

# How Informed are Americans about Race and Policing?

Research Report: CUPES-007 | February 20, 2021

## Research Question

This is the seventh report from the *Civil Unrest and Presidential Election Study* (CUPES). In this report, we investigate a complex and defining issue of 2020 (and, no doubt, many years ahead): race and policing. Amidst calls to “defund” and reform police agencies, informed understandings of police-citizen interactions are crucial. So, here we ask the question: across the political spectrum, how knowledgeable are people when it comes to the available data on fatal police shootings of Black Americans?

## Methodology

### Data Source

- Civil Unrest and Presidential Election Study (“CUPES,” collected in September/October 2020)

### Participants

- 980 adults in the United States from the CUPES dataset that reported a consistent political orientation (see measures below).
- $M_{age} = 47.16$  Years ( $SD = 17.24$  Years), 56% Female

### Measures

- **Political Orientation:** Respondents were asked, “When thinking about the following issues, where would you place yourself on the political continuum?” Participants were asked about their (a) financial/economic orientation and (b) social/ cultural orientation. If participants answered, “very liberal” for both, they were labeled “very liberal.” If they answered “liberal,” “moderate,” “conservative,” or “very conservative” for both, they were labeled “liberal,” “moderate,” “conservative,” and “very conservative,” respectively.
- **Knowledge About Race and Policing:** Measured with two questions.
  1. “If you had to guess, how many unarmed Black men were killed by police in 2019?” Option categories ranged from “about 10” to “more than 10,000.”
  2. “If you had to guess, in 2019 what percentage (%) of people killed by police were Black?” Respondents could choose any number from 0 to 100.

## Summary of Findings

1. The available data on police shootings of unarmed Black men is incomplete; however, existing data indicate that somewhere between 13-27 unarmed black men were killed by police in 2019. Adjusted for the number of law enforcement agencies that have yet to provide data, this number may be higher, perhaps between 60-100.
  - Yet, over half (53.5%) of those reporting “very liberal” political views estimated that 1,000 or more unarmed Black men were killed, a likely error of at least an order of magnitude (see Figure 1).
2. The available data suggest that 24.9% of people killed by police in 2019 were Black. However, across the political spectrum, survey participants overestimated this number.
  - Those who reported being “liberal” or “very liberal” were particularly inaccurate, estimating the proportion to be 56% and 60%, respectively (see Figure 2).

### Take-home Messages

1. Our overall findings indicate that people are uninformed regarding the available data on fatal police shootings in the US.
2. Specifically, we found that the more people reported being “liberal” or “very liberal” on social and fiscal matters, the greater the discrepancy between the available data and their estimations.
3. What might explain peoples’ misestimations of these statistics? Is it liberals’ relatively greater concern with racism? Differential media consumption? Perhaps you have an idea or explanation you’d like to share? Have an interpretation of this you want to share? Email it to [research@skeptic.com](mailto:research@skeptic.com)

