

# Senior Citizens as a Pro-Police Interest Group

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## ABSTRACT

Which groups and individuals influence policy through their political activities? Criminal justice policy, because it is made at the local level, is often excluded from the study of interest group politics. In this paper, I provide evidence that senior citizens operate as a pro-police interest group at the city level. First, I show that senior citizens' attitudes are much more pro-police than their younger counterparts, even within the same race groups. Second, I show that cities with a greater share of residents 65 or older have larger and better-funded police departments, all else equal. These results have important implications for the study of interest groups, racial and ethnic politics, and criminal justice policy.

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*Keywords:* Interest groups; policing; race; public opinion

## Introduction

Which groups and individuals influence policy through their political activities? This question has been of interest to political scientists since at least Dahl

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(1961). But with some notable exceptions (Anzia, 2013; Einstein *et al.*, 2019; Hankinson, 2018), almost all research on interest groups and their influence concerns national politics (e.g. Fournaies and Hall, 2018; Gilens and Page, 2014). This leads to a gap in our understanding of the influence of interest groups in areas where policy is made either primarily or entirely at the local level — which are some of the policy areas that most directly influence citizens' day-to-day lives.

One such policy area is policing. For many Americans, police officers are the only state representatives with whom they regularly interact (Soss and Weaver, 2017). While some studies have documented the political consequences of policing policy (Weaver and Lerman, 2010), fewer have examined the political forces that shape policing policy in the first instance — and those that do focus mostly on the role of race in determining policing preferences and political participation (Eckhouse, 2019).

In this paper, I marshal several types of evidence to show that the current generation of senior citizens constitute a pro-police interest group at the local level. First, I use an original survey question written for the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Survey (CCES) to show that seniors have much stronger preferences for additional policing than non-seniors, even when controlling for age-correlated demographic variables such as race, income, and home ownership status. Indeed, age is a much better predictor of support for additional policing than race is, holding other relevant demographic variables constant. Second, I use General Social Survey (GSS) data from the 1980s to the 2010s to show that this difference is likely due to cohort membership, rather than due to numeric age. Finally, I provide suggestive evidence that seniors successfully influence the size and budget of local law enforcement agencies by combining police agency data from the 2007 and 2013 Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics (LEMAS) survey with data from the 2010 and 2015 American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year demographic estimates.

This paper makes several contributions to the research literature. First, by showing that age differences are more important than race differences in explaining preferences for policing, I show how the relative youth of racial minorities may lie behind many differences in policy preferences that have traditionally been attributed to race, and may help to explain why those minority groups' interests are often poorly represented in American politics. Second, even though there is scant evidence of policy outcomes being biased towards those who turn out to vote at high rates, this analysis provides novel evidence that, for city-level police policy, turnout bias in favor of older city residents may skew policy towards older residents' preferences. Finally, these results have implications for understanding crime policy. Preferences for policing among older Americans of all races — the citizens most likely to vote — may explain the persistence of large police departments, even in the

face of a nationwide decline in crime over the past generation and significant recent criticism of aggressive policing tactics.

### **Age, Policy Preferences, and Political Participation**

One classic definition of an interest group is “any group that is based on one or more shared attitudes and makes certain claims upon other groups or organizations in the society” (Truman, 1971). Senior citizens already operate as a national-level interest group through organizations such as the National Council of Senior Citizens and the American Association of Retired Persons (Hrebenar and Scott, 2015). And Sarah Anzia has found that senior citizens operate as a city-level interest group in the formation of local transportation policy (Anzia, 2019).

Previous research has found that older and younger individuals have divergent opinions on other policies, such as education spending (Poterba, 1998), entitlement programs (Pampel and Williamson, 1989), and redistribution (Sørensen, 2013). Older people clearly have material interests in funding certain social programs (such as Social Security and Medicare) over others (such as primary education) at the margin. But it is likely that period and cohort effects such as the baby boom, liberalizing social norms, and changes in college completion rates also shape attitudes towards public policy (Schwadel and Garneau, 2014).<sup>1</sup>

Existing research on public opinion of policing (and anticrime policy more generally), however, is almost singularly focused on the role of race and racism in opinion formation (Gilliam Jr and Iyengar, 2000; Hurwitz and Peffley, 2005; Kinder and Sanders, 1996; Unnever and Cullen, 2010). Even studies of attitudes towards policing which find that age is a better predictor of attitudes than race ignore this result in favor of extensive discussion of race differences (Dowler and Sparks, 2008; Howell *et al.*, 2004; Weitzer and Tuch, 2005). Research directly related to older persons and the police is primarily concerned with older persons’ fear of criminal victimization, and the fact that

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<sup>1</sup>Age is also closely correlated with partisan identification, which may seem on the surface to explain its importance in determining policing policy preferences. Older Americans are much more politically conservative and much more likely to identify with the Republican Party than younger Americans (Fisher, 2008, 2010). So-called law-and-order issues have long been more central to conservative than to liberal politics in the United States (Edsall and Edsall, 1992; Scheingold, 2011). To the extent that voters form policy preferences based on the preferences of their preferred party’s elites, rather than choosing their preferred party to accord with their preexisting policy preferences (Achen and Bartels, 2017; Lenz, 2013), Republican Party identifiers will be much more supportive of a law-and-order platform. Even gerontologists have noted the extent to which political conservatism is a defining identity of the current generation of older Americans (Hudson, 2018). The data analysis, though, shows that age differences persist even when holding party identification constant.

fear of criminal victimization seems to increase with age even as the real risk of victimization decreases (Ferraro, 1995; Jackson, 2004; Snedker, 2002).

