

Police enforcement of New York City COVID-19 mandates reveals racial inequities by zip code

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New York City ZIP codes with a higher percentage of Black residents had significantly higher rates of COVID-19-specific criminal court

summonses and public health and nuisance arrests in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a new study by Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health. Pandemic policing also mirrored the discretionary nature of the New York stop-and-frisk program, which was deemed unconstitutional in 2013 due to racially discriminatory practices.

The findings add to a growing body of evidence that even when police are tasked with activities outside traditional law enforcement, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, the results reflect similar patterns of racialized criminalization and [punishment](#). The results are published in the journal *Critical Public Health*.

"In addition to the potential for direct physical harm as a result of these police stops, the use of police to enforce [public health mandates](#) could be especially dangerous during an infectious disease pandemic," said Sandhya Kajeepeta, a doctoral student in the Department of Epidemiology at Columbia Mailman School, and first author. "NYPD officers have reported high rates of infection and have low mask wearing compliance themselves. Thus, police stops, which involve forced close physical interactions, increase the risk of COVID spread."

The researchers focused on summonses and arrests related to the enforcement of COVID-19 mandates in New York City from March 12-May 24, 2020, obtained from the NYC Open Data portal. The researchers also integrated cell phone data and 311 data as ZIP-code-level measures of social distancing compliance, making this the first study to use both 311 service requests and non-home dwell time via cell phone data as two control measures of social distancing behavior. The researchers also tabulated ZIP code area-level demographic measures from the 2018 American Community Survey including the percentages of residents self-identifying as Black and percentage of residents with an income below the federal poverty level.

After adjusting for the two control measures of social distancing behavior, a standard deviation increase in the percentage of Black residents was associated with a 73 percent increase in the COVID-19-specific summons rate and a 34 percent increase in the public [health](#) and nuisance arrest rate (which includes arrests for charges such as disorderly conduct and criminal trespass). A standard deviation increase in the percentage below the poverty level was associated with a 50 percent increase in the public health and nuisance arrest rate.

"Our findings support the argument that whenever we expand role of police to address social problems or public health problems, what we get is more policing." said Seth Prins, assistant professor of epidemiology at Columbia Mailman, and senior author. "Regardless of what we ask police to do, what they're likely to do is target Black people and poor people. Specifically, police enforcement of COVID-19 mandates not only reproduced patterns of racist and classist policing and jail incarceration. It also likely increased the spread of COVID-19, by putting people unable to comply with public health directives in danger of coronavirus exposure in jails, where transmission rates are extremely high. After being released from these high-exposure settings, people returned home to communities already disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Furthermore, police enforcement of these mandates likely exacerbated economic precarity in an environment of mass unemployment and underemployment," he added.

The researchers point out that some COVID-19-related police stops were violent in nature, placing individuals at risk of physical harm. For example, videos have shown NYPD officers arresting a mother and forcing her to the ground in front of her child for purportedly wearing a mask improperly and officers kneeling on the neck of a man during a social distancing arrest.

"Beyond the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the over-policing of Black communities has had harmful public health consequences," said Kajeepeta. "A growing body of research shows that living in a neighborhood with a high rate of police stops is associated with higher rates of poor health outcomes like anxiety, post-traumatic stress, and even asthma. This research also suggests that these effects can be more pronounced among Black residents than white residents, thereby potentially producing and exacerbating racialized health inequities."

While the summonses and many of the arrests analyzed in this study occurred in the name of public health, the findings suggest that tasking [police](#) to enforce public health mandates may have contributed to the reproduction of over-policing of Black communities and the dangers to health and safety that practice poses. This body of evidence has implications beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting that using policing as a tool for social service provision or public health promotion in any context risks perpetuating racialized criminalization and exacerbating racialized health inequities.

Co-authors are Emilie Bruzelius, Columbia Mailman School; and Jessica Ho, Columbia Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons.

More information: Sandhya Kajeepeta et al, Policing the pandemic: estimating spatial and racialized inequities in New York City police enforcement of COVID-19 mandates, *Critical Public Health* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/09581596.2021.1987387](https://doi.org/10.1080/09581596.2021.1987387)

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