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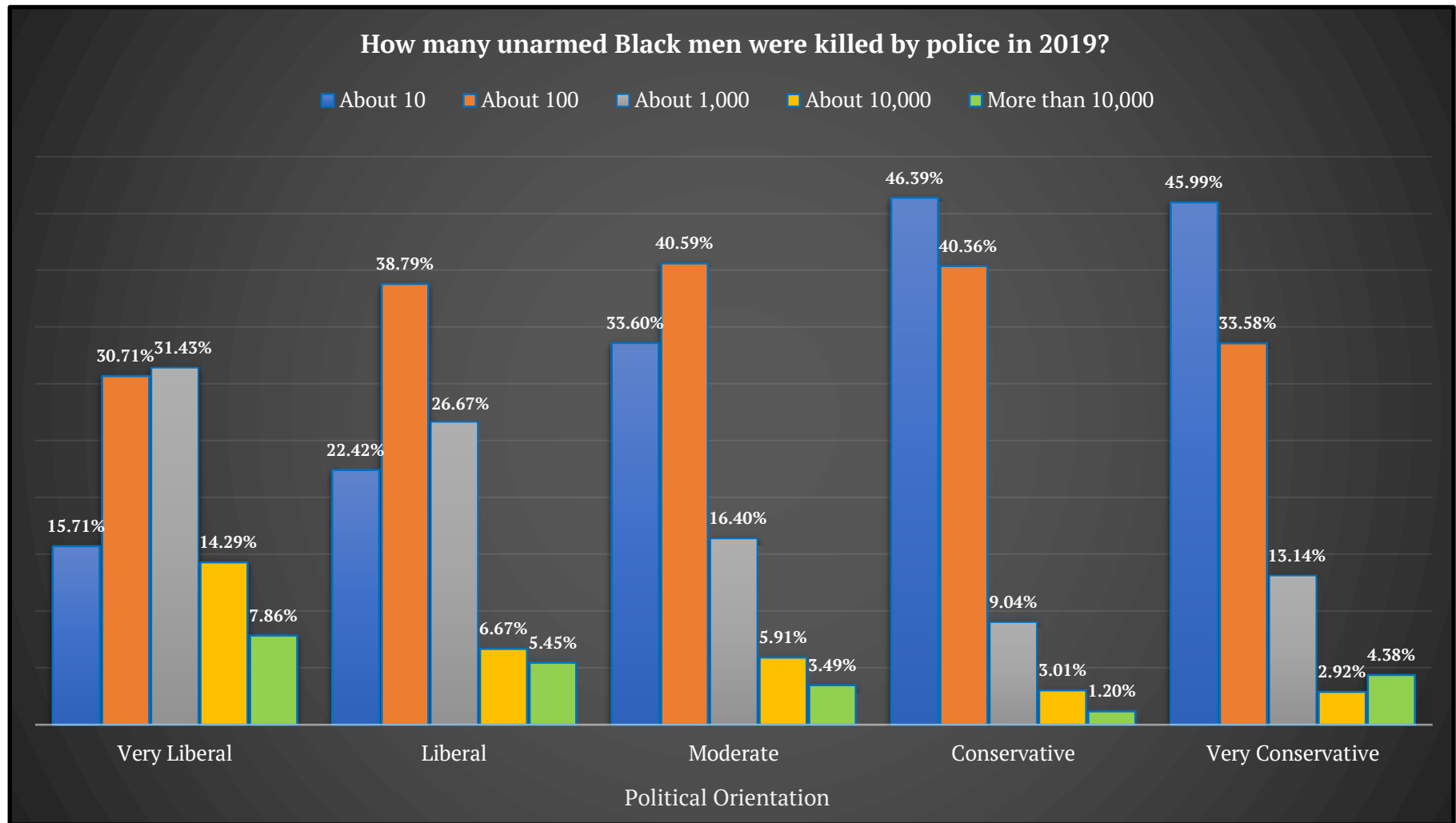
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Figure 1

