EconoFact Chats: Policing in Minority Communities

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Michael Klein:

Hello, everyone. Welcome to EconoFact Chats. I'm Michael Klein, executive editor of EconoFact, a nonpartisan web-based publication of the Fletcher School at Tufts University. At EconoFact, we bring key facts and incisive analysis to the national debate on economic and social policies, publishing work from leading economists across the country. You can learn more about us and see our work at www.econofact.org. The issue of policing in minority communities and related issues like the high incarceration rates in the United States, especially of black men, have been at the forefront over the past few weeks, but of course these issues have been around for a lot longer than that. One of the leading scholars in this field is professor Jennifer Doleac of Texas A&M University, where she is the director of the justice tech lab. She also hosts the podcast Probable Causation, which is about law, economics, and crime. Jennifer, welcome to EconoFact Chats.

Jennifer Doleac:

Hi Michael. Thanks for having me.

Michael Klein:

It's great to have you on the podcast. The death of George Floyd sparked national protests, and even protests in other countries as well. One focus of the protest has been police behavior in minority communities and towards minorities, especially black men. As a leading scholar in the field, Jennifer, what lessons from research would you like people to know?

Jennifer Doleac:

So I think there's a lot of research evidence that the complaints that people have from minority communities are justified. There's certainly tons of qualitative and ethnographic research on this, but even within economics, there are a number of studies that look at racial bias by police, especially in the way that they use their discretion on the job, and in many, if not most contexts, you find evidence of racial bias. I think just generally though, we have an extensive literature at this point showing racial bias is pervasive in almost every aspect of American life, and so it's not at all surprising that it would also be a problem in policing.

Michael Klein:

You mentioned something interesting in the discretion that they use on their job. So that suggests that just rules or regulations by themselves are not going to work. Does research have some things to tell us about policies to fix these problems and what works, training or community outreach or efforts to hire from minority communities?

Jennifer Doleac:

Research has some to say, not nearly as much as we need, I would say, and there's a lot of work to do and lots of creativity going into doing it right now. I think there are a lot of hypotheses out there based on the quality of work that I mentioned before. So there are a few studies I would highlight. There was a really nice randomized controlled trial of a procedural justice training program in Chicago.

Michael Klein:

Can you just ... for our listeners who don't have the background in this, what do you mean by randomized control trial and by procedural justice?

Jennifer Doleac:

Yes, two definitions. So a randomized controlled trial is in some ways that will we think of as the gold standard way to measure causal effects. So if you have a pool of people that ... in this case, police officers that need to be trained, you could randomly assign some to get the training and others not, and then you can compare them going forward.

Michael Klein:

So that's like what's done in medicine, right?

Jennifer Doleac:

Exactly. So it's kind of really -

Michael Klein:

That's the gold standard, yeah.

Jennifer Doleac:

- close to the lab experiment model that we would like to approximate in the real world. And then procedural justice is a way of thinking about the police community interactions, such that it's really emphasizing making communities feel heard and participants in the process and trusting the process, and so these trainings push police officers to make sure that they're asking citizens what their view is and really taking their views into account before they make a decision. So there have actually been two studies on procedural justice trainings. One was a randomized control trial in Seattle. It found beneficial effects in terms of reductions in the likelihood that police used arrests, I think, and I think they might've also looked at use of force, but I'm having trouble remembering off the top of my head.

Jennifer Doleac:

The more recent study was much larger in Chicago, and they randomized the timing of when officers got this training, and Chicago had to train all 8,000 of its officers and they couldn't do it all at once so they basically trained about 25 officers at a time over several years, and that allowed us to see what the impact of that training was on police behavior, and in that study, the researchers found that getting this training reduced citizen complaints by quite a bit. It also reduced officer's use of force. So that's one kind of nugget of good news, something that seems to work, and I hope to see similar studies in other places.

Michael Klein:

So that latter study you talked about, that's actually what we call a natural experiment as opposed to a randomized control trial, because it just so happened that the way it worked, it lent itself to analysis.

Jennifer Doleac:

It was a bit of both. So they actually ... they randomized the timing, but then there was also this staggered rollout. So if we just had the staggered rollout, we might worry that it was the volunteers did it first and then comparing early trainees to later trainees might not give you exactly what you want. So it really helped that the researchers layered on this randomization in this particular case.

Michael Klein:

And that's something you've been advocating, I know for awhile, that the researchers were involved in the implementation and creation of these so we do have a better understanding. So there's a really important role for economists and other social scientists to help see what works and what doesn't.

