

“Kids Do Not So Much Make Trouble, They Are Trouble”: Police-Youth Relations

Rod K. Brunson and Kashea Pegram

Summary

Young people’s encounters with the criminal justice system generally begin with the police. Officers’ decisions about how to handle these encounters are affected by their on-the-spot assessments of young people’s proclivity for delinquency, prospects for rehabilitation, and overall moral character. And because most police-citizen interactions occur in public spaces, officers render these judgments with limited information, often falling back on racial and ethnic stereotypes. In this article, Rod Brunson and Kashea Pegram examine how police officers’ decisions about which young people to watch, stop, search, and arrest contribute to historical and enduring justice system inequality.

Research confirms that officers apply their discretion highly unevenly, Brunson and Pegram write, consistently exposing youth of color to a wide range of harms. Moreover, aggressive policing strategies such as stop-and-frisk disproportionately affect youths and communities of color. In many urban areas, they say, officers are a constant, inescapable, and unwelcome presence in the lives of black and Latino adolescents—especially males, who are disproportionately stopped, searched, and killed by police.

Yet the authors find reason for optimism in efforts to improve trust in minority communities and end racially discriminatory policing through practices based on procedural justice principles—that is, whether citizens believe they’re treated fairly and with respect during police encounters. Still, they acknowledge, racial disparities in policing mean that in many places, police-community relations have already suffered tremendous harm that will be extremely difficult to repair.

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The authors affectionately borrow the title phrase from Egon Bittner’s pioneering work.¹

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More than 40 years ago, renowned policing scholar Egon Bittner wisely recognized that “the working patrolman,” as a frontline law enforcement agent, is largely responsible for juveniles’ entry into the criminal justice system.² Bittner’s statement still holds true today, underscoring police officers’ critical role in addressing juvenile delinquency—and, more importantly, child wellbeing. It thus makes sense to examine whether and, if so, how officers’ decision-making practices about whom to watch, stop, search, and arrest contribute to historical and enduring justice system inequality.

Criminologists have recently begun to better understand how children interpret not only their own police experiences, but also those of family members, friends, and neighbors. They’ve consistently found that this cumulative knowledge helps shape children’s lasting perceptions of police officers and their attitudes toward them. In fact, black parents and elders report that they routinely warn children about the likelihood of police violence and tell them how to behave during interactions with officers. Interestingly, there’s no evidence that adults from other racial groups (Asian, white) similarly warn children about the dangers of unwelcome police encounters.³

Recent episodes of civil unrest following controversial officer-involved shootings of unarmed young black males are harsh reminders that contentious relations between police and minority citizens persist across the United States. Hostilities are especially pronounced in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, where crime problems tend to cluster, where seemingly indiscriminate pedestrian stops are commonplace, and

where residents are more likely to report that they highly distrust the police. The substantial rift between police departments and many communities of color might be improved, however, by implementing police reforms grounded in procedural justice principles—the benchmark used by citizens to assess whether officers treat them fairly. In addition to increasing disaffected residents’ satisfaction with the police, community-supported crime control efforts could also reduce justice system inequality, influencing policies at the executive level where organizational objectives and philosophies are forged. Specifically, police administrators’ directives influence how rank-and-file officers comprehend and perform their daily law enforcement duties.

Discretion and Racial Disparity in Police-Youth Contacts

In the United States, juvenile delinquents are typically viewed differently from adult offenders, largely because of their emotional immaturity. For instance, in the eyes of the law, children are not held fully responsible for their transgressions. It stands to reason, then, that the concept of reduced culpability also resonates with police, leading them to intuitively embrace age as a mitigating factor when considering how best to address youths’ misdeeds.⁴ Officers weigh many contextual factors before deciding on a course of action concerning a juvenile offender, often shying away from arrest.⁵

In 1952, James B. Nolan, deputy commissioner and director of the Juvenile Aid Bureau (formerly the Crime Prevention Bureau) of the New York Police Department (NYPD), chronicled the unit’s more than 20-year history of dealing with the causes and correlates of juvenile offending. Nolan

wrote that a fundamental shift in the NYPD from crime suppression to crime prevention had stemmed from increased recognition among his contemporaries that the traditional criminal justice system responses to offending (arrest, conviction, and punishment) often failed, and that most adult offenders were also once juvenile delinquents.⁶ Therefore, to reduce the overall crime rate, Nolan directed officers to focus on averting juvenile delinquency in the first place, rather than merely relying on ineffective and potentially stigmatizing court interventions.

Because most police-citizen interactions occur in public spaces, officers often render their judgments with limited information about the suspects’ circumstances.

