

The role of race in police contact among homeless youth

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More than 1.7 million U.S. youth experience homelessness each year, according to the U.S. Department of Justice. Homeless youth are at an increased risk of being stopped by police and arrested, yet it is unclear if this interaction is related to race. A new longitudinal study examined the likelihood of homeless youth of different races being harassed and arrested by police. The study found that non-White homeless youth are more likely than White homeless youth to report police harassment and arrest, but that elements of living on the street—including increased visibility and prior experiences with harassment—offset racial disparities.

The study, by researchers at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL), appears in *Justice Quarterly*, the journal of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences.

"Racial minorities are disproportionately represented among homeless youth and youth who are arrested, but research on how race and homelessness combine to shape the risk of police contact has been sparse," says Jerreed D. Ivanich, Ph.D. student at UNL, the lead author. "By looking at these two together, our study contributes to how we understand homelessness and the role of race in shaping youth's contact with the criminal justice system."

Researchers sought to determine the extent to which race shapes police contact within a population whose members share a marginalized, stigmatized, and criminalized identity. By and large, homeless youth

often have increased access to and motivation for engaging in deviant or criminal behavior.

The study used data from the Midwest Longitudinal Study of Homeless Adolescents, which looked at 428 homeless and runaway youth ages 16 to 19 from small to medium-sized urban areas in eight cities in Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska. Most of the adolescents were White (59%), about a fifth were Black (22%), and the remaining youth represented other races and ethnicities. The adolescents, who had the option of being interviewed every three months from 2000 to 2003, lived in shelters, on the street, or in independent arrangements such as with friends because they had run away, been pushed out by family, or drifted away from their families' homes. At the end of the study, 197 youth had been interviewed and 60 youth had completed all 13 interviews.

The study found that non-White homeless adolescents were more likely to be harassed by police than White homeless adolescents, which the authors suggest is in line with expectations because minority youth in the United States are generally more likely to be viewed with suspicion and stopped by police. But White homeless youth who lived on the street or in abandoned buildings—that is, youth who were more visible and subject to policing strategies that criminalize homelessness—were just as likely as non-White homeless youth to report being harassed by police, the study found.

The study also found that non-White homeless youth were more likely than White homeless youth to be arrested. But White homeless youth who reported police harassment in the past were just as likely as all non-White homeless youth to be arrested, the researchers found.

Taken together, the findings suggest that the increased visibility that comes with living on the street and experiencing prior [police](#) harassment among homeless youth may set in motion subsequent events that

culminate in arrest, the study concluded.

"Homeless [youth](#) are criminalized in their living environments, and these experiences lead to increased and prolonged interaction with the criminal justice system, which likely embeds them further in a jail-to-street-to-jail cycle," explains Tara D. Warner, assistant professor of sociology at UNL and faculty affiliate at the Nebraska Center for Justice Research, who co-authored the article. "In light of longstanding patterns of racial disparities in criminal [justice](#) experiences, such a cycle may actually unfold quite similarly for White and non-White [homeless youth](#)."

More information: Seen or Unseen? The Role of Race in Police Contact Among Homeless Youth, *Justice Quarterly* (2018).

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