Jennifer Doleac:

Absolutely. So I mean my own view is a researcher is we really have no idea yet what is going to be most effective at changing policing for the better and reaching the social goals that a lot of people are advocating for right now, and so we should just start trying stuff. There are a lot of hypotheses out there. People are pushing for lots of different reforms, but we know that policies don't work all the time, even if they're really well-meaning, and sometimes they even have negative unintended consequences that can do more harm than good, and I think that's especially true in a space related to diversity and discrimination. So yeah, when I have these conversations with policymakers, I make sure to really push for them to think like scientists to some extent, and really be aiming to just try stuff, and if it doesn't work, to figure that out as quickly as possible so that we can try something else.

Michael Klein:

How do you find their reactions when you bring up these points, Jennifer? Are they amenable to that and they understand it has to be done to actually understand what's going on, or do they push back and say, "Well, you economists, you don't know what it's like on the streets?"

Jennifer Doleac:

A bit of both, I would say. So there are a number of policy labs that have cropped up in recent years that work directly with government. So I spent a little time myself actually working with a lab at DC, which is a research group in the mayor's office in DC filled with researchers, social scientists, data scientists that have tried really to change the culture of government in the city, and I think that's the case in other places that have these kinds of policy labs too, where you basically just have a lot of conversations and a lot of trust building exercises, if you will, with government officials and practitioners, to make them realize that this can be a mutually beneficial process. We're not auditors. We're not trying to figure out where you've failed and catch you in implementing a program that isn't working, that this sort of evaluation process can be helpful on iterating on a program or policy in order to get the best benefits, but I think the extent to which different practitioners and leaders are amenable to that varies widely from place to place and there's a long way to go, but in general, I think this is a policy space. The crime space is one where policy makers and practitioners are more amenable than usual to research.

Michael Klein:

I imagine another challenge is that everybody wants things done yesterday and it takes a while to -

Jennifer Doleac:

It sure does.

Michael Klein:

- both gather the data and do the analysis, and then also there are probably differences in the duration it will take for some of these different kinds of interventions to have an effect, right?

Jennifer Doleac:

Yeah. So for something like the police training that I was talking about earlier, we might expect a really sudden effect, but that seems like the sort of thing that would probably take a little longer to see big benefits and maybe even repeated trainings over time could have benefits. So ideally you want to follow people for six months to a year or two years, especially if the outcomes that you're looking at are more frequent than we would like socially, but relatively rare by research standards. So use of force, for instance, you'd actually need to follow police for a fair amount of time to pick up a statistical impact on that outcome. The way that I pitch this to policy makers is that the time's going to pass anyway. So we might as well think at least a little bit upfront about whether there's a way to implement a policy that improves our ability to measure its impacts over time.

Michael Klein:

Are there any changes where you can observe more quickly than just changing the culture of whether those changes work?

Jennifer Doleac:

Yeah. So there are certainly some types of policy changes where I would expect a more sudden effect. So there's a lot of discussion about the revenue generating activities of some police departments. They often get to keep the fees and fines they collect or assets that are forfeited.

Michael Klein:

Is this the famous story that you don't want to be speeding towards the end of the month?

Jennifer Doleac:

Yeah. So some of it is, quotas on traffic tickets, that sort of thing, and a lot of people have pointed out over the years that our current policies really provide perverse incentives in this space, that maybe the police shouldn't be able to keep the revenue that they collect in this way. Maybe some traffic tickets or sort of socially optimal fines are actually the best way to punish someone for doing something wrong, but we could have that in place and have the revenue go to the state or federal government or something like that rather than have the police departments have an incentive to do perhaps more of that than is socially good. So if we were to change those kinds of policies and suddenly change the incentive incentives for police officers, I would expect a much more sudden change.

Michael Klein:

Right. I mean the basic message of economics is incentives matter and constraints -

Jennifer Doleac:

Incentives matter.

Michael Klein:

That's basically all of economics.

Jennifer Doleac:

That's all we got.

Michael Klein:

Yeah. It works pretty well though. We get a lot out of it. One example of a policy that was thought to be important is the use of police worn body cameras. Is there evidence that this makes a difference, either in the way that the police interact with people or in the cases of alleged misconduct in the outcomes and consequences of investigations?

Jennifer Doleac:

Yeah. So this is actually a policy where we have a fair amount of evidence, which is rare in any policy space, I think, but especially in the criminal justice space. So there have been a number of cities that have done randomized controlled trials where they randomly assigned cameras across officers or across shifts over the course of the day. So on one shift, all the officers would have a camera or none of them would, and then measured impacts on police behavior, and the hope was that if officers know that all their actions are being recorded, then that might deter them from doing things that they know are bad or frowned upon, and so we might see improved behavior, and basically across the board there, those studies ... so on average, they find no effect on officer behavior. There is some variation across places.