Age-based differences in public opinion about policing matter in part because of an age-based political participation gap. Higher rates of political participation and civic engagement among older Americans as compared to younger Americans are a basic fact of American politics and have been the subject of scholarly study for decades (Glenn and Grimes, 1968; Schlozman *et al.*, 2012; Strate *et al.*, 1989; Timpone, 1998). Even in the 2008 presidential election, when turnout among young voters was historically high, voters 65 or older were 54% more likely to turn out than those aged 18 to 24 (Southwell, 2016). Notably, despite the general difficulty of disentangling age and cohort effects, scholars largely agree that older Americans' high rates of participation are an age effect, and not a cohort effect; the positive correlation between age and voter turnout has been observed at many points in American history (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980). Scholars disagree about the relative importance of resources, maturity, and residential stability in shaping the age effect on political participation, but agree on the existence of such an effect (Ansolabehere, 2012).

There are reasons to suspect that age-based gaps in political participation translate into policies that more closely track the preferences of older rather than younger citizens. Political scientists have long been concerned with how low rates of political participation in some demographic groups could translate into policies that disadvantage those groups (Citrin *et al.*, 2003; Lijphart, 1997). That concern is especially warranted in local elections, where turnout tends to be low overall and relatively small demographic groups have the power to be electorally decisive (Hajnal and Trounstein, 2005). Mounting empirical evidence, including the findings in this paper, suggests that municipal governments may be disproportionately responsive to citizens who participate in elections at disproportionately high rates. Sances (2016), for example, finds that elected property assessors in New York are more likely to underassess higher-value homes relative to lower-value homes than appointed property assessors are, and Berinsky (2005) finds that reforms aimed at easing the voting process, such as early voting and voting by mail, skew the makeup of the electorate more towards the socioeconomically advantaged. There is less evidence on differential participation in non-voting political behaviors, but Einstein *et al.* (2019) show using meeting minute records that participation in local planning and zoning meetings in 97 Massachusetts cities and towns is heavily tilted towards older people — the average age of persons making a comment is 59, while the average age of individuals in the voter file in these towns is 51. Finally, Anzia (2019) shows that senior citizens have outsize influence over transportation policy in California cities due to their relatively higher rates of participation in local politics. In this case, too, differences in both opinion and participation rate work together to over-represent the interests of older individuals.

## Data and Methods

The CCES is a nationally representative, stratified sample survey administered annually online by YouGov/Polimetrix. In 2016, as in all election years, one wave was administered before the national election and a second wave was administered afterwards, with all surveys completed in October and November 2016. YouGov constructs the CCES sample by first creating a target sample via simple random sampling, and then using proximity matching to find individuals in their opt-in online panel who match individuals in the target sample. The survey weights are constructed via entropy balancing. All analysis presented here uses these survey weights.<sup>2</sup> The CCES research team also partners with the private voting data corporation Catalist to match survey respondents to their records in the voter file.

This analysis leverages an original survey question I wrote for the CCES common content (the first part of the survey, administered to all respondents). The question appeared in a series of support/oppose policy proposals in the survey (asking respondents to indicate support or opposition for a specific proposal). The proposal which constitutes the main dependent variable in this study is, “Increase the number of police on the street by 10%, even if it means fewer funds for other public services.” Of the 65,079 total respondents to the CCES common content, 64,549 responded to this question — an item response rate of over 99%. The question includes a proposed trade-off against “other public services” in order to capture respondents who would not only prefer additional policing in general, but also would prefer it *more* than spending on other public services. Even though asking about “other services” is perhaps problematically vague, naming a specific other service (such as education) would have risked introducing noise due to respondents’ relative preference for the named service.

Two variables included in the analysis of CCES responses do not come from the CCES. One is the three-point urban–rural classification, which were matched to CCES responses based on respondent county FIPS codes. These codes come from a 2013 calculation by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), which creates six categories for counties, from the most urban to the most rural.<sup>3</sup> The other is the log of the violent crime rate per 1,000 persons in the respondent’s county in 2014.<sup>4</sup> This information comes from the FBI’s

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<sup>2</sup>For more information on the CCES sampling methodology, see <https://cces.gov.harvard.edu/>.

<sup>3</sup>For the purpose of this study, I consolidate these categories into to three: (1) metropolitan and noncore counties, indicating small towns and rural areas, (2) medium and small metropolitan counties, indicating exurban areas and medium-sized cities (metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) with under 1 million residents), and (3) large central and large fringe metropolitan counties (MSAs with over 1 million residents), indicating urban areas.

<sup>4</sup>2014 was the most recent year for which UCR data aggregated to the county level was available as of 2016.

Table 1: Opinion across relevant demographic categories.

Characteristic	Support for additional policing
Age under 30	0.38
Age 30–44	0.51
Age 45–64	0.62
Age 65+	0.72
Black	0.47
White	0.58
Hispanic	0.57
Asian	0.52
Female	0.58
Male	0.54
No HS	0.58
HS grad	0.62
Some college	0.54
College grad	0.51
Postgrad	0.48
Income under \$30k	0.54
Income \$30k–\$60k	0.57
Income \$60k–\$100k	0.56
Income over \$100k	0.54
Democrat	0.48
Republican	0.69
Independent	0.51
Child under 18	0.54
No child under 18	0.56
Homeowner	0.61
Not a homeowner	0.48

Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) program data, matched to CCES responses again using respondent FIPS codes. The UCR defines four violent crimes: murder or manslaughter, aggravated assault, robbery, and forcible rape.

