

Why Are People Misinformed About Fatal Police Shootings?

Research Report: CUPES-008 | March 6, 2021

Research Question

This is the eighth report from the *Civil Unrest and Presidential Election Study* (CUPES). In our last report, we found a surprising degree of inaccuracy about race and policing amongst the American public across the political spectrum. In particular, those who reported being politically “liberal” or “very liberal,” appeared to be the most uninformed. This week we report on a follow-up set of analyses on this important issue. What factors might contribute to peoples’ misconceptions about race and police shootings?

Methodology

Data Source

- Civil Unrest and Presidential Election Study (“CUPES,” collected in Sept & Oct 2020)

Participants

- 940 adults in the United States from the CUPES dataset that identified as “white.”
- $M_{age} = 49.48$ Years ($SD = 16.64$ Years), 53% Female

Measures

- **Trust in News Media:** measured with the question, “How trustworthy would you say news media is in general?” Answers were placed in one of three categories: low trust, medium trust, or high trust.
- **Perceptions of Police Brutality:** Measured with two questions:
 1. “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.
 2. “Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements: - I think police officers are more violent today than they used to be.” Answer options ranged from “strongly disagree” (-2) to “strongly agree” (+2).
- **Educational Attainment:** Measured with the question, “What is the highest level of education you have achieved?”

Summary of Findings

- Our results suggest that the higher a person’s level of educational attainment, the more they trust news media (Fig. 1).
- Relatedly, people that report high trust in news media:
 1. are more misinformed regarding the data on race and fatal police shootings (Fig. 2)
 2. think that police are more violent today than in the past (Fig. 3).
- Subsequent mediation analysis indicates that people with higher levels of educational attainment may be more misinformed about fatal police shootings, in part, because of their relatively higher trust in news media.

Take-home Messages

- We provided some preliminary insight into what might contribute to misinformation on race and fatal police shootings: educational attainment and trust in news media.
- Our findings are convergent with other work on education and media:
 1. Yudkin, Hawkins and Dixon (2019) found that higher educational attainment was associated with greater inaccuracy about others’ political attitudes.
 2. Rosling and colleagues (2018) show that intellectuals are reliably cynical and uninformed about important trends (e.g., assuming global poverty is rapidly rising when it is rapidly falling).
 3. These are particularly disconcerting trends when coupled with what Rafail and McCarthy (2018), and others have shown--that cable news reporting is consistently slanted toward the biases of viewers.
- Undoubtedly, other factors are playing a role. Do you have an interpretation of this you want to share? Email it to us (research@skeptic.com) and it may be included in the Fall issue of Skeptic Magazine.