The NYPD police could refer at-risk youth to social agencies, but several officers assigned to the Juvenile Aid Bureau held master’s degrees in social work, and thus were able to provide individualized, direct services. Nolan also acknowledged the role that schools, churches, and youths’ homes played in “formulating the character and moral fibre of our boys and girls.”⁷ He maintained that juvenile delinquency resulted from the accumulated failures of key social institutions to effectively and positively intervene in young people’s lives. He also emphasized that a dearth of play areas and too much unstructured leisure time also contributed to youthful offending, especially among inner-city children; this led to the formation of the Police Athletic League.⁸ Nolan explained

that “through [the league] we are seeking ... the development of a friendly relationship between our boys and girls and police officers; it seeks to establish respect for those who enforce the law and consequently, for the law itself.”⁹ Finally, Nolan recognized that while officers should dutifully enforce the law, they should do so in ways that positively influenced children’s views of procedural justice and police legitimacy.

Substantial research demonstrates that officers’ arrest decisions are affected by their assessments of youths’ commitment to delinquency, prospects for rehabilitation, and overall moral character. Because most police-citizen interactions occur in public spaces, officers often render their judgments with limited information about the suspects’ circumstances. An observational study of juvenile officers in an industrial city underscored the relationship between suspect demeanor and the severity of sanctions.¹⁰ Detectives often avoided subjecting deferential youth to the long-term consequences of being arrested and officially charged, and spending time in custody.¹¹ But police discretion benefitted some juveniles more than others. For example, officers’ behaviors were largely driven by stereotypes rather than objective evidence that a crime had been committed. Consequently, the most severe dispositions were often reserved for “Negroes” and youths who fit officers’ preconceived notions of criminals. The authors noted that:

older juveniles, members of known delinquent gangs, Negroes, youth with well-oiled hair, black jackets, and soiled denims or jeans (the presumed uniform of “tough” boys), and boys who in their interactions with officers did not manifest what were considered to be appropriate

signs of respect tended to receive the more severe dispositions.¹²

Much evidence shows that officers are less tolerant of perceived disrespect from minors as a whole because of their marginalized social positions.¹³ But confounding influences—such as attire, demeanor, age, and race—may make it harder for certain youths to present themselves as law-abiding, whether or not officers have legal justification to detain them.

An examination of police actions involving gang members also found evidence that suspects' demeanor is important, confirming that youth whose attitudes officers perceived as negative were more likely to be arrested.¹⁴ In fact, suspects' demeanor was the most important factor for determining arrest, revealing that officers routinely make rash judgments about youths worth saving and those they consider irredeemable.¹⁵ The authors explained, "the boys who appear frightened, humble, penitent, and ashamed are also more likely to go free. ... On the other hand, if a boy shows no signs of being spiritually moved by his offense, the police deal harshly with him."¹⁶ Frequent police contact also made it more likely that a youth would be arrested, highlighting the cumulative impact of repeated police encounters. The researchers noted:

if he is caught for a third or a fourth time, however, the sum total of previous contacts may be enough to affect a judgment about his moral character adversely, regardless of the nature or magnitude of the present offense and regardless of the reasons he was previously contacted.¹⁷

Arrest decisions were also shaped by the officers' subjective assessments of whether

youths' caregivers were capable of preventing future delinquency. The research team observed that "the moral character of the parents also passes under review; and if a house appears messy, a parent is missing, or a mother is on welfare, the probability of arrest increases."¹⁸ Thus, youths' living and other structural conditions played key roles in officers' discretion.

Contemporary policing scholars find little evidence that today's crime-control strategies focus on averting delinquency, as Nolan's did. For example, few studies show that youth officers employ an offender-oriented approach, forgoing arrests and juvenile court referrals in an attempt to insulate adolescents from severe court sanctions.¹⁹ In the 1960s, research examining police officers' decision-making revealed a disconcerting pattern of disparate treatment involving disadvantaged youths, sometimes regardless of race. Moreover, beginning in the early 1970s, a shift in juvenile justice philosophy from treatment to punishment occurred alongside a decline in the number of white youths under court supervision.²⁰ A steady stream of recent research confirms that officers continue to apply discretion unevenly, consistently exposing youths of color to a wide range of undue harms (such as arrests, officer misconduct, intense surveillance, and excessive use of force). No matter when they were conducted, studies of youths' police experiences have found that certain children find it difficult to convince officers that they're contrite, respectful, and being raised by decent parents in wholesome households.