To illustrate the general level of support for additional policing in relevant demographic categories, Table 1 presents summary statistics.

To investigate the relationship between share of seniors and police force size and budget at the city level, I combined two years of the LEMAS (2007 and 2013) with corresponding city-level variables from the 2006–2010 and 2011–2015 ACS 5-year estimates and the 2007 and 2013 UCR data. This merge yields 669 cities whose law enforcement agencies completed both the LEMAS and the UCR in 2007 and 2013, for 1,338 total observations in the two-period panel analysis.

## Results

### *Illustrating the Importance of Age Differences in Opinion*

Figure 1 summarizes the main results for opinion on policing in 16 age–race groups. These summary results are remarkable for the similar 30-point gap in opinion between those under 30 and those 65 or older within each race group. Despite the racialized nature of the politics of policing, across all four race groups, well less than half of those under age 30, and a very large majority of those 65 or older, support additional policing.

These stark age differences are especially striking in light of different age distributions in these four race groups: only 18% of voting-age whites are under 30, compared to 26% of Blacks, 32% of Hispanics, and 37% of Asians. Over one-fifth of voting-age whites are 65 or older, but only 12% of Blacks, 10% of Hispanics, and 5% of voting-age Asians are 65 or older. As of 2014, there was a 10-year age difference between the median white and the median Black American (43 and 33 years old, respectively), and a 15-year difference

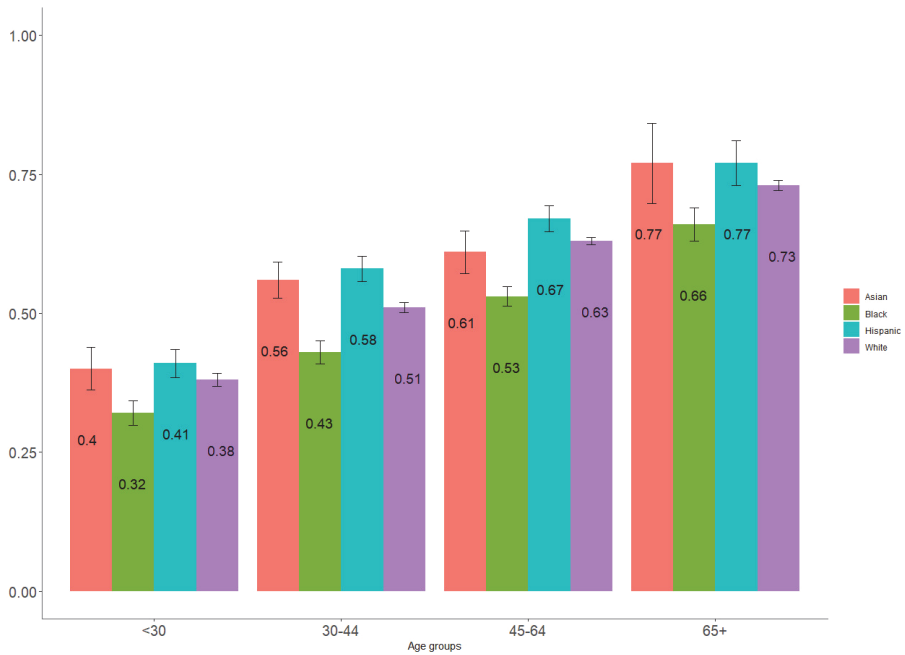


Figure 1: Opinion by race and age. Whiskers are 95% confidence intervals.

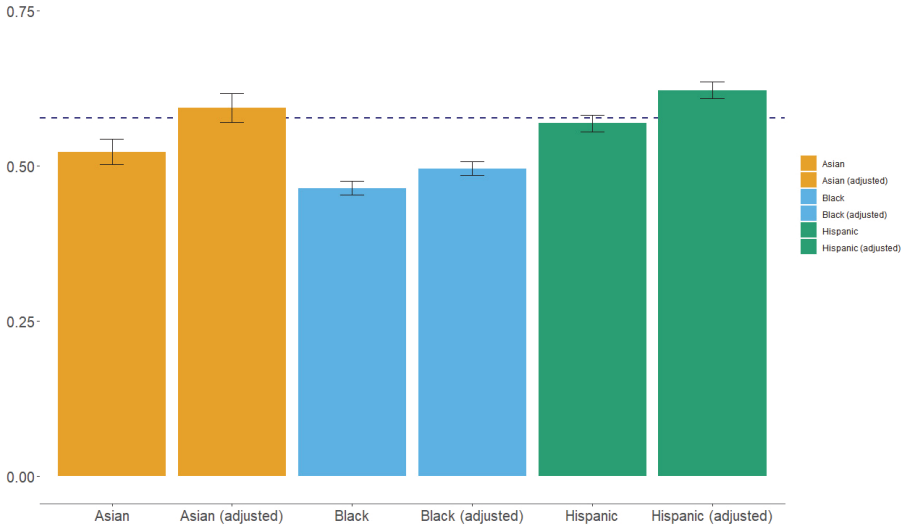


Figure 2: Age-adjusted opinion among Asians, Blacks, and Hispanics. This figure presents opinion in four race groups, along with Asian, Black, and Hispanic opinion adjusted to the age distribution among whites. Opinion among whites is represented by the dashed line. Whiskers are 95% confidence intervals.

between the median white and median Hispanic American (43 and 28 years old, respectively) (Patten, 2016). Because of these differences in age distributions, roughly one-third of the raw difference between white and Black opinion is attributable to different age distributions between these groups, and over 100% of the raw difference between white and Hispanic and white and Asian opinion is attributable to different age distributions in these race groups, as Figure 2 illustrates. For reference, Online Appendix Tables A1 and A2 provide the racial makeup of each age group and the age makeup of each race group.

