Police Contact Predicts Differences within Siblings' Life-Course Outcomes

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Summary

Youths' interaction with law enforcement can have implications for their opportunities for upward social mobility. Indeed, prior studies indicate that police contact (i.e., stops and arrests) predicts lower persistence in education and higher unemployment. However, most researchers used between-individual designs to examine youth and police interactions, which limit claims of causality, as differences in life-course outcomes related to police encounters are likely biased by individual differences in genes and/or environments. Using standard within- and between-sibling analyses, we found that siblings with police contact have poorer life-course outcomes (i.e., years in school and income) across adolescence and adulthood than their sibling without police contact. The links between police contact and life-course outcomes are worse for police arrests (vs. police stops) and within Black siblings (than within Hispanic and White siblings). We believe that these results signal the need for alternative and more developmentally appropriate forms of punishment among America's youth.

Overview

POLICING AND ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT

Police departments in the United States have widely adopted proactive policing policies and practices (National Academies of Sciences, 2017), through which officers are encouraged to use discretion and judgment to deter crime by surveilling neighborhoods where they suspect crime is likely to occur. Specifically, law enforcement may engage in public forms of punishment (e.g., stop-and-frisks) to deter citizens directly and indirectly from engaging in crime.

However, the effects of policing are often mixed and can have collateral consequences on later outcomes (Del Toro, 2021). For instance, some scholars have shown that policing in general deters crime (National Academies of Sciences, 2017). Others, however, argue that the nature of policing matters, with aggressive forms of crime control having no effect on crime, whereas policing with positive dialogue and relationships with the community being linked to low crime rates (Gau & Brunson, 2010; Higginson & Mazerolle, 2014). Furthermore, individuals' relationships with local law enforcement and their opportunities for upward social mobility are dampened when police stops result in arrests and incarceration (Brayne, 2014; Haskins & Jacobsen, 2017; Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010).

WITHIN - AND BETWEEN-SIBLING DESIGNS

The effect of policing on later life outcomes can be masked by differences in individuals' genetics and environments (Del Toro et al., 2019; Wiley et al., 2013). We study siblings to attempt to account for genetic and environmental variation when examining the links between policing and later life-course outcomes. For instance, genetics/biology theorists highlight the role of pubertal development in the onset of risk-taking and delinquent behaviors (Blakemore & Mills, 2014; Steinberg, 2008). Alternatively, theoretical frameworks, such as social learning, link environmental factors such as peer influence and pressure to teens' increased risk-taking behaviors (Amemiya et al., 2019; Gardner & Steinberg, 2005). Currently, it is unclear whether poor life-course outcomes are due to genetic predispositions, environmental influences, and/or police contact. An assessment that accounts for genetic and environmental influences is an

important next step when examining the link between police contact and youth life-course outcomes.

Key Findings

- **Police contact hurts.** A sibling with either a police stop or arrest on average had lower wages and years in school than their sibling with neither a stop nor an arrest.
- **The nature of police contact matters.** Arrests were related to fewer years of education and lower income, whereas police stops were related only to fewer years of education.
- **Policing predicts more disparities within Black siblings than within White and Hispanic siblings.** A Black sibling with a police stop had fewer years in school than their Black sibling. A Black sibling with an arrest had, on average, lower income across their lifespan than their sibling. Both findings were not significant for White and Hispanic siblings, suggesting that life-course outcomes were the same for White and Hispanic siblings with or without a police stop.

Background

POLICING AS RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

Encouraging law enforcement to use judgement and discretion provides room for intersecting racial and age stereotypes to bias officers' decision-making. For instance, stereotypes paint a picture of young Black children as older and more menacing than their same-aged White peers (Gilliam et al., 2016; Goff et al., 2014). These stereotypes are more likely to influence officers' decision-making in conditions that require quick processes and with little time to cognitively recognize biases before acting on them (Kahneman, 2011; Swencionis & Goff, 2017). Indeed, young Black and Hispanic boys are over-represented in rates of police stops despite being a numerical minority in many cities (Dunn & Shames, 2019; Rios, 2011).