Substantial research confirms that aggressive policing strategies disproportionately affect youths and communities of color. In fact, many scholars have documented that black and Latino adolescents routinely experience

troubling indignities at the hands of officers, who unquestioningly enforce departmental zero-tolerance policies.²¹ The widespread use of heavy-handed policing tactics provides additional evidence that Nolan's commitment to treating precursors of youth crime is absent from many current public-safety strategies, including that of the NYPD. Because modern police leaders are increasingly evaluated on their crime-fighting effectiveness, young people of color repeatedly bear the brunt of shortsighted crackdowns, sweeps, and other police efforts to maintain order. Several explanations have been advanced to explain minority youths' disparate police treatment, including racial discrimination. In particular, recent social-psychological research shows that race plays a pivotal role in how police officers conceptualize childhood innocence.

Experiments involving police officers (and college students) have found that because of widespread dehumanization of blacks as a racial group, the time-honored benefits of childhood innocence aren't applied equally to black and white boys; rather, they're reserved for whites. Study participants were less likely to view black children as virtuous compared to children of other races, essentially denying black boys the basic protections typically afforded youth.²² The research team also investigated the relationship between youth, race, and criminal responsibility. When considering the blameworthiness of youths suspected of committing felony offenses, officers held black youths more responsible for their offenses than their white and Latino counterparts. Police officers in the study also overestimated the ages of black males by 4.53 years.²³ These findings suggest that compared to children of other races, black boys enjoy a substantially shorter period

of presumed childhood innocence. These troubling results have serious implications for how young black males manage public interactions broadly, and especially their encounters with police. In particular, if officers are more likely to view black boys as older, hardened criminals, they may also be more physically aggressive at the outset. These biases can increase the chances that officers will use excessive or even lethal force against unarmed young black males.

Police-Citizen Encounters

Youths' Attitudes toward the Police

As we said above, suspects' demeanor as interpreted by officers has been shown to influence both formal and informal juvenile justice outcomes. The relatively unchecked discretion enjoyed by officers makes it especially hard to ensure that comparable situations will be handled similarly. Efforts to reduce disparities in the criminal justice system are hampered by the fact that police-citizen encounters typically unfold on the streets, beyond the eyes of court personnel. Thus, we need to better understand how particular events and settings help shape youth-police relations.

An examination of US and Canadian adolescents' perceptions of police found that the most important factor behind both groups' attitudes toward officers was whether respondents left encounters with a negative or positive outlook.²⁴ For example, study participants who reported positive police experiences were more likely to rate officers favorably, compared to those who described their interactions as negative.²⁵ Research has also shown that youths' assessments of the police are collectively shaped by social environments (such as neighborhood structure and socioeconomic

status), adherence to delinquent subculture, and firsthand interactions with officers.²⁶

The relatively unchecked discretion enjoyed by officers makes it especially hard to ensure that comparable situations will be handled similarly.

Research into urban and suburban youths' police experiences helps show how neighborhood context shapes adolescents' evaluations of police.²⁷ Though an overwhelming majority of respondents in both contexts reported that they were dissatisfied with the police, urban youth held less favorable views of officers.²⁸ Also, teens who initiated contact with officers were more likely to express positive views of the police than those whose interactions were involuntary. The results uncovered stark racial differences among respondents. For instance, nonwhite (mostly African American) youths were more likely to disapprove of officers than were their white peers.²⁹

Sociologist Joe Feagin has argued that the "cumulative impact of racial discrimination accounts for the special way that blacks have of looking at and evaluating" public interactions.³⁰ Indeed, there's ample evidence that involuntary police contacts are particularly salient for black males. One study examined whether black men anticipate unfair treatment during police encounters because of the negative stereotypes associating blacks with crime. The study found that although black males

take precautions to distance themselves from racial stereotypes, they may appear anxious, which inadvertently heightens officers' suspicions. Conversely, white male study participants reported no such concerns about racial stereotyping. Therefore, unlike black respondents, white study participants didn't feel compelled to take precautionary measures in order to appear law-abiding.³¹

Direct Experience

Variations in law enforcement strategies across racially different neighborhoods are often attributed to contextual conditions. In particular, commentators often assert that the reason high-crime areas are policed more aggressively isn't because of the residents' racial characteristics, but because officers consider such places especially dangerous.³² Given the strong relationship between race and place for influencing youths' evaluations of officers, a research team examined the police experiences of Philadelphia adolescents, along with their views regarding the effectiveness of local crime-reduction strategies.³³ Study participants were drawn from three high-crime neighborhoods: predominantly African American, predominantly Latino, and predominantly white. While most respondents across the three neighborhoods were unfavorably disposed toward the police, largely based on previous negative interactions, youth in the Latino and white communities were more likely to express positive views.³⁴

