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Brookings Cafeteria: Understanding when Black Lives Matter protests occur

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(MUSIC)

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast is about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews. My guest today is Vanessa Williamson, a fellow in Governance Studies at Brookings and author of “Read My Lips: why Americans are proud to pay taxes.” On today's show we'll discuss her new article, coauthored with Kris-Stella Trump of the Social Science Research Council and Katherine Levine Einstein from Boston University titled “Black Lives Matter: evidence that police caused deaths predict protest activity.” It's published in the June 2018 edition of Perspectives on Politics.

Also on today's show, a Metro Lens segment featuring demographer Bill Fry and his commentary on newly released Census data that showed that suburban growth has outpaced city growth for the second straight year.

You can follow the Brookings Podcast Network on Twitter @policypodcasts to get the latest information about all of our shows. And now on with the interview. Vanessa, welcome back to the Brookings cafeteria.

WILLIAMSON: Oh, thank you for having me.

DEWS: The last time we spoke was about your book, “Read my lips. Why Americans are proud to pay taxes,” and listeners can go find that on our website, but now we're talking about your new article. Can you summarize the basic question and conclusions of this research?

WILLIAMSON: Sure. So, a lot of my work looks at social movements, and so I was very interested to see the protests that erupted in 2013 and 2014, especially under the banner of Black Lives Matter—a phrase that was originally sort of coined in response to the death of an unarmed teenager Trayvon Martin at the hands actually of a civilian.

But it became much more prominent issue after the death of another unarmed teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri who was killed by a police officer in 2014. So, what you see in the year following that is a lot of very active protest a lot of very active organizing to address what has been a very longstanding problem in America of police violence in black communities.

DEWS: And can you talk about very briefly your data set. I mean what is your approach to this research?

WILLIAMSON: So a fair amount of research on black lives matter has been done looking at the social media presence of the movement. Of course, that's very important because it really was an organizing tool, but you know when we think of it the movement Black Lives Matter you do think a lot about those street protests and I we realized there wasn't sort of a thoroughly vetted, publicly available data set that brought together in person protests that occurred in a public place that brought people together. And so with my co-author we helped using a variety of different sources that had been trying to collect some of this data. We put together a new data set collecting over 700 different protests that

occurred under the banner of Black Lives Matter just in the year after Michael Brown's death.

DEWS: I almost hesitate to ask this question because it's an article that involves a lot of data a lot of analysis. But if you could try to summarize kind of the top level finding that you and your coauthors arrived?

WILLIAMSON: Sure. So we were interested to see how protests related to the events that were at the center of the protests police killing of unarmed people, of black people. And so what we did was connect this data set of over 700 protests with another data set that we had to build from various nonprofit sources of people who had been killed by police. Amazingly the government does not keep track of that number. And what we find is that there's a correlation between those two things. And taking account of other factors: the racial makeup of a city, taking account of poverty in a city, taking account of the number of college kids in a city, all the different factors- the size of the city. We find that there's still a correlation between the history of police cars deaths in a locality and the frequency of protests under the banner Black Lives Matter.

Now on the one hand it seems extremely obvious right? I mean you would really expect that those protests occur where more people have been killed by police. But it's actually from a political science perspective it's not totally obvious that would be the case. Because I mean if you imagine that you live in a community where police violence is more common while you might feel that grievance very strongly, you might also think to yourself it would be very safe to protest. And there are all sorts of other reasons you might think that communities that are over policed are also tend to be lower income, tend to suffer from various other kinds of inequities, that might make it harder for those communities to protest. Especially in this highly mobile digital age you might think that it's not actually about how close you were to death you might respond very strongly to a death across the country. So it wasn't completely obvious that we would see this connection but that's what we find in the data. We find that in 18 months prior to the death of Michael Brown if a Black person was killed in a locality there's about a 25 percent higher chance of protests in the following year.

DEWS: So you focus on a paper a law at all on what's called the carceral system, from incarcerate. Why is that a key factor in this research?

WILLIAMSON: Well I think you know part of what we're trying to do is connect this latest movement with the history of organizing around the role of the state, the punitive role of the state, particularly in African-American communities. So I think sometimes you know when we think about the relationship between government and people we sometimes focus on the benefits government provides reasonably enough. We think about Social Security, Medicare, education, roads, all these things right. And

we look at how that influences people's interest in politics. So for instance you know Social Security makes it easier - as demonstrated - makes it easier for older people to participate in politics not only because they have those resources money but also because now they have a stake. Social security is really important issue for older people. So we often talk about the ways that government intervention can encourage political participation. But we've talked less at least in recent years about the way that the state can suppress political activity. And the way that the justice system, the prison system, the system of criminal justice has an effect on communities that are over policed. And we all know that there is an extremely high rate of incarceration in the United States, and that that experience of incarceration is not randomly distributed throughout the population. We know that African-American communities are over policed that black people are far more likely to be stopped for minor crimes, or to be stopped with no cause at all. And so we wanted to place this movement and this response to a very specific grievance - the killing of black people by the police - in a much longer context.