POLICING CAUSING CRIMINAL BEHAVIOR

When youth justifiably feel that they are being unfairly targeted by the police (Jones, 2014), law enforcement brews distrust among its citizens, and this distrust can have collateral consequences on how youth engage with the larger society (Brayne, 2014; Liberman et al., 2014; Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989). The adolescent years are a critical period for identity development (Erikson, 1968; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). When youth are stopped and labeled as delinquents without having engaged in delinquent behaviors, they may internalize the narrative about delinquency and integrate this narrative into their identity (Lee et al., 2011). In addition, when police surveillance contributes to a hostile neighborhood climate, youth may find ways to reduce surveillance from other institutions, including schools and employment (Brayne, 2014). This may account for why youth who have had police contact show less persistence in education and poor life-course outcomes than their peers with no police contact (Brayne, 2014; Hirschfield, 2009).

PRESENT STUDY

To test our research questions, we used the National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth (NLSY) in 1979 and 1997 (NLSY79 and NLSY97, respectively). For both NLSY cohorts, the study team recruited large samples of youth during their adolescent years and followed them through adulthood. The longitudinal design in both cohorts enabled us to examine the life-course outcomes that may relate to police contact. However, the operationalization of police contact differed between each NLSY cohort—i.e., NLSY79 measured youths' police stop encounters whereas NLSY97 assessed youths' arrests. Although both stops and arrests were not measured for either NLSY cohort, we used any available data to capture a larger picture of the different encounters that youth may experience with law enforcement. Also, the sample sizes of NLSY79 and NLSY97 provide adequate statistical power (i.e., numbers of siblings across multiple racial/ethnic groups) to reliably examine within-sibling and between-racial group variation, after accounting for possible confounds.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Does a sibling with police contact show poor life-course outcomes compared with their sibling without police contact?
- Is the negative consequence linked to police contact worse for racially minoritized youth than for White siblings?
- Is the negative consequence linked to police contact worse when contact is an arrest vs. a stop?

Methods

PARTICIPANTS/SAMPLE

NLSY79 participants came from a sample of siblings (n = 3,930) who participated in the 1979 NLSY. NLSY97 participants came from a sample of sibling who

participated in the 1997 NLSY (*n* = 3,241). Both samples were racially and socioeconomically diverse (Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1. Demographic Characteristics of Each Study Sample

		1979	1997
	N	3,930	3,241
Race	White	57%	53%
	Black	26%	23%
	Hispanic	17%	24%
Mean age, years (standard deviation)		18.23 (1.98)	15.09 (1.39)
Male		52%	52%
Both parents had high school degrees*		72%	51%

*Proxy for socioeconomic status (APA, 2006)

MEASURES

Life-Course Outcomes

In both Studies 1 and 2, life-course outcomes were operationalized as average income and highest education attained from adolescence to adulthood. Average income was the average income from 1979 through 2018 in NLSY79 and the average income from 1997 through 2017 in NLSY97. Highest education attained was the most years that participants spent in school up to their most recent survey participation.

Police Contact

In both Studies 1 and 2, the history of police contact was a categorical variable (0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*). In NLSY79, police contact was a binary variable for whether the participant was ever stopped by the police by 1979. By then, 19 percent of youth were stopped by the police. In NLSY97, police contact was a binary variable for whether the participant was ever arrested from 1997 through 2017. During that period, 34 percent of youth in NLSY97 experienced an arrest.

Results

ANALYSES

All analyses were conducted in *Mplus* v. 8.3 and used maximum likelihood with robust standard errors to account for the possible non-normal distribution of the data. Specifically, we estimated multilevel models in which we assigned individuals at Level 1 (i.e., to examine within sibling pair variation) and siblings at Level 2 (i.e., to account for differences between pairs of siblings). Level 1 contains our key findings, as we examined how differences within siblings' police encounters predicted differences within siblings' life-course outcomes. To examine how siblings' racial identification moderated our results, we utilized chi-square test comparisons in which we tested whether the results significantly differed among Black, Hispanic, and White siblings. All analyses controlled for key covariates, including factors that contribute to differences within-sibling (i.e., participants' age, timing of birth [i.e., born in the first three months of the year vs. born in the last three months of the year], gender, and engagement in delinquent behaviors) and between-sibling dyads (i.e., parental educational attainment, parental income, sibling-dyad aggregated engagement in delinquent behaviors, and sibling-dyad police stops/arrests).