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Figure 1

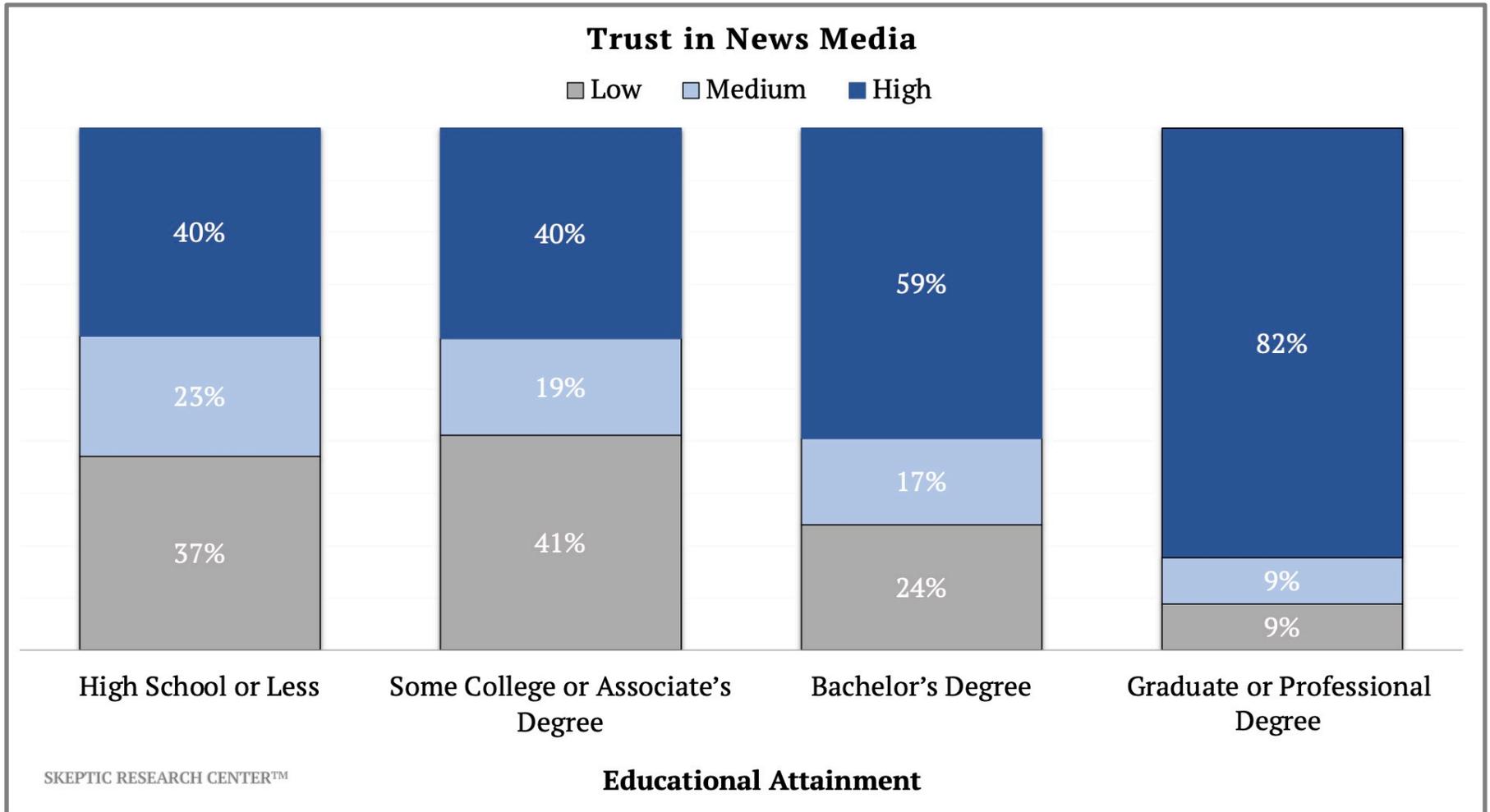


Figure Note

Individuals in the “high school or less” category represented 31.2% of our sample, “some college or associate’s degree” represented 26.4% of the sample, “bachelor’s degree” represented 23.1% of the sample, and “graduate or professional degree” represented 19.3% of the sample. The differences represented in this figure are statistically significant ($p < .01$).