DEWS: Let me follow up on this point about the disproportionate experience of African-Americans in the criminal justice system as compared to their proportion of the population. It is true that African-Americans are disproportionately involved in criminal justice system. But how would you contend with the claim that some people would make that the reason for that is because African-Americans disproportionately commit crimes?

WILLIAMSON: So this is one of those zombie stories that gets iterated again and again and there is an extraordinary amount of literature examining the sense of racial bias in policing in incarceration. And it is not a result of the prior predilections of particular people it's a result of bigotry. And you can see that in a lot of ways for instance if you look at the stop and frisk law in New York City. African-Americans young African-American men in particular were overwhelmingly more likely to be stopped. They weren't particularly likely to be found to be doing anything wrong thereafter. If you look at sentencing for murder. On the other end of spectrum from you know a street corner stop to the most serious crime. If you take account of the race of the perpetrator and look at the race of the victim what you find is that black people charged with killing white people receive far more serious sentences than other racial patterns between victim and perpetrator. So there's an enormous literature that tries taking account of exactly what you're saying and shows that there is bias in the system.

DEWS: I just want to make clear that I don't subscribe to that question. So thank you for sharing that answer and the data that shows why that is so. Let's go back to that question that you mentioned a few minutes ago about the history of the punitive role of the state. You know in the paper that the U.S. criminal justice system is “a system of racial control” what do you mean by that?

WILLIAMSON: Great question. So I think that sometimes we imagine that our criminal justice system is sort of this neutral and unchanging thing that there are just crimes and those are clearly delineated and those have always been that way. And you know maybe at the margins there is a little bit of bias but basically the criminal justice system is like a neutral actor in our society but that's just not the case. And one way you can see that it's not the case is if you look at the times when the carceral state, that is to say the state of laws governing criminality the prison system all those sorts of things, when have they really expanded? And they've expanded in direct reaction to the extension of political rights to African-Americans.

So you see the first great expansion of the criminal justice system in the years following the passage of the 13th amendment that outlawed slavery but made an exception for people who were convicted of a crime. So you can't hold people and not pay them for their work except in the case of having been convicted of a crime. And what you see across the south before even reconstruction started and much more at the end of Reconstruction. You see laws put in place that sort of create classes of people to become criminals. So for instance you put a law in place outlawing vagrancy. And what that means is that you're outlawing being poor. They could stop people on the street you ask them if they're employed, if they're not employed you can call and they say they were loitering and then suddenly all of those people get channeled and disproportionately African-American people but also some poor white people get channeled into a system of prison labor. And so that's the first great expansion of the U.S. criminal justice system. And you see a similar expansion of the criminal justice system following the Civil Rights Acts of the 1960s. So when we look at the development of the criminal justice system in the Untied States you can't look at it from a colorblind lens because that's not how we got the system that we have today.

DEWS: I'll just go back to a point you made much earlier in other writing that the U.S. has the highest rate of incarceration of any industrialized country or any country in the world. It's high whatever it is?

WILLIAMSON: And it's disproportionately high in certain communities. It's really important that we connect those statistics that we've heard about incarceration about stop and frisk with what is that doing to people's political engagement. When we built a system in this country that was intended very specifically to create conditions as like slavery as possible for newly freed black people. We created a criminal justice system to do that when we respond to the Civil Rights Era with mass incarceration. That's not just a legal act. It's a political act because it disenfranchises people. I mean the most obvious example of course is felon disenfranchisement. Right. But also at the lower level stops matter too. So there are some great research done by some other political scientists, notably Vesla Weaver, looking at what happens when people just get stopped and not even arrested, or they're arrested but are not charged. And these low level interactions with the state are basically the opposite of what Social Security does. Instead of providing

resources and make people feel like ‘hey I have a stake in this government this government works for me’, it provides the opposite message you like this government doesn't work for you. This government works for other people. You'd probably take a big step back from interacting with the government that is supposed to represent you because when you do interact with them the consequences are really severe.