Previous literature has typically conflated these age and race differences in opinion by examining race differences only, and treating age as a control variable, and thus has ignored the way that different age distributions within race groups mean that age differences and race differences necessarily travel together (Barkan and Cohn, 2005; Weitzer and Tuch, 2004). Prior studies have neglected two key points which I seek to emphasize in the present analysis. First, race differences in opinion (or, for that matter, in behaviors such as voting) amount in significant part to age differences, because nonwhites — especially nonwhite Hispanics — are much younger than whites on average. When twice the share of whites are 65 or older compared to the share of Hispanics 65 or older, white–Hispanic differences cannot be understood without the context of



age group differences. Second, age group differences in opinion are, in this case, statistically significant and substantively larger than race group differences, even when holding other characteristics constant. These age differences cannot be explained by age-correlated differences in education level, family income, partisan identification, parenting status, gender, urbanness of the respondent's county, or the violent crime rate in the respondent's county (as shown in Table 2).

This analysis makes clear that older Americans are significantly more likely than younger ones to prefer additional policing, conditional on a host of relevant variables (race, party identification, gender, county urbanness, county violent crime rate, household income, education level, parenting status, and home ownership status).<sup>5</sup> In particular, Column (3) of Table 2 shows that as compared to being aged 18 to 29, being aged 30 to 44 is associated with 12 percentage points greater likelihood of reporting support for additional policing, being aged 45 to 64 is associated with 23 percentage points greater likelihood of reporting support for additional policing, and being aged 65 or older is associated with 33 percentage points greater likelihood of reporting support for additional policing. Because the mean support for additional policing among those under 30 is 38%, these coefficients represent increases of 32%, 61%, and 87%, respectively, in the probability of reporting support for additional policing among those 30 to 44, 45 to 64, and 65 or older, compared to being under 30. By contrast, conditional on age group and the same set of background characteristics, Black respondents were only 5.7 percentage points (10%) less likely than white respondents to report supporting additional policing, Hispanic respondents were 3.3 percentage points (6%) more likely than whites to report supporting additional policing, and Asian respondents were 5.9 percentage points (10%) more likely than whites to report supporting additional policing.

Notably, age category is a more powerful predictor of support for additional policing than race, holding all other variables constant.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, this is not the first study to show that age is a better predictor of attitudes towards police and policing than race. But previous studies that included this finding papered

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<sup>5</sup>Throughout this paper, I use ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions to estimate the binary outcomes variables of interest (the linear probability model (LPM)). Because standard errors from LPMs are necessarily heteroskedastic, in Online Appendix Table A4 I compute Table 2 with robust standard errors, and they are not importantly different from the standardly calculated standard errors.

<sup>6</sup>I use age category in this analysis instead of numeric age so that the comparisons between age groups and race groups are more easily interpretable. In Online Appendix Table A3, I repeat this analysis using a continuous variable for numeric age, and find that each additional year of age is associated with a 1.2 percentage point greater likelihood of reporting support for additional policing. The relationship appears well-modeled by a linear predictor for age, since the coefficient on the squared term for age is substantively very small; I discuss this issue further in the Online Appendix.

Table 2: Predicting support for additional policing (linear probability model).

	<i>Dependent variable</i>		
	Support for additional policing		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Age 30–44	0.130*** (0.006)	0.131*** (0.006)	0.121*** (0.006)
Age 45–64	0.243*** (0.005)	0.240*** (0.005)	0.234*** (0.006)
Age 65+	0.349*** (0.006)	0.345*** (0.006)	0.325*** (0.007)
Black		-0.096*** (0.006)	-0.057*** (0.007)
Hispanic		0.033*** (0.008)	0.033*** (0.008)
Asian		0.021** (0.010)	0.059*** (0.011)
Democrat			-0.123*** (0.004)
Male			-0.033*** (0.004)
Medium metro county			0.008 (0.006)
Urban county			0.035*** (0.006)
Income \$30k–\$60k			0.008 (0.005)
Income \$60k–\$100k			0.002 (0.006)
Income over \$100k			-0.011 (0.007)
HS grad			0.043*** (0.008)
Some college			-0.014* (0.008)
College grad			-0.062*** (0.009)
Postgrad			-0.124*** (0.010)
Child under 18			0.046*** (0.005)
Homeowner			0.051*** (0.005)
Violent crime rate (log)			0.041*** (0.005)
Constant	0.389*** (0.017)	0.416*** (0.018)	0.353*** (0.022)
Observations	64,549	61,682	55,240
State fixed effects?	Yes	Yes	Yes
R <sup>2</sup>	0.064	0.068	0.095

<sup>1</sup>Notes: \*  $p < 0.1$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

<sup>2</sup>Omitted categories: no HS, income under \$30k, rural county, white, age under 30.

it over in favor of extensive discussion of race differences (Howell *et al.*, 2004; Weitzer and Tuch, 2005).

