

Study: Adolescents' experiences with police have harmful repercussions for later life outcomes

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The criminal justice system has changed dramatically in the past half century and with these changes has come a greater potential for adolescents to encounter police. A new study examined how adolescents' experiences with police—either directly or vicariously (e.g., via witnessing an encounter)—affected their future orientation during the

transition to adulthood. The study concluded that adolescents' experiences with police can serve as an important life course event with negative consequences for later life outcomes.

The study was conducted by researchers at the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA), the University of California, Irvine (UCI), Johns Hopkins University, and the University of South Florida. It is forthcoming in *Criminology*, a publication of the American Society of Criminology.

Future orientation can encompass an individual's expectations, aspirations, and plans. Youth with a more positive future orientation tend to have [better health](#), educational, and occupational outcomes, and are able to overcome adversity more successfully than youth with a less positive future orientation. This type of outlook can be altered by events that shift the value of a future outcome or the perception of obtaining a goal and as such, future orientation (or lack thereof) is a strong determinant of criminal offending.

"We sought to determine if and under what conditions police contact affected youth's future orientation," explains Alexander Testa, assistant professor of criminology and [criminal justice](#) at UTSA, who led the study. "From a life-course framework, future orientation is important because it captures an individual's outlook toward future key milestones and life-course events that may be harmed by the collateral consequences of criminal justice contact."

Researchers used data from the Pathways to Desistance study, a [longitudinal study](#) of 1,354 serious offenders from Arizona and Pennsylvania who were followed from adolescence through young adulthood. The youth, who were mostly male and non-White, were 14 to 17 years old when they were recruited for the study.

The study analyzed participants' experiences with police, including both in-person encounters (e.g., police stops, the most common form of criminal justice contact during adolescence) and vicarious contact (e.g., seeing someone else in an encounter with police or learning of one involving family or friends). To measure future orientation, researchers used measurements of participants' perceived likelihood and importance of achieving various milestones (e.g., having a good education, career, and family life). They also examined how characteristics of police contact (i.e., youth's perceptions of procedural injustice) and demographic characteristics of adolescents (i.e., sex, race/ethnicity) shaped responses to police contact.

The study found that police contact—even in the absence of unjust treatment—can create cognitive shifts during a key period in life, diminishing individuals' future outlooks. Specifically, the study found that:

- Both personal and vicarious police contact, compared to no additional police contact, was negatively associated with individuals' changes in future orientation.
- Any exposure to police contact, regardless of how just or unjust the contact was perceived to be, was negatively associated with future orientation. That is, adolescents' perceptions of procedural justice did not meaningfully alter the association between police contact and future orientation.
- The negative association between police contact and future orientation was larger for White adolescents than for Black or Hispanic adolescents. Researchers suggest that this may be because police contact has largely become an expected occurrence among minority youth.

"Given the importance of future orientation to subsequent contact with the [criminal justice system](#) for future health and generalized life success,

actions should be taken to mitigate any [negative consequences](#) of police contact on the future orientation of adolescents," says Kristin Turney, professor of sociology at UCI and a coauthor of the study. These might include reform efforts that change the nature of interactions between police and youth to reduce [police](#) surveillance of young people and promote greater connections to civic life in a way that enhances future orientations.

The authors point to some limitations of their study, including that their findings cannot be generalized to other contexts, including adolescents from other geographic areas (e.g., those in rural and suburban areas) and individuals with less serious or no offending experiences. In addition, they say their results should be interpreted as associations and not causal relationships.

More information: Police Contact and Future Orientation from Adolescence to Young Adulthood: Findings from the Pathways to Desistance Study, *Criminology* (2021).

Provided by American Society of Criminology

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