

Study shows contact with criminal justice system affects well-being—with consequences at the polls

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Credit: Pixabay

When police in Aurora, Colorado, handcuffed children and made them lie face down on the pavement after stopping an African-American family they mistakenly identified, they not only made headlines, they prompted city officials to apologize for the officers' behavior and offer to pay for therapy for the traumatized children. When officers in

Kenosha, Wisconsin, shot Jacob Blake in front of his children, the resulting protests and unrest grabbed more headlines than the effects of the situation on the children. A University of Kansas scholar has written a study connecting carceral contact, feelings of well-being and how a predacious criminal justice policy decreases political participation in certain communities.

Brandon Davis, assistant professor of public affairs & administration at KU, wrote a study published in Policy Studies Journal examining [survey data](#) from thousands of [young people](#) across the country about their contact with the criminal justice system, their well-being and how politically active they were. Among the findings, he found feelings of well-being are strongly connected to political participation and that carceral contact negatively affected feelings of well-being.

"That was a critical, prime example of how families learn about their role in the community and how law enforcement interacts with them, and traumatic incidents like that will have a lasting effect on their feelings of well-being," Davis said of the Aurora incident in which officers handcuffed children as young as 6. "That has an interpretive feedback effect on the community as well beyond the people who were handcuffed. These incidents are happening across the country and have a lasting effect on political participation."

For the study, Davis analyzed data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, a data set that surveys nearly 9,000 Americans born between 1980 and 1984. Political participation was measured in terms of being registered to vote, interest in politics and voting history.

Depression was the strongest predictor across levels of participation, and those who experienced it were least likely to take part in any of the measures of political participation. Feelings of sadness or anxiety also had negative associations with participation. In terms of well-being,

those who reported the highest levels of happiness were the most likely to be politically active in all measures.

The data also showed that respondents who had the most carceral contact, whether it was being incarcerated or something as simple as being stopped by the police for a traffic violation, reported the lowest levels of well-being, which in turn indicated they were less likely to be politically active. Davis pointed out African-American respondents were most likely to report feelings of depression and anxiety, followed by Hispanics, then whites, following the pattern of people of color being disproportionately affected by policing, incarceration and criminal justice [policy](#).

Research has long found that people of color are more likely to be negatively affected by the criminal justice system, but it has rarely examined how it is happening and its ties to political participation. That link is vital in order to combat the problem and help boost voting and political participation among [minority communities](#), Davis said.

"The question of how this is happening is important because if you want to fix it, you can't do that if you don't know the mechanisms that it is working through," he said.

Furthermore, understanding which specific policies have negative effects on individual and community well-being and how they discourage political participation are necessary if advocates, scholars and lawmakers hope to craft better policy that is equitable and encourages equal participation, Davis said.

Carceral contact can decrease participation beyond the individuals dealing with the justice system as well. In previous research, Davis found that carceral contact decreases participation for individuals who have a family member incarcerated even more than it does for the individual.

Such negative interactions are passed through family generations and through a community, which leads to communities not being truly represented by their government. A 2016 Department of Justice report on the City of Baltimore's Police Department revealed vastly unequal policing measures taken against minority citizens, which prompted Davis to begin his research in carceral contact and political participation. Among other findings, the report showed citizens of color were commonly subjected to public strip searches for minor offenses.

"It made me think about what that would do to your well-being if you didn't know when you left your house if someone would strip you naked in the street for something as minor as what are essentially misdemeanors of poverty, like having a broken taillight," Davis said.

Perhaps most importantly, the current study shows how public policy affects political behavior. By illustrating the connection between carceral contact, well-being and political participation, Davis said he hopes researchers will further study other forms of institutional contact and how they inhibit participation as well. With further study, it can be better understood how poor and people of color are excluded from [political participation](#) via public policy, which can then lead to addressing those causal mechanisms through public policy reform.

More information: Brandon Rudolph Davis. Feeling Politics: Carceral Contact, Well-Being, and Participation, *Policy Studies Journal* (2020). [DOI: 10.1111/psj.12408](https://doi.org/10.1111/psj.12408)

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