In addition, there are not complex interactions between age and race with regard to predicting support for additional policing; Figure 1 shows that age differences are consistent within each race group, and Online Appendix Table A5 that almost none of the age–race interaction terms are statistically significant at conventional levels. The insignificance of age–race interaction terms means that the large age associations and relatively small race associations with support for additional policing cannot be explained by large age–race interactions, such as especially low support among young nonwhites.

Most importantly, analysis of support for additional policing shows that there are very large age differences in support for additional policing *within* race groups, and that these age differences are so large that — taken together with the very different age distributions of different U.S. racial groups — they should alter the scholarly understanding of the sources of political support and opposition for additional policing. Specifically, when scholars observe that whites support additional policing at greater rates than nonwhites, they should be aware that high support for additional policing among older Americans, and the older median age of whites compared to nonwhites, is an important part of the phenomenon of higher white support for additional policing.

Support for additional policing, however, is a different attitudinal dimension than perceptions of the efficacy, legitimacy, or fairness of the police. A respondent might, for example, have negative views about the police but nonetheless support additional policing. In Online Appendix Figure A1 and Online Appendix Table A6, I present data on responses to the CCES 2016 question, “Do the police make you feel mostly safe or mostly unsafe?” and show that responses are heavily shaped by race. Indeed, 12.5% of Black respondents report that the police make them feel somewhat or mostly unsafe while simultaneously expressing support for additional policing; the same is true of only 6% of Asian respondents, 5.9% of Hispanic respondents, and 2.9% of white respondents.

Thus, the conclusion that age is more important than race in shaping support for additional policing is not intended to suggest that race is unimportant in shaping attitudes regarding policing in the United States. To the contrary, race is central to the history of American policing (Owusu-Bempah, 2017), and to how Americans view the police as an institution (Brunson and Miller, 2006; Carr *et al.*, 2007).

What explains the finding that age is so much more important to explaining support for additional policing than race? A first step to answering this question is to determine whether observed age differences are mostly due to numeric age or generational cohort. I address this question in the next section, and then return to reasons for the observed cohort differences.

### *Age versus Cohort Differences in Opinion*

Are age differences in support for additional policing primarily due to age (that is, numeric age) or cohort (that is, generational membership)? Because the CCES 2016 is a single cross-section, age and cohort are unavoidably confounded. I thus investigate this age-versus-cohort question using data from the General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS is a widely used survey program which has asked respondents the same core social and political questions in 31 of the years since 1972, along with a changing set of other questions. Since 1994, the survey has been administered in every even-numbered year. In recent years the number of respondents has been nearly 3,000, but it was between 1,000 and 2,000 from 1972 to 1993. Researchers interview the randomly selected, nationally representative participants in person at their homes, and interviews last about 90 minutes.<sup>7</sup> The GSS is a repeated cross-section, and is thus appropriate for assessing the roles of age (that is, numeric age, or place in the life cycle), period (the calendar year), and cohort (an individual's generational membership) if the hierarchical structure of the data is appropriately accounted for (Yang and Land, 2006).

For this analysis of GSS data, I focus on a survey item that on each of the 21 GSS surveys between 1984 and 2016 asked respondents, “We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. I’m going to name some of these problems, and for each one I’d like you to tell me whether you think we’re spending too much money on it, too little money, or about the right amount. Are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on law enforcement?” Following Yang and Land (2006), I estimate coefficients for age, for other relevant covariates which are correlated with age and with the outcome variable, and for cohorts (groups of respondents born in certain years), along with fixed effects for survey years. Table 3 presents the results of this analysis (in which the belief that we are spending “too little” on law enforcement is coded as a 1, and “about the right amount” and “too much” are coded as 0).

Table 3 shows that there is no significant relationship between numeric age and belief that there is too little law enforcement spending, conditional on birth cohort, survey year, and other relevant demographic variables. Only two of the survey years (1994 and 2002) were significantly correlated with spending preference at the 0.05 level or below. By contrast, having been born from 1946 to 1958 is associated with an 8.7 percentage point increase in the likelihood of believing there is too little law enforcement spending, having been born from 1958 to 1970 is associated with a 10.2 percentage point increase in the likelihood of believing there is too little law enforcement spending, and having been born from 1970 to 1982 is associated with an 8.3 percentage point increase in the likelihood of believing there is too little law enforcement

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<sup>7</sup>More information about the GSS is available at <http://gss.norc.org/About-The-GSS>

Table 3: GSS analysis: predicting the assessment that the government spends too little on law enforcement.

	Law enforcement spending ( <i>R</i> believes there is too little)
Age	0.001 (0.001)
Born 1898 to 1910	0.005 (0.096)
Born 1910 to 1922	0.049 (0.077)
Born 1922 to 1934	0.059 (0.064)
Born 1934 to 1946	0.078 (0.052)
Born 1946 to 1958	0.087** (0.040)
Born 1958 to 1970	0.102*** (0.029)
Born 1970 to 1982	0.083*** (0.021)
College grad	-0.037*** (0.010)
Democrat	-0.026*** (0.008)
Income (log)	0.023*** (0.004)
Black	0.071*** (0.011)
Male	-0.079*** (0.007)
Child under 18	-0.001 (0.002)
Homeowner	0.004 (0.008)
Constant	0.233*** (0.049)
Observations	18,464
$R^2$	0.029

<sup>1</sup>Notes: \*  $p < 0.1$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

<sup>2</sup>The variable Black denotes Black respondents; all other respondents are coded as non-Black. The GSS did not begin recording Hispanic respondent identity until 2000.