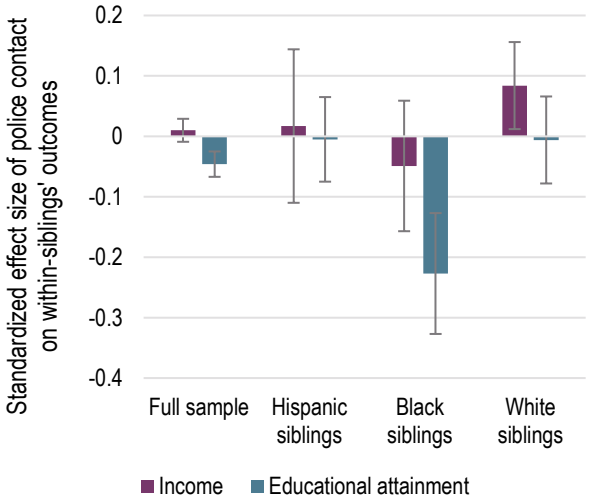
DOES POLICE CONTACT (STOPS VS. ARRESTS) PREDICT WITHIN-SIBLING DIFFERENCES IN EDUCATION AND INCOME?

In NLSY79, a sibling with a police stop on average had fewer years in education than their sibling who was not stopped by the police. A sibling with a police stop did not have statitistically significantly different income than their sibling without a police stop (see left side of Figure 1). In NLSY97, a sibling with a police arrest on average had fewer years in education and lower income than their sibling without a police arrest (see left side of Figure 2).

DOES YOUTH RACIAL IDENTIFICATION MODERATE OUR RESULTS?

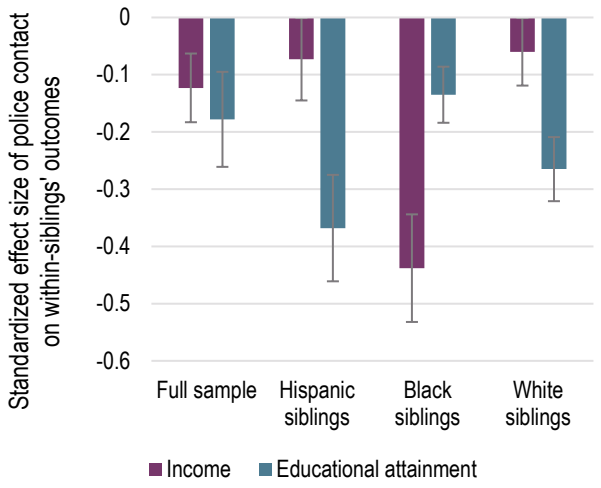
In NLSY79, a Black sibling who was stopped by the police had fewer years in school than their Black sibling who was not stopped by the police. Hispanic and White siblings with a police stop did not have statistically significant differences in their educational attainment than their sibling without a police stop (see right side of Figure 1).

Figure 1. Police stops by race (NLSY79 data)



In NLSY97, a Black sibling who was arrested by the police earned less income on average than their Black sibling who was not arrested. Hispanic and White siblings with an arrest did not have statistically significant differences in their income than their sibling without an arrest (see right side of Figure 2).

Figure 2. Police arrests by race (NLSY97 data)



Discussion

POLICY/PROGRAM IMPLICATIONS

As policy-makers and practitioners consider the cost and benefits of proactive policing policies and practices, serious consideration must be paid to whether severe forms of punishment (i.e., police stops and arrests) benefit community members. The findings from the present study support prior recommendations that governments consider policies supporting developmentally appropriate crime deterrence as alternatives to surveillance (Weaver & Geller, 2019). Possible alternatives could include ways to encourage youths' autonomy and problem-solving skills in communities (Weaver & Geller, 2019).

LIMITATIONS

The present brief was not free of limitations: 1) It was an analysis of full siblings; therefore, we did not have monozygotic (i.e., identical) twins to account for 100 percent of siblings' shared genetic differences when examining within-sibling differences. 2) Our study was a correlational study; therefore, we caution against causal inferences regarding the link between police contact and later life-course outcomes for youth. 3) The police-stop question was not asked in NLSY97 and, vice versa, the police-arrest question was not asked in NSLY79. Therefore, we cannot rule out whether differences in the effects between cohorts are due to differences in police punishment (i.e., a stop vs. an arrest) or in unobserved, temporal differences (i.e., 1979 vs. 1997). Therefore, future studies should take these limitations into consideration.

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