Jennifer Doleac:

So in some places it seems to help a little bit. Officer behavior gets better in the sense of complaints going down or use of force going down, but in other places that actually gets worse. So use of force goes up in some places. The biggest and first study in the United States and in a major city was in Washington DC, and they found no significant effect on any outcomes, and my hunch about what's going on there is that at this point everyone's got a cell phone and there are cameras all over a city like DC. So police officers are probably already assuming they're on camera all the time, and so maybe they were already treated in a sense, but another hypothesis that comes out of all of these studies is that the problem isn't necessarily that officers know that they're doing something wrong and just need more accountability in the moment, but that sometimes they're actually genuinely acting out of fear, and that maybe training is a better approach.

Michael Klein:

Yeah. So some people might think the fact that you found no effect would be a failure of research, but in fact, that shows how important research really is, because you have to show not just what works, but what doesn't work as well.

Jennifer Doleac:

Absolutely.

Michael Klein:

And another issue is whether a policy tested in one place would have similar effects someplace else, the idea and the idea of external validity. How do people in your area of economics address these issues? You talk about, for example, studies done in Washington, DC. Is that relevant if you're thinking about LA or about Tulsa, Oklahoma?

Jennifer Doleac:

Well, we hope so. External validity is always something that is on researchers' minds, and economists are no exception. Ideally we would take something like that procedural justice training that I mentioned earlier and then replicate it, implement the same type of study in another place and see if we get the same benefits. So my policy takeaway from that study, for instance, isn't that procedural justice training works and everyone should just do it at scale immediately, it's that this seems really promising. It worked in

Chicago and it might work in other places too so it's worth trying, but I really do hope that other cities implement in the same sort of staggered rollout way so that they can test it too.

Michael Klein:

At one level, the protests that we've seen recently reflect outrage about police behavior towards African Americans, but of course there are a host of other issues as well. For example, mass incarceration, especially with black and Hispanic men. The US has the highest number of incarcerated people of any country, is that right?

Jennifer Doleac:

That's right.

Michael Klein:

That's a pretty striking statistic, and Hispanic and black men are overrepresented in prison. That's true as well, isn't it?

Jennifer Doleac:

Yes.

Michael Klein:

Are there a few main reasons behind this, or does this reflect sort of a much broader set of societal issues, all of which are intertwined with race?

Jennifer Doleac:

I think the latter is probably more the case, that it's a very broad set of societal issues and historical context that's really important here. In terms of actual policies and what changes happened that led to incarceration of race to skyrocket in more recent decades, I think the consensus is that it's mostly due to our movement toward longer and longer sentences. So we're certainly putting more people into prison. So on the margin, less serious offenders might also be locked up now than they were in the past, but we also are putting people into prison for longer, and once you have sentences of 10 or 20 or 30 years, that adds up really quickly when you think about all the people that are incarcerated at any given time.

Michael Klein:

And not only when people are incarcerated, but when they get out. So you've written about efforts to get people who are released from prison integrated back into society and to avoid recidivism. What lessons from research do we have about this topic, and to what extent has policy been informed by this research?

Jennifer Doleac:

Yeah, so a really large share of my own work is on this prisoner reentry issue. I did a big multidisciplinary lit review a couple of years ago trying to gather together all the studies that we have on measuring the causal effects of different policies or programs on our ability to help people reintegrate successfully into society when they get out of jail and prison. So one example of policies that seem to work that I've become very interested in is increasing just the amount of money that we give people. There's a lot of focus on employment or jobs. There have actually been some really nice randomized controlled trials of just giving people jobs and that does not seem to do anything, which is a bit surprising, I think, especially to economists, but then if you happen to get released from prison at a time when the local labor market is really good, then your recidivism rates go down, and so there's something about

having a good job that seems beneficial, but then other programs are just like if you just give people more gate money when they get out of present, just instead of 50 bucks you get 200, that seems to be really helpful. So I think there's actually something about just giving people money that's really useful.

Michael Klein:

And what do you think ... what are the channels through which that's helpful? Do you have any guesses about that?

Jennifer Doleac:

So there are probably a few different potential ways. So if you give someone more money, then they could potentially afford a security deposit on a stable place to live, they could afford better healthcare, they could afford reliable transportation to work. It also might just be something as simple as if you have more money, then you have less incentive to commit property crime in order to get money that you need to be able to afford necessities. So there are a few different channels there.

Michael Klein:

So a lot of things that many of us might take for granted are really important. Well these are really important issues, Jennifer, and I both commend you for devoting your professional life to this, which is really important and you've shown how this has an impact on policy in a really important way, and also I thank you for joining me today on EconoFact Chats to talk about these and to give us a little bit of a window into the way economists approach these issues. So thanks very much.

Jennifer Doleac:

Thank you. It was a pleasure.

Michael Klein:

Thanks for listening. This has been EconoFact Chats. To learn more about EconoFact and see the work on our site, you can log into www.econofact.org. EconoFact is a publication of the Fletcher School at Tufts University. Have a good day.