<sup>3</sup>Reference birth cohort: birth year 1982 to 1994.

<sup>4</sup>Only two survey years (1994 and 2002) were significantly associated with the outcome at the 0.05 level.

<sup>5</sup>Region (rather than state) fixed effects are used here because region is the most granular geographic identifier in the public GSS data.

spending, corresponding to 22%, 25%, and 21% increases, respectively, all compared to having been born from 1982 to 1994 (among whom 40% believe the government is spending too little on law enforcement).

These results suggest that the reason we observe high levels of support for additional policing among those 30 or older as compared to those under 30 in 2016 is because of a generational feature of the cohort born between 1946 and 1982 (who were aged 34 to 70 in 2016), rather than because of the numeric age of those aged 34 to 70 in and of itself. This result is consistent with the assessment of Fisher (2008), who uses twentieth century election returns to show that the most conservative cohort of living Americans are those born between 1946 and 1964. In the next section, I address the question of what mechanisms might explain these cohort differences.

### *What Explains These Cohort Differences?*

Although the present study does not provide direct evidence for why the current cohort of older Americans is much more supportive of additional policing than the current cohort of younger Americans, in this section I present three hypotheses for why these differences may exist. Each hypothesis is consistent with prior studies on the effects of formative events on public opinion and deserves further research.

First, older Americans lived through and remember the most recent crime wave in the United States, from the 1960s through the early 1990s, while younger Americans were born either at the tail end of the crime wave or once the crime drop had already begun. The FBI's UCR data indicate that violent crime rates rose over fourfold between 1960 and 1991, and property crime rates rose almost fivefold over the same period. Crime rates then began a rapid downward trend, which had slowed, but not stopped or reversed, as of 2016 (Chalfin and McCrary, 2018). The long period of increasing crime in the second half of the 20th century featured extensive media reporting on the causes and consequences of this trend (Lowry *et al.*, 2003; Simon, 2007), in addition to resulting in a large number of Americans victimized by crime. The cohort which most opposes additional policing — those born from 1982 to 1994 — is too young to remember this period well. This mechanism would be consistent with a large literature on attitude formation which emphasizes the importance of memory of past events in shaping current attitudes. For example, individuals who have experienced low stock market returns report more risk aversion in financial investments (Malmendier and Nagel, 2011), and an individual's first presidential election is significantly predictive of later voting behavior (Jennings *et al.*, 2009; Sears and Valentino, 1997). The generational cohort differences in experiences of high and low crime rates, along with seniors' greater fear of crime victimization, likely explain why so many more seniors than non-seniors reported that crime was an issue of high or

very importance to them on the CCES 2016 (see Online Appendix Figure A2). Online Appendix Table A7 confirms that greater reporting that crime is a high or very high importance issue cannot be explained by age-correlated demographic variables such as income, education level, county urbanness, or state of residence. Because support for additional policing might be causing respondents to report that crime is an important issue, rather than the other way around, these results should not be interpreted causally. However, they are consistent with a descriptive picture of older Americans as both much more concerned with crime and much more supportive of additional policing than younger Americans, even within racial, income, education, and geographic groups.

Second, for the current generation of younger Americans, the advent and spread of “broken windows” policing (and similar strategies such as proactive policing or zero-tolerance policing) coincided with the age at which they were (and are) most likely to become targets of police attention. For example, in 2011, at the height of the New York Police Department’s stop, question, and frisk program, the NYPD made over 685,000 stops. Over half (51%) of these stops were of individuals aged 14 to 24 (NYCLU, 2012). These individuals would have been born between 1987 and 1997, and were aged 19 to 29 in 2016. It is reasonable to hypothesize that these individuals might oppose additional policing partly as a result of their or their peers’ experiences with police stops. Broken windows policing mainly targeted Black and Hispanic young men (Gelman *et al.*, 2007), and so perhaps personal experience with this policing strategy better explains age variation in opinion of policing among Blacks and Hispanics than it does age variation in policing among whites and Asians.

A corollary consequence of the timing of the introduction and spread of broken windows policing is that older individuals observed a major crime decline in the years that followed. Although most criminologists do not believe that broken windows policing caused the crime decline (e.g., Harcourt and Ludwig, 2006), it is easy to understand how individuals who lived through this major policy change and the subsequent crime decline would attribute the latter to the former (Zimring, 2006).<sup>8</sup>

Third, local television news reports extensively on crime, and local television news viewing is highly concentrated among older Americans (this is also confirmed in the CCES 2016; see Online Appendix Figure A3). In Online

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<sup>8</sup>It should be noted that both of these possible mechanisms (exposure to high crime and exposure to broken windows policing) could be tested via comparison of where respondents of different ages lived when they were younger, and exploiting different crime rates and policing strategies in those places at those times. Unfortunately, such an empirical strategy is not possible using the publicly available GSS data, since the lowest-level geographic identifier is the multi-state region, of which there are nine. These areas are too large to exploit meaningful differences in crime rates or policing strategies.

