Aggressive Policing and Academic Outcomes: Examining the Impact of Police “Surges” in NYC Students’ Home Neighborhoods

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AGGRESSIVE POLICING AND ACADEMIC OUTCOMES: EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF POLICE “SURGES” IN NYC STUDENTS’ HOME NEIGHBORHOODS

Over the last three decades, cities across the United States have adopted strategies known as “proactive” or “broken windows” policing, with a focus on strict law enforcement for low-level crimes and extensive pedestrian stops. These initiatives have occurred disproportionately in poor communities of color. As a result, an increasing number of students of color—particularly young men and boys—have come into contact with the criminal justice system. A recent representative survey of 15-year-old urban youth found, for example, that 39 percent of Black boys had been stopped by the police at least once, compared to 23 percent of White boys. In New York City, the police conducted more than 4 million pedestrian stops between 2004 and 2012; over 85 percent of those stopped were Black or Latino, and most were under age 25.

While the City’s approach to policing has changed since 2012—including the end of “stop and frisk” policies deemed racially discriminatory by the courts—many young people of color, in NYC and across the country, continue to live in communities with a heavy police presence. Yet, to date, there has been relatively little research on how this impacts students’ educational outcomes. How does aggressive policing in a young person’s community affect their engagement and performance in school? Do these effects differ based on students’ age, race, or gender? And how can schools support students who may be exposed to aggressive policing? This brief begins to answer these questions, presenting findings from a new study (described more fully in this article in the American Sociological Review) and highlighting some important implications for policy and practice.

About the Study

To begin to address these questions, we focused on the New York Police Department’s (NYPD) Operation Impact—a policing program that was implemented from 2004 to 2014 and increased the intensity of broken windows policing in selected NYC neighborhoods. Our study relies on the staggered implementation of Operation Impact, which quickly increased the number of police officers in specific high-crime areas designated as “impact zones” at different points in
time.⁶ Starting in January 2004, the NYPD deployed around 1,500 recent police academy graduates to impact zones, where they were expected to maintain order through frequent pedestrian stops and strict law enforcement. The high concentration of officers in impact zones produced a substantial increase in policing activity and a modest decrease in violent crime. During the period of our study (2004-2012), the NYPD continuously adapted the program by expanding, moving, removing or adding impact zones roughly every six months. During this time, 18 percent of Black, 15 percent of Latino, and 1 percent of White elementary and middle public school students in New York City lived in an impact zone for some period of time.

To understand the effect of Operation Impact on educational performance, we linked information about impact zones with student administrative data from the 2003-2004 school year through the 2011-2012 school year. We examined students’ scores on standardized state tests before, during and after Operation Impact’s implementation in their home neighborhood. We then compared these trends with those of similar students living in neighborhoods that did not experience a police surge at the same time (because they were designated as an impact zone at a different time). This allowed us to isolate the effect of an increased police presence, above and beyond other factors that might influence a student’s educational performance, including living in a high-crime neighborhood.

**Key Findings**

**To what extent does youth exposure to the police vary, based on age, race and gender?**

We combined data from the NYPD’s stop and frisk program with data from the 2010 US Census to examine how the rate of police stops differs for young people, based on their age, race and gender. As shown in Figure 1 below, during the study period, the rate of police stops was substantially lower for girls than boys, reflecting national patterns. Among boys, there were large racial disparities, particularly as they got older. At age 12, encounters with the police were relatively rare for White, Latino, and Black boys alike. Between 13 and 15, however, Black boys began to experience a dramatic increase in the rate of police stops that far exceeded those of their White and Latino peers. (For more information about this analysis, see our Spotlight post or our article in Socius.⁷)
How did police surges affect crime in the targeted neighborhoods?

The data show declines in violent crime following the introduction of Operation Impact in targeted neighborhoods. During the program’s implementation, the number of violent crimes decreased to about 5 percent below the level in comparable areas. Violent crime rates returned to pre-surge levels when neighborhoods were no longer designated as impact zones. Property crime levels remained the same before, during and after Operation Impact.

Substantial research has shown that violent crime in a student’s residential environment can have a negative impact on cognitive development, school performance, and mental health. Thus, one might expect that the reduced level of violent crime in impact zones increased students’ academic performance. As we describe below, this was not the case.

How did police surges affect students’ academic performance?

