Selection Bias and Racial Disparities in Police Use of Force*

Felipe Goncalves† Steven Mello‡ Emily Weisburst§

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Abstract

We examine racial disparities in police use of force. A pervasive issue in studies of policing is that the available data are selected by the police. If officers discriminate when choosing whom to select into the data, disparities measured in the observed data will suffer from selection bias. We use a conceptual framework to show how a disparity of interest in the selected sample can be corrected with an estimate of the racial composition of the unselected sample. We then develop a new approach for estimating this parameter which relies on variation in enforcement intensity across officers. Using administrative data on arrests and force incidents from Chicago and Seattle, we find that Black civilians comprise 56 percent of arrestees but only 50 percent of the unselected sample of potential arrestees, indicating a race gap in arrest rates among potential arrestees. Correcting the racial disparity in force rates in the selected sample of arrestees doubles the Black-White gap in the likelihood of facing force. Among the sample of potential arrestees, non-race characteristics are similar across racial groups, suggesting an important role for officer discrimination in driving racial force gaps.

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†University of California, Los Angeles and NBER; fgoncalves@ucla.edu

‡Dartmouth College and NBER; steve.mello@dartmouth.edu

§University of California, Los Angeles and NBER; weisburst@ucla.edu