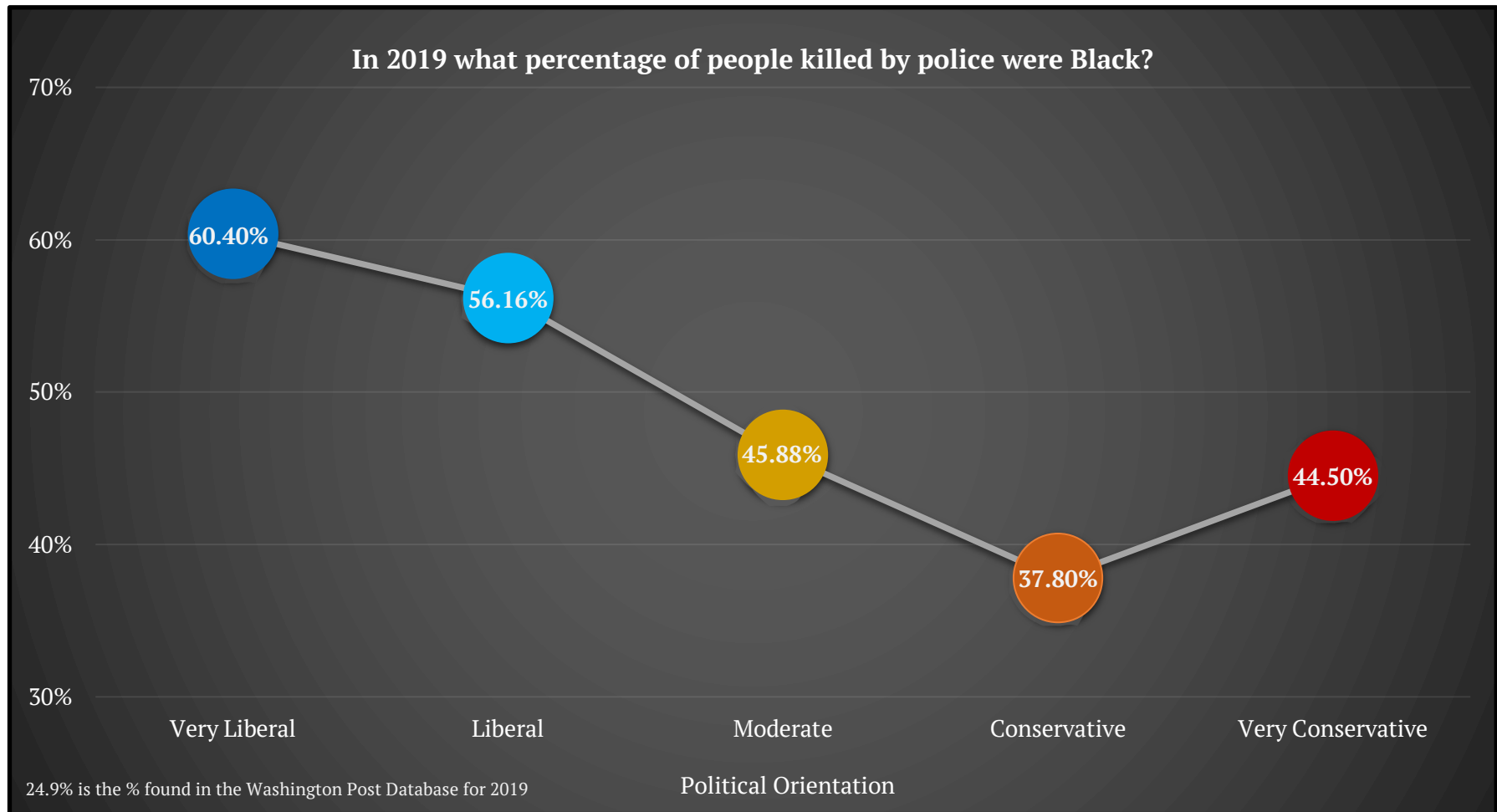


**What does the available data actually indicate?**

According to the Washington Post database, regarded by Nature magazine as the “most complete database,” 13 unarmed black men were fatally shot by police in 2019. According to a second database called “Mapping Police Violence”, compiled by data scientists and activists, 27 unarmed black men were killed by police (by any means) in 2019.

**\*Important Note:** Existing databases are compiled from a central dataset, the FBI’s National Use-of-Force Data Collection. Critically, this data collection effort was established only recently in 2019, law enforcement participation is voluntary and, as of 2020, only 5,030 out of 18,514 federal, state and local law enforcement agencies have provided use-of-force data.

Figure 2



**What does the available data actually indicate?**

According to peer-reviewed research (see citations in supplemental materials), 26.7% of the victims of police shooting fatalities between 2015 and 2020, were Black. Another source, BBC News’ “Reality Check Team,” reported that in 2019 specifically 23.4% of the victims of police shooting fatalities were Black.

Post hoc statistical analysis for the analyses in this figure (see supplemental materials) indicate that those identifying as “Very Liberal” and “Liberal” differed significantly from “Moderates” “Conservatives” and “Very Conservatives.”

For additional information (e.g., statistical output, citations) not included in this document, view the supplemental page for this report located at [skeptic.com/research-center/civil-unrest-presidential-election-study/](http://skeptic.com/research-center/civil-unrest-presidential-election-study/)