

**UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF RACIALLY BIASED POLICING IN THE  
UNITED STATES**

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## Overview of Existing Research

Racially biased policing has the potential to seriously undermine the legitimacy of law enforcement officers and reduce public confidence in the criminal justice system. Therefore determining the nature and extent of its prevalence should be an urgent national policy concern. A substantial body of knowledge has consistently confirmed that people of color hold less favorable views of the police than their white counterparts. In fact, “racial differences in attitudes toward police have been among the most robust findings in criminal justice research” (Taylor et al., 2001: 302). Furthermore, a number of scholars working in this area have suggested that minority citizens’ persistent negative appraisals of police stem from the nature of policing occurring in areas of concentrated disadvantage, where they disproportionately reside (Anderson, 1990, 1999; Fagan and Davies, 2000; Leitzel, 2001; Sampson and Bartusch, 1998; Tyler and Wakslak, 2004; Weitzer, 2000; Weitzer and Tuch, 1999; 2002).

The majority of scholarship on citizen attitudes toward police has relied upon survey-based research or official data on citizen complaints. Moreover, this research has primarily focused on adults’ experiences despite youths’ disproportionate, unwelcome police encounters. Prior research has also shown that youths’ views of police are less positive than those held by adults (Taylor et al., 2001; Hurst et al., 2000), and there is some evidence that this is related to the frequency of adolescents’ involuntary police contacts (Fine et al., 2003; Leiber et al., 1998; Snyder and Sickmund, 1996).

A number of policing scholars in the United States have paid a great deal of attention to examining the nature of police-suspect encounters, pinpointing the situational influences that are

most likely to impact officer decision making. The overwhelming majority of these studies, however, have centered on suspect demeanor, event and setting characteristics (see Engel, et al., 2000; Klinger, 1996a, 1996b; Lundman, 1996; Smith and Visher, 1981; Worden and Shephard, 1996). Whereas considerable knowledge has resulted from scholars employing an interactionist perspective (see Reisig et al., 2004), surprisingly, few studies have gone beyond the customary unidirectional approach of examining suspect behavior to also take into account how officers' actions might influence suspects' conduct (see Mastrofski et al., 1996, 2002; Terrill, 2003). Therefore, there is limited research that investigates police-suspect encounters from the perspective of those who are disproportionately monitored, suspected, and stopped (but see Anderson, 1990; Weitzer, 2000; Jones-Brown, 2000; Brunson and Miller, 2006; Brunson, 2007).

Prior research on the social ecology of policing has greatly improved our understanding of how officers' perceptions of race and place inescapably converge, helping to shape their views of young black males as symbolic assailants and their communities as ecologically "suspicious places" (Terrill and Reisig, 2003). For example, Terrill and Reisig submit that if "officers tend to view minorities as individuals associated with an increased likelihood of violence, it may also be that officers apply a similar, and even more powerful perceptual framework around geographic space" (2003: 308). Despite prior work linking perceptions of dangerous places to elevated crime rates (Terrill and Reisig, 2003), additional research suggests that considerations of race and disadvantage provide a more elucidating explanation than does simply, neighborhood crime (Fagan and Davies, 2000; Quillian and Pager, 2001). Regardless of the rationale, proactive policing strategies such as widespread use of pedestrian checks are harmful to police-minority citizen relations.

Irrespective of whether stop and frisk police practices are legally permissible, minority citizens' perceptions of disparate treatment at the hands of police have weighty implications for police-community relations (see Brandl et al., 2001). For example, Tyler and Waslak (2004) have shown that when people view themselves as victims of racial profiling, they report more unfavorable views of the police. Furthermore, their work calls attention to the relevance of procedural justice, the process citizens use to determine whether they have been treated fairly. In fact, they discovered that when people believed that "the police exercised their authority using fair procedures... and [were] respectful [in their] interpersonal treatment," they were less likely to attribute unwelcome stops to racially biased policing practices, even if they were in fact the underlying cause (Tyler and Waslak, 2004: 276). Tyler and Waslak (2004: 278) conclude: "To effectively deal with racial distrust of the police in the minority community it is important to regulate not only the selection of the people whom the police stop, but also the manner in which they conduct stops as well."