Appendix Table A8, I show that age is a statistically significant and substantively important predictor of having watched local TV news in the last 24 hours, conditional on a host of sociodemographic variables; in particular, being 65 or older is associated with 24 percentage points (57%) greater likelihood of having watched local TV news in the last 24 hours compared to being under 30. I also show that, although a causal claim is impossible due to the possibility of reverse causality or endogeneity, having watched local TV news in the last 24 hours is associated with 8.5 percentage points (18%) greater likelihood of reporting support for additional policing, even when controlling for age, race, income, county urbanness, gender, party identification, education, home ownership, the presence of a child in the home, and state fixed effects.

The relationship between age and TV news consumption is by definition largely a cohort effect, because television news did not become widespread in the United States until the mid-1950s, and some American cohorts became quite accustomed to watching TV news during its heyday in the 1960s and 1970s (de Leon, 2015). TV news consumption has declined precipitously in the twenty-first century, and is lowest among Americans aged 18 to 29 (Mitchell *et al.*, 2015). Although there is no direct evidence of a relationship between television news consumption and concern about crime in the United States, it is plausible to think that news coverage of local crime (of the sort common on local news) might increase demand for policing, and research has found a strong relationship of this sort by exploiting the random rollout of digital television in Italy (Mastrorocco and Minale, 2018). Future research would be required to definitively show that local TV news consumption causes heightened concern about crime in the United States.

### *Consequences for Policy*

Extensive research has investigated whether elected officials better represent the interests of voters than the interests of non-voters (Griffin and Newman, 2005; Martin and Claibourn, 2013), but it has typically focused on either race (Hajnal and Trounstone, 2005) or income (Gilens and Page, 2014). With the important exception of Anzia (2019), this research mostly neglects two facts. First, the higher voting rates of older individuals, regardless of race or income: those under 30 represent 22% of the voting-age population but only 14% of registered voters, and those 65 or older represent 18% of the voting-age population but 25% of registered voters. Within race groups, these differences tend to be even larger. Twenty-seven percent of voting-age American Blacks are under age 30, but only 17% of Black registered voters are; Hispanics age 65 or older are only 9% of all Hispanics in the United States, but they are fully 14% of Hispanic registered voters. Second, older Americans are whiter and wealthier than younger Americans on average. As a result, policies that favor wealthy whites also necessarily favor the relatively older; conversely,



policies that favor older Americans necessarily also favor whiter and wealthier Americans.

There are many political behaviors other than voting, and these behaviors are at least as important in the shaping of public policy as voting (Schlozman *et al.*, 2012). Importantly, behaviors such as attending local meetings or donating to candidates can convey specific policy preferences to officials in ways that voting cannot (Anzia, 2019). Over-representation of older individuals and under-representation of younger individuals among those participating in politics is one of the most consistent findings in American politics (Ansolabehere, 2012). In Online Appendix B, I confirm that these same patterns are also found in the CCES 2016. These differences in participation rates are potentially consequential for policing policy because demographic groups who are numerical minorities can be decisive in local elections (Hajnal and Trounstein, 2005), and because public safety policy is especially responsive to the preferences of local voters (Gerber and Hopkins, 2011).

At the same time, large differences in both opinion and the rate of political participation do not necessarily mean that policy outcomes are biased towards the preferences of the higher-participation group.

To empirically test the relationship between senior citizen political participation and sworn police force size, I combine data from the LEMAS 2013 survey with city-level demographic data from the ACS (2011–2015 five-year estimates) and crime data from the UCR program (2013 data), and data from the LEMAS 2007 survey with city-level demographic data from the ACS (2006–2010 five-year estimates) and crime data from the 2007 UCR reports.

Table 4 shows that, holding a city's share of Black residents, Herfindahl index of racial diversity (the sum of squared shares of white, Black, Hispanic, and Asian residents), per capita income, violent crime rate, and state of residence constant, a 10% increase in the share of voting-age residents 65 or older is associated with a 1.3% increase in the number of police officers per capita and a 0.9% increase in the police department operating budget per capita. For a city with 50,000 residents, these coefficients translate into a police department with a predicted value of 256 full-time sworn officers adding three full-time sworn officers if its share of voting-age residents 65 or older increased by 10%. For the same city, this model would predict a police department operating budget of \$23.6 million to increase to \$23.8 million if its share of voting-age residents 65 or older increased by 10%. The inclusion of two time periods in this data analysis also allows me to non-parametrically control for national differences in police force sizes between 2007 and 2013. (Just 6.7% of residents are 65 or older in the mean city in this sample, and so for the mean city, a 10% increase in the share of residents 65 or older would represent an increase from 6.7% to 7.3%.)

This analysis should not be considered causal because the share of senior citizens is not randomly assigned to cities. This analysis is also limited by

Table 4: Predicting police force size and budget using city-level demographic variables.

	<i>Dependent variable</i>	
	Officers per capita (log) (1)	Budget per capita (log) (2)
Share 65+ (log)	0.131*** (0.014)	0.089*** (0.018)
Share Black (log)	-0.106*** (0.025)	-0.141*** (0.031)
Herfindahl index	0.132 (0.152)	0.068 (0.193)
PC income (log)	0.347*** (0.054)	0.547*** (0.068)
Violent crime rate (log)	0.586*** (0.015)	0.613*** (0.019)
LEMAS 2013	0.842*** (0.086)	0.678*** (0.110)
Constant	-11.855*** (0.679)	-1.621* (0.845)
State fixed effects?	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,338	1,304
$R^2$	0.679	0.585

Notes: \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

the relatively small number of cities (669) which completed both the LEMAS and the UCR in both 2007 and 2013. But it shows that senior citizen share of the population is significantly positively associated with police force size and budget, even when accounting for important confounders such as city demographics and crime rates.