A study of three carefully matched neighborhoods in St. Louis, MO, also attempted to disentangle the effects of race and place, while controlling for disadvantage and crime rates.³⁵ Researchers conducted face-to-face interviews with adolescent males residing in three disadvantaged

neighborhoods: one majority-white, one majority-black, and one racially mixed. White study participants were more likely than blacks to report positive relationships with officers. Conversely, black youth described being stopped by officers indiscriminately in situations where their law-abiding status should have been abundantly clear. The authors found that "white youths' risk of being stopped was heightened in three specific situations: (1) while in the company of young black males, (2) when in racially mixed or majority-black neighborhoods, or (3) while dressed in hip-hop apparel."³⁶ Black youths residing in the predominantly black and racially mixed neighborhoods reported routinely hearing racial slurs and insulting language from officers.³⁷ Finally, although white youth reported fewer direct experiences with verbal abuse, they described often seeing black youth being publicly humiliated by police.

A study of high school students from South Side Chicago neighborhoods suggests that officers are a constant, inescapable, and unwelcome presence in the lives of many black adolescents.³⁸ For instance, respondents reported that police routinely exerted dominance over them by asking offensive questions and giving degrading directives. Study participants said they constantly felt powerless, often acquiescing rather than challenging whether officers possessed the legal authority to subject them to widespread suspicion, unwarranted verbal aggression, and excessive physical force.³⁹ To remain safe, study participants ultimately decided that it was unwise to question officers' behavior.⁴⁰

As we've seen, social scientists have produced considerable research documenting young black men's disproportionate police

contact. Such studies have alerted us to many harmful byproducts of aggressive policing, but they haven't always explored how gender affects the phenomena they examine. One study looked at encounters between youths from different racial backgrounds (African American, Latino, white, and Asian/Pacific Islander) and NYPD officers and other "agents of surveillance and protection" (such as teachers, restaurant staff, and security personnel). That study uncovered important gender differences in how NYPD officers treated male and female study participants.⁴¹ In particular, while males' negative views of officers stemmed largely from concerns about being unjustly ensnared in neighborhood sweeps, female study participants reported repeated sexual harassment by officers.⁴² Similarly, a study of black male and female adolescents' police experiences in St. Louis found that although young black males were the primary targets of aggressive policing tactics, black females expressed fear of police violence in the form of sexual misconduct.⁴³ Youths' strategies for dealing with neighborhood dangers, including unwelcome police attention, were explicitly gendered.⁴⁴

Much of the research on minority youths' adverse police experiences has focused on black youths.⁴⁵ Though this research has yielded important findings, it hasn't given us enough information about how other young people of color experience and view officers. This issue warrants careful investigation, because scholars have noted that the attitudes of Latino youth toward police fall somewhere between those of their white and black counterparts. Furthermore, Latino youths' lived experiences should be considered and

valued through their own unique cultural perspectives.

A study of Afro-Caribbean (Puerto Rican and Dominican) youths' experiences with NYPD officers found that they had unfavorable views of the officers patrolling their neighborhoods.⁴⁶ The study participants described officers as generally discourteous to residents, but they also noted that the disrespect was decidedly racialized. For example, they believed that because they were "Spanish," police frequently targeted them for unjustified stops.⁴⁷ Respondents said that the racial animus they experienced stemmed from officers' unfounded suspicions about their immigration status. The authors wrote that "the police have a difficult time distinguishing between citizens from Puerto Rico and possible undocumented immigrants from the Dominican Republic," making it likely that Latino youth from many backgrounds would be viewed with suspicion.⁴⁸

Vicarious Experiences

Considerable evidence shows how direct police contacts shape adolescents' future appraisals of officers. But scholars have also increasingly acknowledged the role of insights gained by learning about others' encounters.⁴⁹ Policing research refers to accounts shared by family members and peers as *vicarious experiences*. A study examining vicarious experiences found that citizens who reported having seen or heard about police officers engaging in "impolite or rude treatment, unfair treatment when making an arrest, physical abuse, covering up another officer's wrongdoing, [or] taking sides in an argument between citizens" were less likely to see the police in a positive

light.⁵⁰ Though age and race are consistently strong predictors of citizens' negative evaluations of the police, indirect experiences have also been shown to be important. In particular, the aforementioned study found that secondhand police experiences had the greatest impact on both white and black youths' negative perceptions of officers.⁵¹

Black elders may try to insulate their own and neighborhood children from bigotry by equipping them with a set of conduct norms to use during involuntary encounters with officers. One study found that these preemptive conversations were offered because adults were convinced that simply being black posed substantial safety risks.⁵² Youth were instructed to answer officers' questions with "yes sir" and "no sir," to speak normally, and to refrain from activities that could attract police attention. The authors noted that their findings were race-specific, pertaining mostly to black children. The research team found no evidence that adults in other racial groups (Asian, Latino, or white) similarly prepare children for unwelcome police encounters.