Figure 2 below shows the effects of Operation Impact on students’ English Language Arts (ELA) standardized test scores. It is important to note that this analysis does not consider whether individual students actually had encounters with the police, but rather how living in an impact zone influenced their academic achievement. We found that ELA test scores for Latino students and Black girls were unaffected by a higher
police presence in their neighborhood. This was also true for Black boys aged 9 and 10. However, for older Black boys, police surges had an increasingly negative influence on test scores. At age 12, the effect was statistically significant, but modest in size. For 13- to 15-year-old students, the effect was substantial. The effect size corresponds to about a fifth of the Black-White test score gap\(^9\) and is similar to that of a number of popular interventions designed to increase educational achievement (e.g., improving teacher quality\(^{10}\)). Put another way, the negative impact of aggressive policing on Black male students’ ELA achievement is large enough to cancel out the potential benefits of other (often costly) interventions.

**Figure 2: Effect of Living in an Impact Zone on English Language Arts (ELA) Test Scores, by Race, Gender and Age**

![Graph showing the effect of living in an impact zone on ELA test scores](image)

**Source:** Data on students were provided to the Research Alliance by the NYC DOE. Data on Operation Impact were provided by the NYPD.

**Note:** Table shows students’ age when they took the ELA test. Circles with lines represent point estimates with 95% confidence intervals. The sample size is 195,743 for Black boys, 210,566 for Black girls, 200,830 for Latino boys, and 208,244 for Latina girls. Full regression tables are presented in Table A2 and A3 of our article in the American Sociological Review.

When we looked at the impact on math test scores, we saw a similar pattern, with small or no effects for the younger Black boys (as well as for Latino students and girls), but an increasing effect size for older Black boys. However, the effect size was somewhat smaller for math scores than for ELA scores.
Implications for Policy and Practice

Overall, our analyses reveal a substantial negative impact from aggressive, order-maintenance policing on the educational outcomes of Black boys who happened to live in the affected neighborhoods. As we discuss below, these findings suggest important considerations for policymakers, police department and school district officials, and educators:

Implications for Policy

- **Consider the potential social costs of aggressive policing in communities.**

  In 2013, a federal judge found that NYC’s stop and frisk program constituted “a policy of indirect racial profiling.” Litigation continued, but the program was officially ended in early 2014 after Mayor de Blasio (who had campaigned against stop and frisk) took office. The recorded number of police stops then plummeted—falling from their peak of more than 685,000 in 2011 to around 18,000 in 2015. Still, advocates have argued that while official stops in the City have fallen dramatically, “low level” encounters—which involve police questioning (but not “detaining”) citizens—continue to happen at high rates in some neighborhoods. These types of encounters do not have to be recorded. More broadly, stop and frisk or broken windows approaches to policing remain in effect in cities around the country. These policies have been implemented in a variety of ways, and evidence about their impact on crime is mixed.

  Our study found a modest decrease in violent crime as a result of Operation Impact. This might have been expected to improve the educational performance of students living in those areas. Instead, we found the opposite, at least for older Black boys, whose ELA and math test scores declined following police surges in their home neighborhood. These findings highlight the need to consider a range of potential costs associated with aggressive policing in communities. Our study’s focus on neighborhood-level exposure is particularly important. It shows that the consequences of the criminal justice system are not confined to those who are incarcerated, arrested or even stopped by the police, but extend to entire communities—with racial disparities in the criminal justice system helping to perpetuate racial inequalities in education. Policymakers should consider these and other potential ripple effects when evaluating law enforcement policies and approaches.
Clarify the role of police officers in schools.

The memorandum of understanding that currently governs the presence of NYPD officers in NYC schools dates back to 1998. In 2016, a report from the Mayor’s Leadership Team on School Climate and Discipline recommended rewriting this agreement “to ensure that school-based arrests, summonses and school-based crime continue to decline and that New York City schools promote a positive school climate.” The changes that were proposed included limiting the involvement of police officers in responding to many types of disciplinary issues and curbing the use of handcuffs and student searches. The findings from our study underscore the importance of updating this memorandum to clarify the role that police officers should play in NYC schools. If aggressive policing in communities harms the educational performance of some students, it is not unreasonable to theorize that it could also have a detrimental effect inside of schools. An updated memorandum of understanding could provide guidance for educators and police officers to help them mitigate this risk and prioritize the development of positive, supportive relationships with students.

