Presentation title:

What does the evidence suggest about whether, how, and where, police bias manifests?

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Introduction: Public perceptions of police bias have never been more pervasive, and undermine feelings of trust in the police. But what does the evidence collectively say about this important yet contentious issue? To begin to answer this, a research team led by the NZ Institute for Security and Crime Science systematically assembled an 'evidence and gap map' of global research into disparities in police outcomes. This resource is available open-access to other researchers.

Methods: We followed systematic methods to identify studies that were eligible for the map. This involved: a key word search of the Global Policing Database; screening according to predefined inclusion criteria; inter-rater reliability tests; coding of studies to extract their data; and the creation of a visual map to illustrate the many different cross-sections of studies.

Results: 403 eligible studies were identified up to 2019 and coded for the evidence map. We are currently updating this with studies published 2020-2022. The evidence is dominated by research from the United States on racial bias, with gender and age also being commonly studied individual characteristics. A smaller, but growing, body of evidence looks at structural, institutional and ecological dimensions of bias. A wide variety of studies are represented on the map; for instance, more than two dozen police actions (e.g., deployment, arrests, stop and search, investigation) and over 20 theories frame the research on the map. We will outline eight evidence syntheses that cover 253 primary studies, which can be considered the most rigorous summary at this present time.

Conclusion: police bias is a complex issue to research and many studies are extremely weak quality. The strongest evidence suggests there are disparities in police outcomes, but opinions differ (strongly!) as to why this is.