

With unfair police treatment, the tragedy is not limited to the incident itself

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New research using a nationally representative sample of more than 12,000 participants shows the collateral consequences victims are likely to confront following unfair treatment by police.

Michael Brown, George Floyd and Tamir Rice are just some of those who have died recently at the hands of police.

Their names are now tragically familiar, but thousands of other people who are unjustly stopped, searched or questioned by law enforcement will likely experience a range of detrimental outcomes associated with unfair police treatment, including depression, suicidal thoughts, drug use, and a loss of self-efficacy, according to Christopher Dennison, Ph.D., assistant professor of sociology in the University at Buffalo College of Arts and Sciences.

Previous work using small, non-random samples has suggested similar results, but Dennison's study leverages the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health), a powerful and illustrative data set that clearly shows how these unfortunate patterns are generalizable.

Controlling for variables including behavioral and socioeconomic indicators early in life, treatment by parents and perceived [social support](#), the results showed that individuals who reported unfair police treatment were more likely to also report detrimental social-psychological and behavioral consequences, such as depression and suicide ideation, than

those who reported no unfair police treatment.

When examining these relationships within each racial and ethnic group, however, the gap in predicted depressive symptoms and self-efficacy scores between [white people](#) with and without a history of unfair police treatment was significantly more pronounced compared with that of Black people.

Black people, and specifically Black men, were far more likely to report unfair police treatment than white people, but the consequences of such experiences were more apparent for white people, according to the findings.

"This effect we found among white people could be attributed to evidence suggesting how minority families are socializing their children to prepare for police encounters," says Dennison, the paper's corresponding author and an expert in life course criminology and social responses to crime.

"It's the realization of the 'experience of the expected hypothesis,'" he says. "For minorities, more generally, there's a belief that [unfair treatment](#) by police will likely happen at some point in their lives, while white people don't have that expectation. That preparation and lack of [preparation](#) might be responsible for the effects we see in this study."

The findings published in the journal *Criminology* broaden the understanding of unfair treatment by police by showing the tragedy is not limited to the incident itself. The detrimental effects of this type of injustice can become corrosively lodged in the life course of victims.

Transparency is critical to moderate the likelihood of the detrimental outcomes, and proactive police tactics, such as stop-and-frisk, should be eliminated, according to Dennison.

"The perception of these interactions is certainly consequential," says Dennison. "The Add Health data do not provide context. It asks only if someone has been unfairly treated by police. But context might not matter, because what someone perceives as unfair is indeed consequential."

Making law enforcement aware of these results can help motivate transparency, according to Dennison. It's critical that people know why something is happening in a police interaction to increase the perception of legitimacy.

"It's also important to be aware of how these findings reinforce structural inequalities," says Dennison. "These experiences involving police are leaning to the point of being normal and engrained."

"That's alarming and disturbing."

Dennison's research with Jessica Finkeldey, an assistant professor of criminal justice at SUNY Fredonia, relied on the fifth round of questioning from the Add Health data set.

Started in 1994, Add Health is a sample of 20,000 participants who were in grades 7-12 during the first round of data collection from participants and their parents relating to social, familial and behavioral areas.

For the fifth wave, roughly 12,000 participants were asked whether they had ever been treated unfairly by police.

"We controlled for many behaviors that might have generated inaccuracies, and the findings remain robust," says Dennison. "People who report these kind of interactions with [police](#) were much more likely to experience these detrimental outcomes."

More information: Christopher R. Dennison et al, Self-reported experiences and consequences of unfair treatment by police *, *Criminology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1111/1745-9125.12269](https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9125.12269)

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