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UMaine Professors Examine Race Factor in Support for Police Use of Force

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ORONO -- A recent paper by two University of Maine sociology professors indicates that racial prejudice plays a factor in determining support for police use of force.

"Racial Prejudice and Support by Whites for Police Use of Force: A Research Note," was written by Steven Barkan and Steven Cohn, professors of sociology at UMaine. The paper has been published in a recent issue of "Justice Quarterly," the official journal of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences.

"This is just part of a series of articles we've done that have looked at how racial prejudice affects people's attitudes about crime and crime control policy," says Barkan. "In the past, we've looked at the court systems and the death penalty, and this was a natural extension of the subject."

In the article, Barkan and Cohn use data from the 1990 General Social Survey. The survey is a national multi-stage probability sample of the U.S. population that included a special section on racial prejudice. They found that racial prejudice predicated support for police use of excessive force, or police brutality.

"Police are authorized to use force to subdue suspects who are resisting arrest or who are posing a threat to the police officer's safety or that of any other person," says Barkan. "Beyond that, police are not allowed to use force and once a suspect is subdued they cannot continue to use force so we call that excessive or undue force."

Respondents in the survey were asked whether force is warranted in four situations: when a suspect says vulgar and obscene things, when the suspect is being questioned in a murder case, when the suspect is attempting to escape from custody and when the suspect attacks police with fists.

Only 12 percent of those surveyed thought that vulgar statements were enough reason for the use of force, and 10 percent believed being a suspect in a murder case justified force. Barkan and Cohn found a correlation between those who believed these were enough reasons for force and those who showed evidence of racial prejudice in separate questions.

The questions dealing with racial prejudice asked respondents whether they thought minorities were lazy, desired to live off welfare, had a lack of patriotism or a lack of intelligence. The study showed that whites believed minorities were more likely to commit crimes, as well.

"In these surveys, you ask people a lot of questions and find correlations and infer conclusions based on the data," says Barkan. "For example, if whites who favor use of force and the death penalty also show strong signs of prejudice when other factors are held constant, then that prejudice is probably a factor in their opinions."

Many of the responses also dealt with the respondent's views of police in general. Overall, whites tend to think more positively of police than minorities.

"In a democratic society, it is unacceptable for racial prejudice to guide public policy," says Barkan. "Infosar as racial prejudice motivates calls by the public and perhaps by public officials for the harsher treatment of criminals, such treatment is unjustified."

The underlying problem of racism that often fuels such prejudices, says Barkan, can be addressed through education.

"I'm not saying education would make all prejudice disappear, but it would help," says Barkan. "Prejudice has been around for a long time, so we're not going to solve the problem overnight."