

# Racial groups suffer disparate consequences after unfair police treatment – but not the groups you might think

May 18 2021, by Christopher R. Dennison and Jessica Finkeldey

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George Floyd's high-profile death has become synonymous with unfair police treatment.

His death has sparked discussions surrounding [police reform](#) and the long-term consequences for people who experience [violent contact with police](#).

But what does research say more generally about unfair treatment by police?

One of the biggest questions that researchers like my [colleague](#) and I examine is whether different groups of individuals—[young people](#), [racial and ethnic minorities](#) and those from [poorer socioeconomic backgrounds](#)—are more likely than their respective counterparts to report police treatment that they perceive to be unfair.

We focus on perceptions of police interaction because [research has long contended](#) that "citizens' perceptions of police stops may be considered just as important as the objective reality of such stops."

In our [January 2021 study](#) of roughly 12,000 U.S. adults, we found that 62.9% of Black men, 36.5% of Latino men and 21.8% of white men reported experiencing unfair treatment by police.

Our findings also expand current research in two important ways.

We found that experiencing unfair treatment was psychologically detrimental. And some of these consequences were significantly worse for certain racial and ethnic groups, but maybe not the ones you might think.

## **The consequences of unfair police treatment**

Research shows that when someone reports experiencing police contact that they perceive to be unfair, it can lead to a range of negative outcomes. They include [suicidal ideation](#), [post-traumatic stress disorder](#) and [diminished physical health](#).

Our study aligns with these findings.

It also shows that experiencing unfair police treatment leads to the increased use of illegal drugs like cocaine, methamphetamine, ecstasy and heroin.

For instance, 7.2% of those who experienced unfair police treatment reported subsequent illegal drug use compared with just 3% of those with no history of unfair experiences. We also found that experiencing unfair treatment decreases people's self-efficacy—the general belief in their ability to succeed in life.

## **Unequal consequences**

Our research also focused on whether the consequences of unfair police treatment differed among racial and ethnic groups.

[Some studies show](#) that minorities' preexisting fears that police contact

will be unfair may amplify the consequences if they experience unfair police treatment.

As researchers noted in a [2018 study](#) of unfair police treatment, "the high-profile incidents of police beating or killing Black men (e.g., Rodney King, Eric Garner and Walter Scott, among many others) may be [emotionally] relived as trauma after experiencing unfair treatment by police."

The study shows that unfair police treatment leads to worse physical outcomes among Black people compared with white people, such as premature cellular aging that indicates exposure to stress.

Another [recent study](#), published in 2020, found that intrusive police stops—such as those that involve a frisk or search—lead to increased depressive symptoms among Black adolescents but not white adolescents.

## **Expecting future police interactions**

On the other hand, the preconceived expectation of unfair police treatment among Black communities might normalize these experiences to the point where the [consequences are less pronounced](#), according to studies.

Our study, [like some others](#), found evidence of this phenomenon.

We found that some of the consequences of unfair police treatment were weaker among Black Americans compared with white Americans. Although experiencing unfair police treatment resulted in depressive symptoms and lower self-efficacy among Black and white people, these consequences were more pronounced among white people.

Black people's expectation of unfair treatment may explain these results. Another explanation for the weaker effects for Black people might stem from the increasing prevalence of Black families [socializing their children](#) to be better prepared for navigating future interactions with law enforcement.

That is, Black families teach their children [strategies](#) to interact with police safely, such as following officers' instructions and not fighting with police.

## What can be done?

One suggestion to offset some of the consequences of [unfair treatment](#) is to encourage officers to [explain the reasoning](#) for their actions to those [who are being stopped](#).

While research on this [topic is emerging](#), it is plausible that legitimizing the interaction in the eyes of those who are stopped may make the entire process be seen as [procedurally just](#).

Other research suggests that the use of proactive policing strategies that involve heavy [police](#) presence should be minimized.

For example, the use of [stop-and-frisk](#) policies, wherein officers question and search individuals if they have reasonable suspicion that the individual is involved in a crime, disproportionately targets people of color. Thus, reducing the use of stop-and-frisk procedures may [improve public opinions and perceptions of police](#).

Regardless of the approach, the overarching goal of these suggestions is to move the U.S. closer to a fairer and more equitable criminal justice system.

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