

Post-Ferguson study finds area was over-policed, reports improvements in policing quality

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The fact that crime rates in Ferguson, Mo., remained steady even as the number of traffic stops and arrests fell—and that the de-policing

occurred disproportionately in non-white areas—suggests that cops had previously been "over-policing," research from the University of Colorado Boulder and others finds.

The findings are the latest in a series of studies on the aftermath of a controversial [police](#) shooting in Ferguson.

David Pyrooz, CU Boulder assistant professor of sociology and one of the authors on the study published earlier this year in the Journal of Criminal Justice, examined the "racialized" impact of police behavior.

The 2014 shooting death of Michael Brown by Darren Wilson, a white police officer in Ferguson, Mo., touched off a wave of protest. In the wake of that event, police in Missouri made fewer traffic stops. The retreat from proactive forms of policing is known as "de-policing."

Some observers have worried that when the police stand down, crime will tick up, creating a so-called "Ferguson effect." But Pyrooz's research did not find evidence of increased crime rates associated with the Ferguson effect and also suggests that de-policing may be advantageous.

The racial composition of cities was related to de-policing, but the altered behavior of [law enforcement](#) officers does not impact crime rates, Pyrooz's study finds.

Racial minorities are stopped and searched at significantly higher rates than other populations, so a less-proactive police force could cut the number of fruitless stops but still curb crime, Pyrooz said.

His research aim was to discover if the police were actually disengaging from proactive methods of law enforcement to reduce the potential for confrontations.

"They don't want to be the next viral video," Pyrooz said.

By examining the changes in the number of stops, searches and arrests, and the quality of "hits" (stops that yielded contraband), made from those stops in 2014 and 2015, Pyrooz and his colleagues found dramatic results.

Within the 118 cities studied, there were 67,000 fewer stops in 2015 than 2014, yet the "hit rate" rose by 11 percent. Throughout all of Missouri, there were 100,000 fewer stops.

Pyrooz and his colleagues did not find any change in overall [crime](#) rates associated with a more reserved police force.

"The quality of policing is improving," Pyrooz said.

If [crime rates](#) remained the same with less-active policing, were law enforcement officials previously policing too much? Pyrooz believes they were, at least based on his metric of "hit" rates.

In the study, Pyrooz and his colleagues cited a 2016 survey conducted by two other scholars in which a significant number of sheriff's deputies' in a southeastern state admitted to being less motivated to enforce the law as a result of the negative publicity surrounding the police.

But why had law-enforcement officials been policing more aggressively in the past? More stops generate more fines, which bolster local budgets in places like Ferguson, Pyrooz noted. That monetary incentive seems to have spurred higher levels of policing.

"Our current administration pushes for stronger policing instead of smarter policing," Pyrooz said. This mindset might encourage unethical law enforcement tactics, he continued, so de-policing could help groups

at highest risk of being unlawfully targeted.

These findings relied on the contributions of the "top-tier criminologists" that Pyrooz collaborated with. John Shjarback of the University of Texas El Paso, Scott Wolfe of Michigan State University and Scott Decker of Arizona State University, all assisted in the extensive research process.

"This is going to be a difficult situation to remedy," Pyrooz admitted.
"We discovered a problem, not a solution."

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder

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