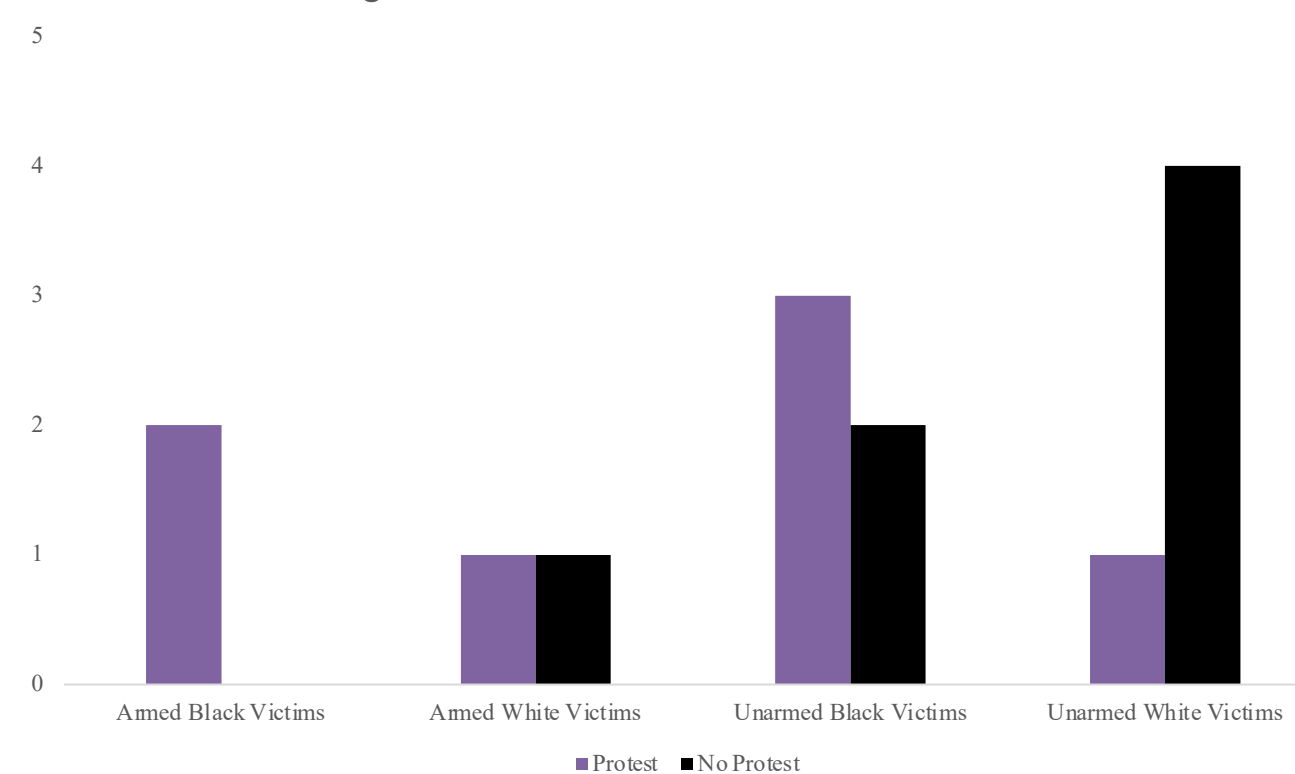


Emergence of Protest for Black vs White Male Victims



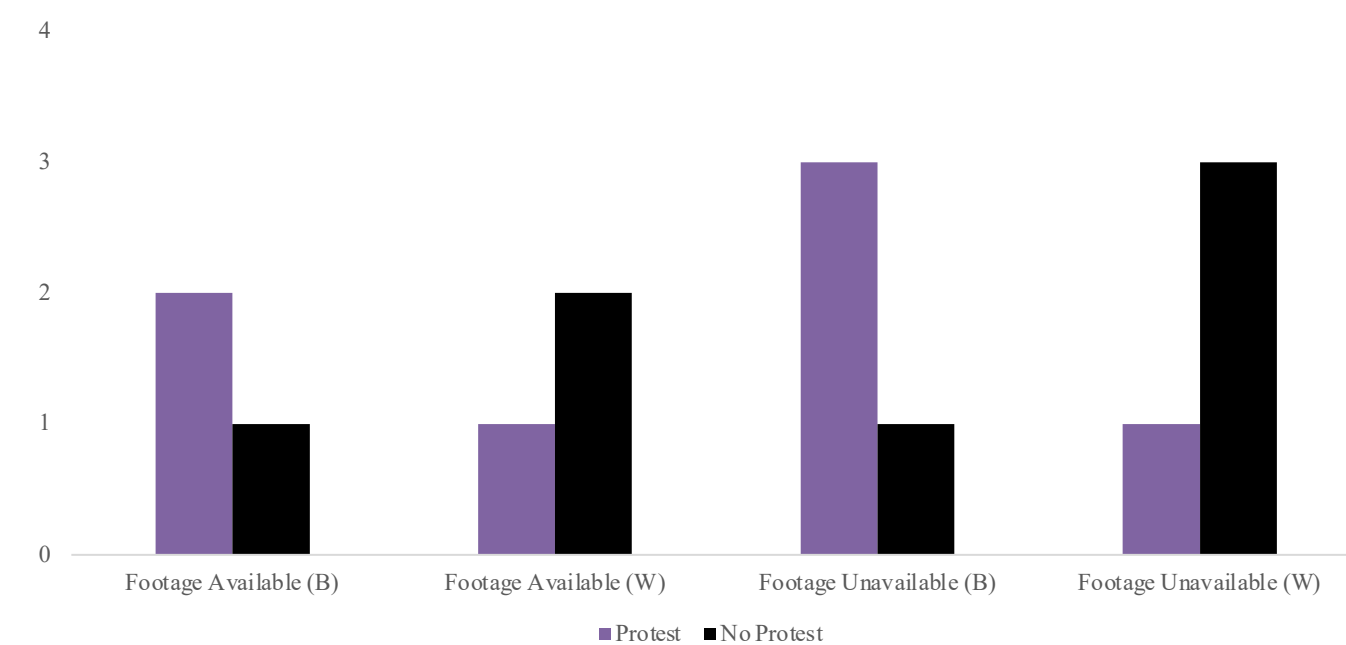
Of the 14 cases studied, 7/14 or 50% of cases resulted in protest. For cases involving Black Male victims, 5/7 or 71% of selected cases resulted in protests or some form of case-specific mobilization activity. For cases involving White Male victims, 2/7 cases resulted in protests or some form of case-specific mobilization activity

Emergence of Protest for Armed vs Unarmed Victims



Of the 7 cases studied that resulted in protest, 2 cases, one involving a Black Male victim and one involving a White male victim, were cases where the victim was armed and had a physical altercation with the Police officer who killed them. All 5 other cases were unarmed victims.

Emergence of Protest for cases with and without Body Camera Footage



In 6/14 or 43% of cases studied, body camera footage from the police department and from the officers on duty who killed the victims were obtained and made available to the public. 2 cases involving a Black Male victim where body camera footage was present resulted in protest while 1 case involving a White Male victim where body camera footage was present resulted in protest.

Media Coverage Statistics



Overall, the case with the highest amount of media coverage for Black victims, unarmed victims, and victims whose cases did not have body camera footage was Anthony Hill, while the case with the most coverage for White victims was James Dudley Barker. Black victims had a higher average of media articles released, largely skewed by outliers like Anthony Hill. This aligns with an accepted truth regarding media coverage for victims of police brutality, where some victims receive an overwhelming amount of coverage while others receive little to none. For Black