Aggressive Policing Strategies

Much of the tension between police and communities of color stems from heavy-handed policing strategies used in high-crime urban areas, where people of color disproportionately live.⁵³ Research shows that aggressive crime-control efforts can seriously erode citizens' trust in the police. For example, many researchers have studied *stop-and-frisk* and *broken-windows* policing strategies that target low-level offenses, physical disorder, and poorly defined suspicious behavior. The effectiveness of these campaigns depends heavily on whether citizens see officers as legitimate and believe

that they will execute their duties in a procedurally just manner. Legal scholars Jason Sunshine and Tom R. Tyler define *legitimacy* as “a property of an authority or institution that leads people to feel that that authority or institution is entitled to be deferred to and obeyed.”⁵⁴ Community residents are more likely to follow directives when they believe that officers possess not only the legal authority to enforce laws, but also the moral authority. Specifically, Sunshine and Tyler write, “the legitimacy of the police is linked to public judgments about the fairness of the processes through which the police make decisions and exercise authority.”⁵⁵ The procedural justice perspective hinges on police legitimacy, emphasizing that outcomes (such as arrests and summonses) are less important than the processes officers use in reaching decisions.

Aggressive crime-control efforts can seriously erode citizens’ trust in the police.

Studies that examine citizens’ experiences with aggressive policing strategies demonstrate how such tactics undermine procedural justice principles and police legitimacy. For example, a study of youths’ involuntary police experiences in St. Louis found that black respondents reported being routinely harassed by the police, as well as knowing people who had suffered similar harms.⁵⁶ Moreover, black youths attributed their mistreatment at the hands of police to the widespread use of stop-and-frisk tactics. Although study participants complained about being frequently stopped, searched, and “harassed” by police, they took particular exception to officers’ careless use

of racist and otherwise demeaning language during encounters.⁵⁷

The NYPD is perhaps forever linked to one of the most polarizing and contested policing initiatives in the United States: stop-question-and-frisk. NYPD’s stop-question-and-frisk policy has affected tens of thousands of otherwise law-abiding black and Latino adolescents. Between 2008 and 2009, for example, NYPD officers stopped a total of 416,350 people aged 14 to 21—52.4 percent of them black and 31 percent Latino.⁵⁸ These widespread stops strained police relations with minority citizens throughout the city, but yielded contraband or weapons only 1.5 percent and 1.2 percent of the time, respectively.⁵⁹ An overwhelming majority (89.6 percent) of youths subjected to stop-question-and-frisk were not arrested or issued summonses.⁶⁰

In a survey of more than 1,000 New York City youths, 48 percent of respondents reported having had a negative police experience in the previous six months.⁶¹ Police interactions varied by race and gender. For example, black and Latino males were more likely than their white and Asian peers to report adverse police experiences. Black and Latino males were also more likely to report verbal and physical mistreatment by officers.

NYPD’s controversial stop-question-and-frisk practices are the most widely known, but research in other jurisdictions has produced similar findings. For instance, a study of young black men’s police experiences in San Francisco neighborhoods found that respondents were resigned to the fact that arbitrary stops were a “regular routine.”⁶² Participants reported that police routinely asserted dominance by conducting

physical searches of their persons.⁶³ These interactions further eroded trust between police and the community. Respondents reported feeling helpless during stops; as a result, they tried to avoid coming into contact with police altogether by adjusting their behaviors and social interactions. These avoidance strategies may have been rational responses to what the youths considered widespread police harassment. But when seen as evasive actions, they may have inadvertently attracted increased police attention, as they led officers to erroneously conclude that the respondents were engaged in criminal activity.⁶⁴

Perceptions of intense police harassment in neighborhoods besieged by officers have been shown to deter young men of color from fully participating in public life. Several studies have examined how police saturation of minority neighborhoods restricts the use of public spaces among young black and Latino males.⁶⁵ Research has found that black youths use a variety of techniques to avoid unwelcome police attention—such as not walking alone, not walking in large groups, staying indoors, avoiding eye contact, and moving with the appropriate speed.⁶⁶ And to help black youths avoid becoming victims of police violence during unwelcome encounters, their elders tell them “hold your hands up,” “don’t move suddenly,” and “never run” when stopped by the police.⁶⁷