DEWS: I think that's a good segue to my next question which is about an interesting problem that's presented in the paper which is that direct contact with the justice system can be as you put it demobilizing for civic participation and that associations of people who have a lot of resources may not mobilize say on the street because they have other options were civic debate. But somewhere in the middle this protest activity occurs between people who are demobilized and people who have other choices. So can you unpack what that means?

WILLIAMSON: Right. So I think sometimes in a way it would be nice if it worked this way right that we would expect that when people face a grievance they're going to protest about it. That's just not the case. It's reasonable when you think about I think about the grievances around in the world that how few people are protesting at any given moment! So protest political activity of any kind, any kind of organizing, requires resources. Both straightforward resources like money to print flyers, or you know the time you can take off of work to go and attend meetings, or to go and be in the street. But also resources like social capital right. Your connections to your community. Can you get 50 people who are meeting where you get to know 50 people who will respond to your e-mail? Or 50 phone numbers you can call and that phone tree? So resources really matter for mobilizing. And so one effect of the carceral state is that it removes people's resources right in the most obvious way of putting them in prison where they no longer have a salary or even if they're just you know held up from work because they got pulled over again today. You know are all these ways in which interacting with the justice system gives people fewer resources. So it's really hard for people most affected by the carceral state to engage in political activity.

Now this is a really dangerous thing right. Because if the people most effected most repressed by a political system are the least capable of responding then you have this downward spiral effect. How do you ever get rights? So one of the things that some recent research shows is that the people not the people most affected by the proximate people actually respond quite strongly and can respond to rights violations by organizing. And so they don't suffer the very direct effects in terms of their resources but they do feel the mistreatment. And so in our research it sort of fits in with that. We're looking at a much bigger scope we're looking at localities some cities and towns and what we find is that places that have had this pattern of police behavior the killing of black people by the police in the past organized more during the Black Lives Matter movement. And again you'd like that to be how it always works but it doesn't. And of course there's still the tension within it right because it's not the people who are most affected who are necessarily the ones participating and that can have problems too. If the people who are participating don't really

represent the interests or are not as closely tied as the family right to the interests of the people most affected. Maybe they're not going to support the right policy changes. Maybe they're not going to understand what the community needs. But I still think it's important to look at the ways that at a community level localities respond to sort of systematic state violence.

DEWS: Related to the last question and I'm going to quote from the paper here: “Political and social discontent only occasionally results in public protest in part because mass protest faces a substantial collective action problem.” What does that mean?

WILLIAMSON: So a collective action problem is the issue that if we want something to get done we all need to help do it. But if I tried to buy myself it’s going to happen. So I have to have faith that everyone else is going to participate too. So there are all kinds of collective action problems in life. Protest is one of those. So let's say I want to make some kind of change to policy say here in D.C. maybe a protest would help get that done, but I'm not going to go to the protest if I don't think everyone else is going to protest - why would I do that? One, maybe I'm taking a larger risk if I think there's going to be a police response to the protest if you're actually engaging in nonviolent direct action. There's a real risk there. I don't want to do that alone because then I'm just going to go to jail and nothing will have happened. But more generally I'm taking my time off work and spending my Saturday standing on the mall. I'm only going to do that if I'm going to be there with enough other people who are going to join me and make a statement that we think is loud enough to change policy. So because there's this collective action problem you know if everyone gets in it will work, but if no one wants to be that first person or the only person to do it can be difficult to organize political action.

And it's particularly difficult when the risks are higher when you think that your participation in the protest might result in violence against you or retribution at work or when you think that there is relatively little likelihood that the protest will result in policy change. So all of these factors are in play which make every individual have a calculation about protest and that makes it quite hard to get over that sort of initial barrier to protesting.

DEWS: That seems like a particularly acute problem for people who are thinking about protesting the actions of police in their own community because here are the law enforcement authorities in their community not some distant community but in their own community it seems the collective action problem is exacerbated thereby.

WILLIAMSON: Yeah I think that's exactly right. I think that you know it's one of the reasons why I was saying it's not necessarily obvious that you'd see more protests in places that had a longer history of police violence or more extreme history of violence. On the other hand. It's not always the case that when

you protest something you get to interact directly with the agency that you were protesting. But if you have a protest about the police the police will be present for your protest. So in some ways there may be sometimes many grievances are more nebulous. You can feel that you have a grievance because you are poor. Very reasonable grievance. Who made you poor? It's not totally clear who who's the agent at fault. But with a grievance like we speculate in our paper that with a grievance like police violence the agents very clear to you. So it may be the case that there is also an element to which it would spur activity because you can identify very clearly who is responsible for the wrong against your community.

DEWS: So what does this research add to our understanding of the Black Lives Matter movement?

