

Update: How Informed are Americans about Race and Policing?

Research Report: PADS-003 | April 4, 2023

Research Question

“Defund the police” was the rallying cry of liberals in the Summer of 2020, motivating “mostly peaceful” protests that led to property damage in excess of two billion dollars across at least 20 US states (Johansmeyer, 2021). To better understand the motivation behind these protests, in 2020, we surveyed people about their estimates of the number of unarmed black men shot by police in 2019 and found a shocking degree of inaccuracy, particularly amongst progressives. In this report, we present an update on these data and ask: have people become more knowledgeable when it comes to the available data on fatal police shootings of unarmed black Americans?

Methodology

Data Source

- Political Accuracy and Divisions Study (“PADS,” collected August 2022 - October 2022)

Data Quality Control

- All participants in this dataset passed attention, response time, fraud, duplication, and bot checks.

Participants

- 3014 adults in the United States (51.2% Female)
- Average Age = 44.39 years (SD = 17.41 years)
- 46.4% White; 32.2% Hispanic; 21.2% Black

Measures

- **Political Orientation:** Respondents were asked, “When thinking about [social/cultural issues], where would you place yourself on the political continuum?” Answer options were: “very liberal,” “liberal,” “moderate,” “conservative,” or “very conservative.”
- **Knowledge About Race and Policing:** Respondents were asked, “If you had to guess, how many unarmed Black men were killed by police in 2021?” Option categories ranged from “about 10” to “more than 10,000.”

Summary of Findings

1. In our 2020 sample of 980 adults, we found that people of all political orientations tended to be inaccurate about the number of unarmed black men killed by police in 2019.
 - Those identifying as “very liberal” were the most inaccurate. While an estimated 12 unarmed black men were actually killed by police in 2019, over 30% of “very liberal” participants believed this number was “about 1,000” (see Fig. 1).
2. In our new sample of over 3,000 adults, we asked participants to estimate the number of unarmed black men killed by police in 2021. Inaccuracy was again the norm across political orientations.
 - Liberals were, once again, the least accurate group—over 70% gave answers that were off by between 1 and 2 orders of magnitude (i.e., saying 100 or 1,000 unarmed black men were killed by police, when the actual number was 11; see Fig. 2).
3. Between 2020 and 2022, there was modest improvement in the accuracy of peoples’ beliefs (see Fig. 3).
 - While liberals increased how often they gave the false answer of “About 100,” they gave more extreme answers less often.
 - The greatest improvement in estimates occurred among those identifying as “very conservative.”

Take-Home Message

- Overall, many people still hold false beliefs about this issue, particularly liberals. However, it is possible that the public dissemination of accurate data on this topic has had a net positive impact on the accuracy of peoples’ beliefs. It is also possible that the lack of recent widespread rioting related to this issue has moderated people’s estimates.
- Have another interpretation? Share it here: research@skeptic.com

SKEPTIC

This report was brought to you by the **Skeptic Research Center** and the Worldview Foundations Research Team.