Policing scholars use the term *hot spots* to refer to areas where crime and disorder tend to cluster. Advances in mapping technology have helped police agencies identify such areas and allocate resources to them.⁶⁸ Some hot-spots policing efforts have indeed reduced crime, but the results have been mixed when it comes to sustained effectiveness and police-minority community

relations.⁶⁹ For example, policing expert Dennis Rosenbaum cautions,

because the police have chosen to focus on removing the “bad element” and serving as the “thin blue line” between “good” and “bad” residents, these strategies can pit one segment of the community against another. ... Parents, siblings and friends of gang members and drug dealers can feel a divided loyalty and be caught in the crossfire.⁷⁰

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The potential for divisiveness, especially among communities with low levels of *collective efficacy*—defined as “social cohesion among neighbors combined with their willingness to intervene on behalf of the common good”—has so far received limited attention; researchers need to examine whether hot-spots policing can unwittingly weaken police legitimacy and erode citizen confidence.⁷¹ Broken-windows, zero-tolerance, and ordinance-maintenance policing, for example, were all once lauded as indispensable crime-fighting tools, yet recent evidence has shown that aggressively targeting low-level offenses has both direct and collateral consequences, especially for already disenfranchised populations.

Policing scholars have recently asserted that evaluations of police performance should extend beyond the two traditional measures of lawfulness and effectiveness to include

whether police operations constitute *rightful policing*.⁷² Though it respects both lawfulness and effectiveness, rightful policing is based on principles of procedural justice—that is, whether citizens believe they were treated fairly and with respect during police encounters. A focus on fairness can lead citizens to believe in the legitimacy of the police and their moral authority to enforce the law. Research has consistently shown that how people believe they were treated by officers affects their perceptions of police more strongly than such outcomes as arrests or tickets. The rightful policing framework makes a strong case for including fairness as a guiding principle for evaluating police executives.

Efforts to Reduce Justice System Inequality

Police-Community Partnerships

Community policing can help residents and the police work together, improving trust between them.⁷³ It's based on three core principles: citizen involvement, problem solving, and organizational decentralization.⁷⁴ The strategy enlists residents to identify and help solve neighborhood public safety problems. To promote mutual trust, residents and police are encouraged to interact regularly outside of officers' crime-fighting duties. It may involve a wide range of outreach, including substations, foot or bicycle patrols, and citizen satisfaction surveys.

Other policing strategies have been introduced in the hope of reducing crime and restoring citizen confidence. Many of them center on encouraging neighborhood residents to take more active roles in public safety. In Minnesota, for example, the Brooklyn Park Police Department (BPPD)

sought to increase collective efficacy among residents.⁷⁵ It implemented a crime control strategy based on: “(i) the establishment of ‘proximal relationships’ with and between residents; (ii) the development of ‘working trust’ between relevant parties; and (iii) the ‘shared expectations’ that result from that trust and compel residents to act against social problems.”⁷⁶

The BPPD initiative comprised three stages: asset identification, coalescence, and follow-up. In the first stage, officers identified community resources that could be effectively mobilized.⁷⁷ In the second stage, coalescence, officers and residents worked collaboratively to tackle persistent neighborhood problems. Specifically, officers relied on both community- and problem-oriented policing perspectives to design and implement crime-prevention strategies.⁷⁸ In the third and final stage, patrol officers not only pledged their continued support for improved public safety, but also shared with residents their plans to monitor progress.⁷⁹

One study examined how community-policing officers interacted with adolescents, compared to colleagues operating under a conventional problem-oriented policing model. The researchers found that community-policing officers were less aggressive because they had previously established positive relationships with youths in recreational activities.⁸⁰ One community-policing officer explained how his approach to apprehending a juvenile suspect differed from that of a “regular cop”:

If I know who he is and where he hangs out, we know where his friends live, and how he might run. In this way we have a better opportunity and advantage to apprehend him, and to do it relatively

quick. A regular officer [however] will pull his gun only [putting lives on the line]. [With our approach] we can prevent putting lives in danger.⁸¹

The researchers observed that secondary prevention “is generally aimed at strengthening bonds or ‘protective factors’ and/or diminishing ‘risk factors’ in order to reduce or eliminate motivation to commit crime.”⁸² While working with delinquent youth in informal settings, many community-policing officers sought to form bonds with them before they committed an offense. For example, an officer commented:

We don’t want to straighten just one kid out. We want to get a lot of them [into a positive lifestyle]. Chief T gave us the ideas. We talk to the kids. By going to see the kids in [residential treatment facilities] they see our human side. If we can get to kids while they’re young, it will make our jobs a whole lot easier in the long run.⁸³