How exactly might seniors be influencing criminal justice policy in their cities? I do not provide direct evidence of a specific answer to this question in this project. Most likely, it is through a combination of high senior voter turnout rates (which have been documented by many other scholars and I discuss in Online Appendix B), and high rates of senior participation in local meetings with city officials and police officers.

Sociologists and criminologists studying police–community relations have extensively documented the over-representation of older city residents in city- and police-organized efforts to improve police–community relations (Forman Jr., 2004). Despite the success of Chicago’s community policing initiative

in the 1990s in engaging Black residents, for example, an evaluation found that older residents and homeowners were substantially over-represented at so-called beat meetings with officers (Skogan, 2006). In Cincinnati, too, a RAND-administered survey of 91 of the 229 participants in 16 observed police-community meetings found that the median age at these meetings was 48 and the median number of years lived in Cincinnati to date was 30 (Riley *et al.*, 2005). More recently, journalists covering the NYPD's new initiative to hold police-community meetings, called Build the Block meetings, found that "young people were absent. The meetings, held at public housing developments, senior centers, Police Athletic League facilities, and other community spaces, were instead attended by mostly older residents with complaints about parking, marijuana, teenagers loitering, homelessness, and various other quality-of-life complaints" (Abraham and Mercado, 2018). Although I do not have direct evidence of this mechanism of senior influence, it is consistent with other research which has found that seniors are heavily over-represented in other city-level policy-making forums, including zoning meetings (Einstein *et al.*, 2019) and transportation policy (Anzia, 2019). Other research on local senior political participation, along with existing evidence of senior over-representation in police-community meetings, makes such involvement one likely mechanism of senior influence on city-level policing policy.

## Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, I have sought to demonstrate that senior citizens are a pro-police interest group by (1) showing that today's senior citizens have shared attitudes on policing not shared with younger age cohorts, even co-ethnic younger age cohorts, and (2) showing that disproportionately high rates of political participation by today's seniors likely result in larger and better-funded police departments in cities where they make up a relatively larger share of the population.

The wave of civil rights protests that took place during the summer of 2020 drew strength from a pre-existing progressive shift in public opinion on issues of race (McElwee, 2018). The protests also seem to have further contributed to an overall leftward move in attitudes on issues of race and policing (Thomas and Horowitz, 2020). Although this survey question was asked well before those protests, dynamics around them are consistent with this study's findings: although Blacks were overrepresented among protesters at 17% of protesters compared to 11% of the population, people aged 18 to 29 were even more overrepresented among protesters, making up 41% of protesters and 19% of the 2020 population (Barroso and Minkin, 2020). It is fair to say that the current shifts in opinion on policing and race, then, reflect a country that is both more racially diverse than ever before, and one in which young people

are more progressive than their older counterparts (Levin, 2019; Parker *et al.*, 2019).

This paper's results suggest that age differences in opinion and political participation can help explain the persistence of large police departments despite falling crime and criticism of police tactics. The rate of violent crime fell by 38% and the rate of property crime fell by 44% between 1987 and 2013. But U.S. local police departments expanded the sizes of their officer corps by 34% on average over the same period (Reaves, 2015). Moreover, during this same period, police departments in low-income, majority-minority neighborhoods faced mounting criticism from community organizations (Brunson and Miller, 2006). Opinion and participation gaps provide an explanation for how these dynamics can exist in unison. City policy seems to be responsive to the public's preferences (Gerber and Hopkins, 2011), and many police departments make specific efforts to incorporate community feedback into their strategy and tactics (Tillyer, 2018). But if older Americans are participating in politics at higher rates than their younger counterparts, this differential participation may be skewing policy outcomes towards the preferences of older Americans. Additional policing may be preferred by older people, but can lead younger people to have frequent contact with the police — which can be both burdensome in and of itself and have serious downstream consequences for incarceration and labor market participation (Lopoo and Western, 2005; Meares, 2004; Pager, 2008). These results raise the possibility that testing strategies for increasing youth participation in criminal justice policymaking — already an area of exploration by some scholars of the criminal justice system — could be a fruitful avenue for future research as well (Cohen, 2010; Luttig and Cohen, 2016; Weaver and Geller, 2019; Weaver *et al.*, 2019).

Finally, by illuminating how racial minorities suffer disproportionately from the well-studied problem of youth under-representation (Schlozman *et al.*, 2012), these results imply that increased youth political participation may also help ameliorate racial minority under-representation in politics. Prior research has noted the severe under-representation of minorities in local-level political institutions, such as city councils, and attributed this to low minority turnout (Hajnal and Trounstone, 2005), insufficient voting rights protections (Marschall and Rutherford, 2016), or districting practices (Trounstone and Valdin, 2008). The challenge of youth representation may be especially acute in the case of criminal justice policy, where individuals most directly affected are often officially disenfranchised or informally demotivated from political participation due to their adverse experiences with government authority (Lerman and Weaver, 2014; White, 2016). Increased political participation among those who are both young *and* non-white could reverberate in several policy domains which implicate dimensions of both age and race.

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