



The Usual Suspects: Police Contacts with Youth and Adult Arrests

Research on race and policing indicates that Black Americans experience more frequent police contacts, discretionary stops, and police harassment during stops. Studies of long-term consequences of police contact with young people have not yet examined whether the criminal justice consequences of police contact differ by race. However, using longitudinal data from Seattle collected by the Social Development Research Group, researchers have found that **police encounters in childhood increase the risk of arrest in young adulthood for Black but not White respondents.** Black respondents experiencing police contact by Grade 8 are *11 times more likely to report an arrest and be arrested* by age 20 than Black respondents who did not experience early police contact. However, White respondents experienced no criminal justice consequences stemming from these early police stops. The data indicate that criminal justice system responses to prior stops, and not illegal behavior are driving these results.

Should Resource Officers Be in School?

Police stops represent an entry point into the criminal justice system that, until recently, has received less academic attention than other stages of the criminal justice process. Research has started examining how early involvement with the criminal justice system through stops or arrests may increase the risk of future stops and arrests—police stops beget more police stops. However, studies have not investigated whether the racial identity of the stopped individual influences this process. ***This study is among the first to examine how police contacts with young people and the race of the child interact to produce varying criminal justice consequences.*** The findings have implications for policing in the community and call into question the role of police in schools.

This study uses data from the Family Connections study, a random sample of 331 Black and White students who were enrolled in Grade 8 in the Seattle Public Schools in 2001 or 2002. These youth were surveyed several times over the next 3 years and then again as young adults (at age 20).

Of the 261 respondents surveyed as young adults, White respondents were more likely to report illegal behavior than Black respondents (53% and 32%, respectively), primarily because they were substantially more likely than Blacks to report illegal drug use (40% and 14%, respectively). There were no significant differences by race for violent crimes or property crimes. Conversely, Black respondents were more likely to experience arrest than White respondents (14.5% and 6.3%, respectively).

To avoid capturing the effects of income inequality or early delinquency, this research controls for background variables such as household income, early delinquency (illegal behaviors reported in eighth grade), earlier arrest (arrests reported in tenth grade), and past-year illegal behavior reported as young adults. After controlling for these factors, overall, youth with early police contact were 5 to 6 times more likely to be arrested as young adults than were those without an early police contact. **However, large race differences were apparent in the impact of an early police contact. The impact on White youth was not significant, while the odds of arrest by age 20 was 11 times higher for Black youth with a police contact in eighth grade than for Black youth with no police contact.**

The reasons for these disparities are not examined in this study; however, the authors point to the enduring legacy of stereotypes of Black criminality and their continued existence within our systems and institutions. **Clear policy implications emerge from this research, including minimizing police contacts with young people.**

While some proactive policing practices have subsided (such as the stop-and-frisk policy in New York City), others continue. Of particular concern is the use of school resource officers (SROs). Fear of school shootings has often left school boards and school administrators tempted to add police officers to patrol inside schools. The potential benefits to school safety need to be weighed against the negative impact on the long-term consequences to Black youth, and the role of SROs should be reconsidered. **Contacts by school resource officers—often for disciplinary reasons that used to be applied by teachers or principals—constitute police contacts. Other school staff might fill the need for interventions in schools, with fewer deleterious effects on youth.**

In our sample, respondents who reported a police contact by eighth grade were significantly more likely to experience an arrest at age 20, after controlling for engagement in illegal behavior. Because our measures of police contact included both arrests and unofficial contacts with police (i.e., police stops that do not lead to arrest), encounters with police and not just official system involvement appear to set in motion events that subsequently lead to arrest.

For additional information on this topic, please refer to the original article:

Anne McGlynn-Wright, Robert D Crutchfield, Martie L Skinner, & Kevin P Haggerty, The usual, racialized, suspects: The consequence of police contacts with Black and White youth on adult arrest. *Social Problems*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spaa042>

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