

# Black Lives Matter Protests, Fatal Police Interactions, and Crime

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In 2013, the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the death of Trayvon Martin sparked the use of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter on social media. The following year, the movement became nationally known as people took to the streets to protest following the deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and Eric Garner in New York City. Since the death of Michael Brown, the movement has focused on fatal interactions with police, with protests occurring across the nation in response to deaths of individuals in and out of police custody. As with many social and political movements, Black Lives Matter (BLM) was met with backlash. Some feared that the increased scrutiny on the police could lead to depolicing, which in turn would lead to higher crime rates.

My work seeks to answer two questions. First, did the BLM movement have an impact on the number of fatal interactions with police? Second, did the BLM movement have any impact on arrests and crime? Although the BLM movement was widespread and well known, little is documented about the impacts it may have had.

Recent research has found that BLM protests are more likely to happen in locations where there has recently been a fatal interaction with police and that the BLM protests moderately decrease racial resentment toward the black community for certain segments of the general population. However, it is unknown whether the increased protests have had an impact on racial disparity within the justice system.

Because BLM protests were widespread and garnered significant media attention, it is also plausible that they may have increased scrutiny of police. Critics of the movement have argued that increased scrutiny of police would lead to a decrease in proactive policing, which, in turn, may lead to more crime. This depolicing effect has been coined the Ferguson effect. Existing empirical research on the Ferguson effect in the post-BLM era focuses on relatively short spans of time and limited geographic areas. In contrast, my work is the first to examine the countrywide impacts of increased police scrutiny caused by BLM protests.

For this research, I combine data from Fatal Encounters, a national database of fatal encounters with law enforcement



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officials, with data collected from Elephrame.com, a website that tracks BLM protests, to create a new state-by-month panel data set. This panel data set allows me to analyze what impact the BLM movement may have had on black fatal encounters with police. To the best of my knowledge, this is the largest and most complete data set that has been compiled on this subject. Then, using data from the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting database, I am able to examine whether the BLM movement has had any impact on the number of crimes across a variety of crime classifications.

For both of these questions, I use the number of BLM protests as a measure of intensity of the movement in a state over time. Generally, one would expect a positive correlation between the current month's protests and the number of fatal police interactions if protests are motivated by black fatal encounters with police. This paper focuses on the impact of protests on fatal interactions with police in subsequent months. As protests bring a higher level of scrutiny to police actions, they may lead to fewer fatal interactions with law enforcement in the following months. However, the

added scrutiny on police may make officers more hesitant to proactively police, which could lead to emboldened criminals and higher crime rates.

I find that an increase in the number of protests within a state is associated with a decrease in the number of black fatalities from police encounters in the month immediately following the protests, yet there does not appear to be a longer-lasting impact on the number of fatalities. In addition, I do not find evidence that BLM protests have any measurable impact on a variety of crime measures or the number of arrests within states. This suggests that, contrary to the Ferguson effect hypothesis, increased scrutiny of police due to BLM protests did not, in fact, lead to increased crime rates.

## NOTE

This research brief is based on Evelyn Skoy, "Black Lives Matter Protests, Fatal Police Interactions, and Crime," *Contemporary Economic Policy* 39, no. 2 (October 2020): 280–91, <https://doi.org/10.1111/coep.12508>.



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