

Modern Indicators of Historical Injustices: A Dataset of Structural Bias in the Policing of Racialized Violence in Sundown Towns

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Background

This research links historical racial inequalities with modern social issues by examining reported hate crimes and policing of intergroup violence. Using sundown communities—**places that expelled Black residents after Reconstruction**—as a reference point, the research compares racially exclusive communities with sundown policies to other communities not identified by James Loewen, the seminal author on the topic. Despite enduring racial homogeneity, hate crimes and bias-motivated violence remain prevalent in these areas.

The study also scrutinizes local law enforcement responses, categorizing them as a) true compliance (reporting at least one hate crime incident over several years), b) ceremonious compliance (submitting reports without acknowledging incidents), and c) noncompliance (refusing to report). This approach challenges the “official story” of hate crimes by addressing systematic reporting bias among police agencies in American counties. As part of a broader UROP project, this work employs county-level (presented) and multilevel analysis (not presented) to reveal how historical exclusion continues to shape structural racism in American Law Enforcement.

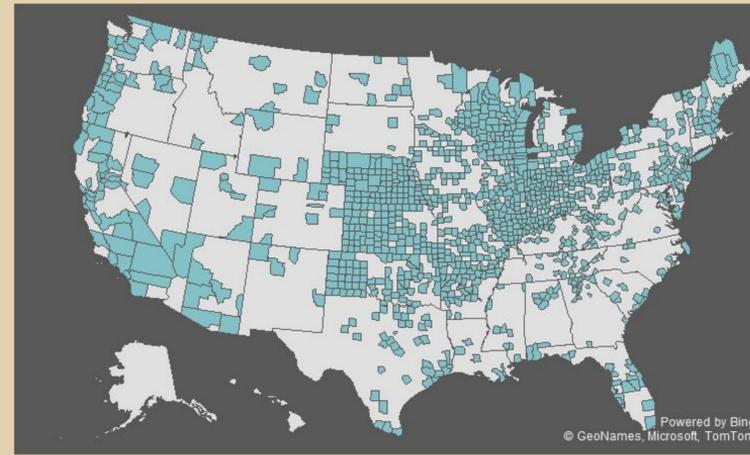
Methodology

This study uses three datasets to examine outcomes of reported hate crime, policing compliance, and qualitative accounts of intergroup violence. First, data on sundown communities (hereafter SCs) comes from the extensive primary collections of historical sociologist James Loewen (2018). Second, information on reported hate crimes is yielded from the Uniform Crime Report between 2005-2016. Third, given that recent research has revealed troubling patterns of systemic bias in hate crime policing (Mills et al., 2024), the current study engages in ongoing primary data collection to build a dataset of personal testimonies detailing direct or vicarious experiences of targeted violence, threats of violence, or other forms of intergroup prejudice, discrimination, and segregation for the same time period.

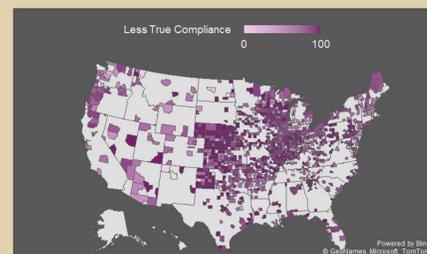
Qualitative Exploration

Four testimonies shared from people in counties where % of agencies are biased in their hate crime reporting

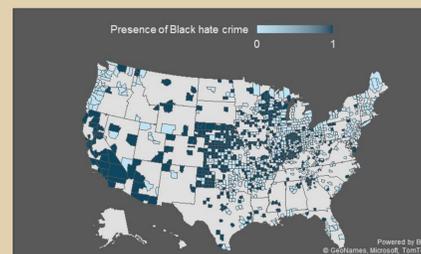
- Surf City; Pender County; NC: Quote from police Chief Mike Halstead, “I have instructed my officers to be vigilant, if threatened take appropriate action. If that means shoot a thug, then do it and answer for it while you are still alive not dead.” **(100% bias)**
- Flagler Beach; Flagler County; FL: A Flagler officer used excessive force and racial slurs twice. During a traffic stop, he jerked an elderly, disabled man from his car and pepper-sprayed him. Later, during a disturbance call, he used a racist slur while arresting a suspect. **(85% bias)**
- Bellingham; Whatcom County; WA: In Bellingham Park, a man addressed the victim with racial slurs before starting a fight. The suspect repeatedly punched the man and attacked him with a screwdriver while continuing to use racial slurs. **(45% bias)**
- Dunlap; Sequatchie County; TN: A mixed family felt racially targeted by store owners, claiming rude treatment, frequent price errors, ignoring them, and continued poor service. **(0% bias)**



County-Level Visualization of Sundown Towns in America



Panel A
Prevalence of structural bias in policing hate crimes in counties where historical sundown communities exist, between 2005-2016



Panel B
Presence of anti-Black hate crime in counties where racial minority population is nonzero AND at least one agency reported a hate crime between 2005-2016

32% OF

Counties with SCs had no racially marginalized population or reported race/Black hate crime.

53% OF

Counties with SCs had at least one “non-compliant” police agency

96% OF

Counties with SCs had at least one “ceremonious compliant” police agency

65% OF

Counties with SCs had primary accounts of intergroup violence, threat, and prejudice

Highlights

- Sundown communities are pervasive, appearing in 1095 American counties (not including Alaska or Hawaii)
- The average Black population in counties with historical sundown communities today is about 5%
- 503 of the 1095 counties with historical sundown communities did not report ANY anti-Black hate crimes between 2005 and 2016.
- About 98% of counties with historical sundown communities had at least one agency that reflected structural bias in hate crime reporting (Mills et al., 2024)
- In ongoing qualitative exploration, the current research finds evidence of primary accounts of violence, threats, or prejudice in 65% of sundown communities that never reported ANY hate crime

Discussion

- Areas where historical sundown communities thrived deserve more attention due to ongoing issues with structural racism
- Many counties with sundown communities experience disproportionately harmful policing practices toward marginalized communities, especially Black
- Further research should use multilevel modeling to examine relationships between communities and counties
- More qualitative work will be done to examine primary accounts of prejudice and discrimination, focusing especially on the Midwest

Future Directions

- Complete qualitative data collection on primary accounts of intergroup violence, threats, and segregation.
- Compare these findings with hate crime and compliance datasets.
- Further investigate communities exhibiting structural policing bias.

Resources