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/

Figure 2

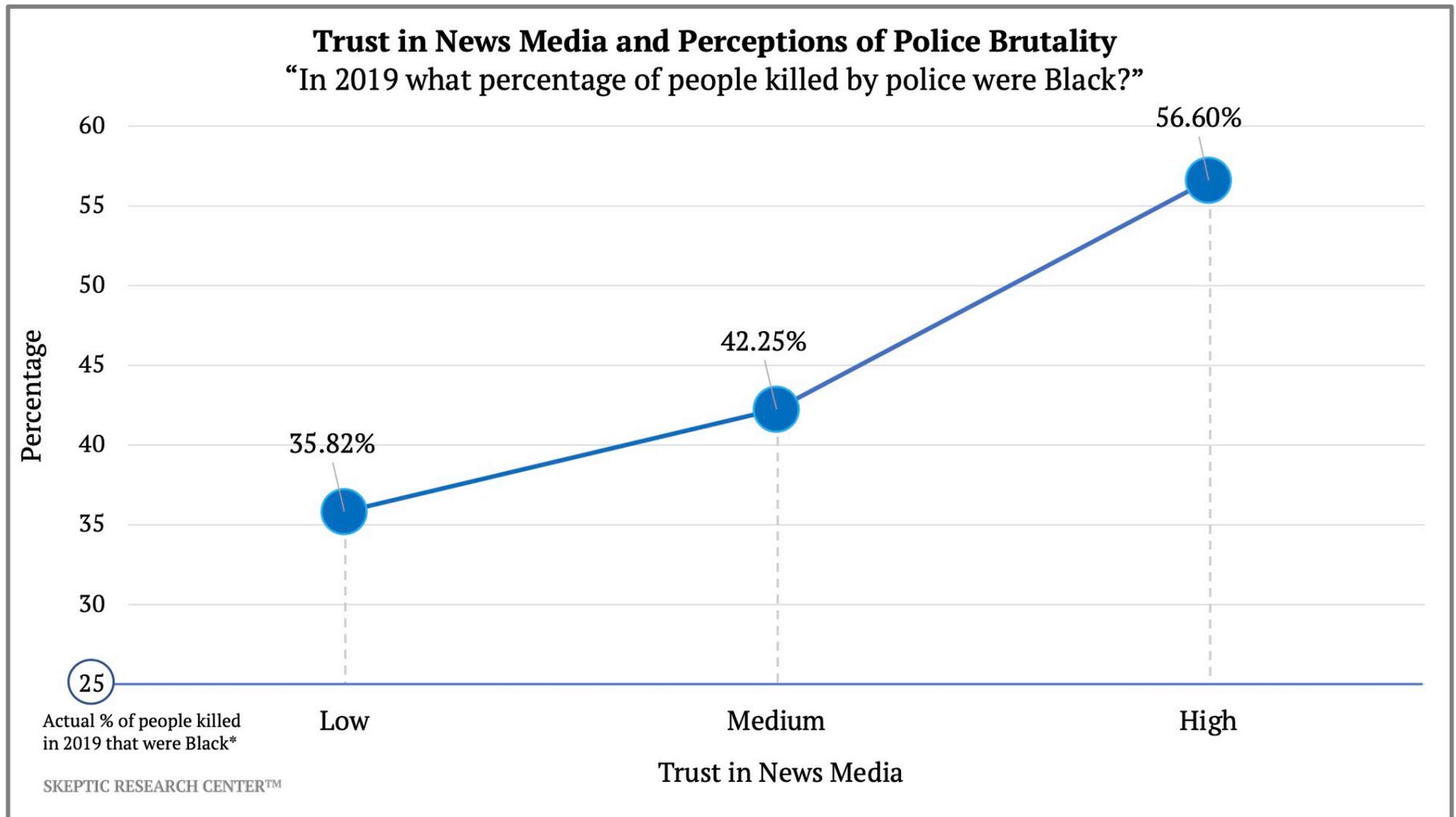


Figure Note

The differences between those in the low, medium, and high trust groups are statistically significant ($p < .01$). The difference, for example, in percentage estimated between individuals that reported low trust in news media and high trust in news media would be considered medium-to-large in size based on interpretation conventions regarding the statistics we used.

*This percentage (rounded up) was taken from the Washington Post Database. Refer to our last report, CUPES-007, for more information.

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Figure 3

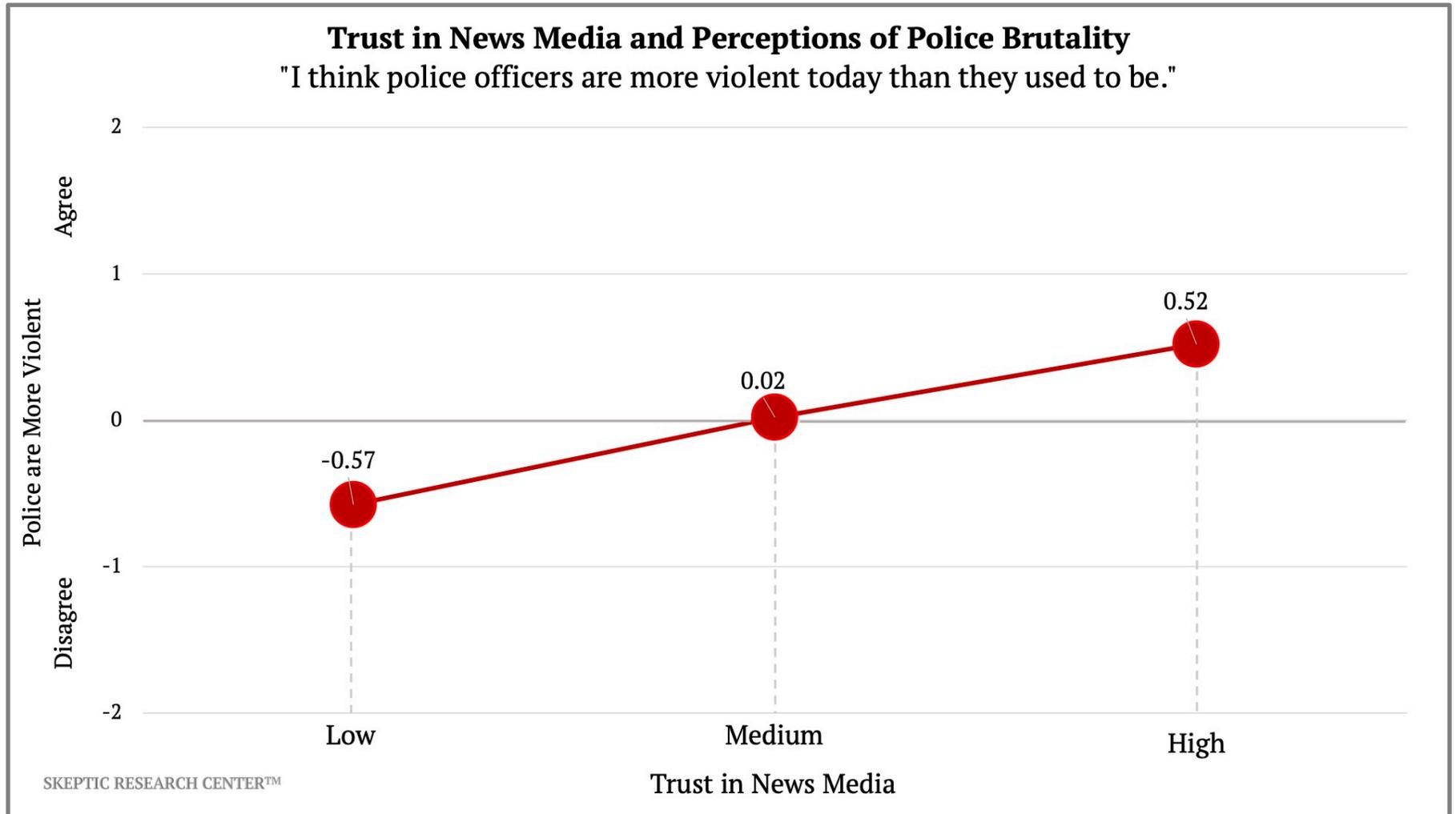


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The differences between those in the low, medium, and high trust groups are statistically significant ($p < .01$). The difference, for example, in agreement with the statement between individuals that reported low trust in news media and high trust in news media would be considered large in size based on interpretation conventions regarding the statistics we used.

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