Implications for School Practice

The findings from this study speak to a reality that students, and by extension, their schools face. What options are available to educators who want to proactively address the negative effects that aggressive policing in neighborhoods has been shown to have, particularly for Black boys? The Research Alliance has conducted fieldwork in a large number of schools that are actively focused on improving the educational experiences and outcomes of Black male students, including 40 high schools that participated in NYC’s Expanded Success Initiative (ESI). Our evaluation of ESI highlighted a number of strategies these schools used to support young men of color—some of which are especially relevant in light of the current findings. These include:

• Create safe spaces for students and foster meaningful, supportive relationships.

The current study highlights the ways that experiences outside of the classroom can impact students’ engagement and achievement in school. Teachers, administrators, and other school staff can acknowledge this and work to create a warm, supportive educational environment where students feel safe, comfortable, and cared for. Educators in ESI schools described doing this through mentoring programs, student advisories, and a variety of other efforts designed to promote strong, supportive relationships among students and between students and staff. Our evaluation suggests
that these strategies did in fact enhance students’ perceptions of school: Black and Latino young men in ESI schools reported a stronger sense of belonging and fair treatment, compared to similar students in non-ESI schools.

- **Consider restorative approaches to address student discipline and conflict.**

Given the impact of aggressive policing on Black boys’ attendance and learning, it seems important to avoid reproducing these same dynamics inside of schools. Yet research consistently shows that punitive disciplinary actions, including suspensions, expulsions and school-based arrests, disproportionately affect Black male students. Many schools, in NYC and around the country, have a strong police presence. For example, a recent report by the ACLU found that millions of U.S. students attend schools with police in the building, but no counselors, nurses, school psychologists, or social workers. The same study found a 17 percent increase in school-based referrals to law enforcement between the 2013-2014 and 2015-2016 schools years.

In response to these challenges, many educators have begun to experiment with less punitive approaches to student discipline. ESI schools, for example, adopted a variety of approaches under the heading of “restorative justice,” including conflict resolution training for students, peer mediation, and youth courts. These kinds of strategies may enable schools to address misbehavior without “criminalizing” it, and provide students with valuable opportunities to repair harm to relationships or the community.

In recent years, the NYC Department of Education has moved to reduce the use of suspensions and revised the disciplinary code to promote more restorative approaches to student discipline. Some stakeholders have argued that educators are not receiving sufficient training or support around these new approaches. Rigorous research could illuminate the impact of these approaches for students and schools and provide guidance about the types of training and support that educators find most useful.

- **Elicit and learn from the perspective of students.**

Our findings about the impacts of aggressive policing suggest that it may be valuable for schools and districts to gather information about students’ experiences with and perspectives on the police. Currently, the annual NYC School Survey includes a question about students’ feelings of safety on the way to and from school, as well as a question about School Safety Agents (i.e., police officers who are assigned to work in particular schools). Student responses to these questions, including analyses of how they vary over time and across students, could provide useful information to.
educators and policymakers. In addition, the district might consider incorporating a new question that asks about students’ exposure to and relationships with police officers in their home neighborhoods.

Our study also provides hints about stresses that many Black male students encounter in their communities—and how these stresses can harm their academic performance. These findings suggest that it may be worthwhile for schools and districts to find ways of collecting more information about students’ mental and physical health. This could help educators identify students who are struggling with issues outside of school, so they can be connected with needed services. Such data would also be valuable for future research about how physical and mental health issues influence school performance, and about the effectiveness of services aimed at addressing these issues.

**Conclusion**

As educators and policymakers strive to foster inclusive school communities that promote better outcomes for students of color, it is essential to understand how external factors shape students’ engagement and achievement in school. The findings from this study highlight one important example: the way that aggressive policing in communities can harm Black boys’ educational performance, as measured by state tests. As discussed above, this raises questions about how to evaluate the ripple effects of law enforcement policies, how to define the relationship between schools and the police, and how educators can best support students who experience aggressive policing in their communities. More broadly, the study highlights the ways that systems outside of education can affect student outcomes. It follows, then, that fully addressing educational inequality will require reforms not only in schools but in other systems and institutions that shape young people’s lives.
Endnotes


9 The Black-White test score gap is 0.72 standard deviations in our sample, so an effect size of -.136 and -.150 standard deviations (depending on the model specification) corresponds to 19 or 21 percent of the Black-White gap.

10 Research shows that increasing teacher quality by 1 standard deviation corresponds to 0.15–0.20 increase in reading test scores. See Rivkin, S., E. Hanushek, & J. Kain (2005). “Teachers, Schools, and Academic Achievement.” *Econometrica*, 73(2), 417-58.


NYPD Stops Reported 2013-2015.”


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