WILLIAMSON: So I think I mean honestly the paper is a very first step. I think there's a ton of work still to be done. We're really proud to have created a data set that's publicly available for other scholars to use to compare to other movements in other times. There's a whole array of interesting questions we haven't answered. We find a correlation between police violence in the past and protest in 2014. Was there less police violence afterwards? All these questions that you can ask. How did neighborhoods respond to where these deaths occurred? So there's a lot of work left to be done. How did the media respond did it change attitudes of people living nearby? We can look at all of that in different kinds of data. So I think it's a first step. I also think it was worthwhile to just you know document what is clearly an important social movement United States today.

DEWS: And will you be continuing the research on another avenue.

WILLIAMSON: Undoubtedly, undoubtedly yes.

Well Vanessa I want to thank you for sharing your time and expertise about this really important research today.

WILLIAMSON: Thank you so much.

DEWS: The paper is “Black Lives Matter: evidence that police caused the deaths predict protest activity” in the June 2018 edition of Perspectives on Politics. And you can learn more about Vanessa Williamson and her research on our Website.

(MUSIC)

DEWS: And now here's Bill Fry with another edition of Metro lens.

FREY: I'm Bill Frey. I'm a senior fellow with the Metropolitan Policy Program here at the Brookings

Institution.

Newly released census data for city population growth through 2017 showed that what I and others previously heralded as a decade of the city may be less valid during the waning years of the 2010s. While most big cities are still gaining population, the rates of that gain are falling. For many of them at the nation's population shows signs of broad dispersal. The new numbers for big cities, those with a population of over a quarter million are telling. Among these 84 cities, 55 of them grew either at lower rates than the previous year or sustain population losses. Between 2016 and 2017 these large cities together gained 424,000 people well below gains exceeding 600,000 for each of the first five years of the decade. In the most recent year New York City's gain of a little more than 7,000 people is dwarfed by gains exceeding 90,000 in each of the first two years of the decade. New York's situation is emblematic of this trend because the most pervasive growth declines are seen in the biggest of these cities. Among the 25 largest cities, 21 registered growth rates that were either negative or lower than the previous year. For 15 of these 25 cities recent growth rates were the lowest of the decade.

The reason for these declines may be attributable to the high cost of living in some, the increased attractiveness of the suburbs, or economic circumstances associated with industrial decline in the entire region the latter almost certainly impacted some of the 16 cities that lost population over the recent period including Baltimore, St. Louis, Chicago, Pittsburgh, Milwaukee, Detroit, and Cleveland. This is the largest number of cities among those with over a quarter million people to sustain losses for any single year of the decade. There are still cities where growth has shown upticks in recent years including affordable Midwest places like Columbus Cincinnati and Kansas City. Suburban cities like Henderson, Nevada are those that lie on the periphery of pricey regions such as the interior California city of Fresno. Another outlier of this trend is Atlanta whose growth has risen precipitously. Yet the pervasiveness of declining big city growth reflects a broader dispersal of the nation's population. From large metropolitan areas to smaller ones, from cities to suburbs, and from the Snowbelt to the Sunbelt. These patterns can be seen in migration flows as well. They reflect the easing up of constraints toward personal and job mobility. As the economy continues to revive.

Still another indicator of this dispersion is the return of the suburban growth advantage over cities now apparent for the second year in a row after five years of city growth advantage for the nation's largest metropolitan areas. The huge attention given to the city growth revival in the early part of this decade was warranted by the long history of suburbanization in the United States. The housing crunch and Great Recession at the end of the previous decade led to a situation in which the choices of potential suburban movers, especially young adult millennials, were constrained and who either by choice or necessity fueled city growth levels which outpaced those of the suburbs. Now suburban growth exceeds city growth though at more modest levels than in the early 2000s. And for many areas do more to a city growth slowdown than a suburban growth pickup. It is still the case that city growth exceeds suburban growth in some metropolitan areas like Boston, Atlanta, Washington D.C., San Francisco, and Seattle. Though no longer New York. The trends are shifting toward a renewed suburban advantage. The broad population dispersal

now underway in the nation, as evidenced in recent census releases, appears to be ending many of the demographic trends that seemed to make the 2010s look unique only a few years ago. This new census release of city data suggests that some moderation should be in order to claims that we are living in the decade of the city.

DEWS: Thanks to audio engineer and producer Gaston Roboredo. Brennan Hoban and Chris McKenna are the producers. Bill Finan does the book interviews. Jessica Pavone and Eric Abalahin provide design and web support. Thanks to Camilo Ramirez and David Nassar for their guidance and support.

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