Become Involved

skeptical.com/research-center/become-involved

Researchers

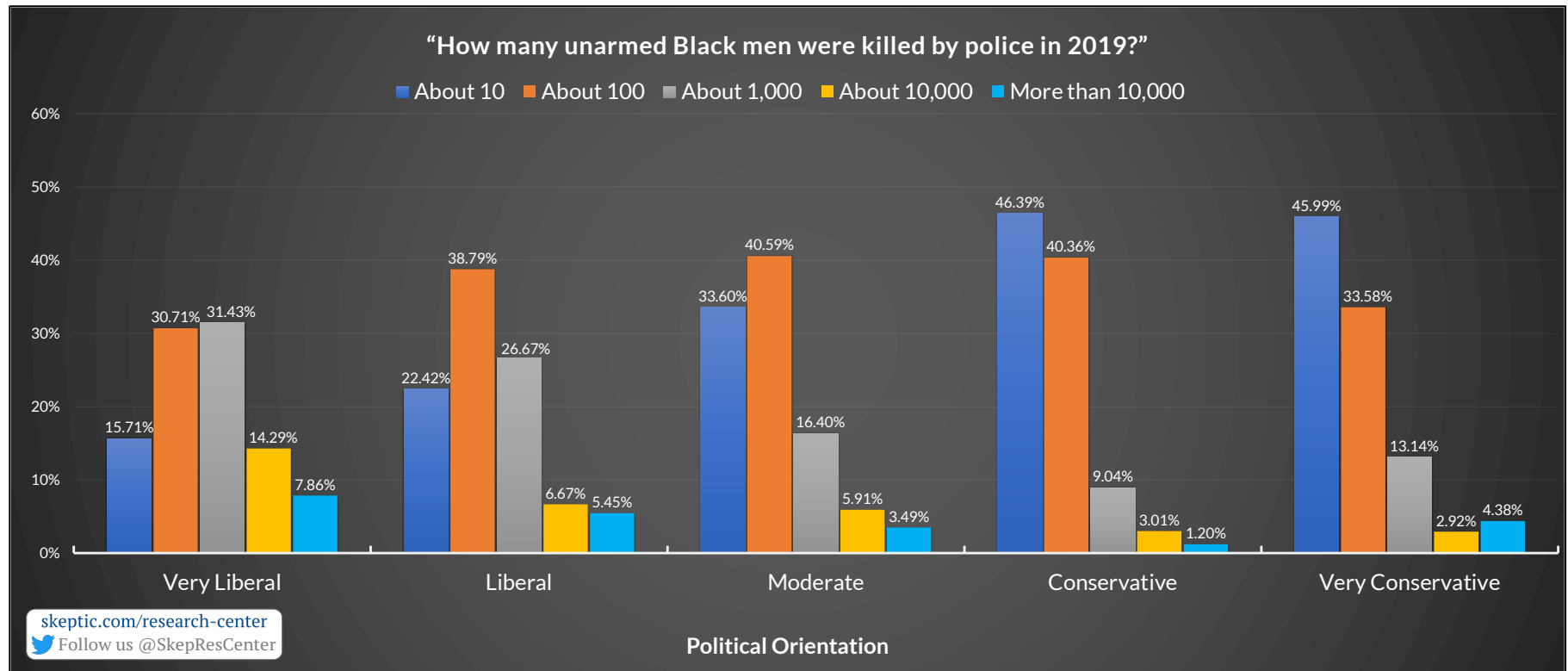
Kevin McCaffree, PhD
Anondah Saide, PhD

research@skeptic.com

Suggested Citation

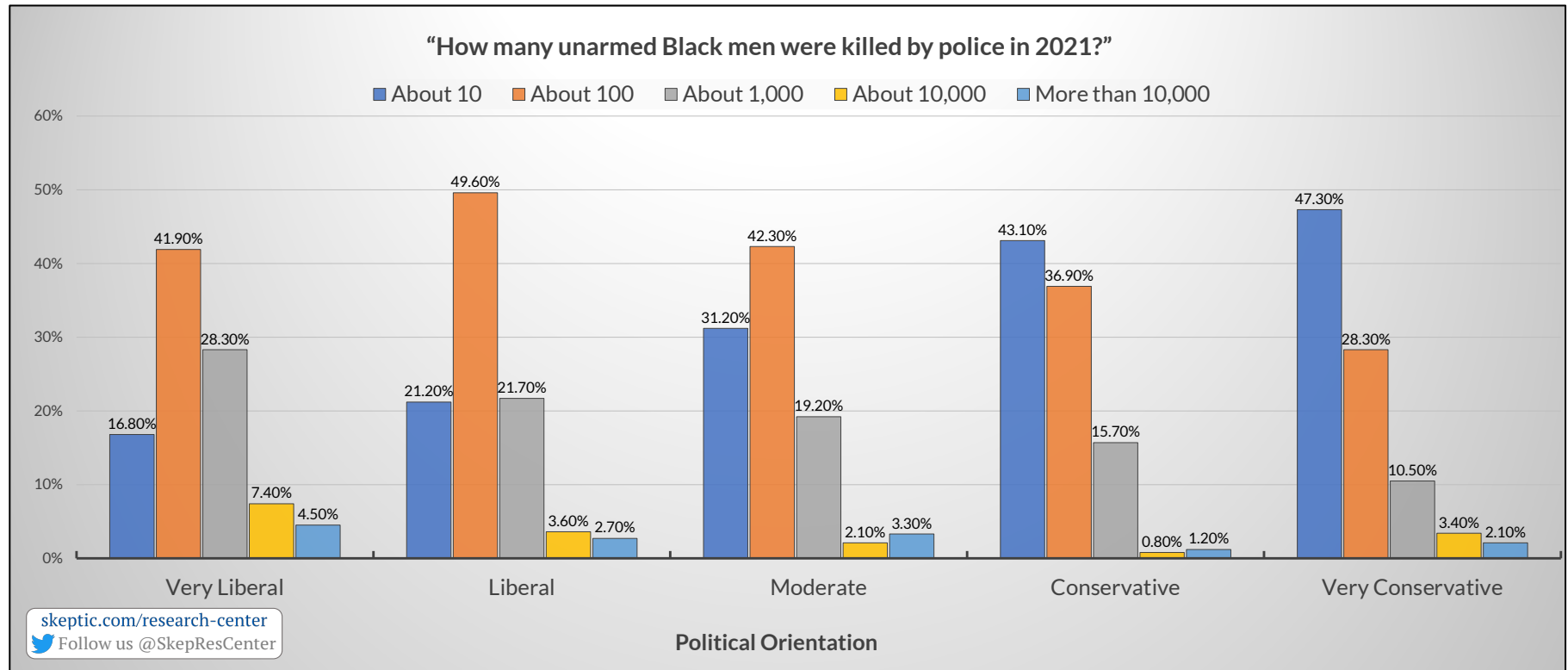
McCaffree, K., & Saide, A. (2023). Update: How Informed are Americans about Race and Policing? Skeptic Research Center, PADS-003.