victims, unarmed Black victims had a higher average of media coverage than armed victims, though some unarmed victims fell into a gray area, where a physical altercation took the place of a weapon. For all victims, the presence of body camera footage often took hold of media discussion at some part of the rhetorical timeline in media coverage, even at times reopening cases, and re-prompting

Total Number of Media Articles By Case



Conclusions



This study found that Black victims received more frequent media coverage than White victims, unarmed victims received more coverage than armed victims, the availability of body camera footage drove discourse just prior to protest activity but did not increase the likelihood of protest, and victims who were killed in cities with larger media markets or places with an established local newspaper saw an increase in coverage and likelihood for mobilization on their behalf. Findings reveal consistent trends in media framing, suggesting a deliberate strategy in influencing public perception and response to police brutality cases.

It is imperative that there is a just public understanding of police violence, especially seeing its ability to affect the mobilization for justice or police reform. Assessing the media's role in framing particular cases of police violence and the various frames utilized, we can ensure that conversations surrounding police violence and brutality are handled properly—asking not the question of whether a weapon was involved or whether a victim deserved to die and instead, why brutality and violence was an answer to begin with. Doing so stands in the gap for all victims, so that we no longer have to retroactively "say their names" or wonder which names we aren't aware of and that we as an American public are justly informed and able to undertake civic action.