Our prior work examining the experiences of urban young black men casts additional light on the topic and confirms the importance of procedural justice for improving police-minority citizen relations (Brunson and Miller, 2006; see also Carr et al., 2007). Specifically, we found that "young men's complaints of aggressive and discourteous treatment during routine [police] encounters illustrate that it is not only *who* is policed, but *how* they are policed that matters in establishing the credibility of police officers in minority communities" (p. 636). Furthermore, our findings suggest that the distorted perceptual frameworks that police officers working in disadvantaged, urban areas bring to their encounters with residents makes it all the more unlikely that in every instance they will treat minority suspects fairly and exercise their authority evenhandedly. Finally, minority citizens' perceptions of disparate treatment at the

hands of officers increase the chances that they will assign a racially biased motive to their involuntary police encounters (Tyler and Waslak, 2004). Nonetheless, a growing body of research reveals that disadvantaged urban residents acknowledge the need for police but are increasingly calling for a *different* kind of policing – one that above all, recognizes their humanity.

### Measurement Concerns

The vast majority of racial profiling studies have attempted to document the frequency of stops involving pedestrians and motorists from different racial backgrounds in hope of determining whether members of certain racial groups are being disproportionately targeted by police. These data alone, however, are incapable of fully capturing the complexities of police-minority citizen relations or improving our understanding of what takes place *during* involuntary police encounters. Furthermore, since attempts to strengthen police legitimacy are often based on feedback from community members, including the perspectives of persons who are at greatest risk for experiencing routine unwelcome police encounters might provide important insights for better understanding the impact of proactive policing strategies on the lives of disadvantaged minority citizens. That is, rather than simply compiling and examining quantitative data of discrete, one-time police-citizen contacts, future studies should also attempt to capture the impact of individuals' accumulated police experiences. Employing such a research design might reveal how stop data translates into respondents' lived experiences and go a long way toward improving police-minority citizen relations.

### Discussion

Police often call on the public to assist them in carrying out their duties. Thus, it stands to reason that residents are more likely to assist when they view the police favorably and with

legitimacy (Decker, 1981). On the other hand, citizen perceptions of widespread and indiscriminate pedestrian stops have the potential to unwittingly thwart effective crime-control efforts and cause irrevocable harm to police-minority community relations. This situation is especially dire for African Americans, who have a unique, longstanding, and tenuous relationship with the police (Bass, 2001; Websdale, 2001). For instance, Feagin and Sikes (1994:16) note that “a black victim [of racial discrimination] frequently shares the account with family and friends, often to lighten the burden, and this sharing creates a domino effect of anguish and anger rippling across an extended group.” Therefore, efforts to improve police-community relations must begin with police organizations themselves because unlike residents of disadvantaged communities, they have the capacity to draft, implement, and enforce meaningful policy changes (see Chevigny, 1996; Mastrofski et al., 2002).

In addition to focusing on official crime data, a number of policing scholars have recently begun to conduct more holistic evaluations of promising crime reduction strategies (i.e., Operation Ceasefire, Pulling Levers, and Drug Market Intervention approaches). Specifically, a growing trend among such studies has involved documenting community residents’ perceptions of changes in neighborhood crime patterns *and* their experiences with local policing practices (see Corsaro et al., 2010; Corsaro et al., forthcoming). Thus, it appears that police administrators and scholars are beginning to realize that crime-control at all costs is not worthwhile.

### Key Questions

- ❖ Despite the efforts of law enforcement agencies to improve police-community relations (e.g., evidenced by the proliferation of community policing concepts), what accounts for the consistent finding of higher levels of minority distrust of

and dissatisfaction with the police? Furthermore, why do these unfavorable evaluations seemingly persist?

- ❖ How do we expand law enforcement administrators' understanding that disadvantaged communities may in fact simultaneously experience under- (see Klinger, 1997; Kennedy, 1997) and over-policing?
- ❖ What are the best strategies for measuring the nature and extent of racially biased policing? Moreover, how should scholars determine the appropriate benchmark(s) for meaningful comparisons?
- ❖ Given that most citizens will seldom experience frequent involuntary police encounters, how might we use various forms of media to facilitate public discourse?

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