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## BLACK SHERIFFS ARE LESS LIKELY TO PURSUE LOW-LEVEL ARRESTS AGAINST PEOPLE OF COLOR

New research finds that black sheriffs have different priorities from their white counterparts.

TOM JACOBS · JUN 11, 2019

The phrase "There's a new sheriff in town" serves as an admonishment that, under fresh leadership, things are about to change. It turns out that's literally true: [New research](#) reports that, when a black sheriff replaces a white one, there is a notable shift in who gets arrested under the new regime, and who doesn't.

"I find compelling evidence that the race of the sheriff affects the race of arrestees, especially for less-serious offenses," writes economist [George Bulman](#) of the University of California–Santa Cruz.

Specifically, Bulman finds that the ratio of blacks to whites who are arrested is significantly higher under white sheriffs, in part because white sheriffs place a greater emphasis on policing criminal behavior that is traditionally associated with black Americans.

Bulman created a data set noting the race of every county sheriff between 1991 and 2015. [Sheriffs](#) are the top law-enforcement officers in each of the United States' 3,100 counties, primarily patrolling unincorporated areas and cities too small to have their own police forces.

The economist discovered 102 counties that had seen at least one transition between a black sheriff and a white one over the course of those 24 years. Utilizing comprehensive arrest records kept by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, he compared the records of the old and new sheriffs, and found a clear pattern.

"The estimates reveal that years during which a county has a black rather than a white sheriff are associated with a reduction in the arrest rate of blacks relative to whites of 6 to 8 percent," he writes. This ratio remained valid after Bulman controlled for a variety of factors, including the arrest rates of municipal police forces located within those same counties.

Bulman found that, after a black sheriff takes command from a white one, "arrests of blacks fall relative to whites. During years in which a black sheriff is in office, there are approximately 1.6 fewer arrests of blacks per 1,000 black county residents."

Digging deeper into the data, he found no statistically significant change in the racial composition of arrests for the most serious crimes, but identified "large and significant" changes for less-serious ones—the sorts of infractions where officers have considerable discretion over whether or not to make an arrest.

Bulman then looked at the specific crimes people had been arrested for. He compared crimes for which blacks are more frequently arrested, such as robbery, gambling, murder, vagrancy, fraud, and prostitution, with those for which whites are more frequently taken into custody, including driving while under the influence, sex offenses, manslaughter, arson, and vandalism.

He found that, after a black sheriff took office, there was a significant reduction in arrest rates for crimes traditionally associated with black Americans. In contrast, there was no change in the arrest rate for crimes traditionally associated with whites.

This finding suggests that the black sheriffs, and the deputies they hired, had followed different priorities than their white predecessors in deciding what types of crimes to pursue aggressively.

Bulman notes that an overwhelming majority of county sheriffs are white; only 4 percent of counties had a black sheriff during any year between 1991 and 2015.

White sheriffs who are committed to justice for all may want to think about why, compared to their counterparts of color, they put a greater emphasis on policing crimes that a white majority traditionally associates with black people. Black residents of their counties may not have these statistics at their fingertips, but they know when they're being targeted.