Another study examined a pilot program that aimed to strengthen police relations with minority youth by pairing young people of color with officers to form 10-member basketball teams for a six-week tournament.⁸⁴ The goal was to examine how officers’ and youths’ perceptions of each other changed after participating in the competition.⁸⁵ The team members were questioned both before and after the program to assess their attitudes. Young people rated the officers based on whether they were “helpful, aggressive, trustworthy, racist, friendly, rude, fair, [or] strict.”⁸⁶ Officers were asked whether the youth were “trustworthy, aggressive, proud, racist, outgoing, disrespectful, strong, [or] lazy.”⁸⁷

Both the young people and the officers scored their own teammates favorably. But

although officers rated the youths more positively after the intervention than before, the youths’ overall perceptions of the police didn’t change.⁸⁸ It’s possible that six weeks wasn’t enough time for meaningful interaction to develop between study participants outside of practices and games. It’s also plausible that minority youths’ views of officers remained unchanged because people’s negative police experiences, whether firsthand or indirect, have such long-lasting effects on their global assessments of officers.

Despite historical rifts between the police and communities of color, there’s reason for optimism.

If police executives were to publicly acknowledge past harms and offer heartfelt apologies, that could go a long way toward improving relations between police and minority communities. In 2012, the Community Oriented Policing Services in the US Department of Justice published a report on racial reconciliation that encouraged candid dialogue between police leaders and community stakeholders, recognizing that traditional crime-control efforts have been ineffective and have undermined police legitimacy.⁸⁹ By asking residents to help police disseminate anti-crime messages, reconciliation efforts can also underscore the fact that community members play a critical role in public safety.

Despite historical rifts between the police and communities of color, there’s reason for optimism. For example, since 1994, a loosely allied group of activist black clergy,

the Ten Point Coalition (TPC), has partnered with the Boston Police Department (BPD) to try to reduce youth violence and improve police relations with the city's minority community. The collaboration helped improve police legitimacy and created stronger relationships between officers and residents of Boston's African American community. As a consequence, the TPC became a vital component of Operation Ceasefire, which aimed to reduce gun violence. Specifically, the TPC was instrumental in providing "[compassionate] voices at offender call-ins and help[ing] to connect social services to gang youth and their families."⁹⁰ The TPC and BPD had to work together for several years, however, before their longstanding mutual distrust subsided. Nonetheless, the strongest and deepest relationships developed between individuals, not organizations.⁹¹

Consent Decrees

Beyond policing strategies, reforms are sometimes pursued through legal channels, specifically through consent decrees, which arose from the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act.⁹² The legislation was spurred by the brutal videotaped assault of motorist Rodney King by Los Angeles Police Department officers in 1991.⁹³ Section 14141 of the act, commonly known as the Law Enforcement Misconduct Statute, grants the US Department of Justice the authority to file lawsuits against entire police departments rather than individual officers to "pursue equitable and declaratory relief against police engaged in a 'pattern and practice' which deprives individuals of their constitutional rights."⁹⁴

Consent decrees usually have five key elements: modification of policies and

procedures; increased reliance on data; implementation of new training programs; investigating instances of alleged police misconduct; and administrative oversight.⁹⁵ Agencies subject to consent decrees are routinely required to revise or create department policies involving several highly scrutinized law enforcement actions (such as the handling of citizen complaints, racial profiling, vehicle pursuits, search and seizure, high-tech surveillance, and use of force).⁹⁶ Using data to guide departmental policy is critical, because it improves oversight of officers' activities. Also, the decrees often compel police departments to address training and managerial deficits in areas like cultural sensitivity, homelessness, and mental illness.⁹⁷ Under a consent decree, a court-appointed federal monitor files quarterly progress reports.

Over the past two decades, Justice Department investigators have examined the policies and practices of several US police agencies in response to unsettling allegations of civil rights violations. Though many police departments have been or currently are under consent decrees, we know little about the effectiveness of this process.⁹⁸ Some of what we do know is discouraging. For example, a study involving claims of racial profiling against the Los Angeles Police Department, the New Jersey State Police, and the NYPD found:

The data collected from three consent decrees of significantly disparate design, strictness of requirements, and level of monitoring have shown no cognizable effect on racial disparity in police stops and searches. Therefore, at least as currently structured, such consent decrees are not by themselves effective weapons against racial disparity in policing.⁹⁹

Another study, one that investigated whether community response to a consent decree in Pittsburgh, PA, affected officers' and citizens' perceptions, produced mixed findings.¹⁰⁰ Some residents believed that policing had improved, but others saw no change. Moreover, a small percentage of civilians said that policing had actually gotten worse.¹⁰¹ The research team also found that the overwhelming majority of police personnel held negative views about the consent decree, citing its perceived adverse impact on employee morale.

