

Heat of the Moment? The Effect of Temperature on Police Leniency

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Abstract

Police officers often exercise substantial discretion when making highly consequential decisions, which can lead to unfair and arbitrary law enforcement. In this paper, I exploit daily ambient temperature as a source of transitory, high-frequency shocks and examine how it affects an officer's decision whether to discount a driver's speeding penalty in Florida. I find that a 1-standard-deviation increase in temperature lowers the driver's probability of receiving a lenient ticket by 2%. In addition, using traffic monitoring data and crash reports, I do not find evidence of decreased police effort or increased reckless driving on hot days. I show that the reduction in leniency is disproportionately borne by white drivers, who are less likely to get a discounted penalty from white officers as the temperature increases. In addition, I find that newly hired officers become less affected by temperature as they accumulate more experience on the job. For a potential mechanism, I find a negative effect of temperature on expressed sentiment using posts from an online police forum based in Florida, which suggests that the result could be due to increased officer hostility.