Figure 1



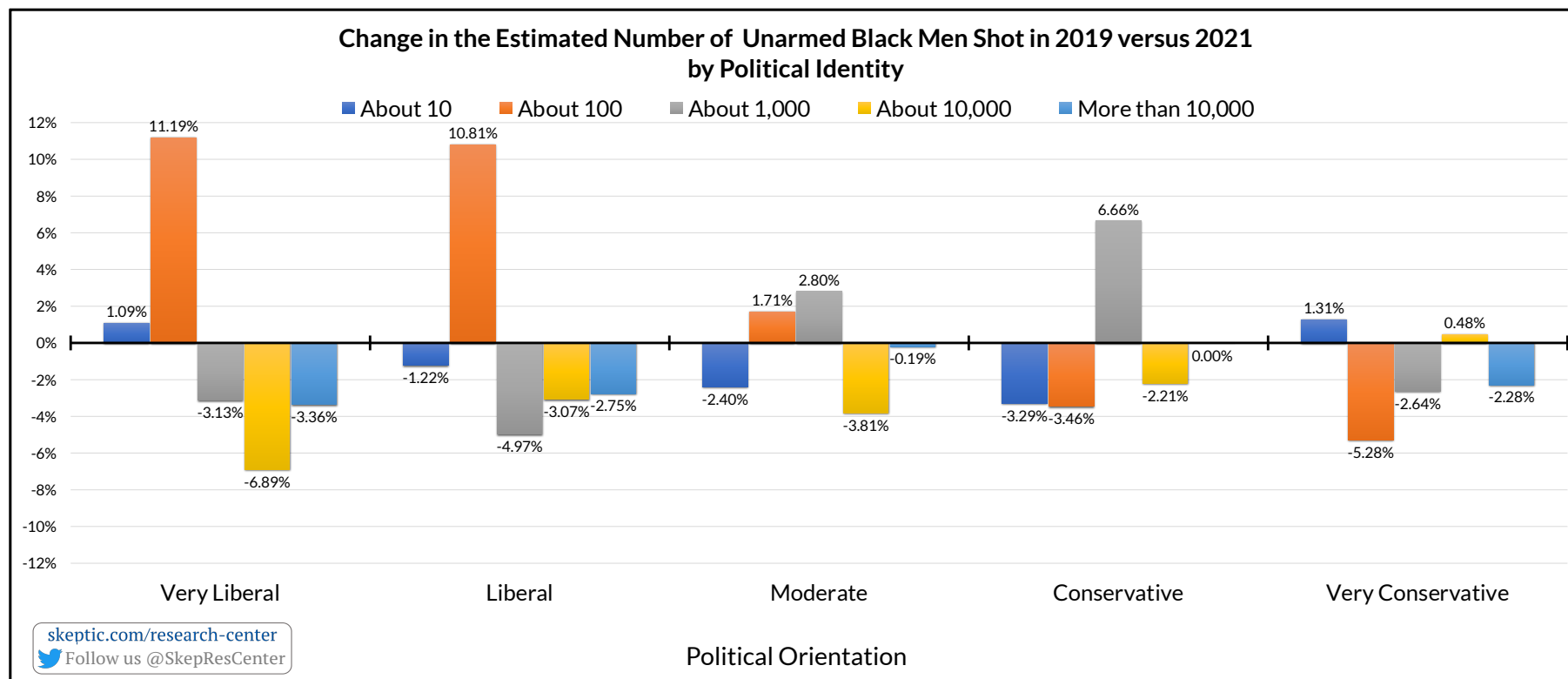
What does the available data actually indicate? According to the Washington Post’s “Police Shooting Database,” regarded by *Nature* as the “most complete database,” 12 unarmed black men were fatally shot by police in 2019.

Figure 2



What does the available data actually indicate? According to the Washington Post “Police Shooting Database,” regarded by *Nature* as the “most complete database,” 11 unarmed black men were fatally shot by police in 2021.

Figure 3



References

Johansmeyer, Thomas. 2/22/2021. "How 2020 protests changed insurance forever." *World Economic Forum*. URL: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/02/2020-protests-changed-insurance-forever/>

Washington Post Police Shooting Database: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/>

Nature magazine's "most complete database" reference: <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-02601-9>