Using consent decrees to reduce injustices and restore public confidence in the police is a major undertaking whose benefits have yet to be empirically documented. Unfortunately, the lack of research evidence hasn't prevented some observers from treating consent decrees as a panacea for dysfunctional police culture. For the time being, consent decrees have the support of those who are calling for increased police accountability and transparency. For example, legal scholar Noah Kupferberg argues that data about police activities have been "made available solely through consent decree provisions, and where consent decrees or other forms of outside monitoring do not exist, the public will often have no idea what individual officers or police departments are up to."¹⁰² But critics of consent decrees have pointed to the sobering financial costs. For instance, the Los Angeles Police Department consent decree cost an estimated \$250 million dollars over five years.¹⁰³ Still, a Harvard University research team reported several encouraging organizational changes as a result of the decree.¹⁰⁴ The researchers cautioned, however, that even federally mandated court interventions are limited without "both strong leadership and strong

police oversight."¹⁰⁵ Regrettably, by the time consent decrees are put into place, police-community relations may already have suffered tremendous and perhaps irrevocable harm.

Conclusions

The Egon Bittner phrase we borrowed for our article's title fittingly suggests that because of the imperfect nature of police work and the unbridled folly of youth, numerous young people will inevitably find themselves under police scrutiny. Officers are given great discretion when deciding whether to arrest suspects or impose informal sanctions. Though such discretion is essential to the working policeman's toolkit, the unchecked use of extralegal factors has proven disastrous for young black and Latino males, who are disproportionately stopped, searched, and killed by police. Because officers are the frontline agents of the criminal justice system, they're also largely responsible for setting in motion other processes that contribute to persistent racial disparities. But as formal organizations, police departments have the capacity to develop and implement policies grounded in procedural justice principles.

Research demonstrates that both direct and indirect police experiences help to shape youths' long-term attitudes toward police. Furthermore, several studies have shown that the settings in which encounters unfold are profoundly important. This comprehensive understanding has inspired pioneering research on race, place, and policing. In particular, several researchers have attempted to disentangle the impact of race from that of neighborhood conditions, illuminating racially discriminatory policing practices.

The Black Lives Matter movement has intensified public discourse about racially biased policing and other forms of justice system inequality. In 2012, Black Lives Matter launched a social media campaign after George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch volunteer in Sanford, FL, fatally shot Trayvon Martin, an unarmed 17-year-old black male.¹⁰⁶ After police officer Darren Wilson shot and killed unarmed teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO, in August 2014, Black Lives Matter increased its virtual and physical presence as a national organization. The group uses impassioned chants and direct action to publicly condemn what it considers to be America's proven disregard for black lives, evinced by the overrepresentation of blacks among those killed by the police. On the other hand, law enforcement officers and others have criticized the organization for not expressing comparable outrage about the devaluing of black lives when people other than police pull the trigger.

Franklin Zimring, a law professor at the University of California, Berkeley, somberly asks, "How much do police chiefs care about whether the civilians their officers shoot live or die?"¹⁰⁷ He asserts that "radical changes" in the behavior of rank-and-file officers, especially as it relates to lethal shootings of civilians, will emerge from police leaders rather than from city hall, labor unions, or federal or state courts. He reasons that "until police departments

become willing to spend time, money, and management effort on resolving conflicts without killings, nothing significant can happen."¹⁰⁸ In particular, Zimring argues that the number of people killed by police might drop if administrators were to implement departmental policies focused on decreasing the number of unnecessary rounds discharged (the "just to make sure" shots), limiting single-officer assignments, and, legal justification aside, using greater restraint before firing on suspects flourishing knives, other sharp devices, and blunt instruments. Zimring also implores agencies to form research collaborations in the hope of collecting better data on police shootings. Substantially reducing the number of civilians killed by officers would help reduce tensions concerning the ultimate justice system inequality.

Police departments across the United States have tried to enhance public safety and improve police legitimacy. Unfortunately, the threat of police violence (both lethal and nonlethal) is among the myriad challenges that confront young people of color growing up in dangerous neighborhoods. We remain hopeful, however, that policymakers are committed to strengthening the fragile relationships between the police and the minority community so that the future of all children will no longer require sobering instructions from elders about how to stay safe when approached by police officers.

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